

The Learning of Teaching: A Portrait Composed of Teacher Voices

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In this portrait, Irene Liefshitz considers learning as an aspect of teaching—how teachers learn to teach, what they learn about teaching, and how they are transformed by teaching. Because unsolicited, free-ranging, teacher-to-teacher conversation about teaching rarely makes it to education research, the author analyzes conversations between teachers recorded for the StoryCorps National Teachers Initiative to inquire how teachers talk about learning and what they say about it when no researcher is guiding their conversation. Such centering of teacher voice is a practical and political stance and positions education research as an act of listening. By transmitting and interpreting teachers' talk, the author makes a case for focusing research agendas on teacher learning based on what teachers say is important to them, for promoting a scholarship of voice in research on teaching, and for further use of the StoryCorps National Teachers Initiative as a rich data source of teacher voice.

Keywords: portraiture, teacher voice, professional development, professional learning, teaching, learning

The mission of the nonprofit organization where I work is to disrupt education inequity by accelerating teacher effectiveness. While I am critical of the language of *effectiveness*, *performance*, and *quality*, I know that teachers' skills, capacities, beliefs, and behaviors make a big difference in student learning and outcomes. My organization's theory of action makes sense: if we help teachers become better at the craft of teaching, then the quality of their students' learning will be better too. My job is to conduct workshops with teacher mentors, instructional coaches, and principals and to consult with district leaders. What gnaws at my heart is how rarely I listen to the teachers themselves, how filtered—if present at all—their voice is in the content of my work. I hear from principals what teachers can't do. I hear from coaches what teachers need. I analyze the annual survey in which teachers get to rate, on a scale of 1 to 5, the relevance of the supports they are receiving. With teacher voice so weak a

Harvard Educational Review Vol. 90 No. 3 Fall 2020
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determinant of the content of our work, I doubt our promise to help teachers develop in their practice.

It's not like teacher-facing preparation and professional development (as opposed to my organization's primary focus on instructional coaches, mentors, and administrators) can be labeled highly effective. Teacher education, whether through graduate degree programs or alternative certification pathways, is widely acknowledged to be inadequate (Drury & Baer, 2011). There is scant evidence that school systems' significant investment in professional development has yielded impact (TNTP, 2015). And in New York City, my home, 30 percent of teachers quit within three years. Direct interaction with teachers does not mean we are seriously considering what they are saying and experiencing. If we did, we would likely have different results. While we take as a matter of pedagogical truth that children should be agents of their own learning, we set no such standard for our work with teachers. We make little space in practice and policy for teacher voice.

Equally critical is the presence of teacher voice in education research on teacher learning: teachers speaking of their learning and leading us to the questions we need to ask, the knowledge we need to create, and the methods we need to devise. This kind of teacher voice—centered, self-authoring, directional—is also largely missing. I came to this conclusion when I began my training as an education researcher after many years as a teacher, assistant principal, instructional coach, and professional developer. Attending graduate school after many years working as a teacher, I was eager to bring my experiences to the research table, only to find that my stories were “anecdotal,” “off topic,” and “context bound” and therefore did not really count. In written feedback on my papers, I was advised to remove personal connections to teaching, as they would compromise the validity of my arguments. In course discussions, I was challenged to provide proof of the generalizability of my teaching experiences to other contexts. And when my teaching experiences and stories did matter, it was when they corresponded to an identified gap in the literature or an articulated direction for further research or were relevant to a particular researcher's interest. If my experience was useful for a well-defined research question, it was then circumscribed by the study design and defined and delimited by survey or questionnaire items, interview questions, or a specific observation focus. Mostly, my knowledge and experience lay dormant.

Jonathan Kozol (1981) described his conversations with teachers as “again and again . . . four or five teachers open up a bottle of wine, or a six-pack of beer, and quietly start to speak about the struggles, fears, dilemmas of a life's career” (p. xi). This aligned with my teacher memories but seemed alien in education research. The great space between unrestricted, free, and meandering teacher conversations with each other and teacher responses to researchers struck me as a huge loss. And it seemed an especially sharp loss when considering teachers' own learning in schools. So much of what we said to

each other was about ourselves as learners, as learners responsible for other people's learning. Little of what we said to each other about what we learned and how we learned it or what we needed to learn made it into research, much less drove it.

It is true that some studies are intentionally designed toward a more equitable balance of teacher voice and research design and direction, specifically in participatory action research and design-based implementation research (Leary et al., 2016; Lykes et al., 2018; Parker, Patton, & Sinclair, 2016). But while such methods afford teachers opportunities to contribute to research question formulation, study design, and data collection and analysis, they are still bound to the researchers' focus and topic of inquiry. In most education research on teaching, teachers' talk about teaching is elicited and collected by researchers. With this elicited *teacher talk*, education researchers analyze teachers' beliefs, perceptions, and the social relations and pedagogical concerns of teaching. When researchers do study teacher-to-teacher talk, they overwhelmingly operationalize it as the discussions that occur between teachers in small-group settings (such as grade or content teams at schools) and professional development contexts (Kosko & Herbst, 2012), rather than informal social settings. In almost all such studies (Gonzalez, 2011; Little, 2008) the researcher is present as facilitator, participant, or observer/recorder, and there is a specific topic for teachers to discuss (Chamberlin, 2005; Kjellin, 2008). There are only a few examples of studies where the presence of the researcher was muted or diminished or where teachers had latitude to choose the topics of their conversations: Wendy Strong and Michael Baron (2004) asked mentors and novice teachers to audio-record their check-in conversation; Anat Kainan (1992) conducted a two-year ethnographic study of a teacher staffroom; and Marguerite Nelson (1993) sent teachers in one school district blank audio tapes to "share stories about memorable or meaningful moments" (p. 152).

Recently, teacher-generated online communities on social media platforms and teacher-designed online platforms have presented opportunities for researchers to study what teachers communicate to each other about their own learning. A systematic review of research on such teacher spaces (Lantz-Andersson, Lundin, & Selwyn, 2018) found that researchers mostly used survey, participant interviews, and social network analysis data collection techniques to find that teacher-generated online communities served as asynchronous spaces for sharing resources, filtering and curating new ideas, and offering emotional and professional support. However, while teacher-generated online communities may offer opportunities for researchers to access teachers choosing to communicate with each other on topics of their own choice, this is not the same as teacher talk—living language constructed, shared, and mediated in the moment with teachers engaged as speakers and listeners.

Education researchers are most often solicitors of teacher talk, interpreting it to answer our concerns. Rarely are we simply listeners. No matter how unstructured the interview or focus group, how unobtrusive the observa-

tion, how inclusive and self-reflective the researcher, or how active the teachers are in codesigning the research, teachers' talk of teaching is mediated by the researcher's presence, teachers are almost always positioned as respondents and objects of observation, and teachers' words are data to answer the researcher's pursuit. Such teacher voice is at best incomplete.

Of course, outside of a research inquiry, teachers do talk about teaching—all the time. This teacher voice has always been there. As long as there is teaching, teachers will always talk about what they are learning, how they are learning it, and what is happening because of their learning. What do we know of this teacher talk? What if we could listen to teachers talk about teaching unprovoked by a research agenda when *they* initiate this conversation, when *they* choose their listener, when *they* own the flow and parameters of talk about teaching?

As a researcher, I stumbled on just this teacher talk and chose to simply listen.

The StoryCorps National Teachers Initiative

The StoryCorps National Teachers Initiative (SCNTI) provides a unique opportunity to listen to teachers talk about teaching of their own accord and volition.¹ The initiative was launched in September 2011 to honor the work of public school teachers and amplify their voices in the often contentious national conversations about education (Nicki Berger, personal communication, November 26, 2012). Over a period of eighteen months, in sixty-two different urban, suburban, and rural locations nationwide, 687 teachers chose to have and record a conversation with someone significant to them about the “meaning of the experience of teaching.”

Teachers were solicited to participate in SCNTI through town hall meetings and community partners, such as schools, community-based organizations, nonprofit and government organizations, and school districts. Community partners identified a location for three days of recording and StoryCorps provided a facilitator who managed the recording equipment. Teachers and their conversation partners (other teachers, other education professionals, friends, family, spouses, past and current students) completed demographic, contact, and release forms and then talked about teaching. One CD copy of the unedited, live recording was given to the participants, and additional copies are preserved at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress and are available to the public.

The SCNTI conversations, specifically the ones where teachers chose to speak to teachers, are the “teacher voice that’s always been there.” For education research, they are unique manifestations of teacher voice. First, this teacher voice is in demotic speech, an ordinary vernacular in which speakers move from topic to topic, ask questions, tell stories, make jokes, use sarcasm, or sit in silence. This conversational, everyday language, captured in the

moment of its utterance, exists in its unedited form. It is therefore different from online interactions about teaching, where teachers communicate with the typed word and are able to edit what they “say.” Second, this teacher voice is teacher-to-teacher; the speakers are all teachers. Third, research on teaching is not why they are talking with each other. The teachers are the true authors of what they say, starting with their choice to say anything at all and then with their choice of interlocutor. Finally, this is free teacher voice about teaching writ large, with no defined set of topics for discussion and no researcher frame or agenda to set the parameters of the conversation.

While education research had no hand in the making of the SCNTI teacher conversations, it can be much enriched by this teacher talk. By considering these free, teacher-to-teacher conversations as data for understanding teachers’ learning, we can privilege teacher voice practically and politically. Because teachers’ knowledge of the ways they learn “embeds itself in what they say” (McDonald, 1992, p. 8), careful listening to this teacher talk is a practical way to access teachers’ knowledge and experience of their learning. And politically speaking, education researchers should be “multilingual with respect to the ordinary languages of those people whose problems their inquiry addresses” (Scheffler, 1984, p. 154). Listening to the “ordinary language” of teachers not only enables us to gain facility in understanding and dealing with the problems of teaching, but it also positions research as listening to teachers, not giving voice to them. We can take direction and purpose from what teachers say.

Portraiture for Teacher Voice

As promising and exciting as this unfettered teacher voice seemed to me as a researcher, I recognized some methodological dilemmas. At the time of my listening to, analyzing, and writing about the teachers’ conversations from the StoryCorps National Teachers Initiative, there was no precedent to follow: no other empirical study at that time, in any field, used audio-recordings of the full conversations as data (four studies used audio excerpts available on the SCNTI website or edited transcripts from its publications). Moreover, no study had an inquiry as open as the one I posed, which was simply to listen and make sense of the whole. What did it mean to listen to, understand, and interpret teacher voice? The SCNTI conversations are a treasure—a huge, rich trove of teacher voices, a wealth of information about the experience of teaching. They are precious in their very ordinariness. These conversations deserve immersion, deep attention, and time. They need disciplined analysis. They require a methodological approach that favors critical interpretation, careful composition, and analysis that balances the researcher’s voice with data, sensitivity with empirical rigor. The methodological approach must also pay close attention to language and make sense of extant conversation neither arranged nor framed by the researcher.

With deep respect for the teacher voices, I decided to use the method of portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), undergirded by hermeneutics and metaphor analysis. Hermeneutics is the theory and practice of interpretation with which a reader, listener, or observer can make sense of someone else's writing, speech, or actions. The three central elements of hermeneutic analysis are the "fixing" of speech or action into text through transcription (Ricoeur, 1981), the systematic articulation of the interpreter's subjectivity (Smith, 1991), and engagement in a back-and-forth process where close analysis of particular elements of the text is combined with critical consideration of the text as a whole (Van Manen, 1990). Because a key aspect of hermeneutic inquiry is deep attentiveness to language, metaphor analysis is a complementary methodology. As a linguistic feature of everyday talk, metaphor is especially useful in understanding the meanings of teaching revealed in conversation (Provenzo, McCloskey, & Kottkamp, 1989).

It is portraiture, however, that affords both the parameters and freedom needed to work with teacher voice. The SCNTI conversations cannot be dissected, stripped of their essence, and left disembodied as facts and findings. Nor is it appropriate to begin with people's regular conversations and produce writing meant solely for the academy, removed from the everyday world. Portraiture is a productive method to use with teacher voice because it mirrors and honors the complexity, humanity, and authenticity of teachers talking about teaching. Four key ideas express portraiture's usefulness for this research. First is the search for the universal in the particular, the aim to document and illuminate the complexity and detail of unique teacher talk to discover resonant themes (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005) about teaching. Second, portraiture presents a complex notion of goodness (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). While StoryCorps intended to honor and celebrate public school teachers, the conversations are not simple celebratory accounts but are as multifaceted as any human experience, revealing disappointments, sorrows, fears, prejudice, and misunderstandings. Third, portraiture as a research method has an explicit purpose of solidarity (Featherstone, 1989), a deliberate intent to stand inside ordinary human experience and outside the gated community of academia. Centering teacher voice means producing scholarship that doesn't merely study teachers but stands with them as fellow authors of knowledge. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, portraiture is itself scholarship of voice and therefore particularly fitting as an empirical method to use with the SCNTI conversations, continuing the StoryCorps mission to share and preserve "the stories of our lives."

Knowing my role as interpreter, attentive to metaphor and story, and intending to make a portrait of teacher learning composed of teachers' voices, I began with "hermeneutic attitude" (Binding & Tapp, 2008), believing that the conversations are coherent and meaningful and that there is something to be learned from them. With this mind-set, I undertook a series of analytic steps. I first simulated the SCNTI experience for myself by asking a teacher (and

close friend) to have a conversation with me about teaching. It was important to have a subjective experience as a teacher-speaker similar to the one I would encounter as a researcher-listener and interpreter. Next, I formally engaged in the hermeneutic practice of distanciation by writing a memo on the preunderstandings and preoccupations I bring to the topic of teaching and listing theoretical constructs, etic themes, and metaphors from the literature. I listened to all the conversations in my data set and then listened again, writing listening notes for each conversation. I transcribed each conversation and read each transcript. I wrote an initial interpretive response for each conversation and reread each transcript. Next, I analyzed each transcript for themes through coding and began writing integrative memos describing the emergent codes and possible themes and then performed metaphor identification and analysis. I sought alternative explanations from the conversations themselves and from reconnecting with etic themes and theoretical constructs. I then constructed emergent themes and wrote the portrait. My final step was to check for resonance and authenticity by sharing my portrait with teachers.

The portrait I present here answers the question, *When teachers speak of teaching, what do they say about their own learning?* It is foregrounded by some description of the teacher voices I listened to and followed by implications for education researchers interested in teacher learning and teacher voice.

Who Is Speaking?

The data in this study are 17 audio files of New York City public school teacher-to-teacher conversations recorded for the StoryCorps National Teachers Initiative in 2011–2012. On average, each is 50 minutes (5,500 words) in length, for a total of approximately 16 hours of conversation (110,000 words). The 35 teachers whose voices I listened to were as young as 22 and as old as 67.² One teacher had more than 40 years' teaching experience, 2 were in their first year of teaching, and 22 had fewer than 10 years in the classroom. Twenty-one of the 35 were women, and 5 identified as gay or bisexual. Eighteen of the 35 were white. Eleven of the teachers were born and raised in New York, with the remainder coming from other states. Four entered the teaching profession through alternative certification programs. Eighteen taught at the high school level, 13 at the middle school level, and 4 at the elementary school level. Most teachers spoke with their school colleagues; a few talked to friends who were also teachers or former colleagues, and one pair was a married couple teaching at the same school.

In addition to focusing on teacher-to-teacher conversations, I selected this sample because it is from a geographic and professional context I know intimately: New York City public schools. As a former student, teacher, and administrator in NYC public schools, and because I am currently working with NYC Department of Education (NYCDOE) principals and teachers, the places and events that characterize these teachers' working lives are deeply familiar to me.

Because I was not present as a researcher in the production of these conversations, and because my “knowing” of these teachers is based on my repeated listening to their conversations and consequent intellectual, spiritual, and emotional encounter with their voices, my own experience with and knowledge of our shared professional context helped me produce deeper and more sensitive interpretations. In addition to such referential adequacy (Eisner, 1985), I relate to these conversations with ease, care, seriousness, and commitment because, at the same time that I analyze them, I see myself in them.

The NYC public school context I share with these teachers will be recognizable, if slightly different, to readers who are teachers and educators working in schools or who study education policy or who research public K–12 education. The NYC public school teachers are 76 percent female, 59 percent white, 20 percent Black, 14 percent Latinx, and 4 percent Asian (Crain’s New York Business, 2014). The NYC public school system is the most segregated in the nation; its racially segregated high-poverty schools have less-experienced and less-qualified teachers, higher rates of teacher turnover, less-stable student enrollments, and lower quality facilities and learning materials (Civil Rights Project, 2014; IBONYC, 2014). One in nine NYC teachers will quit after their first year of teaching; about 20 percent will do so within two years and 30 percent within three years. Approximately 15 percent of the entire NYC teacher population are Teach for America corps members and New York City Teaching Fellows (Crain’s New York Business, 2014) who do not have prior teaching experience and teach in hard-to-staff schools while earning master’s degrees in education.

Like other teachers nationwide, NYC public school teachers work, on average, fifty hours per week on instructional activities, such as in-class instruction, preparing lessons, and checking or grading student work, and spend an additional minimum of five hours a week on noninstructional activities. Working in the nation’s largest school district (serving more than a million students), where everything is fast paced, high stakes, and constantly scrutinized by media, legislators, and other school districts, NYC public school teachers experience the shifts of K–12 policy in areas such as accountability, evaluation systems, training and licensure, induction and professional development, and differentiated teacher roles and leadership. The SCNTI conversations reveal the contours of these conditions. Teachers spoke about being observed by their principals and the measures of effective practice, the pressures of standardized testing, the roles they have outside of the classroom, and collaboration with their colleagues. At the time of the initiative, in 2011–2012, a teacher evaluation system was being piloted in NYC schools, and the shift to Common Core learning standards was well under way. Amid organizational restructuring and adapting to new information systems to collect and manage data of student learning and teacher performance, there was a growing and unyielding emphasis on accountability and school performance based on standardized test scores.

I learned of the existence of the SCNTI teacher conversations in late 2012, roughly a year after they were recorded and four years after I worked in NYC public schools. The thirty-five teacher conversations I selected as my sample brought me right back to teaching in the Bronx and Washington Heights. When teachers spoke of their first years of teaching—as fraught with failure, eye-opening, transforming—I remembered my first years, when I composed lesson plans late into Sunday night, spoke my first phrases in Spanish, and struggled with getting to know 180 children in the six math classes I taught. When teachers spoke of engaging lessons, I remembered the pressures of “test prep,” those many weeks prior to standardized tests when I kept my students on task and focused, tolerating the boredom and each other. And I also remembered the year we had a double-period science class and how we transformed our thirty-six desks into three lopsided, uneven lab benches and how much trouble I had getting the students to stop and clean up before the bell. Yet, while these teachers’ stories resonated with my own experiences, their familiarity begged deeper examination. As they talked about teaching, their students, their lives at school, what were these teachers saying about their own learning?

The Learning of Teaching: A Portrait

Learning is the essential work of teaching. Our children come home from school and we ask them, “What did you learn today?” We listen to their responses and inevitably think of the adult in the classroom responsible for that. We measure children’s learning with standardized tests and then use these metrics to judge the “effectiveness” or “quality” of their teachers. To the extent that schools are places where learning happens, teachers are widely regarded as the agents of that process and the deliverers of that product. In personal experience, by popular opinion, and with political action, we hold teachers accountable for children’s learning. They are the human bodies doing the work of a public institution; they are the face, hands, and minds of education.

But children’s learning is not the only learning that happens in schools. Understanding the experience of teaching would be incomplete without regarding teachers themselves as learners and their learning an essential phenomenon. One teacher, Mrs. English, said, “My grandparents used to tell me that teaching was a way of life: that you learned and you thought and you taught and then you learned again, and that it was very organic. And I said yes to them, but I never really got that.”

In response, I try to “get it” by focusing on how the thirty-five teachers I listened to spoke of themselves as learners. The teachers spoke of teaching as an ongoing, formative development that started with early implicit and embodied experiences and continued with learning “on the job” and from the people they encountered while teaching, including themselves. They also spoke of

the lessons they learned through teaching, as much about the work of teaching as about themselves as people in the world.

Implicit Learning: "Being a Teacher Before Becoming a Teacher"

It was fascinating to hear in these conversations how many teachers "played school" or "played teacher" as children. These early experiences were remembered as the times when a teacher identity was first acted out or tried on. For example, Mrs. Tully and Mrs. Wayans reminisced:

Mrs. Tully: I was from a large family. If I couldn't get my brothers and sisters to play school with me and be my students, then I remember taking all the dolls—and I had three other sisters—and I'd line them up, sit them in little doll chairs, and get my little chalkboard and I would be the pretend teacher.

Mrs. Wayans: I lived in Park Slope in a brownstone all my life, so we had stoops. And I remember I would ask kids the questions, and if they did answer the question they would kind of go up to the next step. And maybe I was thinking about those teachers back in the day on TV, they had that stick, and I do remember having some kind of . . . I must admit, maybe a belt.

Teachers brought up these childhood memories when talking about how and why they became teachers, usually making the point that they "always knew" they would be a teacher. In the rituals of make-believe, teaching was a stand-by role with a clear script: lining students up, asking questions, rewarding and punishing, writing on the board. The enactment of these rituals was a socialization into teaching, an implicit and embodied learning. By incorporating their knowledge of teaching into imaginative role-play with objects and other children, these would-be teachers made their understandings and conceptualizations of teaching concrete experiences.

Another implicit way of learning how to teach was evident in the number of teachers who spoke of having family members who were teachers. This experience, unlike the make-believe play, was true for both male and female teachers. For example, Mr. Nevins's grandmother, a teacher in Russia, "inspired [him] with her stories of the classroom." Mr. Drake grew up around boarding schools, where his father was a teacher and chaplain. Ms. Mays said that her mother "was a teacher forever and I was always aware of that." Moreover, some teachers considered teaching to be a family tradition or legacy, like Mr. Solomon, who said his becoming a teacher was "maybe predestined": "Family members on both my mother's side and my father's side were in education, from teaching to principal. I don't know if it was in the cards for me to continue that family tradition having some role in education."

Like the memories of playing school, these family histories were brought up when teachers talked about the reasons for entering the profession, to say that teaching was somehow already familiar because it was literally "in the fam-

ily.” Images of teaching were absorbed or imprinted through hearing family members’ “stories of the classroom” or “always being aware” of their teaching work. While there were few concrete descriptions of the family members’ teaching work—though nothing as detailed as the actions described in the make-believe role-plays—the fact that the teaching examples and stories were close by and part of the family makes it reasonable to believe that the would-be teachers took them on. In this way, perhaps unconsciously, learning how to teach had begun.

The final subliminal dimension of learning how to teach was when a teacherlike quality or characteristic was detected by others and communicated to these teachers-to-be. This was a predictive kind of socialization, where ways of being a teacher were “recognized,” valued, and thereby reinforced. These were generalized associations, like Mrs. Wayans remembering that “people looked up to me to be a teacher” even in her adolescence. Other encounters were more specific, such as Ms. Baker being told she was a teacher: “I did a presentation in college in a literature class, and after the presentation my professor came up to me, and said, ‘You know, you’re a teacher. You are a teacher.’ And I was like, ‘I am?’”

Ms. Baker likely walked away from that encounter with some idea of what a teacher does or what a teacher is—and that she had “it,” though her incredulity indicates that she couldn’t specify what “it” was. Another teacher, Mr. O’Brien, remembered how he “found a tour guide position in Ketchikan, Alaska. One of the tourists said to me that I would make a great teacher because I made up stories and I told them about the history. And in retrospect, it had absolutely nothing to do with real teaching. But that said, I think that stuck.” Mr. O’Brien learned that storytelling was part of teaching and that he was good at it. That sense of how to teach, or what it means to be a great teacher, carried forward into his understanding of teaching.

Learning on the Job

Whenever teachers spoke of learning how to teach through their formal teacher education in undergraduate and graduate school, alternative certification programs, and organized professional development opportunities, the overwhelming conclusion was that these programs—and even prior experience working with children in summer camps or tutoring—did not prepare them for the work of teaching. Behind the often-heard lament that teachers are left to “sink or swim” in schools is the undeniable fact that teaching is intricate work that calls on all of a person’s imagination, agility, responsiveness, decision making, and resourcefulness *in addition to* solid content knowledge, pedagogical skill, and highly developed social and emotional acuity. Mrs. Cameron recognized this: “Wow, there are so many different moves that a teacher makes. It’s a really complex way to think.” Mr. Simmons emphasized the responsiveness of teaching when he spoke of “thinking on your feet

and the flexibility and unpredictability of not only what you've planned but what actually happens in class." Thinking in a "really complex way," making "moves," and dealing with "what actually happens in class" could perhaps be learned only by doing. Much like life shows us how to live, it was the act of teaching itself that helped teachers learn how to teach.

One way teachers in these conversations acknowledged this on the job learning was by talking about the ways they failed. Ms. Fields, for example, remembered making a mistake when she stepped out of her classroom to speak to a parent about an issue:

I made a very bad rookie error and left the room for a minute, which of course is a colossal mistake, huge no-no. But in my head I was like, "It's just a minute." It literally was four steps. And when I got back another kid had gotten into an argument, and it just was like an all-time low. I left for four seconds to deal with one massive issue and something else already happens.

Even if a teacher knows the "huge no-no," the learning comes from the experience of making the mistake and living through the "all-time low." At other times teachers spoke of how learning came through experiencing the chasm between plan and reality. Mr. Lowry remembered: "I made what I thought was a full lesson plan with multiple activities going on in the first day. Our classes are one hour long and the whole lesson took 15 minutes, and I was like, 'Okay, I have to pretend that I planned it this way and I still have 45 minutes' worth of things that I wanted to do.'" Though student teachers typically compose lesson plans and even whole units during their training, it is through the experience of miscalculating how a lesson plan would play out in real space and time that teachers learn pacing and content design.

How did teachers transform their experiences of failure into the substance of learning? For many, the experience of failure was new, or at least infrequent, prior to teaching. Ms. Baker, for example, found failure to be personally motivating:

My first year was horrible. It was so bad. I had never really been bad at anything before, but I was a horrible teacher. I decided that I wasn't going to stop teaching until I got good at it, so it became a personal challenge to me. I also felt horrible I wasn't serving my students better, and so I felt I needed to stay in until I got good.

The personal challenge, combined with "feeling horrible" for her students, probably helped Ms. Baker adjust her experience of incompetence into one of perseverance and a desire to learn. But does learning have to be a trial by fire? For some teachers, experience on the job, both struggles and successes, was the best learning. Ms. Linden said, "There are so many things that I feel [new teachers] need training in, but some of it just comes with experience, and no one can necessarily teach you how to handle that situation."

Indeed, alongside the stories of things going wrong in the classroom were

stories of teachers having learned their pedagogical craft through experience and across time. Mrs. Ferner told this story:

I was observing my student teacher, and she was making pancakes with the children, and the kids were doing their mixing. And after they made the pancakes, they wrote something about it. And one of the children wanted to know how to spell a word. Tiger was asking how to spell *sugar* and he wasn't comfortable sounding it out. He was looking around the room trying to find a sugar box or something, and Izzy turned to him and said, "Tiger, it ends the same way as your name." So then I came to my student teacher afterwards and I said, "Oh, Izzy is ready for word families."

The punchline of this story—noticing Izzy's learning strengths as well as Tiger's learning needs—highlights how teachers can learn from "what actually happens in class." This learning comes with experience, with years of making pancakes in a classroom, years of collecting sugar boxes, years of letting children find their own way to spelling, years of listening and observing. The beauty of teaching, its art and its skill, is how much learning it requires.

Learning from Others

"Learning on the job" meant that the teachers also learned from and with the people they encountered in their school lives—their students, their students' parents, and their colleagues. It almost goes without saying that teachers learn how to teach *from* their students, if only because we are in some sense learning to teach *on* or *through* them, every day practicing the pedagogical skills, techniques, and moves whose purpose is student learning. Ms. Baker, however, spoke about the need for teachers to learn *about* students in order to learn how to teach:

I think one of the most important things is that we have to study our students and we have to study as intellectuals as well. So, study books, study our students. I don't think you can be an effective teacher unless you are open to and informed by the realities and interests of the people you are teaching. I mean, that's how learning takes place.

Learning from students, it seems, is both a literal and a philosophical stance. One can't learn how to teach without attending to what the students are doing in the classroom, literally "studying" them in order to learn how to respond to them, be with them, and instruct them. But there is another dimension of studying students, a more philosophical stance of openness to "the realities and interests of the people you are teaching." Learning how to teach comes from an openness to students as people, not as receptacles of knowledge or followers of directions or indicators of success and failure. Ms. Baker's perspective subverts the inherent regard of students as the objects or recipients of teaching and positions them as sources, causes, and activators of teachers' learning.

Teachers easily acknowledged learning from students, whether they considered them as the material of their learning or as actors in it. Mention of parents as people from whom they learned how to teach was much less frequent. Mostly, teachers mentioned parents as important actors in their children's learning. For example, Mr. Drake expressed how "incredibly helpful parents are," and Mr. Solomon said he was disappointed in how little interaction he saw between teachers and their students' families and communities. One notable story was from Mrs. Adams, who said that a parent changed her teaching:

I was twenty-two and teaching during the war in Vietnam, and I was ardently opposed to it. I would often say things in my class about what was wrong with the war, and I was very outspoken about it. And I was doing this, I thought, in the true interest of this community and the world. But a parent came in early in the morning, very irate because her son was in Vietnam. She told me I should really think about what I am saying to children and that it isn't fair to tell them how to think. She didn't really ask for a response from me; she just wanted to tell me how she felt. I thought about it and then spoke with the class about how our opinions and points of view are negotiable, that it isn't okay for me to say you should feel this way. That was it. We never talked about it again. It did change how I was with the children. I thought I was giving them the materials to be open-minded and come to conclusions on their own, but in fact I was being as dogmatic and ideological as the people who I objected to myself. I have learned how to reframe and remodulate my passions in order for them to mix with other peoples' and not dominate, or alienate myself from them as a result of that.

Mrs. Adams articulated the potent idea that teachers can learn from parents how to "be with children." In her story, parents, who in their typical relationships with teachers are helpers or supporters of their children's learning or, less charitably, nonfactors or even problems, are repositioned as lesson-givers and learning-makers.

Though the teachers in these conversations spoke about parents infrequently, the role of colleagues in their learning was much more prominent. First, teachers often mentioned their school's culture, or "atmosphere," as conducive to learning. For example, Mr. Geller spoke about the "trust" and "commitment" among his colleagues, which was helpful in focusing everyone on student learning. Another teacher, Mr. Wang, said of his colleagues that "we all understand ourselves and our own flaws so well, and we realized we were in it together." Mrs. Ferner spoke of belonging and inclusion as conducive to learning: "I think in our school you could feel yourself, you didn't have to hide behind a name, you didn't have to hide behind authority. You were who you were, your practice was open to everybody." Teachers also spoke frequently about their colleagues' influence on their own teaching. For example, Mrs. Thomas spoke about the head teacher with whom she worked in daycare, her "multiplicity of skills and activities," how she was a "fabulous resource." Ms. Levy shared a similar thought about learning from her colleagues: "As my colleagues, you inspire me. I see you with students, or hear about the projects

that you are doing, look at your work on bulletin boards . . . I am learning something about how I can become a better teacher, and I can't do without that."

Other teachers were even more specific about how their colleagues helped them learn how to teach, naming both pedagogical skills and personal values. For example, Mrs. English told her colleague how much she appreciated her support:

Our school was on the fourth floor and I had no idea how to get the kids up and down the stairs. Unlike all those practical ideas about teaching, where some people would say you give them gold stars or you reward them or you scare them . . . the things that you said were very consistent with my own values. Like, how do I entice this kid to want to be a part of this community? Or want to get up the stairs with a partner they don't like? I felt you really understood how kids could do the work that they wanted to do and that they could become this very productive community together.

Mrs. English's words show, again, the complexity and beauty of teaching—how the mechanics of moving a class of children up the stairs are inextricably tied with notions of community, use of reward and punishment, and the building of relationships.

Such multifaceted intricacy of teaching work was especially vivid in the conversations of older, more experienced teachers. To them, learning how to teach was a never-ending pursuit; learning from their colleagues never stopped. Mrs. Wayans and Mrs. Tully expressed this wonder and appreciation:

Mrs. Tully: We haven't plateaued-out and we haven't given up. We're always working on bettering ourselves as people and as teachers, and we take that into the classroom.

Mrs. Wayans: With some modesty, I think we're like a think tank, both of us. We're always talking about new ways, new ideas, new thinking, and we don't always have to agree. I love that too—we don't agree all the time. You strengthen me . . . What's that saying—iron sharpens iron. You keep me sharp.

Learning from Self

In addition to learning how to teach from their colleagues, their students, and their students' parents, the teachers also learned from their own experience as students. The memories of themselves at school influenced how they related to students as learners, how they set up their classrooms, and what they thought was important to learn. Some of these memories centered on the teachers they had. For example, Ms. Levy reminisced about her teacher in first grade, who "was just so wonderful, so loving. We always had singing time which was just the best, because she was a great song leader and she would sing the funniest, most fun songs." The "loving" feeling as a student stayed with Ms. Levy, and it's possible that she carried this feeling into her own teaching, let-

ting it shape the contours of comfort and care she wanted her students to feel in the classroom. Mr. Nevins, however, had a different memory:

I grew up in the Soviet Union, and a Soviet classroom was, above all, orderly. It wasn't about learning, though we did learn a lot. It certainly wasn't about fun. It was about order. Students sat with their arms perfectly placed on the table. You had your uniform with your Lenin pin, your tie had to be perfect, your posture had to be perfect. You raised your hand at a ninety-degree angle from the desk. Nobody ever called out, nobody ever laughed; and if they did, a teacher could hit you. I left the Soviet Union when I was in the third grade, but in many ways the format of the classroom stayed with me. And so when I became a teacher, I didn't want to replicate a Soviet classroom, but it seemed to me that order, especially in rowdy Brooklyn, would be very important.

Mr. Nevins formed a narrative of his experience as a student, and while he did not want to "replicate" it as a teacher, he was aware of how his past mixes with what he values in the present.

This blending of past and present was also articulated by other teachers, who heard echoes of their own experiences as students. Ms. Gill talked about her students' struggles in her classroom while remembering her own:

All through school math was my worst subject. I remember having Ms. Hill my sophomore year taking algebra, and I remember she told me that I needed to have self-confidence. I never really thought about it in terms of having confidence. I always doubted myself around a test, an assignment, even a set of questions in the classroom. It was just intense anxiety because I felt that I was going to let her down, or I would feel embarrassed that I couldn't get the problem. With my students, I can tell that they want to say the right thing, they want to please me. I tell them that it's ok to get it wrong. "That is why I am here. I am here to help you figure it out." I tell them they need to have confidence. "You just have to work through it."

As a teacher, Ms. Gill recognized herself in her students and tried to help them learn the same way her own teacher helped her. This identification of their former student-self with their current students was, for many, a powerful way to learn how to teach. Mrs. Wayans also talked about how her experiences as a student shaped her as a teacher:

I was definitely the struggling student, and that's why a lot of times when I look at my students I am so connected. I identify. When I was a kid in school, I just did not understand anything. There were no connections to my life and learning. Now I'm a teacher, and I put a lot of emphasis on trying to develop analogies, examples, or looking at the child's expression just to see whether or not they do understand. A lot of these things I understand, and when I teach I keep that in mind.

It was from her own experiences of struggling as a student, not connecting life with learning in school, that Mrs. Wayans "made decisions about what kind of teacher she wanted to be."

Lessons Learned

Exploring the ways teachers in these conversations have learned *how* to teach highlights *what* they have learned. Like Mrs. Ferner learning not to force her political passions on children or Ms. Gill learning to encourage her students' confidence, other teachers articulated the growth and development they have noticed in themselves because of teaching or through teaching. These "lessons" were about teaching and learning, about children, and about themselves as teachers and people. Mr. Lowry, for example, spoke of learning how to adjust in the moment, of "perfecting my lesson even while I'm giving it" and how that has become "a natural tool I have now." That ability, however, is not what he considered his greatest learning.

I feel like my first year I was focused on the subject of math and the quality of the lesson and the worksheet and cold impersonal things like that. And now there is a lot of thought and time spent developing student relationships and really caring about their growth, their understanding. Checking in with kids, that's a big part of my practice and my thought process. Making sure the kids actually understand what I'm saying, not just making sure that I feel a lesson is good. Helping them outside of class, giving calls home to talk to them—"I saw in your face you were frustrated yesterday. Let's talk about it."

The lesson of valuing that kids "actually understand" over a "good lesson" is both simple and profound: it is the ability to shift perspective from teacher to learner, from delivering instruction to privileging students' growth and understanding. Other teachers articulated lessons that were equally important. Mr. Geller spoke of a major shift in his mind-set:

I was having a really frustrating class and I was sort of talking too much, which probably was the problem. I was at the front of the room and there was just so much off-task behavior. I noticed there was a cluster of kids that were focused pretty well, so I took my easel and walked over to them and was like, "This is where class is going to be happening. If you want to be a part of class you can join." One by one they came over and they huddled together and they had their notebooks and they were taking notes and they were doing all of the things that I wanted them to do. It was clearly the wrong thing to do, and I would probably go ballistic if I ever watched a teacher do that. But what it showed me was that my students are clamoring to get the education. It was the first time I realized that they wanted it too; it wasn't just me trying to compel them to want it. That really changed my outlook. What students can get educationally is more important to them than it is to me.

The power of this realization lies in its subversion of the usual premise that education is something given or offered to children. Instead, education is something we owe children.

Other teachers spoke of the personal development they experienced because of teaching. Mr. Pelles said that "if you're not a teacher, I don't know what other events in life can cause you to emotionally develop as a communi-

cator and as a leader, as well as a socializer.” More specifically, he connected learning how to have “presence” in the classroom with developing confidence more broadly:

I remember slowly building that presence, and by the second year I was, “I feel like night and day.” And it’s not just here. I was just amazed. I don’t think I realized how wide of a skill set teaching required and how much you would develop as a person by developing as a teacher. And once you can actually achieve that, then maybe it just naturally spills into the other areas of your life.

Some teachers spoke of gaining greater self-knowledge because of teaching. Ms. Baker explained:

Teaching is an interesting profession, because in doing it you are learning so much about yourself. Your students, especially middle and high school students, are the most honest and clear. If you listen, they are going to tell you everything about yourself. So in the act of doing that, I learned a lot about my own strengths and weaknesses, as well as what pants or dresses make me look pregnant. They let you know.

Though she ended her thought jokingly, the idea that “you are learning so much about yourself” in “doing” teaching is powerful. Part of the power lies in a paradox: while the work of teaching is others’ learning, the unintended benefit is your self-knowledge and self-understanding. Ms. Baker continued, “Part of what I learned from teaching is just in terms of how to move throughout the world.”

There were strains of this idea in other teachers’ words, such as Mr. Nevins’:

I’ve learned a lot teaching. I learned self-control, I learned patience, I learned how to read people. One of my closest friends served in the military, and I won’t compare my experiences to his other than they happened concomitantly. When we were both through, I believe we both came out closer to [being] men than we had been before. That the experiences proved not only difficult—certainly his—but also instructive in a way that things really settled down in the soul, and once you got out you saw that you were not the same person. Certainly I was not the same person who walked into P.S. 62.

The things Mr. Nevins mentions as the content of his learning—self-control, patience, reading people—are relational phenomena, ways of being in the world with others. Teaching, then, is a formative experience.

As much as learning teaching is formative, it is also never final. For some teachers, like Mr. Lowry, this realization was expressed in terms of ongoing learning and improvement:

I really love learning and teaching, and every day as a teacher I’m learning and teaching . . . And I couldn’t imagine doing anything else. I can’t imagine not being around people who want to know more about everything that they’re doing and about how to improve everything around them.

Other teachers, like Mrs. Morse, saw the “practice” of teaching as never finished or completed but always in development.

[Student teachers] want the answer, the one thing they can do to be successful in a classroom. And my challenge has been to say there is no one thing . . . Or when you find one thing, the next day it will be a different thing. The only advice I can offer is that it is an evolving talent and engagement that you develop as a professional in teaching that will keep you thinking of new things that will work. There are many different pillars that make a good teacher, and you’ll devote the rest of your life to developing all of the other components.

The long view of teaching as a developing practice—evolving, incomplete, imperfect—portrays teaching as something that is impossible to do without learning. Mrs. Wayans spoke of always having “something I want to work on,” and Mrs. Tully said she was “still excited by teaching.” Most teachers who spoke of teaching as learning had twenty, thirty, or even more years of experience. What kept the excitement going for them was the creativity and intellectual engagement of teaching, a sense of ongoing development in knowledge and capacity. Mrs. Ferner said:

Every year you get better and better at observing the children, and you help the children more and more and more. It’s not a question of becoming stale and exhausted but knowing more and being able to do more. It’s what keeps you alive intellectually and in a creative way, and it’s what makes me feel so good about being a teacher.

Listening to Teachers: Implications for Education Research on Teacher Learning and Teacher Voice

I began this article in a practitioner voice, relating my current experience in schools helping mentors, instructional coaches, principals, and district administrators develop teachers’ practice. And it was as a teacher and education researcher that I listened to the SCNTI conversations and composed a portrait of teacher learning from their voices. In the act of composing this portrait, I saw learning to be an essential part of teaching, with teachers forming and transforming themselves both as pedagogues and as people throughout the course of their practice. Here, at the end, I ask my fellow education researchers, *What can we learn from teachers speaking about how they learn to teach and what they learn from it?* I propose three ways for researchers to respond to this portrait of teacher learning.

First, I suggest we turn to SCNTI as a data source when designing research that relies on teacher talk about teaching. There are nearly seven hundred teachers who recorded conversations for SCNTI, offering data about the experience of teaching that, to date, no other education researcher has accessed. It is unconscionable to ignore these teacher voices available to all of us.

Second, I suggest some directions for the questions we ask about teacher

learning and the knowledge about teacher learning we want to produce. Perhaps we could investigate the opportunities teachers have to learn from their colleagues, what they learn from them, and how what they learn aligns with their own values and identities. For teachers like Mrs. English who do not want to learn systems of reward and punishment but instead to build a class community, we could ask, *How might schools become places where teachers could do this?* Perhaps we could document and analyze ways that teachers become “open to and informed by the realities and interests of the people they are teaching,” like Ms. Baker, who insisted that teachers study their students as well as study books, and we could ask, *How might this happen within all the constraints of school?* Perhaps our research interests in parent engagement and parent-school partnerships could narrow down to the micro instances in which teachers might learn from parents, like Mrs. Adams, who learned to “not dominate, remodulate and reframe” from a parent, and we could ask, *How might we facilitate parent-teacher interactions that help teachers learn?* Or perhaps we could explore how teachers’ childhood experiences and memories shape their day-to-day interactions with students, like Mr. Nevins, who thought “order” was important in his “rowdy Brooklyn” classroom because of his Soviet upbringing, and we could ask, *What kind of professional learning might help teachers connect their past and present selves?* and then critically examine how these selves influence their practice and, more broadly, how teacher education and professional learning programs account for the formative, developmental aspects of teachers’ learning that happen over the course of a career and lifetime. All these inquiries build on what teachers told each other about their learning.

Third, I suggest that we who study teaching practice promote a scholarship of voice, building on Featherstone’s (1989) concept of such scholarship as “a way to speak of important matters in a human voice” and as “the sound of a human voice making sense of other voices” (p. 375). Portraiture is certainly a scholarship of voice because it allows for storytelling in which teaching is the subject and teacher voice is the narrator. But regardless of method, to practice a scholarship of voice means to stand in solidarity with our subjects—teachers—and build a learning community around teaching, a community of scholars who take teaching seriously enough to listen to teachers. So I end with an invitation to education researchers and others—teachers, administrators, policy makers, parents, and anyone who cares to understand teaching—to continue the project of carefully listening to teacher voice, transmitting it, amplifying it, responding to it, and listening some more.

Notes

1. David Isay (2010) founded StoryCorps in 2003, driven by the belief that the stories of everyday people are interesting and important and that listening is an act of love. SCNTI is a massive public oral history project, the largest in the world, with more than forty thousand recorded conversations. See also www.storycorps.org.
2. Teacher names are pseudonyms.

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