Continuing the Conversation — A Response to Black and Milburn

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As I read the two responses to what was once intended to be an editorial for the *Journal of Educational Thought* and is now part of the journal's dialogue section, I was encouraged to think further about what is entailed in making spaces in the research literature for teachers' voices, for engaging with them in written conversations about teaching.

In his "researcher" response, Geoff Milburn asks many questions about stories and narrative, about what it means for teachers to tell their stories, about the kinds of stories teachers tell, about the criteria needed to judge the worth of teachers' stories, about the validity of teachers' stories, and about the ideological bases of teachers' stories. These are important questions and ones that we and others are asking (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Donmoyer, 1991). In her "teacher" response, Kerry Black draws our attention to the exciting possibilities of engaging in collaborative research relationships in which the knowledge of both teachers and researchers would be valued. In both of their responses, enough important research issues and possibilities are raised to provide several research agendas.

In my final response, my intent is not to answer Milburn's questions nor to imagine Black's possibilities. To answer with certainty would shut down the conversation rather than encourage the inquiry. Their responses will be ones that will further my own and others' inquiries. In this short response, I want to consider what engaging in written conversations with teachers in our research journals might look like as we consider the possibilities of including their stories.

To engage in conversation is not a simple endeavor. It is, as Yinger (1988) notes, a dwelling together on a topic. Conversation involves not only trying to convey your own understanding to another but also involves hearing another's words and responding to how you understand their meaning in some way. Buber's words are helpful to me in understanding what is involved in conversation. He writes:

> In genuine dialogue . . . it is a turning of the being . . . But the speaker does not merely perceive the one who is present to him in this way; he receives him as his partner, and that means that he confirms this other being, so far as it is for him to confirm. The true turning of his person to the other includes this confirmation, this acceptance. Of course, such a confirmation does not mean approval; but no matter in what I am against the other, by accepting him as my partner in genuine dialogue I have affirmed him as a person . . . if genuine dialogue is to arise, everyone who takes part in it must bring himself into it. And that also means that he must be willing on each occasion to say what is really in his mind about the subject of the conversation. (Buber, 1965, p. 85)

Part of what seems important then, as we begin to think about engaging with teachers in written conversations, is the importance of confirming all participants as partners, as persons in the conversations. This confirmation of the other as a knowing person involves acknowledging that teachers have constructed their knowing in different professional knowledge contexts than we have as researchers. Their knowledge is different than our research knowledge but, if we are to engage in conversation with them, must be no less valued. To engage with teachers in conversations we must confirm them as knowing people who have practical knowledge embodied in them as persons and enacted in their practices. I do not imagine this will be an easy task. As researchers we have had years of practice with other ways of responding to teachers' voices, ways which emerge from seeing teachers within a deficit model, as less knowing because their ways of knowing are not the same as ours and as less knowing because, from the distance from which we have often tried to make sense of teaching, it has seemed that teachers did not understand the complexity of teaching.

But learning to confirm the other, the teacher, as a partner in the conversation is only part of what we will need to learn how to do in order to engage in conversation with them. Teachers are not accustomed to telling or writing accounts of their practices. They are more used to hearing others' accounts of their practices, accounts written or told by administrators, policy-makers, journalists, or researchers, accounts usually written from a distance. It is a difficult task to learn to make their private worlds of the classrooms public. We need, then, not only to figure out ways to read what it is that teachers are telling us in their accounts, but we also need to validate the many ways teachers will begin to make what has been too often private within their classrooms into public accounts of their work.

And so beginning the conversations will be even more difficult than the bat-poet in Jarrell's book, *The Bat-Poet*[1] notes when he says, "The trouble isn't making poems, the trouble is finding somebody that will listen to them" (Jarrell, 1963, p. 15). Teachers not only need to learn to make their poems but also to find someone to listen to them. As researchers we are accustomed to giving accounts of our work, our research, to others in ways that teachers are not. We have expected other researchers, policy makers, and teachers to listen to our research knowledge. If we are to engage in conversations, we need to listen and

respond to the accounts of teachers. Listening and responding are crucial to all conversation. The word "response" provides the etymology of responsibility (Bateson, 1989). As Bateson notes this, she draws our attention to the ethical side of response and to what it means to respond in a conversation. As we talk with teachers, we have to figure out how to respond in ways that open up conversations, that enable each of us to ask further questions, to enable each of us to engage in shared inquiry into our knowing.

Belenky describes the importance of engaging in ongoing conversations in which we learn to trust each other so that we can ask the hard questions, the probing questions that will lead each of us to new ways of knowing our world. She writes that without sustained conversations, "I don't think a single person can get the kind of clarity that comes through working together to pull away the chaff and let the bold ideas come forth" (Ashton-Jones & Thomas, 1990, p. 280). It will be necessary for both teachers and researchers to learn to listen and respond to each other in sustained conversations, to engage with each other.

These relationships of trust will be difficult undertakings for teachers and researchers for we are accustomed to uneasy relationships with each other. Teachers too often feel that research is disconnected from their worlds of practice and have learned not to trust researchers who are eager to apply their research knowledge to teachers' practices. Similarly, researchers have felt that teachers are too quick to turn away from research findings and researcher insights. It is a relationship in which conversation has not been the established norm.

Conversation implies a mutuality, a sense that all participants are engaged in the conversation and that each partner is open to learning, to trying to construct and reconstruct their knowing in order to come to new understandings. As researchers we are not yet accustomed to engaging with teachers in this way, nor are teachers accustomed to engaging with us in this way. I wish to thank both Kerry Black and Geoff Milburn for furthering these attempts at conversation, for engaging with me in what I hope will become a sustained conversation between teachers and researchers.

Notes

1. I am indebted to my colleagues, Drs. Allan and Lori Neilsen, for bringing this book to my attention.

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