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Marking Papers and Marking Time: How Women and Men Perceive Themselves as Teachers

by
Janet L. Miller

It is not expected of critics as it is of poets that they should help us to make sense of our lives; they are bound only to attempt the lesser feat of making sense of the ways we try to make sense of our lives. It makes little difference...whether you believe the age of the world to be six thousand years or five thousand million years, whether you think time will have a stop or that the world is eternal; there is still a need to speak humanly of a life's importance in relation to it--a need in the moment of existence to belong, to be related to a beginning and to an end. (Frank Kermode, The Sense of An Ending)

"Always, there were too many papers, too little time..."

I watched the young man, dressed in scuffy denim and T-shirt, dark curly head bent in concentration, juggling a book and a stack of papers on his lap as the subway lurched through the darkness. At first glance, I thought that he was working on his assignment, writing quickly and intently, in a race with the subway and its inevitable stops. As a load of passengers spewed into the car, he shifted slightly to accommodate the new crush, and it was then that I saw varied and youthful handwriting on his pages. He was grading those papers, not composing his own, balancing his comments on the surface of his text, entitled The Write Book. Ah--immediate affinity--an English teacher no less--and as we hurtled beneath the streets of the city, his intense concentration recalled the countless hours of my own markings, red pen poised against the press of time and constraint of numbers in a variety of forms. Always, there were too many papers, too little time, and my constant resistance in having to pluck, from the ephemeral store of correct and absolute numbers, a fixed

estimation of the quality of a student's written answer.

He kept marking, even as people jostled one another for seats around him. Finally, he gathered his papers into his book, stood, and then draped one arm around a pole near the car doors. He was able to read two or three more papers, jotting quick comments on the margins as he swayed with the moving train. And I was connected to his isolation, to his encapsulated and intense oblivion, and, as he exited and quickly disappeared into the 14th Street crowd, I wondered where he taught, who were his students, how did he feel about marking papers in suspended time to subway rhythms. This young teacher had enacted in my mind a timeless scene--teachers groping for marked certainty within the elusive realm of fluid and ever-changing needs of their students as well as themselves. We are asked to chart, in static form, a teaching and learning process that defies such categorization, and I believe that this press to, in a sense, mark time, contributes to a collective frustration as well as unspoken connection among teachers. We struggle against the artificial beginnings and endings embedded in the linear structure of the school day, the semester, the final exam. Intuitively, we feel the hypocrisy of the markings on the paper and the grade book, for in truthful teaching moments, we are engaged with our students, midst the measured marks of progress and accountability. It is in those moments that we truly mark our belonging, our sense of self and our connectedness to others.

"It is in those moments that we truly mark our belonging, our sense of self and our connectedness to others."

I have been interviewing, for several years now, women and men who teach, and, often, I am struck by the suspended moments in our conversations--quiet moments that sometimes fill up with unspoken meanings. Perhaps, because artful teaching itself becomes unspeakable, undefinable according to popular modes of categorization, it is natural that we become silent once we have moved through the chatter of objectives and accountability and test score pressures that comprise our daily teaching lives. This common recognition of the contradictions inherent in our work appears in both women and men's perceptions of their roles as teachers, and becomes a link in my attempts to make "sense of the ways we try to make sense of our lives."

Initial Interviews with Women Teachers

I originally conducted these conversations with women teachers in my attempts to understand ways in which women perceived their teaching roles. I was, and continue to be, interested in studying the dichotomies

expressed by many women teachers with whom I've talked who feel torn between their own expectations of the role of teachers and the realities of their educational experiences and environments. I am interested in how women see themselves as teachers and to what extent those perceptions are congruent with their personal expectations for themselves as women. I wonder, for example, to what extent Horace Mann's description of the model teacher in his Tenth Report as Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education in 1849, still permeates and constitutes conceptions of teaching as "women's work"; in spite of the fact that there were more men teachers than women teachers in 1849, Horace Mann defined the model teacher in obviously feminine or subservient terms:

(Imagine a person) whose language is well selected, whose pronunciation and tones of voice are correct and attractive, whose manners are gentle and refined, all whose topics of conversation are elevating and instructive, whose benignity of heart is constantly manifested in acts of civility, courtesy and kindness, and who spreads a nameless charm over whatever circle may be entered? Such a person should the teacher of every Common School be.¹

"In what ways are women who teach continuing to transmit values, morals and other cultural aspects into which they have had no acknowledged influence?"

As I conversed with women teachers, we acknowledged that women have made strides in moving beyond Mann's prescription into active positions in educational leadership. As well, many have worked to infuse the traditional disciplines of knowledge with women's contributions and discoveries. Efforts such as changing textbooks to reflect the presence of women in all aspects of the construction of knowledge, for example, are crucial in the continuing struggle to illuminate the varied and immense contributions of women. However, even as we work toward such illumination, we must analyze the very structures of the disciplines into which we wish infusion. In what ways do those very constructs reflect the dominant, patriarchal paradigm? In what ways are women who teach continuing to transmit values, morals and other cultural aspects into which they have had no acknowledged influence? In what ways do women teachers continue to transmit structures of knowledge into which they have had no significant input? And in what ways do these larger paradigms, constructed and constituted in the main by men, contribute to the dichotomous feelings experienced by many women who enact and thus contribute to the perpetuation of forms that are not necessarily their own?

I believe that it is not sufficient to work toward substantive change without questioning the underlying structures which control and subsequently mold the pervasive and generally accepted perceptions of the role of women in American education. As well, I believe that by questioning together, we are empowering ourselves not only to understand but also to change those structures which confine and oppress us all.

Stanley and Wise, in their discussion of feminist consciousness and the research process, note:

It is possible...merely to add women in what already exists, but if the social sciences begin from the point of view of women's reality, then this will have far-reaching consequences. It isn't enough for us to supplement what already exists, and to add women into fundamentally sexist social science. Doing this not only isn't enough, it also leaves us unable to account for the important disjunctions that exist between women's experiences within the world, and the concepts and theoretical schemes available to conceptualize these...In other words, the social sciences claim to provide us with objective knowledge independent of the personal situation of the social scientist. But, of course, women's perspective, women's knowledge, and women's experience, provide an irrefutable critique of such claims. Within such products of social science research, women's lives are omitted, distorted, misunderstood, and in doing this, men's lives too are similarly distorted.²

Subsequent Interviews with Men and Women Teachers

As I began to share my initial perceptions of my conversations with women who teach, I was interrupted in my analyses by men teachers who claimed to be experiencing similar feelings of fragmentation and isolation as those reported by women. I began to wonder, then, if that "similar distortion" of which Stanley and Wise speak is more an inherent part of the teaching experience, per se. If so, then I felt I should examine ways in which men and women cope with such experiences. Do men teachers feel the same dichotomies of expectations as women do in the public and private spheres of their lives? Certainly, larger issues here may include conceptions of teaching that are embedded in socialization by gender, as well as by class and race. Such

socialization influences preunderstandings of the issues underlying situations of control and hierarchical structure which characterize schooling. In what ways are men and women different and/or the same in their awareness of these issues and feelings? How do these enactments affect their perceptions and expectations of themselves as teachers? And to what extent are both women and men teachers aware of and able to define their potential as creators and enactors of curriculum in improving teaching and schooling?

And so I am now interviewing women and men who teach, perhaps compelled by my sense of attachment and shared understandings with the anonymous young teacher on the subway; I know that there are those moments of recognition and unspoken connections among all teachers and I'm compelled, at this point in my study, to move with those feelings of connectedness in order to unravel the points at which we begin to differ and to separate. Two years and more into this work, then, and I'm still at the stage of recording impressions, searching for patterns, tracing the meandering threads that connect, intersect and dissect the experiences of those who teach. I have had to work hard to feel comfortable with the impressionistic mode which characterizes my interpretations of the patterns which I have sketched thus far from the interviews I have conducted. The uneasiness, of course, is exemplification of my own continuing sense of fragmentation within academe and my search for some sense of integration and connection within a context still dominated by "objective" modes of research and discourse. As I continue this work, however, I am marking my own points of connection among the teachers I am interviewing, convinced now that this marking constitutes the heart of my study. And I draw strength from the resonance that emerges from our conversations, as well as from the perspectives of others who are searching for ways in which to make sense of our lives.

"I am marking my own points of connection among the teachers I am interviewing, convinced now that this marking constitutes the heart of my study."

Teachers' Perceptions of Gender-Related Roles

In my interviews, I ask, among other questions, teachers' reasons for choosing to enter the profession. I encourage them to recall memories of that decision-making process; I am looking here for influences not only upon those career decisions but also upon individuals' conceptions of the teacher role. Further, and at the core of the study, I am interested in teachers' perceptions of the effects of gender upon their expectations and realizations of the role of teacher and the ways in which those perceptions are congruent with their

images of themselves as women and men. I want to share my impressions of teachers' responses to these general areas of questioning, for I believe that the points of similarity and of departure among women and men emerge clearly and are indicative of the extent to which we all have internalized the predominant structures of appropriate gender-specific teacher behaviors. The following reflections are culled from over 50 interviews and questionnaires conducted thus far in this ongoing study.

Many of the women with whom I've spoken recall strong childhood memories of wanting to be a teacher. Memories of standing with a pointer at the makeshift chalkboard, instructing younger brothers and sisters in the intricacies of the alphabet and multiplication tables are recounted by a number of women. Such memories, I feel, reflect not only the acceptance of teaching as a career for women but also, and more deeply, the role of nurturer, caretaker for younger siblings and neighbors that young girls often fill:

One teacher noted:

*It seemed the natural course to follow.
From early on, I was very involved with
taking care of young children.*

Another woman's voice:

*I wanted to be a teacher since grade
school....Teaching to me seems 'natural.'
It's kind of inborn, I guess. Teaching
makes me feel satisfied and rewarded.*

In contrast, the men noted not an attachment to or experience with children per se but rather a fondness for certain subject matter or a desire to help others or have an impact on others' lives. Women's accounts of being with children in a deeply personal way contrasted strongly with the men's more abstract talk of working "with others." None of the men with whom I've spoken thus far can recall childhood ambitions or fantasies of becoming a teacher. Rather, they seem to have moved into teaching as a means of attempting to develop expertise within certain disciplines while maintaining a "people-oriented" as opposed to "business-oriented" career.

One male, in talking about other men who taught in his school, described them as being mostly burned out and just waiting to become administrators. He noted that many of his male colleagues seemed to try to find job-satisfaction outside of school in terms of more "competitive-type" jobs such as selling real estate and

insurance "on the side." When I asked him why he thought these men didn't or wouldn't leave their primary positions for what apparently would be more challenging work, he replied:

I think most of them are scared to change. In school, they have a sense of power and control. I'm not so sure they'd feel that in the outside world.

Another male teacher noted:

I see more women who are happy being a teacher. Men seem to be striving for more tangible things in the field. I think that this affects their teaching--their minds don't really seem to be focused on teaching.

One male I interviewed, who left the profession after two years' experience, described his fellow teachers as brighter and more reflective people than those with whom he now works in the business world. However, he felt that he had to leave teaching in order to avoid the stigma. I asked him to elaborate, and he replied:

You know, most people regard teaching as a place for underachievers. Especially for men, it's degrading to go to college just to teach. I felt funny telling people I was a teacher. I myself didn't feel like a wimp as a teacher, but I left to avoid that stigma. I really felt that very few of the other male English teachers were there because they wanted to be. Ninety-eight percent of them were going somewhere else--into a side business or to write the great American novel. None of them viewed teaching as a career. I really think most of them were failed artists. Also there was no money in teaching for a man. I think this has a lot to do with the stigma I'm describing about male teachers. I don't think this affects women so much.

“Another in describing his assigned task of handing out chalk to teachers at a faculty meeting, recalled his male colleague’s comment to him: ‘Wonder what they’re doing at IBM today?’ ”

While such views appear to be an extreme internalization of appropriate male roles within the larger social order, others reflected such internalizations, albeit in subtler ways. One male teacher said that teaching was not a profession in ways that most people categorized professions--that is, by money and status. Another, in describing his assigned task of handing out chalk to teachers at a faculty meeting, recalled his

male colleague's comment to him: "Wonder what they're doing at IBM today?"

As I talk with these male teachers, I note the long pauses, and then the rush to fill in gaps, to complete the blank spaces, to mark time in deliberate count, until we can move on to more comfortable discussions of their aspirations or their critiques of the educational system. I feel that they somehow feel safer when speaking of the larger systems and structures which impinge on teaching possibilities. At the same time, when they speak of actual teaching moments in their classrooms, I feel the connectedness that somehow transcends conceptions of gender specific and abstracted roles. One man's face brightened as he spoke of helping students:

I got really excited when they understood that math equation. We'd been working on it for days. I think I did a good job that day.

Another related a decision to tell his students about having to tie up his car muffler with his necktie until he could get to a gas station:

I told the kids, "This can be a lousy day, or not. I've decided that this can still be a good day, so let's move on." And the kids notice things like that, so I try to move in a positive way.

These accounts compare closely with women's accounts of their actual teaching encounters. Both women and men become more animated when speaking of these moments and it is in these accounts that the gender distinctions blur. The focus becomes students and the teacher's desire to help them grow and develop, both cognitively and emotionally. Women appear more concerned than men, however, with maintaining that developmental balance with their students; even when larger issues of bureaucratic structure and pressure are posed as dilemmas, many women maintain their primary stance of helping students to develop in the midst of such pressures, while men appear to become more engrossed in the machinations of the system.

One woman responded to my query of what she perceived to be her major functions within a classroom:

In order of priority, 1) to help kids discover about the world they live in and themselves; 2) to develop an environment of acceptance to permit long-lasting growth; 3) to guide the discovery of

mathematics. My perceptions have not really changed except that I feel I have more experiences to draw from and thus bring more to the class. I used to feel I had a job to do --teach math. Now I feel I have a responsibility--to children.

A man, describing his disagreement with his department chairman over the objectives developed for a certain course, said:

Well, I think the kids will be bored by this stuff--it's repetitious--but I guess it's important here to present a united front and take more of a company line.

As I ponder the conversations I've conducted and the questions I have posed to teachers thus far, I can see ways in which we all, at one time or another, have taken "the company line." My sense is that we see that line differently, and respond to its abstract delineations of proper teacher behavior in ways that reflect not only our gender-constructed perceptions of teaching but also our constructions of our personal realities and expectations for ourselves. What I continue to respond to is the need in us all to "speak humanly of a life's importance," and, while I will continue this study within the contexts of these gender-related issues, I am connected most deeply to what we say to one another as individuals searching for our moments of belonging.

Implications of the Interviews:
Empowering Perspectives

It is at this point of connection, too, that I see this work exemplifying one empowering perspective on the generation of curricular knowledge. It is a perspective that honors teachers as meaning makers while situating them within the broader contexts of social, economic and historical forces which shape experience. By raising interview questions which focus upon teachers' awareness and understanding of how gender-related expectations may contribute to, or infringe upon their conceptions and enactments of their roles as teachers, I concurrently, and by extension, am raising the empowering possibilities of the pedagogical role. So too might this research process itself, dialogical and reciprocal in nature, contribute to an evolving theoretical framework which addresses an openly emancipatory intent.

"I can see ways in which we all... have taken 'the company line...' I am connected most deeply to what we say to one another as individuals searching for our moments of belonging."

One way in which I see these interviews contributing to an enlarged vision of teaching as an empowering process is by positing such gender-related concepts of teaching as problematic. I intend the questions which I pose to allow for teachers' retrospective structuring of their own teaching experiences within this contextual framework. As well, I intend these same questions to frame teachers' emerging texts, their changing perceptions or newly formed questions which may have coalesced as a result of our conversations.

The reflexive and reciprocal nature of the interviews themselves contribute to what Lather calls "an enabling context" which helps people conceive of themselves and their situations differently.³

The fact that I have been conducting these interviews over an extended period of time, often with teachers who appear and reappear in my daily life as students, as inservice colleagues, as members of a larger scholarly community, allows elaboration and refinement of initial interview responses. Many women in particular, when first questioned about their perceptions of teaching as a gender-influenced activity, respond with minimal acknowledgement of that issue as a problem in their careers. However, I have many instances of those same women, often months after the initial interview, stopping by my office, or telephoning, or writing an addendum to the actual interview question to inform me of examples from their teaching lives which might illustrate a gender-related incident or conception. The most often-repeated line about such happenings is, "you know, I never thought of it that way before."

One woman, who had experienced just such a process, returned several times to discuss her frustrations with her older sister, to whom she had posed these most recently realized connections. Her sister, a teacher, ten years older and a strong influence on this woman's decision to become a teacher also, refused to discuss the issue and chastised this young woman for questioning the underlying assumptions of teaching as "women's work." As this teacher struggles with the dissonance that her own questioning has created, she is commenting not only upon her own changing perceptions and feelings but also upon the concepts and theoretical perspectives which frame this study. She, in addition, contributes to that evolving framework and to the patterns of interpretation which are emerging from the study.

In such a reflexive research process, the boundaries of the initial study blend, blur and reemerge, and, at the same time appear increasingly permeable. Each new interview, each enlarging conversation turns out to be profoundly embedded in its larger, real world situation.⁴ These situations obviously determine not only the extent to which teachers' self-concepts are embedded within their perceived roles as teachers but also the degree to which they feel they have control over their lives, both in and out of the classroom. These interview extensions, then, allow for those necessary periods of rumination which so often are a prerequisite for the emerging awareness of the disjunctures and contradictions in individuals' unique situations. As well, they allow for that rumination to occur within teachers' daily lives, and so enable teachers not only to confront the possibilities of new ways of seeing these connections but also to decide upon the extent to which they may or may not feel comfortable in confronting the revealed contradictions in their particular contexts. The extended interviews permit the degree of movement and resonance to be determined by the researched, not the researcher, and thus demonstrate a profound respect for individuals' situations, and a refusal to impose theory upon the researched.

As well, they provide a means by which teachers may begin to examine, confront and transform structures of consciousness as well as of culture and society. I believe that these interviews and the extended conversations which emerge from them exemplify what Lather points to as the positive effects of "face" and "catalytic" validity in moving toward "self-determination through research participation."⁵ Too, the trustworthiness of the data emerges from the participants themselves, as they deliberate and point to intersections of resonance and dissonance within their teaching and personal contexts.

The reciprocal and spiraling nature of this study also has created spaces in which new meanings, new directions and unexpected connections have emerged. Initial boundaries of the study, that is, the theoretical frameworks which gave impetus to my explorations of womens' expectations for their roles as teachers and as women, became problematic as men responded to the tenets of the framework in ways that demanded inclusion into the study. By sharing emerging perceptions of this "knowledge in process," I became aware of counter patterns as well as connections among the personal and public roles of women and men teachers; thus the parameters of this study expanded with these unexpected and still problematic connections, exemplifying a reciprocal relationship between data and theory.

By extension, then, my own vision is being redirected, refocused; the sharpness of concepts thought to be germane to the study blur as new imprints layer one upon another, creating a montage of patterns to be traced and deciphered. And I believe that the most profound revisioning has taken place not within the conceptual framework of the study per se, but rather within the new tracings that have marked fresh points of connection or understanding within myself as researcher and teacher. And these revisions only have occurred in concert with others, in conversations which began in initial interviews and which have extended into ongoing forums of dialogue and reciprocal questioning. And these extensions are not end points, closing in generalizations, but rather are marking sensitive points of entry into a revising and transforming process. I have changed my conceptions of key issues as well as sensitive points within this research study, and by sharing those revisions and by marking the points of connectedness with others, we all have begun to examine the ways in which we see ourselves as women and men who teach.

Dale Spender notes that:

...until women's view of the world coexists with men's view of the world, our entire system of education will be limited, distorted... Women have a responsibility to describe the world from the position they occupy--for other women: and for men who will not know unless they are informed. If we wish to describe and analyze human experience, and to formulate explanations of the world which take human beings into account, then we must include the experience and understandings of women as well as men.⁶

It is within this spirit of responsibility to describe our world from the position that we occupy then, that I will continue this study of women and men as teachers.

EPILOGUE

I wonder sometimes about my insistence in doing this study. Carol Gilligan is probably right; it's one more way in which I reach out for connectedness, for reassurance that the pieces of my life will fold together somehow and that some semblance of sense and meaning will emerge, that this puzzle will eventually lay itself neatly out, all sides interlocking and smoothly matched. I drive home in the rain from my Wednesday night class, mind racing, again trying to make the connections--content and process juxtaposed as curriculum--and my thoughts drift back to my conversations with women and men who teach. Have we moved so very far away from Horace Mann's description of that gentile paragon of virtue in our subtle demands upon ourselves? I'm still feeling the responsibility for the class even as we engage in our debates and dialogue. It's this sense of responsibility that permeates my role as teacher and my embedded expectation that it's all up to me. Perhaps our awareness of embedded issues has enlightened the surface verbalized expectations for women and men's roles as teacher, but the deeper constructs and questions and frustrations and dichotomies still emerge in myself as well as in the voices of those with whom I've spoken thus far. The puzzle is not yet ready to be put into its box, not yet neatly stored away, the fragments merged and smoothed by logic and perseverance.

I pause at the stoplight, trying to make my connections midst the raindrops. I turn the windshield wipers off for the stopped moment--trusty little Datsun, its circuits can't handle too much at once--and, as I give the car every chance not to stall in the storm, I watch as the rain blurs the signal, a red glow merging into the patterns of reflected light, sharp edges becoming soft, a water-color of traffic in the dusk. It's much like trying to make the connections, boundaries merging and melting, flowing into one another and then away. The light turns green, I flip on the wipers, and in one sweeping instant my vision is clear, a crystal moment in which edges coalesce and patterns emerge, bright and clear. The vision quickly blurs but it is that crystal moment of connectedness that I search for, and for one bright instant I saw clearly. It is the possibility of crystal moments of connectedness that compels me to enlarge the patterns, to keep pursuing the meanings that emerge as we talk and work together. And so I drive on.

FOOTNOTES

¹Horace Mann, "The Massachusetts System of Common Schools; Being An Enlarged and Revised Edition of the Tenth Annual Report of the First Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education," (Boston, 1849), p. 86.

²Liz Stanley and Sue Wise, Breaking Out: Feminist Consciousness and Feminist Research (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), pp. 163-65.

³Patti Lather, "Empowering Research Methodologies," Paper presented to American Educational Research Association, Chicago, 1985, p. 29.

⁴Clem Adelman, David Jenkins and Stephen Kemmis, "Rethinking Case Study: Notes from the Second Cambridge Conference," in Towards a Science of the Singular, ed. Helen Simons, (East Anglia: Centre for Applied Research in Education, 1980), p. 51.

⁵Lather, p. 33.

⁶Dale Spender, Invisible Women: The Schooling Scandal (London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative Society Ltd., 1982), p. 17.
