

## **Life stories and the development of a multicultural community of women educators**

One of the main roles of teachers is that of passing on to students the language, conceptual categories and forms of discourse which constitute society. In a multicultural society, this task is obviously complicated by the diversity of languages, perspectives and discourses at play in the society. To carry out their educational role in a multicultural setting, teachers need to be able to draw on their own life experiences and identities, examining for themselves and then presenting to their students issues of diversity from a personal perspective. In the conflict-ridden situation of Israel, Jewish and Palestinian-Arab educators come to their work carrying a heavy baggage of historical memory, and with competing collective narratives which often impede mutual understanding and dialogue. However, the telling of personal stories has the potential to promote intercultural understanding. Through a process of 'resonance' (Conle 1996), participants from diverse backgrounds can listen to and connect with one another's stories, examine issues closely, and experiment with claiming different voices as they reread and retell their own and others' stories. The study to be presented here explores the use of personal life stories as a vehicle for examining and developing multiculturalism in education. The study looks at issues of memory and storytelling in the context of multiple and overlapping identities, conflict and narratives of exclusion that characterize the Israeli context.

Examining one's personal investments in multicultural education is never easy, because it requires educators to acknowledge the provisionality and contingency of identity. Further, a public language in which the personal can be discussed critically is still lacking. This study seeks to contribute to the shaping of a public language adequate to this task, by focusing on the work of women educators who came together in a multicultural group to examine these issues in the context of their own lives and work.

### **Background**

Bowers (1987) considers the role of educators to be one of 'primary socialization', which on his view takes place whenever students are dependent on a significant other "to explain and model an aspect of cultural experience they have not encountered before" (p. 147). While the formative impact of family, the media and other social agencies on the development of young people is not in question, teachers take part in the primary socialization of their students whenever they introduce new curriculum material, for example. For the most part this is not undertaken consciously, giving rise to a taken-for-granted view of social life; in the complex and dynamic, multicultural Israeli society, however, this is no longer sufficient. To function effectively as citizens in a democracy in conflict, to be able to question given social arrangements, and to live with respect and tolerance for others, students – and their teachers – need a "conceptual framework necessary for reflection, for comparing perspectives, and for testing conceptual understanding against the complexities of the life world" (Bowers, 1987, p. 147).

Critiques of multicultural teacher education suggest that despite years of work there is still a dearth of knowledge on how to best prepare teachers to cope with diversity (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Zeichner, 1999), and practice often falls far short of

its goals (Goodwin, 1994; Jordan, 1995; Cochran-Smith, 1995). Hoffman (1996) judges the discourse of multicultural education in the United States to be uncritical and insufficiently reflexive. She argues that this discourse draws on concepts of 'culture', 'self' and 'identity' that derive from an individualistic Western-centric discourse. Eilam (2002) highlights the dilemmas encountered by Palestinian Israeli teachers who are educated in a western-oriented teacher education program and then return to teach in the traditional Arab-language educational system.

The conceptualization of multiculturalism in education is undertaken from diverse perspectives. MacLaren categorizes approaches to multiculturalism in political terms, identifying conservative, liberal, left-liberal and critical-resistance approaches (1995); only the critical-resistance approach, in his view, holds promise for bringing about significant educational change. Giroux (1992) invokes the metaphor of 'border pedagogy' as a model for multicultural education. Banks & Banks (1993) adopt a more practical perspective which allows for different forms and degrees of change: they identify 'additive', 'infusion' and 'transformational' approaches in the development of multicultural curricula. For them too, the 'additive' and 'infusion' approaches (which add on or incorporate content from diverse cultures) are limited in scope; needed are multicultural curricula which radically rethink education, moving towards social action and transformation. From a philosophical vantage point Taylor (1994) emphasizes the notion of recognition as central to an understanding of relations between groups with differential access to power in society.

What is missing or under-emphasized by these theorists, however, is the importance of taking a personal perspective in confronting issues of diversity. Nieto (1994) suggests that teachers need to "undergo a process of personal transformation based on their own identities and experiences... (and to) engage in a collaborative and imaginative encounter to transform their own practices and their schools" (175-6). Sleeter (2001) sees narrative research as useful because it "enables teacher educators to connect strategies or observations with examined life experiences and to communicate emotions." (238) Taubman (2002) also discusses the importance for educators engaged in multicultural and anti-racist education of examining their personal investments in their work. Among reasons for an avoidance of the personal, he points out that "to look at the personal, to begin to face the provisionality and contingency of identity, is to surrender the security of stable identities." Further, it is difficult to examine the personal because "we have yet to develop a public language to describe the personal that does not dissipate into psychologisms or unexamined narratives, or reduce our experience to some sociopolitical script." (p.99) This paper foregrounds the examination of personal narratives and perspectives by a group of women educators, and in doing so aims to contribute to the shaping of a public language adequate to the task of dealing with the personal.

Multiculturalism in the Israeli context. Israel can be characterized as a deeply divided society in which relations between Jewish and Palestinian citizens are under constant tension (Al-Haj, 2002). Within both the Jewish and Palestinian communities, there are diverse sub-groups based on countries of origin (for Jewish Israelis), religion and forms of adherence to religion, social class and other characteristics, giving rise to multiple and overlapping identities. There is likewise a diversity of opinion, which results in lively and sometimes acrimonious debate, concerning the nature of Israel as a multicultural society (Yonah & Shenhav, 2000) and the prospects for multicultural education (Eden & Kalekin-Fishman, 2002).

At the school level, however, policy is set and curriculum must be implemented without waiting for conceptual agreement. Studies have shown that the Israeli school curriculum fails to promote learning about the other (Soen, 2002; Al-Haj, 2002; Bar-Tal & Zoltek, 1989). Given this vacuum in official curricular treatment of multiculturalism, the task of teachers in classrooms is doubly significant: in addition to their everyday role in introducing students to new aspects of the discourse and culture, their role as 'curriculum makers' (Clandinin & Connelly 1992) leaves room for them to adapt programs and elaborate their own multicultural curricula in the classroom.

Teacher identity. In developing a pedagogy and curriculum adequate to the multicultural situation, one necessary resource on which teachers must draw is their own identity. Teacher identity is markedly shaped by the individual's biography and early educational experiences (Nias, 1985; Beijaard, Verloop & Vermunt, 2000); however, it does not follow that teachers cannot engage in questioning and thoughtfulness around issues of identity and the development of teaching practice (Britzman, 1991; Estola, 2003; Conle, 1996; Heikkinen, 1998). Recent studies, strongly influenced by the work of Bakhtin (1981), conceive of teacher identity as constructed in and through discourse. For example, Marsh (2002) illustrates the complex identities of a beginning teacher, identities which are seen as shaped by and within the different discourses that "swirled around her teacher education program," her school and classroom, and her personal life (p. 335). Elbaz-Luwisch, Moen & Gudmundsdottir (2002) draw on the ideas of Bakhtin to examine the multi-voicedness of teaching for practising teachers in different cultural contexts. Similarly, Coulter (1999) highlights the different discourses and voices at play in educational settings, and suggests that educational research should seek to generate dialogue among different voices. For this to happen, however, the teacher must become aware of the complexity of her own identity as a story constructed from diverse elements.

Narrative identity. The conceptualization of narrative identity rests on the idea that the stories we tell about ourselves over time play a formative role in shaping our sense of ourselves. Sociologists have explored the complex processes through which identity is narratively constructed in various social and cultural contexts (Shotter & Gergen, 1989; Giddens, 1991). The connection between life and story can be seen as a hermeneutic relationship, each giving meaning to the other. MacIntyre (1984) stresses the importance of narrative, in producing the sense of "narrative unity" in life. Ricoeur (1991) emphasizes the role of "the act of plotting" in giving form to life and making its meaning explicit; he speaks of "life as an activity and a desire in search of a narrative" (1991, p. 434), and suggests that some episodes of our life may be seen as "stories not yet told." Both Ricoeur and MacIntyre remind us that we necessarily make use of tradition, and of the stories provided by the culture in developing our own narrative; thus, for Ricoeur, "we learn to become the narrator of our own story without completely becoming the author of our life" (1991, p. 437).

The work of Bakhtin, drawing on studies of the modern novel with its multiple story lines and many characters speaking in the voices of a diversity of social milieus, has been seminal in establishing the idea of narrative identity as multi-voiced. Paying attention to the way that selves are produced through dialogue, Bakhtin's theory sees the self as continually revisioned, and not only through the dialogues we hold directly with others: the voices of others are also sounded indirectly and come into play as equal partners in self-dialogues. Thus "the dialogical self knows itself through the

responses of real, imagined, historical and generalized others” (de Peuter, 1998, p. 39).

This conception of self illuminates the multiple challenges facing teachers in a multicultural society: they need to first shape a workable personal and professional identity, and then draw on the resources of that identity and of their own life experience to adapt, develop and implement curricula and pedagogy that are adequate to the challenges of a multicultural environment. Bloom (1996) argues that the patriarchal, male model of the singular voice stigmatizes as weak or unhealthy any subjectivity which does not present itself as unified, strong and clear. Ribbens (1998) discusses the difficulties of studying and writing about personal experience and giving expression to “feeling voices.” Bekerman (2002) stresses the pervasive, and often ignored, role of nationalism in shaping understandings of society and identity, particularly in the Israeli context. Thus, claiming a voice in a particular social, historic and cultural setting is not something to be taken for granted, but requires considerable effort (Gudmundsdottir, 2001).

The work of Lensmire and Satanovsky (1998), drawing on Bakhtin, can help to explain the process of claiming voice. Lensmire and Satanovsky understand voice as a “project”: “it points to ongoing human labor that constructs and reconstructs our selves and our relations to others and the world“ (p. 284). They see voice as involving three aspects: appropriation, social struggle, and becoming. The notion of *appropriation* emphasizes “the activity of the self in the face of cultural resources” (p. 284): knowledge is not passively acquired; rather, all of us must work to make sense of the phenomena around us using the language we share with others. The element of *social struggle* comes into play as we work to express our ideas in ways which will persuade our audience; often we must choose among multiple voices, taking a stand which positions us with certain audiences and against or outside others. The final element, *becoming*, means that in developing an internally persuasive voice we are engaged in growth and change, reconstructing the knowledge handed down to us, choosing what is useful for our current situation. The notions of appropriation, social struggle and becoming are particularly apt to describe what takes place as teachers, throughout their careers, engage in an ongoing process of identity development as teachers within the complex setting of the Israeli school system.

The role of storytelling in multicultural encounters. In the development of multicultural education in Israel, structured programs of encounters between Jewish and Palestinian Israelis have played a significant role for some years; only recently have these educational efforts been examined more critically (Bekerman, 2002; Maoz, 2000). Research makes it clear that just bringing people together is rarely sufficient (Abu-Nimer, 1999; Maoz, 2000). Practical arrangements are crucial: courses that extend for a full year or intensive residential workshops, facilitation by two persons belonging to the Jewish and Palestinian communities respectively, the possibility of speaking in either Hebrew or Arabic, with translation, have all been found to be important. These arrangements, however, are difficult to provide within typical institutional contexts (pre-service education and ongoing in-service programs for teachers). It is also apparent that encounters must acknowledge and address wider political and economic issues: Bekerman (2002) points to “the inevitable penetration of outside power struggles, identity clashes, and structural asymmetry into contact situations”. However, in most educational settings the addressing of such issues, however even-handedly, may be perceived by some participants as inappropriate to a professional context.

Meetings that are organized around various forms of storytelling have the potential to overcome some of these difficulties. In situations of cultural difference, it has been shown repeatedly that storytelling enables marginalized groups or individuals to claim the voices silenced by mainstream culture (McLaughlin & Tierney, 1993); hooks (1990) views storytelling as a way to “claim all the tongues in which we speak, to make speech of the many languages that give expression to the unique cultural reality of a people.” Various formats have been developed for the use of story and narrative to promote teacher development in general, and intercultural understanding in particular. Conle (1996) describes the process of 'resonance' by which prospective teachers from diverse backgrounds were able to listen to and connect with one another's stories. Berlak (1996) provides an account of students learning about cultural difference through readings, film, classroom dialogue and, in particular, their own writing. Personal stories are rarely neutral with respect to past history or power relations in the present, so they allow these issues to be confronted, often indirectly; they also enable educators to experiment with claiming different voices as they reread and retell their own and others' stories in a multicultural group. Not least, they also facilitate the development of friendships among group members.

In recent work, telling and listening to one another's personal and family stories has enabled teacher education students to begin a process of 'restorying' their understanding of the 'other', examining the cultural codes which organize their lives as Jews and Palestinian Arabs in Israel, and trying out new forms of action on the basis of what they learned (Elbaz-Luwisch 2001a, 2001b). As part of a larger study examining these issues, the present paper focuses on one part of the study, involving a small, multicultural group of women educators from diverse levels of the education system.

Understanding dialogue. The notion of dialogue is often used loosely in speaking about multicultural encounters. Theorists, however, have raised serious concerns. Hartley (2000) points out how often we do not say what we mean, fail to understand, or simply break off the attempt at dialogue without reaching shared understanding. For Hartley the idealized view of dialogue as “a neutral linguistic space wherein the conflict between voices is harmonised” (p. 82) cannot be sustained. Perhaps dialogue across difference requires what Bakhtin termed "living into", a process in which “one enters another's place while still maintaining one's own place, one's own outsidedness, with respect to the other.” (Min, 2001, p.10) Thus, for example, a Jewish student teacher was told by a Palestinian family friend, “You'd understand what I'm talking about if you lived as an Arab, that's the only way you could really understand what goes on in the heart and the mind.” (Elbaz-Luwisch 2001a, p. 135)

Steinberg & Bar On (2002) propose a typology for categorizing discourse in encounters; their six categories are "ethnocentric talk, attack, opening a window, recognition of differences, intellectual discussion, and dialogic moment." This typology, based on the work of Bakhtin and of Buber, helps to identify different types of discourse that occur during meetings in the multicultural group. However, a typology cannot account for the movement from one type of discourse to another, nor explain how 'dialogic moments' come about, or what enables participants to “live into” the experience of the other. Some approaches to conflict resolution (e.g. Mindell, 1995; LeBaron, 2002) suggest dialogue has to be understood holistically: conflict is not a negative phenomenon to be got rid of, but something that embodies and expresses meaning, and to understand it calls for intuition, imagination, and somatic knowing. Not surprisingly, these approaches rely on story and narrative.

Contested memories and the possibility of dialogue. In the Israeli context, efforts at dialogue come up against the inevitable barrier of memory; the weight of historical memory carried by both Jewish and Palestinian participants, even if they themselves were not participants in the events, is heavy. Lentin (2000) uses the term "territories of silence" to refer to the many untold stories of the Shoah: survivors of the Holocaust were silent for many years because of the impossibility of narrating their experience, while society, and even therapists who treated survivors were often unable to hear their stories (Danieli, 1982). Still, it seems clear that telling the stories of trauma and loss can have both a therapeutic effect for the individual and an impact on learning (Crossley, 2000). Neumann (1998) discusses the impact on her personal academic work of the process of reconstructing the life stories of her parents, both Holocaust survivors.

The problematic of memory and storytelling is by no means confined to the Holocaust, though the unique difficulties of representation of Holocaust memory undoubtedly have an impact on any life story told in the Israeli context. Immigrants to Israel have found that their stories must be told in prescribed ways (Golden, 2001; Liebllich, 1992). The experience of the Palestinian community since 1948 has only recently begun to be heard in the public forum (e.g. Grossman, 1993). The Jewish and the Palestinian collective narratives of the events in 1948 are perceived to be in direct conflict (Salomon, 2004); it often seems that each side negates the memory and narrative of the other (Gur Zeev, 2001). It is difficult to conceive ways of reconciling the collective narratives, but in the context of a small group, participants seem to draw on resources of creativity and generosity that enable them to accept and appreciate one another's personal stories and to raise and deal with difficult questions.

### **Objectives of the study**

The purpose of the study described here is to examine the use of personal life stories as a vehicle for learning about multiculturalism in education. The study (still ongoing) looks at issues of memory and storytelling in the context of multiple and overlapping identities, conflict and narratives of exclusion that characterize the Israeli context. The focus is on the relevance of these issues for a pedagogy of border crossing and multicultural dialogue. Specific objectives of the research are:

1. To describe the processes of 'identity work' engaged in by participants in the different settings, their learning about their own conceptualizations, stereotypes and views of culture.
2. To identify the conditions and circumstances which are conducive to bringing about 'dialogic moments' in the interaction between participants from different backgrounds.
3. To identify the constraints on dialogue among the participants in the different settings.

The study is of potential significance at the individual, inter-group and curricular levels. For participants, the opportunity to tell an important personal story, to have the story heard and validated by others, contributes significantly to both personal and professional development. In the group context, the significance widens as participants examine the various collective narratives that are in play in the society; while collective narratives are often competing and contested, speaking in what Bakhtin (1981) termed an "authoritative discourse", participants in the small-group format are often able to work out ways of receiving, interpreting and understanding the personal narratives of their colleagues from diverse backgrounds, elaborating and

drawing on their own "internally persuasive discourses". The curricular significance for teachers lies in motivating them to elaborate ways of using personal stories in their teaching of diverse subjects, in their work as mentors of other teachers, and in their work as educators of new teachers, thus bringing multicultural perspectives into classroom curricula and teaching practice at all levels.

### **Description of the study**

As one element of a larger project, a small informal group of twelve women educators, citizens of Israel from diverse communities in the northern part of the country, was formed based on a shared interest in telling their stories and listening to others. By design, the basis of membership in this group is not institutional or professional, participation is voluntary and the format resembles other communal settings in which the women participate; hence the choice of a women's group, in which it may be easier for some women to tell their stories openly. The group has met once a month for three hours over a period of a year and a half, and its meetings are continuing.

Data collection. The meetings of the group have been audiotaped, and an assistant has also recorded by hand to supplement the audiotaping. Transcripts were prepared of all meetings. At each meeting, one participant told her story; the transcripts were returned to the participants who checked them for accuracy. After all the stories had been told, the participants engaged with the stories, each one responding in writing to significant passages in selected stories. This process generated a dialogue which continued in meetings and through email.

Analysis and interpretation. The materials collected are being analyzed from a phenomenological perspective to identify major themes. The tools of narrative and biographical analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Denzin, 1989; Mishler, 1986; Phillion, 2002; He, 2002) are drawn upon, as well as the Bakhtinian perspective presented above.

Main questions of the study. The study seeks to respond to a number of questions:

- 1) What do educators learn from the process of writing, telling and retelling their personal stories in a multicultural group setting?
- 2) What meanings do participants derive from the encounter with colleagues from diverse backgrounds?
- 3) What are the main characteristics of the encounter?
- 4) What role does the institutional and professional context play in fostering or impeding dialogue?
- 5) What events and circumstances within the setting foster dialogue? What impedes it?

### **The story so far**

The group of women educators is made up of twelve women, ranging in age from the twenties to the sixties. Three of the women are native Arabic speakers – one belongs to the Druse community, one is a Christian Palestinian Israeli, and one is from a Beduin background; the other women are Jewish, from varied backgrounds: four were born in Israel, five immigrated to Israel (three as young children) from South America, India and Canada. Two of the woman have doctoral degrees, two are currently engaged in doctoral studies and three others about to begin. One of the women had just completed her bachelor's degree and teacher education diploma as the group began its meetings, and was just beginning her involvement in education. The

other women all work in various capacities: as teachers, teacher educators, teacher advisors, mentors and inspectors, and as researchers; most work in the formal education system, but one participant recently retired and continues to work freelance as a teacher advisor, and another is also involved in developing a consulting business. The women have a wide spectrum of talents: several are very involved in the educational uses of computers, at least two write poetry (one in Hebrew, one in Arabic), one has written a children's book, and the list could be continued.

The group began meeting in November 2005. Two of the attendees at the first meeting did not continue because of time constraints, and two others joined soon after; the group has remained stable, except for one participant who was unable to continue after the first year because of a change in employment. At the introductory meeting, one participant volunteered to tell her story at the next meeting. This proved to be a significant starting point: in her twenties and having just completed teacher education, this young woman joined the group after taking part in a course (on curriculum development for multiculturalism) in which participants wrote the life stories of persons who had influenced them, and then worked on these stories in multicultural groups. That experience (included as part of the larger study) had been meaningful for her and she came to our group eager to continue examining her own story. She told about her life, growing up in a Beduin family, with great candour and openness, and with rich detail that allowed all the listeners to connect to her story in various ways. This seemed to be one of those stories that demand to be told; and as such, it set a standard and opened wide a door for what was to follow.

For next year and a half, we have continued meeting once a month. The meeting usually begins with some sharing about what has been happening since we last met; several times we began with a creative activity: once we told and shared our stories in collage form, and another time we brought objects to tell about. Then one of the participants tells her story, in whatever format she chooses. Many of the stories have been accompanied by photographs, objects or other materials. All the stories have intertwined the personal and professional aspects of our lives, though in varying proportions and modes. Quite a few of the stories have been told at critical junctures in the life of the teller: one participant told her story not long after the death of her father, another told hers soon after completing her doctoral dissertation, and one had recently learned of a serious health problem. In each case the situation served to organize the story in ways that might not have been chosen at another time in the teller's life; despite their wide diversity, the way that all the stories were told reflected the openness and trust that had been established in the group.

At the end of the first year the group held a day-long meeting outside the university, in the beautiful pastoral setting of a kibbutz not far from Haifa. We began the day with a visualization that invited each participant to look over her own life's journey, and then drew pictures of our journeys and put them on the walls for all to share. Two participants told their stories over the course of the day, and then we worked in small groups to imagine the continuation of our journey as a group. The participants agreed that the journey of the group had been important, exciting and valuable for them; they mentioned qualities of wisdom, kindness, optimism and calm that had been manifested by other group members. They experienced a feeling of acceptance in the group that was liberating and inspiring, and they wanted it to continue. But they also found it difficult to formulate the nature of this shared journey: one person wrote, "What is our goal? Where are we going together? I don't know ...", and another said, "All year I have been asking myself, what is this journey? What is its meaning for me? What are the stages that pop up near me/in front

of me/ by my side, every month?" It was agreed that we wanted to continue, to formulate some tasks for the group, to both share our experience with other educators and to envision a product that we could work on together.

During this special day that we enjoyed together, the outside world made its presence felt in an insidious manner: the television set in the office of the centre where we were meeting carried breaking news of the kidnapping of two soldiers on Israel's northern border. The second Lebanon war ensued in the following days, and all the group members were affected by this war in varying degrees: most live in Haifa or nearby towns that were under rocket attack, some of the group members had to leave their homes, and many had family members serving in the military. During this time we kept in touch by phone and email, but when one of the women wrote with the quite natural suggestion that we share our experiences and feelings via email, the communication was sparse. The harshness of the events seemed to have silenced us. In September we met to share our experiences, letting out all of the feelings, fear and sadness that we had not been able to express earlier. The bond we felt during this meeting was tangible; we raised a toast to the New Year just beginning, hoping that it promised better things for all of us and for the country and region of which we are a part.

It is interesting that while the wider social and political issues appeared in our stories in a variety of ways, they rarely intruded into our interactions with one another. This was underlined at a recent meeting held at the home of one of the participants, in the town of Shefa'amer, a mixed Christian/Moslem/Druze town. As we basked in the early spring sunshine on a balcony overlooking the town and its surroundings, our talk was punctuated by the sounds of Friday prayers from the nearby mosque, broadcast over a loudspeaker. The melodies of the Moslem prayers provided a contrasting background for the observance of the customs of Easter and Lent (not least, a delicious meatless meal) in the home of our Christian hostess; the Jewish participants happily took time off from preparations for Passover a few days later. We talked about a recent event we had held at the university in which we shared our experiences of the previous year with a group of 50 invited women; we engaged them in a storytelling workshop and many of them had expressed interest in joining new circles of women educators. As we discussed these plans to expand our activities, many other topics peppered the conversation. We discovered that some of us loved coriander (used in one of the salads), while others really hated it; suddenly our hostess disappeared into the kitchen, and returned to tell us that all of us, without exception, had eaten – and enjoyed – coriander in the falafel which had quickly disappeared from the plate. Soon after, without warning, we found ourselves in the midst of a heated discussion about the reasons why many Israeli Arabs consider themselves Palestinians, and what the implications of this might be for Israeli citizenship and Jewish-Arab coexistence. Everyone talked at once: one Jewish participant tried to explain what she found problematic and conflictual about the designation "Palestinian Israeli", while another woman insisted on claiming both her cultural identity as a Palestinian and her civic identity as an Israeli citizen. Then, like the Moslem prayers which had just ended, the argument peaked and came to a close (unresolved), and we all hugged and said our goodbyes, wishing one another good holidays. Just as we had differing views about coriander, yet all of us had eaten coriander in the falafel, so we managed to contain our diverse political views, holding them within the circle of our friendship and our commitment to living and working together.

Our presentation will examine the life stories of participants in the group with a view to showing the pattern of shared and divergent themes that play throughout the

stories, in particular the themes of family, the influence of mentors and other important people in our lives, turning points and crises as catalysts for growth, and the centrality of learning and development. We will also highlight the diverse voices that circulate in our environment and that we have claimed in speaking about our lives and work: our voices as concerned professionals, as mothers, daughters, partners, sisters and friends, as academics, and as community members. We focus on the ways that each woman responds to the stories of other participants and uses these responses to reflect on her own life and work. Through working with our stories, we seek to better understand our multicultural environment and find ways to elaborate educational practice that fosters and promotes living well together.

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