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Introduction

What we had not anticipated was that "voice" was more than academic shorthand for a person's point of view. We became aware that it is a metaphor that can apply to many aspects of women's experience and development. In describing their lives, women commonly talked about voice and silence: "speaking up," "speaking out," "being silenced," "not being heard," and so on in an endless variety of connotations all having to do with a sense of mind, self-worth, and feelings of isolation from or connection to others. We found that women repeatedly used the metaphor of voice to depict their intellectual and ethical development; and that the development of a sense of voice, mind, and self, were intricately intertwined. (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule 1986, p. 18)

Discovering Girls' Loss of Voice

Laurelei takes her seat in front of the class. It is 10:25 on a January morning in Chicago. Laurelei shivers as she rearranges the black cushion on the chair; is she cold, or is she nervous about sharing her writing in Author's Chair? I shiver too, the room *is* cold, but I *am* nervous about how her piece will be received by her peers. After all, I have been a participant observer in this particular fifth-grade classroom since September, and I have yet to see one of the eleven girls in this room share *anything* in a large group.

Laurelei, a ten-year-old Mexican-American, begins to speak: "A Report on Bill Clinton," she says rather quietly. Mr. Roscoe, the classroom teacher, stops her saying, "You're gonna have to be louder." She stumbles and starts again, reading her piece on the presidential inauguration a little more loudly. She does not look up, but her feet, crossed at the ankles, swing back and forth, keeping time as she reads. I look around the room. Many of Laurelei's peers are restless. But Laurelei doesn't notice, and she finishes reading her piece as she began: quietly and nervously.

There is scant applause and Mr. Roscoe opens up the discussion component of Author's Chair (Graves & Hansen 1983) by saying, "Laurelei, *choose* someone." (Students have begun to raise their hands with suggestions, "favorite parts," and questions). Laurelei timidly chooses a boy, who suggests that she put in her piece how Hillary and Bill Clinton met. Mr. Roscoe disagrees, adding, "No, then her piece would be a report on early life." Laurelei again chooses a boy (not one of the remaining ten girls in the class has raised her hand) who wants to know, "What color dress was she [Hillary Clinton] wearing?" This time, Laurelei answers the boy herself, describing in full detail the powder blue dress that Hillary had worn. As no more hands are raised, Mr. Roscoe signals the end of Author's Chair by suggesting to Laurelei that they need to have a content conference to "straighten out some of the order of events." Again, the class applauds quietly, and Laurelei returns to her seat.

As the students then line up for lunch, I place myself alongside the girls' line to talk to them about this event: a girl sharing her writing in Author's Chair. I tell Laurelei what a nice job she did, but she only hangs her head and smiles. Some of the other girls, when I ask as I have asked in the past, tell me again why they will never share their pieces in a large group and why they rarely ask questions of the author in that large group. "My stuff isn't good enough," "I'm too afraid," "What would I ask?" and "Nobody would think it was very important."

Contexts and Rationale

Mr. Roscoe's fifth-grade classroom is situated in a poor, urban neighborhood in Chicago's near-northwest side. "Near-Northwest"* Elementary school serves children who come from a wide variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds, including African American, Anglo American, Latino (Cuban, Puerto Rican, Mexican, Guatemalan) and recent immigrants from Poland and the former USSR. The school's largest population consists of Latinos who comprise well over 50% of the student population.

Considered one of the poorest schools in the city, poverty seems to exacerbate other difficulties (limited English-language status, single-parent homes) that these young students face. For example, close to 100% of the student population qualifies for the state subsidized lunch program, giving evidence to the fact that the community population as a whole falls below the national poverty line set by the United States government.

One of the major challenges, however, that these students faced was *within* the school walls. Near-Northwest was extremely overcrowded as a result of the school district's efforts to "redistribute" and "rebalance" numbers of students throughout the city. Yet, among Mr. Roscoe's colleagues, the common assessment of this phenomenon was that the overflow of students Near-Northwest received was comprised of the students nobody wanted; a sort of Haitian boat people scenario among this city's schoolchildren.

These beliefs were mirrored by attitudes on the "outside" too, as an insidious and dark cloud hung over the city's public education system fueled, in large part, by then-secretary of Education William Bennett's comments some years earlier stating that Chicago had the worst schools in the nation. There was simply a general feeling among many residents of the city that there was no sense to helping these schools; these children simply could not be "saved."

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* For reasons of confidentiality, the school name, the teacher's name, and all the girls' names are pseudonyms.

This sense that poor urban students were being "dumped" and could not be "saved" was chronicled by teachers and researchers alike (Kozol 1991) and reflected the increasing disdain society in general held toward the poor. Exacerbated by reports of welfare abuse, dropout rates, and violent crime, politicians were able to speak to society's worst fears: the poor would tear down whole cities and educational systems, leaving total destruction in their wake.

Poor girls and women, in particular, are often blamed for this urban decline by a society that expects them to be responsible and accountable for themselves, their families and communities. When they do not behave in a way that "mainstream" society dictates (i.e., maintenance of middle-class values and standards within a nuclear family setting) they are "punished." And their punishment in recent years has become more vicious—moving from such public disdain and distrust to cutting of assistance in health care, child care, and education.

It was in this particular moment of urban public school education that I came to Near-Northwest Elementary school, hoping to give testimony to the promises and potential of urban education, rather than adding to the debate over the challenges and failure of urban public education. With this deeply embedded in my mind, I began a study in Mr. Roscoe's classroom in April 1991 and remained there as a participant observer for several years at the teacher's invitation. Specifically, I had come to Near-Northwest school to observe how non-native speakers participated in peer writing conferences (Blake 1992) and if, as a result of "talking" in these conferences, made substantial revisions to their written pieces. (I was able to report that regardless of native language, students participated fully in conferences and wrote prolifically). What I hadn't noticed, however, was that I had focused my work mainly around the boys' conferences. I hadn't noticed that usually only girls conferenced with girls. I hadn't noticed that girls wrote about certain topics like family responsibilities, altering their voices to fit the public audience of peer conferences and other writing workshop activities. And I hadn't noticed

that as the year went on, the girls became increasingly silent and withdrawn from many of the daily classroom activities.

The focus of this book is a study of voice through writing among poor, urban, pre-adolescent fifth-grade girls. Voice became a central focus of this work when, during this earlier study of peer writing conferences I have mentioned, I began to notice what I thought was the girls' loss of voice. This "loss of voice" was apparent through the girls' increased silence in conferences, oral discussions I had with the girls around their writing and other topics, conversations the girls had with each other to which I was privy, and their written pieces, including notes and stories created for both private and public use. Because there were only eleven girls out of a total of twenty-eight students in this present inquiry, the issue of voice became even more crucial, as the girls' voices were quite often, literally, drowned out altogether. The challenges for these young women began in the classroom, and it was here, I believed, that promises and potential could be made and found.

Writing and Voice

Writing is a major means through which girls can begin to integrate what Gilligan (1990) calls formal educational experiences with powerful, personal learning experiences. Because all language is social (Halliday 1978), writing becomes a social activity in which a community of writers interacts to negotiate and construct meaning. Writing, although social, is yet personal, and is inextricably bound to one's culture (Bakhtin 1981, 1986; Burke-LeFevre 1987). Indeed, according to Willinsky (1990) students can shape, construct, and reconstruct their lives experiences as their voices receive an "elevated status" through and by their writing. For example, Shuman (1986) describes how writing allowed the urban adolescent girls in her study a way to work out ideas and problems in the midst of their ongoing experiences. Writing helped them to express their voices as

they learned to write and talk about what was important in their lives.

Voice is an elusive, complex, and controversial concept. To writing classroom researchers (Atwell 1987; Calkins 1983, 1986; Graves 1983; Murray 1968), for example, voice is central to the process of writing itself. Expressing "effectively" one's voice becomes the primary avenue in achieving ownership and control of one's writing while students are given opportunities to learn the value and purpose of peer review and collaboration, shared knowledge, and community. Students who are "successful" in moving back and forth among the recursive stages of the process of writing are more willing to revise and edit, produce pieces that exhibit higher textual readability, and develop one's voice. Only recently, however, have writing theorists (Bakhtin 1981, 1986; Dyson 1993; Gilbert 1989; Lensmire 1993, 1994) addressed how and why a writing process approach becomes the site for significant tension and struggle over issues like ownership and voice.

For Bakhtin (1981, 1986) the entire process of writing is charged with emotion and struggle over meaning, value, and voice. Multiple, socio-historical voices collide in this struggle and it is a very difficult task for the writer to sort out, organize, and express these competing voices in writing. This becomes especially difficult for girls, for example, as they search for voices of their own among the multiple voices they hear and know.

In Mr. Roscoe's classroom the girls exhibited multiple voices as they wrote and talked about their lives. In public writing contexts such as writing workshop activities, the girls shared their writing, albeit reluctantly, with their peers and with Mr. Roscoe. It wasn't until a quarter of the way through the school year that the girls began to include me in their repertoire of private writing activities, such as note writing and oral texts they created around fights, for example. It was here, outside of the public sphere of classroom writing, that a plethora of writing was taking place. It was here that I began to hear voices that were distinctly different from the voices I heard expressed in public. And it was

here that the girls' voices resounded with critical issues they wished to be addressed.

This book, in an attempt to describe the multiple voices of eleven girls in Mr. Roscoe's classroom through their writing, also seeks to fill a large gap in the current research and in current prevailing attitudes about urban public education in general. Through a close and detailed study of these girls' voices, we can begin to move toward a more positive yet critical analysis of the struggles and hopes of poor, urban pre-adolescent girls, leading us toward curricular and attitudinal changes that seek to speak to the *success* of urban, public education, rather than to its failure. It is hoped that these voices will educate and enrich others' lives as they have enriched mine.

Overview of the Book

Chapter 2 begins a discussion around language and language choice, particularly as choice relates to power, prestige, and resistance. In this fifth-grade classroom, I learned not only how I was defined and redefined by language, but also how the boys, for example, used particular language to control and remain more powerful over the girls. Language choice, and resistance to language choice, then, became a crucial prerequisite for voice among the girls in Mr. Roscoe's classroom.

Chapter 3 addresses more fully the theoretical constructs of voice. Central to this discussion will be an examination of what is meant by "multiple voices" and how attempting to sort out and express multiple voices can become, at the same time, both a dilemma and a survival technique for girls in particular.

Chapter 4 consists of two parts. The first part begins by describing not only the various contexts, both public and private, in which the girls wrote but also the genres, topics, and themes the girls chose for their writing. The second part focuses on the girls themselves as, mostly through their own writing, they are described. It is here that the girls'

linguistic heritages, family backgrounds, and interests both in and out of school are revealed.

In chapter 5, I explore the writing workshop as the major "public" avenue by which girls could write and express their voices. Specifically, chapter 4's focus is on the non-fiction pieces the girls created for public use and the influences from literature that supported the girls' inquiry and resultant texts. Chapter 6's focus, too, is on pieces created within the public context of the writing workshop. Here, however, I examine the narrative and fictional pieces the girls created for public use and the influences from popular literature, for example, that helped to shape these stories.

Chapter 7 explores more closely the private contexts that Mr. Roscoe and I created for the girls to expand and express personal voices through writing. Specifically, this chapter focuses on three pervasive themes on which the girls most often chose to write: domesticity, family life, and sexuality. Chapter 8 also examines the girls' writing through more private contexts. Influences from popular culture such as television, rap music, families, and school will be examined through their writing and their talk around their writing. The increasing and insidious influence of violence is also discussed in these latter contexts.

Chapter 9 begins an initial exploration of the necessity of providing a critical response to what I have called the "cultural texts" and thus, the voices, of the girls as they write. Some of the boys' voices are introduced here to highlight the very powerful influence their voices have on the girls, Mr. Roscoe, and even myself, as we learned to move toward a critical response of the girls' texts and voices.

The final chapter of this book, chapter 10, explores future directions of this research in relation to the efficacy of a process writing approach and on the necessity of a critical response both by students and the teacher to girls' multiple voices. A central focus for the discussion and implications, then, is how girls' multiple voices need to be included into the classroom writing curriculum.

The overall goal of this study was to reveal and document the struggles and tensions poor, urban girls experi-

ence and how these struggles and tensions could be explored through various contexts within a classroom writing setting. Poor, urban girls' voices have not been adequately represented in research, and to that end, it is hoped this work can contribute to discussions surrounding improved education for all students, but especially for those students who have little power. Through language and the written word, poor, urban, pre-adolescent girls express their voices as they learn to resist and challenge other voices, creating their own. If heard, and critically responded to, these multiple voices can become powerful voices on the edge of adolescence.