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# **The Variable of the Self in Classroom Research**

## **A Brief and Incomplete History of My Work as a Teacher Researcher**

Karen Gallas

In September of 1989, the first week of the school year, I accidentally came across a letter which had just been posted on the bulletin board in the teacher's room. It was an invitation to teachers who might be interested in learning more about teacher research, language, and literacy, to join the Brookline Teacher Research Seminar. The letter described a weekly seminar in which teachers looked together at children's talk and at the same time were introduced to methods of conducting classroom research on language. I was intrigued, and after a conversation with Ann Phillips, who was the seminar leader at that time, I decided to join the group.

It is important for me to point out that the school year of 1989-90 was also the year that I was visited by what I now affectionately call "The Class From Hell." The children in this class were creative, independent and active with a few other very significant problems. It is intriguing to me now that they were the first class that I approached formally as a teacher researcher. I say "formally" because I had always been involved in documenting my classroom practice, but this was my first experience in looking systematically and intensely at practice from an ethnographic perspective. This was the first time I named what I did—"teacher research." [Note that the research for my doctoral work (Gallas, 1982) had been conducted in my classroom in 1979 - 80, but I did not call it "teacher research."]

In September, as I realized the magnitude of the teaching task before me, I also began to understand how an orientation to children's talk would enable me to focus on each child's stories rather than their collective behaviors. I became very involved in researching what I now call "Science Talks" (Gallas, 1995), and I found that my work with the seminar and with the Science Talks enabled myself and the children to carry on a continuous dialogue about science. That was an immensely positive focus for us as we struggled every day to live and work together.

I quickly found that the process of researching my first question, "How do children talk about science?", unleashed a torrent of other questions and a constant stream of writing. Within three years after beginning my work on Science Talks, I had also become deeply involved in documenting the role of the arts in the classroom, studying children's work on community

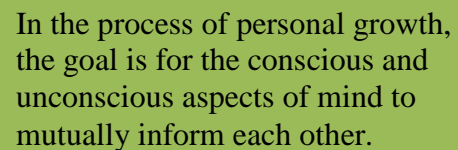
building in sharing time, and looking at the dynamics of gender and power in the classroom.

Each of these projects seemed to evolve naturally into the next. For example, my work in science talks forced me to be silent during the talks. In doing so, I saw how children's thinking and their sense of community developed. I wondered what would happen if I put the child in the sharing time chair alone and became part of the audience. What might I then see and hear? (Gallas, 1992). While documenting sharing time, I observed how certain powerful boys used language to leverage power. That led me to a much wider exploration of the role of gender and power in my classroom (Gallas 1998). As the children in my classroom gained greater control over forums like sharing time and science talk, my ability to teach and build a responsive curriculum with them also expanded. Gradually, I became fascinated by the ways in which children naturally used imagination to further their own learning. Eventually, that fascination led to important changes in my teaching (Gallas, 2003).

### A New Direction

In 2003, after teaching for thirty years, I made an adjustment to my career for both personal and professional reasons, returned to graduate school, and trained to become a psychotherapist. I have found that the work I do clinically, and the theoretical schools I have been exposed to as I continue to study psychology (Jungian psychology, Archetypal psychology, Imaginal, Narrative and Self psychology) have expanded my ability to talk and write about classroom research, literacy, and teaching. I have also realized that the separation of the field of clinical psychology from that of education is unfortunate. Many of the basic principles of psychotherapy have extreme relevance to the practice of teaching. After all, learning is from the start about relationship, and relationship is the stuff of psychology.

As I have considered the intersection between teacher research and psychotherapy and the arc of my process as a teacher researcher, I see more clearly the influence of the self in classroom research. In psychology, specifically in Jungian psychology which is where my interest really lies, the self is composed of the conscious and unconscious mind, and both parts are active at all times. In other words, we are never free of unconscious influences in our lives, even during our waking hours. In the process of personal growth, the goal is for the conscious and unconscious aspects of mind to mutually inform each other. Carl Jung had this to say about the researcher of human behavior:



In the process of personal growth, the goal is for the conscious and unconscious aspects of mind to mutually inform each other.

No investigator, however unprejudiced and objective he is, can afford to disregard his own complexes, for they enjoy the same autonomy as those of other people. As a matter of fact, he cannot disregard them because they do not disregard him. Complexes are very much a

part of the psychic constitution, which is the most absolutely prejudiced thing in every individual. His constitution will therefore inexorably decide what psychological view a given observer will have. Herein lies the unavoidable limitation of psychological observation: its validity is contingent upon the personal equation of the observer. (1934/1960, 213)

Specifically, for this paper I will focus only on the role of the unconscious mind in shaping research in each phase of the process: identifying the questions, developing a methodological framework, and analyzing the data. I will illustrate my points by further unpacking different aspects of my own work. What I am hoping to highlight is the action of the unconscious mind, to stimulate curiosity about how research questions, points of curiosity, and the data that catches our attention are first, and foremost, pushing up from beneath and bringing our “complexes,” as it were, to bear upon our work. It is most important to say here that the influence of the unconscious is not necessarily a bad thing. As the saying goes, “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger,” and, I would add, wiser.

### Research Questions

So how do unconscious contents affect our choice of research subject and the questions we investigate?

In 1988, when I began to research the questions my students asked about the world when they weren’t being taught science, I felt there was something missing from the science curriculum; and that “something” was my students’ ideas about science. At the time, that’s why I thought I was researching Science Talk. In 1989, when I began documenting sharing time, I thought I was simply expanding my questions about children’s oral language skills and their ability to build community through a more open format of sharing in which they talked and I kept quiet.

As time passed, however, and I became more and more involved in studying children’s language, I came to realize (even before I studied clinical psychology), that the actual motivation behind my research on science talks and sharing time could be found in the silence and the isolation of my own childhood. Each new research question expanded upon my need to reclaim that silent child and give her voice.

In 2001, when I was living on the beautiful central coast of California, I made a decision to take a job teaching Kindergarten in a remote Navajo community in New Mexico. Most people I knew thought I was crazy. Why would a seemingly sane woman leave a comfortable life by the beach to live and teach in one of America’s most impoverished communities? To me, however, my decision felt completely rational. I wanted to teach and live among one of our country’s most in-need populations, to see if the principles of developmental teaching and literacy learning that I believed in were relevant. I felt my experience of almost thirty years had prepared me, and

that I could be of service there. I did not feel I was being of service in California—but that’s another story about a system of public education.

Once the school year began, however, I quickly found that I got much more than I had *consciously* bargained for. Here is an excerpt from my field notes taken on the third day of school.

*What is this? For the first time in my entire teaching career, and that would be more than twenty-eight years of teaching, I resorted to a desperate measure and used stickers to reinforce positive behavior while depriving those children who didn’t do what I said of something they wanted. The stickers had an enthralling effect; they immediately resulted in quiet attentive children. I suppose it must be that if you don’t have anything (as in material goods), something, even a small happy face stuck on your shirt, seems like gold. I have to consider how to work with this, how to find things these children consider to be of value that aren’t necessarily material objects, because I know the thrill of the stickers won’t last. Obviously, adult approval isn’t going to do it. I can charm and cajole the pants off them, and while they do respond to my charm, it doesn’t translate into authority.*

*Here’s the deal: These kindergartners are staging a coup, taking over the class each time I attempt to “instruct” them in anything. Even though I always expect five year olds in a crowd to be anarchists, I’ve never experienced this before. What it amounts to is a bunch of little kids who do not seem to have any use for an adult who is attempting to grab their attention. Beginnings of the year in an early childhood classroom are always like herding feral cats, but this is much more intangibly out of control.*

*Surrounding this entire phenomenon is an aura of disregard for the wishes of adults. These children simply don’t care if I want them to sit quietly for ten minutes to hear a story, but they do splendidly choosing independent activities, staying focused while they do them and cleaning up with supervision after their choice time.*

*And it seems that everywhere we go adults have no clout, including Amelia and Jackie, my Navajo assistant teachers. So it isn’t about who is Navajo, and who isn’t. Amelia and Jackie are two very different people: One uses a stern no-nonsense tone of discipline: “Do this or else!” The other is more “anglo,” as she says, since she grew up in an anglo household. She speaks softly and cajoles. The children ignore them both. They are bald-faced defiant, and that’s the truth! What to do? What sense does this make? What the heck is this?*

In these field notes, you see the kind of fixes the unconscious mind can get you in as a teacher and a researcher. What I want to say about this anecdote is that while I believe my decision to take on this challenge was more visceral and unconscious than logical, the outcome for me and

for my students was, in the end, remarkable. I knew by the close of the school year that I had grown immensely as a teacher and a human being, and that my teaching had made a difference for my students. I also found that the dilemma these children presented in the first part of the year pushed my questions about literacy into the area of questions about learning and relationship, about how we overcome cultural difference and the effects of poverty (Gallas, in press). Most probably, my subsequent decision to study psychology was in large part a result of my work with these children.

This anecdote also allows me to re-emphasize an earlier point. As I have said, our culture looks at the unconscious as something scary, something to be armored against, but in reality, the unconscious mind has a great deal of wisdom living in it. That is why Jung believed it should be brought into a more balanced relationship with the conscious mind. It makes us whole. On some level, my experience with the Navajo, beginning with an illogical decision, pushed me over the edge of my comfort zone and forced me to grow.

### Research Methods

The anthropologist Ruth Behar, in her book, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that would break your heart* (1996), consciously attempts to unpack why she studies what she does and how her own emotional history reverberates throughout her research. She writes, “because there is no clear and easy route by which to confront the self who observes, most professional observers develop defenses” (p.6). She cites the work of George Devereux, an ethnopsychiatrist, whose book, *From Anxiety to Method in the Behavioral Sciences* (1967) was one of the first to call for the inclusion of the self as a factor in research. Devereux believed that attention to both conscious and unconscious motivations would take what he called the “toughminded or tenderminded” study of human behavior and place it more securely in the realm of objective science. He wrote, the “subjectivity of the observer influences the course of the observed event as radically as ‘inspection’ influences the behavior of the electron” (Devereux, 1967, cited in Behar, 1996, p.6).

Both Behar and Devereux view method as the defense researchers develop to compensate for the involvement of the self. Method functions to control and contain a researcher’s personal involvement in the work. Yet Robert Romanyshyn, a Jungian analyst, takes the discussion of method a further step in his book, *The Wounded Researcher: Research with soul in mind* (2007). He proposes that any discussion of subjectivity in research has to “involve a consideration of how one understands subjectivity (p.108).” It is important to note that subjectivity, for Romanyshyn and for Devereux, diverges from Behar's conceptualization to include not just our conscious emotional reactions to our research, but the unconscious influences that are brought to bear. Romanyshyn concludes that until those unconscious contents are brought to awareness, work on human behavior will never realize its full potential as a science of mind.

But how does the unconscious mind influence method? Here we will briefly digress to illustrate this point.

### *Influence or the Wave - Particle Effect*

O'Neill (2008), in writing about quantum field theory and its relationship to Gestalt Therapy, explores the wave-particle effect as a paradigm for human behavior:

There are times when light behaves as both a wave and a particle. Sometimes the nature of light as particle or wave is dependent on whether it is observed. This has become known as 'wave-particle duality'. (Einstein & Infield, 1938; Bohm and Hiley, 1993; Lightman, 2000). In the famous Double Slit Experiment originated by Thomas Young, a very dim light is passed through two slits in a board onto a screen that produces a pattern demonstrating light acting as a wave phenomenon or a field. However, when non-interfering glass monitors were attached to the slits to record each photon as it passed through the slits, the photon acted as a particle, or as matter instead of field. In other words, when the photon was observed by the monitors, it acted not as a field or a wave, but as particle. When not observed, it acted as a wave phenomenon. (p. 15)

O'Neill joins other researchers in psychology who propose that when not under observation, humans act as a field or a unified group. When they become the objects of observation, however, the energy of the observer changes the behavior of the observed, making him or her, in effect, one particle in the field. This paradigm offers two important thoughts about research methodology: First, in looking at a class of students, we can say that each child in the class is both a wave and a particle. When observed, the child becomes distinct from the field; when unobserved, the child acts as part of the entirety, in tune with the entirety.

Second, as researchers we can not underestimate the importance of understanding that we are also part of the whole, and as a particle in that whole, we are both the knower and the known, both field and matter. Our influence on the system we observe cannot be over emphasized. As soon as we begin to circumambulate a phenomenon, from the first asking of the question through the entire process of collecting data, to the point of analyzing and writing about it, we are effecting a change in the entire field of the classroom. My experience has certainly been that as soon as I begin to research a puzzling situation, it is inevitable that my interest creates a change in the field of the classroom and in the little particles that inhabit it. I think more deeply about every aspect of my teaching practice and the dynamics of the classroom, and I become more willing to call that practice into question. Simultaneously,

...as soon as I begin to research a puzzling situation, it is inevitable that my interest creates a change in the field of the classroom....

my students notice my interest and respond to it in different ways.

And lest we discount the influence of the unconscious, because it still sounds like hocus pocus, consider the following theory, taken again from quantum physics, as cited by O'Neill:

One phenomenon of quantum fields that is often overlooked is that an effect generated in a field is determined solely by its form rather than its intensity. This is much different from the classical reality theory wherein the effect, or ability to do the work, is in direct relation to the available force. For example, a moving ship requires a considerable amount of energy. However, in quantum field theory, a very weak field can produce a full quantum effect since it is attributed solely to the form and not to the intensity of the field. In many ways this is like the effect of a radio signal telling a ship where to go, wherein the radio wave is not directly pushing or pulling the ship that it guides. Action of the Quantum Potential depends only on form, not magnitude, and there its effect may be dominant even when the intensity is small. (2008, p. 20)

Form, rather than intensity or magnitude. One thing we know about unconscious activity is that it deeply influences our behavior and the behaviors of those around us, and that its presence is, for most of us, kind of like radio waves. The field of psychology uses terms like “projection” and “transference” to describe how unconscious contents color our perceptions and interactions with others in our daily lives. Certainly, in our daily encounters with friends, relatives or colleagues most of us are able to perceive, without any words being spoken, who is happy, anxious, sad or angry.

### *Data Analysis*

Why is it important, when analyzing data, to recognize and factor in the concept of unconscious influence or motivation? Because until we do we assume that our questions, our curiosities, our area of research are really only for and about the others we are researching. We assume that with conscious rational study, we can identify and factor in our own influence on the research. Those assumptions, however, give us access to only a part of what we know about our work and our tough-minded or tender-minded feelings toward it. And in some cases, those assumptions deeply impact the process of completing the work. Have you, for example, ever experienced resistance to writing about your research? Or perhaps you've had the feeling that your life was falling out of balance while doing the research. According to Romanyshyn, that signals that the work is pushing back against you, resisting the way you are consciously interpreting it. Lest you think that by giving “the work” legs to stand on I am animating something that can't be animated, consider again the nature of unconscious activity. It is unconscious, and, therefore, it manifests not in logical thought and actions, but in thoughts or actions that, until we reflect upon them, seem capricious.



Below is an example from my book, “*Sometimes I can be anything*”: *Power, gender and identity in a primary classroom* (1998), of my work pushing back against me.

I naively began working with the data and writing about it as I often had for past projects. However, after three months I was noticeably disoriented and disturbed by what I was writing and had actually made very little progress in figuring out what was going on. At the point in late December when I got locked out of my house not once, but twice in the same day, my husband very perceptively ordered me to stop writing and try to get a grip on what was happening. It is a tribute to his understanding of me and the work I had been doing that when he did so, I meekly (and uncharacteristically) did exactly as he told me and did not attempt to work on the data again until February (p.21).

As the passage relates, my sense of equilibrium was thrown off; I was losing my moorings. In other words, my unconscious was sending me messages about the activities of my conscious mind; it was pushing me to self-correct.

Romanyshyn characterizes this kind of disturbance as

...the fundamental shift from the point of view of the ego....In this shift, the ego has to let go of the work, has to surrender a work....The ego as author of the work has to “die” to the work to become the agent *in service to those for whom the work is being done* [italics added]. (p.6)

I emphasize the last line here because I believe this is a central question for teaching and classroom research. Who is our work for? Is it for us? In some ways I’m saying, “yes, it is”, but in the later stages of our research we have to figure out how to get out of the way. Who is the work for? I believe we do it for our students because we care deeply about them, because it is their collective lives that are most important here.

Romanyshyn continues:

Research always has its moments of falling apart, moments when the work falls out of the hands of the researcher, when the work seems to resist the conscious intentions of the researcher and twists and turns in another way. Such moments are crucial ... because they signal a shift from the researcher’s ego-intention for the work to the intentions that the work has for itself, a shift from what the researcher wants from the work to what the work wants from the researcher. (p.48)

The outcome from the falling apart that halted my writing and analysis of my data on gender was my realization that the children I was studying were not reproducing my life history and my assumptions about gender and power. They were showing me a different way. Once I came back to the work with the intention of setting my assumptions about human behavior and its meanings and effects aside, a space was created for the data to speak for itself. And the writing moved. I can say with certainty now that when you hit a block, specifically a writing block, that is not a sign that you're not a good writer; it is a sign that something else is asking to be considered, something apart from the direction you are moving.

Once I came back to the work with the intention of setting my assumptions about human behavior and its meanings and effects aside, a space was created for the data to speak for itself.

Now, I want to return to my Navajo kindergartners. The problem of adults having no authority continued for more than a month. Then, one day something happened.

*September 19*

*This morning, as on every morning since school started, I unsuccessfully attempted to gather the children, who had been having a short break for snack and relaxation, back together in a large group. I tried switching off the lights and making an announcement. I tried walking from group to group and asking them to gather in the meeting area. I tried quietly raising my hand above my head to signal that I'd like them to stop and look at me, something many of their teachers have been working on as a way to gain attention. As usual, none of these techniques worked. Because I am not "a yeller," escalating my efforts to the level of loud verbal assault was not an option for me. Feeling hopeless and out of answers, I pulled a stray chair into the middle of the room, sat down on it and seriously contemplated sitting there silently for the rest of the day.*

*Then, out of the blue, I decided to sing. So I began to sing the song, "Little Rabbit Fufu," if only to amuse myself, and the room went silent. The children turned to look and listen, and then they all got up and walked quietly over to the center of the room, sat down, and joined in the song.*

*As the day went on, I tried it again in different forms to see if the behavior was a fluke, or really real. It didn't matter if I sang, chanted, or clapped a pattern. Uniformly, they dropped what they were doing, ran over, and sat down. Apparently, the call has to start with sound and rhythm and music. Then I've got them. How simple, and how complex. And even more wonderful is the discovery that once I start the song, I can stop, look and*

*listen, and they continue without me.*

“Then, out of the blue, I decided to sing.” What was that, that small flash of inspiration? I’m betting that every teacher has had that kind of flash in the process of teaching, a moment when you seem to pull something out of the air that saves you from impending disaster. That small discovery came, of course, from my unconscious. It is yet another demonstration of how much wisdom our psyche has lurking beneath the surface.

So the questions I leave you with are my ever present questions. As you consider your research, ask yourself: Why have I chosen this question, why this setting? What do my choices tell me about myself, about my life history, about my teaching practice, and about my unfinished business with childhood, friends, or family? How is my work reclaiming a part of my childhood for me? How do my choices as to methodology reflect my own efforts to redo a part of my life, or, perhaps, undo a part of my life.

And, if you get stuck or overwhelmed or just burned out, consider that the work might be pushing back at you, asking you to let go of your logic and pay attention to what is intuitive and, yes, unconscious.

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*This paper is based on a presentation that Karen Gallas made in 2009 at the Annual Research Forum sponsored by the Center for Practitioner Research at National-Louis University. Karen has taught early childhood and elementary levels for over 30 years and now works as a psychotherapist. She holds a doctorate, has taught at the college level, and serves as a consultant to schools, government agencies, and foundations. Her books include the four titles listed below.*

*Imagination and literacy: A teacher's search for the heart of learning. Teachers College Press, 2003.*

*"Sometimes I can be anything": Power, gender and identity in a primary classroom. Teachers College Press, 1998.*

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*Talking their way into science: Hearing children's questions and theories, responding with curricula. Teachers College Press, 1995.*