INTRODUCING A GENRE OF CRITICAL SIGNIFICANCE: TWO PACIFIC WOMEN TEACHERS

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Learning from women teachers' stories: A regenerative praxis

Women teachers' personal (life history) narratives or "stories" are essential primary documents, and these documents do not exist for Fiji, as in many other parts of the South Pacific, or for the rest of the world.[1] One reason for this may be that women teachers telling, and sharing with other women and girls, stories about their lives and, more specifically, about how they have come to be teachers, is not seen as a particularly "heroic" practice or an exemplary "communicative" act. In Fiji, as in Nepal, Kedrayate and Schulz have discovered what Casey found in the United States, that is, the narratives of women teachers

> who have "authored" their own lives in significant ways, and [who] have written the social script for themselves and for others...document the enormous obstacles which contemporary women must overcome to establish the sense of personal authority which is vital for every person (Casey 1990:318, see also Young-Eisendrath & Weidemann 1987).

The main purpose of our research was to engage with the views of other women and the traditions and the environments inhabited by women teachers in their role as women and as teachers as possibilities, as forms for learning. Our purpose was to regenerate a "grounding practice or praxis," that is, "informed, committed action" (Smith 1994:166-7) on what it means to be a woman and a teacher in the world today. Sen (1995:259) states that "empirical research has brought out clearly the extent to which women occupy disadvantaged positions in traditional economic and social arrangements." We wanted to know how our shared, and sharing of stories might strengthen and extend what it means to be a woman and a teacher in order to confront such theory and practice.

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[1] Internationally, this literature is beginning to develop and to transmigrate into other forms (for example, see Casey 1993, Clandinin 1993, Middleton 1993, Schulz 1995, Thaman 1987). According to Casey (1993:163), ordinary women teachers working for *social change*"(re)create distinctive concepts and metaphors, they (re)produce particular forms of social relations, and they (re)construct specific dimensions of the social environment; they change their own lives and the lives of those with whom they work." According to Sen (1995:261; emphasis added), "*social change* is facilitated by a clearer understanding...between what happens and what is acceptable." Therefore, we continue to wonder what impact on our understanding of the human experience of being a teacher the inclusion of different life experiences of women would have (see also Personal Narratives Group 1989).

Human capital theory

Human capital theory, as a theoretical concept most responsible for the relationship between education and development (for instance, see Merchant 1992), simply suggests that if we invest in people, something will happen. Human capital theory cannot make sense of the differences between educational expenditure and educational outcomes in various contexts; instead, it centers on the productive capacity of the human manpower process and, in doing so, plays down the social implications of development issues, treating the improvement of the workforce as a form of capital investment (for instance, see Hindson 1992). According to Bacchus (1992:2), many of those who still subscribe to this theory of development advance a single view of progress or change: "The provision of more opportunities for education will increase the stock of human capital in a society and thus will eventually raise the level of national productivity and economic growth." When female education advocacy concerns have coincided with arguments derived from human capital theory about an underutilized reservoir of female labour and consequent waste of talent in connection with visible structures like schools, they have found the warmest reception by governments in various developing countries such as Nepal and elsewhere (Basnet, in Schulz 1995, see also Wilson 1991). Unfortunately, human capital theory tends to view human beings as units of production and *human capital*-- "the economists' term for production of economically valued characteristics" (Sunstein 1995:354)-- and it ignores the complex reality of the human condition (e.g., gender/ethnicity) and human education and development praxis.

Human education and development praxis

Where are the stories about teachers who have realised their own capabilities, freedom, and functioning against obstacles, even wanting to be something else, anything else but a teacher? This is but one of the generative themes that sometimes emerges in the stories teachers tell about their lives: wanting to be something else, anything else. This is a story that is also used as a story with the power to teach. This is a regenerative praxis that emerged in Nepal and in Canada and in the interview reported later with a Fijian woman teacher from a chiefly clan. This is a story about dreams, beliefs, hopes, about our ability/capacity to change, to transform not only ourselves, but others too. Is that not what teachers do? Is that not what we can teach ourselves to do if we can find such stories to live by? In Canada, a teacher-educator and teacher-researcher says:

> I have learned that someone needs to give back my story...I needed to be "looking on with someone"...so they could help me see what I had said and could give back the story in order that I might see new possibility in what I had told and lived. I needed to find a space to say the story, to have the story heard, and then to be with someone who could give the story back, someone who could offer me a response of possibility for living and telling a different story (Clandinin 1993:158).

Anderson (1995:168) suggests that perhaps "the most important thing" about education "is that children develop new concepts of what kind of persons they are." And while "education preserves intellectual systems," young people "learn how to remould traditional intellectual systems into new forms" (Anderson 1995:168). He suggests that "vocational aspirations are not produced by schools." They are as unpredictable as emotions or feelings that "result from looking at the job market, from observing people, and from ambition" (Anderson 1995:173). We believe that occupations such as teaching do not attract young people in many developing countries because of the low wages often paid. Teachers tell stories about the wage gap and about "the need for voluntary action, possibly the most potent instrument of conscientization....mercifully, reserves of altruism still survive and it is not impossible to find enthusiastic [education] workers motivated by a service ethic" (Dube 1988:90, see also Schulz 1995, 1996c, Smith 1994). We believe that women teachers' input through stories could provide new insights about such things as low wages, a service ethic, the role of tradition and culture, what it means to become, to be, and to sustain a life-course as a teacher.

We believe that teachers are human beings in touch with their transformative potential. According to Bacchus (1995:10), not limited to, but perhaps more so "in developing countries...the relationship between the teacher (or the guru) and the student...often has deep personal and emotional links." Women teachers who have realised their own capabilities, freedom, and functioning against immense obstacles, suggest in their stories that women and girls should have the same opportunities as men and boys to meet the teacher who will help them to activate their potential. But as Nussbaum (1995a:360-1) has argued:

> if we are to make a convincing case for women's equality and to develop a single account of human functioning and capability for both women and men, we evidently need to come to grips with this issue and take some stand on the role of emotion in good human functioning.

In order to explore transformative potential, it is necessary to be conversant with

> the various anxieties people have as their understanding of themselves alters. There are the possible impacts that these changes might have on people's relationships and lives. It also involves getting and staying in touch with the emotional nature of the relationship between educators and those with whom they work (Smith 1994:34).

Following Clandinin and Connelly (1988, see also Combs et al. 1984), we believe that the research subject is a person. Educational research (re)conceptualised as human education and development praxis emphasises that we need to create safe, educative spaces to listen to teachers: "the participating practitioner has feelings, values, needs and purposes which condition his/her participation in the research, and which can enrich and validate the study which elicits them as much as it can sabotage the study which ignores or suppresses them" (Clandinin & Connelly 1988:271-2, see also Clandinin & Connelly 1995). These ideas about choice and voice have several dimensions for women and teachers: Sen's (1995:264-266) "capability perspective" involves concentration on how "transformation possibilities vary greatly from person to person" and on "freedoms to achieve in general and the capabilities to function in particular" spaces. Smith's (1994:33) concern for "the whole person" involves "valuing" and categorising "yourself; being in touch with your capacities" or capabilities; "working to integrate different parts of yourself," focussing "on the relationship of individuals to others and to the world (the whole and the parts); and that between values, thinking and action (praxis)."

Where are the stories about women?

Models of and strategies for development that inform the process of directed social change in developing countries (for instance, see Lélé 1991) and "most traditional ways of valuing and categorising" have not yet accorded women "full membership in the human species" (Nussbaum 1995b:96). The literature having to do with education and development had "failed to include" the stories of "the majority of the human race, women, and particularly rural women until 1970" (Merchant 1992:8). This literature, which still fails to include "a conception of the human being and human functioning in public policy," has led to an inadequate public response, especially in terms of improving "the *capabilities* of citizens to perform various important functions" (Nussbaum 1995b:86-7). According to Nussbaum (1995b:90), Sen's "focus on capabilities and functioning" is essential to an "understanding of how women are doing." While, "participative decision making...can correct many of the imbalances and distortions that characterise the planners' plans," they "are far removed from the social reality of the day" (Dube 1988:107). Sen's capability approach suggests that we "come to grips with each persons' concrete life story" (Nussbaum 1995a:384). Experience suggests that the failure to pay attention to women's capabilities and functioning in the planning of education and development, focussing rather simply on GNP or visible structures like schools and access to them, undervalues and narrows the social roles and significance of women as teachers. It is possible that without the input (stories) of women, especially women teachers, policy makers, who decide how to spend ever shrinking budgets, may find themselves pouring good money after bad.

Interviews as a discourse of reflection

When asked to tell stories about how they came to be teachers, Schulz has discovered that whether in Nepal, Fiji, or Canada, teachers often tell their stories in exactly the space of one lesson. Kedrayate has discovered that there is more and more to the story when a woman takes away a tape and a tape recorder (see the Rotuman woman's story later in this article). In Nepal, Schulz (1995) returned again and again to inquire more about specific aspects and to pull on connecting threads in women teachers' stories but found the very first stories to have been succinctly told. Schulz's interviews with the Nepalese women teachers lasted approximately one to three hours. The interviews were autobiographical, focussing on the women's stories of how they came to be teachers. Initially, Schulz had planned to use an interview schedule designed to obtain a total life history into which more detailed information about occupational involvement and family life could be placed. This interview schedule was untenable and proved unnecessary as the Nepalese women teachers' stories covered these areas in ways that were important to them. Life history interviews are marked by conversational negotiation, and stories emerge in narrative/dramatic forms of monologue and participatory dialogue,[2] consequently, Schulz and Kedrayate decided that research with Pacific women teachers should be conducted in *all* ways.[3]

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[2] As education and development workers, Kedrayate and Schulz are also indebted in their practice to Freire's (1970) notion of "participatory dialogue" and Boal's (1979) dramatic forms for eliciting storytelling. We continue to grapple with their assumption(s) in terms of our research with women teachers. For instance, "both...*assume* that [oppressed people] suffer within a 'culture of silence' (Schulz 1990:253; emphasis added).

From a chiefly clan, a Fijian woman teacher's story: 'I just had to find my feet'

In the first Fijian woman teacher's story that has been marked by conversational negotiation, the more dominant story is a story where men are the protagonists, "the leaders," the ones who "get to do things, and the women are in the background." Positioned within such a story, she says that "the last thing I wanted to do was to become a teacher." While this cultural overlay (Fijian, traditional) and the boarding school experience (English, Catholic)--"where you were not allowed to speak in any other language but English... from morning till night"-- is acknowledged, there is another story being told. It is a story about a girl and then a woman finding spaces and ways and means to turn the dominant cultural discourse(s) and way(s) of thinking so that she might stand on her own feet.

> For many years, maybe up until the last two or three years, it never occurred to me that women could do so much. Until perhaps when I came here [to the University of the South Pacific], and then my eyes just kind of opened. And then it has kind of, not turned my world upside-down, but kind of turned my way of thinking on its head.

Smith (1994:129) asks:

> When we say that certain people are able to reflect-in-action, what is it that they are able to do? "Thinking on our

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[3] Those wanting a fuller discussion of life history not just as a method or technique but as a discourse of reflection offering a way(s) and means for girls and women being and becoming teachers in Nepal and elsewhere an alternative to the legend of say, *Saraswati, Parvati, Ram-Sita*, or Sleeping Beauty can find it in two mimeo papers (Schulz 1996a, 1996b) which are available from the writer Dr L.Z. Schulz, Lecturer in Education, Department of Education and Psychology, School of Humanities, The University of the South Pacific, PO Box 1168, Suva, Fiji.

> feet" is not a bad description of what is going on...reflection-on-action comes later; it is distanced in time-space from the original experience.

Safe educative/narrative "distance" allows this Fijian woman teacher "to entertain feelings and emotions that were bottled up or present only dimly in an encounter," in a "to-and-fro movement...between reflection-in-and-on-action" (Smith 1994:129), which involved other women:

> And now I'm the one that's thinking women can do anything. I'm looking around at all these women and saying "good on you." No, I'm really happy I'm a woman. There are so many facets of woman that you don't really get to appreciate because it's never kind of been brought into the open and kind of acknowledged really. That's how I see it.

The Fijian woman's story of how she came to be a teacher offers a view to a teaching life that began with a human (transformative, female) encounter, and such stories are rare in education.

> I remember a nun that I had in high school. She was a lovely, gentle person and...she was really kind to everybody. But she was no good on discipline...by this I mean that when she came to discipline somebody she would be the person more hurt than the person that she would be disciplining. Because I remember coming across her a few times and when she spoke to me she had, you know, tears in her eyes...so that it was just the fact that I affected her in that way that kind of worked with me rather than had she spoken harshly...I wouldn't say *she* was emotional. But she felt very strongly about people she was speaking to, and she had a *lot* of patience. So, you know, she's the person that I remember.

The terrain of feelings and emotions is *unsafe* (very difficult to measure) terrain to negotiate as a woman and a teacher since it is argued that "women are emotional, emotions female," and "this view, familiar in Western and non-Western traditions alike, has for thousands of years been used in various ways to exclude women from full membership in the human community" (Nussbaum 1995a:360). Kedrayate also reveals how in a chiefly family, emotions are to be kept in check: For instance, at the death of the father, this Fijian woman teacher, daughter of a chief, must not cry. The teacher that turned this young girl--who as an adult reminiscing says, "I think I was almost, well, I wouldn't say a delinquent, but...I've tried all the tricks that the kids are trying now"--was a teacher, a nun, who, in lieu of disciplining, "had tears in her eyes."

The Fijian woman teacher's story suggests how the narrow basis of human capital theory needs to be broadened as a rationale and a theoretical perspective to make important the provision of learning opportunities for and among women and girls. The outcomes have profound effects, *"not necessarily the lesser because they are delayed or difficult to measure"* (Jones 1996:4):

> In the schools that I've been in, we've always had other female teachers, so I've always had people to interact with. And if it was out in a mission station, there would always be women that we would be sharing a house with, or there would be other women on the staff, so maybe...I can't...say that I've ever been lonely...I'm glad I was born a woman. It had something to do with my education courses [at USP] where we had to go do some research and in the discussion groups we formed in that particular course we kind of looked at that which I had never really done any serious thinking about. In many of our primary schools we can have 90% majority of women and there can be perhaps only one man on the staff and this man will be head teacher, or if the head teacher moves out, then it has to be a man coming in and be the head teacher.[4] And it never occurred to me that this was something that shouldn't have been until

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[4] This reminds Kedrayate and Schulz of Thaman's (1993) "Reflections," for Thaman is one of the teachers of this woman teacher: "addressing a conference/on human resource management/I notice that they were all men."

> I came here [to USP] and then I started talking to others, "Why does it have to be a man that comes in and gets to be a head teacher, especially in primary schools?" *Especially in the primary schools.* And it's still something that is happening today, it's not something that happened ten years ago and that's the end of it.

When the tape was turned off, this Fijian woman teacher spoke about the lack of affection in the relationship she had with her mother. She spoke about the affective education of the bush school (Catholic mission school and boarding), which she *"really liked,"* where she was so hungry, as a child she had to forage: "We had to literally scratch around for our food, and we never had enough food to eat." It taught her finally that she could survive anywhere on these islands, which Kedrayate feels was a type of education encouraged by the nuns. The Fijian woman teacher spoke about how it felt at the age of five, and each year beyond, to watch the *dock recede,* and she remembers crying, crying when she got to boarding school and crying at nights. She did not say that Schulz could not turn on the tape recorder again, but it was felt as an intrusion and in a deeper sense was an acknowledgement of this safe, distanced in time-space but not in interaction, teacher research story, where "the presence of others generates a new shared narrative for each as it does in friendship and does not in acquaintanceship" (Clandinin & Connelly 1988:281). In such interaction, this Fijian woman teacher suggested that emotions and feelings, the affective or empathetic aspects of learning, and learning opportunities for and among women and girls at different positions in the educational hierarchy, helped her to arrive at a place where she could stand on her own feet.

A Rotuman woman teacher's story: A search for 'what makes a whole person'

With tears in her eyes still visible after speaking into the tape recorder, the Rotuman woman told the story of how, with meagre resources, her family was able to accommodate an overflowing number of persons in their home. The obligation to meet the needs of the extended family--"sometimes reaching a maximum of twenty-eight people"--as demanded by "traditions, actions, and songs," and the pressure to continue these largely rural traditions in an urban setting was demanding upon the sole breadwinner, her father. This brings to mind two Pacific writers: in New Zealand, Frame's (1979:133) notion of "the mysterious unexpected nature of guests and their relation to hosts...the host a sacrifice and ultimately a blessed food," in Fiji, Subramani's (1990:9) augmentation of Stewart's (1982) *Pacific Profiles*, a "collection of personal experiences," which he says "offers the reader most of the pleasures associated with a book of fiction." Like a novel's enticement to read on, the Rotuman woman teacher's dramatic monologue (told into a tape recorder without interviewer interruptive interaction) points out to a larger and more complex educative/communicative terrain to measure than just that of the productivity of salaried workers, but one as a woman and a teacher she knows quite well in her search for "what makes a whole person." Her life story turned on what her father used to tell:

> ...that a 40-pounds tin of biscuits doesn't last a week. And that's the number of people we used to have in our house, *all the time*, especially when people came from the island of Rotuma. So I believe that as I grew up I learned to *share*.

At a young age, she learned to share with others what little and what surplus *they and she* both had. As a single parent, she struggled to look after two invalids, mother and a relative, as well as her own children: "It is probably because of the hardships and struggles that I went through in life that I have been able to have empathy with other people." The Rotuman woman teacher's story confirms what Comber and Hancock (1987:7) suggest: "Every one of us has been constructed by our society, every teacher and every student...To know ourselves we need to know how our world has made us what we are," particularly, in terms of both surplus and deficit.

> My dad used to wake up at four o'clock, *like a clock*, every day, five days a week to have his breakfast. And he used to walk to where the public works depot is so that he can be on time. At that time, even three pennies was a lot of money for me. [Crying] I remember having just one uniform. My mother used to wash it in the evenings and iron it before I went to school. My dad used to tell me that because my five elder brothers and sisters did not fulfil his wishes, that is, being better educated to help the family, I

> had to do my best. Because of what he said I was motivated to work harder...
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> I cannot recollect all my experiences in life. The ones that have an impact on my life include the responsibility of looking after my mom and relations when my father passed away, my mother brought up a handicapped boy, who is about 38 now. I can remember the times when, sometimes my mother was in a coma, [crying] and he's having his fits. So I had to juggle the two. And I thought that made me very strong in my character. My firstborn only lived or survived for twelve hours and then passed away. [Crying] I also had to bring up the family. My husband died when I was six months pregnant with my last child so he didn't see his dad. He is eleven years old.

Facing the demands and constraints of her three life stages, child, adult, and parent, the Rotuman woman accumulates experiences (a surplus) that she uses to address the spiralling demands and expectations made of her from an early age (the demands of deficit):

> So all these things I thought really strengthened my character. They made me more flexible. Because of these early experiences, I think it has enriched my life as a tutor. I acted sometimes as a counsellor, as a mother to the students...
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> As a single parent, I had to be both a father and a mother to my children. And I sort of brought this in my teaching too. When I say "no," I meant "no." It's not for my own personal reasons, but I think there are some students who need to be treated very strictly. Later in life they will appreciate it. Now some have come back to me and said, "If you didn't tell me or punish me, I don't think I'll be what I am now." So I believe I've helped a lot of students and I think it has also enriched my life. I find that I can relate to them, even though there is an age difference.

> These are just some of the incidents that have enriched my life as a teacher.

However, it is only through narrative and reflection, sharing her life story in a safe and educative place, that she is able to value an inner sense of self and an "out there" awareness of the emotional nature of the relationship between educators and those with whom they work" (Smith 1994:34). To be a good teacher is to have the ability to understand students, some of whom may be academically weak and yet she says,

> I found these students have beautiful personalities. It's just that they couldn't cope with academic subjects. And my advice to them is that if they have tried their best and failed, they had to be satisfied knowing that they have tried their best...If they know that they could have done better than what they did, they shouldn't be satisfied, because they are not giving their best.

Lamenting that cultural values and traditions that have been commercialised have lost their meaning and value while encouraging the sharing, the caring, and the give-and-take of her culture, the Rotuman woman teacher recognises how the "situation today is that of a world-wide confrontation and interchange between the imperatives of tradition and modernity" (Benhabib 1995:241). Cultural mediation between the imperatives of tradition and modernity may be less easy to quantify in human capital theory, but it is one of this woman teacher's tasks (outputs): paying attention to the cultural cohesiveness of the community. The attention she has paid to the feelings involved with learning, the emphasis she places upon the interdependence of affective and cognitive aspects of learning (see also Salzberger-Wittenberg et al. 1983) have given her an awareness of her own and others' attitudes to education and to the significance of her cultural and social roles (capabilities/function/freedom) as a teacher:

> I consider...the personality, how one is brought up, to be flexible to appreciate other people's shortcomings or weaknesses...I feel that my experiences do have some impact on my students who come to ask for help...What's

> the point of having another certificate when you don't have dreams, when you don't have families, when you don't have extended families with whom you can share? My father always told me that money is not everything. What is the point of having a lot of money when there is a death in the family, and there's nobody to do the *lovo*, to dig the grave, to do the little running around, the errands? He always said money is to a certain extent good when it can buy essential things, but it is not everything. It is what you are, your personality, your outlook that makes you a whole person.

Having become emotionally/intellectually engaged with the Rotuman woman teacher's story, Kedrayate reflected on her own story of how she came to be a teacher in Fiji. She reminisced about growing up in a village, about the struggle and the hardships she encountered, and how they strengthened her character and how she learned to accept and not to question the traditional way of life while at the same time encountering modernisation: the push for young people to gain further education. She remembered facing a significant contradiction in terms of her learning. It was not acceptable to the elders to ask questions beginning with the word *why*. But when her mother and two sisters were on an island with no water, and she was told that girls do not climb coconut trees, she wanted to ask "Why?" "Why" and other questions that young people, especially girls, were not supposed to ask are a part of her own story of coming to be a woman teacher and are just some of the questions we are beginning to explore. In that way this is just a beginning, an introduction to the value of life history, exploring "the source of the problem [which] is the pervasive diversity of human beings [that makes] equality in one space conflict with equality in other spaces" (Sen 1995:264).

Cooper (1995:4) suggests that "trying to manipulate the demands of work, family and domestic responsibilities represents real challenges for women teachers." Nussbaum (1995c:15) adds how the struggle for human capabilities, functioning, and freedom "is not just a theoretical" but a practical "construct. For women all over the world, and for everyone who cares about women's well-being, it is a way of life." These stories of revelation of women teachers' human potential are also stories to structure activism. These stories are valuable and need further analysis.

Implications

In terms of education and development, the work most helpful with which to begin to understand the significance of listening to women and to teachers tell stories about their lives is Sen's human capabilities approach. He bears in mind "the recognition that each individual has a separate life story, and that good planning should aim to understand those stories, so that it can make each distinct individual capable of fully human functioning" (see Nussbaum 1995a:383-4). By engaging women teachers in telling stories about how they have come to be teachers, through conversational negotiations, we have attempted to bring to light the reality of being and becoming a woman teacher in a particular society, and in particular time-spaces; a reality of human capability, functioning, and freedom that is often overlooked in the theories that inform policy decisions in education and development. These stories about how women have come to be teachers can be viewed as an introduction to a genre of critical significance that policymakers and planners should aim to understand and to make important in order to improve the provision of learning opportunities for and among women and girls.

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