

Constructivist Listening for Empowerment and Change

Julian Weissglass

Reform programs that address only the cognitive and behavioral aspects of educators' professional lives neglect an important part of their humanness and fall short of fully attending to the empowerment of teachers. By ignoring the influence of feelings on thought and action, such programs promote a view of school as a factory, whose purpose is to install knowledge into students' minds. Some educators, however, have a vision of schools as communities where 1) people care about and support each other in learning and living, 2) adults nurture young people as complete and complex human beings, and 3) youngsters are encouraged and stimulated to construct their own understanding, rather than memorize facts and procedures. If such a view is to be promoted, then reform programs must include methods that address educators' feelings concerning schools, students, and colleagues. Although some of the literature¹ on school culture implicitly recognizes that teachers' feelings affect, and are affected by, school culture, and although some of the educational change literature makes the connection between feelings and change more explicit,² the depth of the relationship between feelings and educational change is rarely acknowledged by most educators. Fullan, recognizing the connection, writes:

Real change whether desired or not, whether imposed or voluntarily pursued, represents a serious personal and collective experience

Julian Weissglass is associate professor. Departments of Mathematics and Education, University of California, Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, California 93106.

The Educational Forum, Vol. 54, No. 4, Summer 1990

THE EDUCATIONAL FORUM

characterized by ambivalence and uncertainty and if the change works out, it can result in a sense of mastery, accomplishment and professional growth. The anxieties of uncertainty and the joys of mastery are central to the subjective meaning of educational change and to success or failure—facts which have not been recognized or appreciated in most attempts at reform.³

Most reform efforts, nevertheless, focus on teacher's knowledge or behavior, ignoring the fact that teaching and learning are done by persons with unique histories, feelings, understandings, and needs. In recent years, for example, there have been numerous calls for fundamental changes in, among other things, the organization of schools, the methods of instruction, the content of many subject areas, and the curriculum access for minority students.⁴ These changes would require educators to examine in depth their values and practices and to alter substantially their ways of viewing and performing their jobs. These calls come at a time when schools are dealing with the effects on children of divorce, single parent families, alcoholism, homelessness, violence, ethnic prejudice, sexual and physical abuse, and the widespread misuse of drugs. Furthermore, in many schools teachers are faced with increased class size and clerical responsibilities, declining resources, and pressure to raise standardized test scores. All of this creates high levels of stress that affect teachers' and principals' abilities to even consider, no less implement or sustain, the processes of change.⁵ In schools where change from the traditional methods of "teacher as lecturer" and "drill and practice" is most needed, namely, those schools serving children who have not been succeeding in school, the stress on teachers and students is extremely high. Given the awareness of the high level of stress experienced by teachers,⁶ and the concerns generated in educators by proposed change,⁷ it is unfortunate that the documents calling for reform do not suggest methods for helping teachers cope with stress or change or even mention that teachers might need help with their feelings. While the Holmes Group does point out early in its report that, "The entire formal and informal curriculum of school is filtered through the minds and hearts of classroom teachers . . .,"⁸ it does not mention teachers' hearts (or feelings) anywhere else in the document. Even Fullan, who recognizes the importance of the issue, does not suggest methods for assisting teachers in this area.⁹

I believe that the educational community's failure to help teachers, administrators and parents work through their feelings about education and change is a major obstacle to achieving fundamental educational reform. Many components of the current school culture (beliefs,

CONSTRUCTIVIST LISTENING

attitudes, types of relationships) that determine instructional practices are resistant to reform efforts. If instructional practices are to change, these other components must also change. But changing these components of the school culture is more complex than introducing new textbooks or schedules. Beliefs, attitudes and relationships are connected to people's feelings about themselves, their colleagues, and their students. If educators do not find methods of helping teachers with their feelings, the current wave of reform will have as little lasting effect as the last one. This article will describe a method that has been used in two professional development projects over the past seven years to help teachers obtain emotional support. Although the projects provide support for teachers in a variety of ways (information, participation in hands-on learning activities, materials, time for planning and reflection, visible support by the principal, parent education, discussion groups, review of the research, coaching, demonstration lessons, and encouragement), the emphasis on the need to work through feelings in order to achieve sustainable educational change is a distinctive feature of the approach.¹⁰

Why feelings have been ignored. There are several possible reasons for educational reformers' failure to adequately assist teachers with their feelings.

1) The way children's emotions are treated in our society results in adults often distrusting the expression of emotions. Many people have difficulty acknowledging or responsibly expressing their feelings and accepting others' feelings. The dominant culture values calmness, coolness, and an image of strength. Although it is often acceptable for adults to express upset or angry feelings toward children, children are rarely encouraged to express their feelings. On the contrary, their feelings are usually repressed. Expressions of anxiety or fear by children are disparaged or ridiculed ("Don't be a scaredy-cat!" "Don't be a sissy!"). Their displays of anger are repressed ("Don't talk to me that way!"). They receive the message that crying by both girls and boys is a weakness, even when one is hurt or sad ("There, there, don't cry!" "Big boys don't cry." "Stop crying or I will give you something to cry about."). Even laughter is sometimes criticized ("Don't be so silly!"). The continual disparagement and repression of youngsters' expressions of feelings have their effects. Most adults are uncomfortable about honestly revealing their own feelings and unable to give attention to others when they convey strong emotion. Adults stop others' attempts to express feelings by looking away, interrupting with a personal story, changing the subject, communicating discomfort through body language or facial expressions, admonishing each other to stop feeling that way, or offering a drink or a tranquilizer.

THE EDUCATIONAL FORUM

Furthermore, people do not always handle their emotions responsibly. The acting out of anger and the "if it feels good, do it" mentality have led to a justified skepticism of the position that emotions are a natural response to distress. Some people identify any reference to feelings or emotions with encounter groups or similar activities.¹¹ In some of these groups, leaders manipulate participants' feelings and it is acceptable to act out one's feelings—for example, to attack verbally someone you dislike or to yell at someone with whom you disagree.

2) It is difficult for teachers to consider the expression of emotions as a significant component of their professional development. First of all, schools are not always a safe place for teachers to talk meaningfully about their professional lives. If teachers admit to fear or inadequacy they may open themselves to criticism. If they express feelings of frustration or dissatisfaction they may be regarded as disruptive or unprofessional. If they express feelings of joy or excitement they may be regarded by their colleagues as arrogant or over-enthusiastic. If they show their grief about children being mistreated they may be regarded as unstable or over-involved. Yet all of these feelings are normal and understandable.

Secondly, teachers are usually under tremendous pressure to prepare lessons, counsel students, communicate with parents, serve on committees, and meet state and district requirements. They tend to be "workaholics." The culture of teaching does not value taking time to consider feelings. Talking about feelings does not have the immediacy of grading papers or going to a committee meeting. It is regarded as a luxury, for which teachers do not have time.

3) The profession traditionally has had an intellectual-cognitive focus. Teachers are regarded as professionals, who should maintain "appropriate" relations with each other and advance professionally by developing their knowledge of subject matter and theory. Even in a profession with a strong commitment to the nurturing of young people, it is considered by many to be unprofessional and "against the rules" to share deep feelings with colleagues. There is an attitude that emotions are to be ignored or taken to professional therapists rather than to colleagues. Furthermore, as Ost points out, the selection process that produces teachers stabilizes the professional culture.¹² This point makes me wonder whether people who are more likely to express feelings may be "weeded out" from entering or staying in the profession. If this is so, then those in authority are likely to be even more enculturated to non-expression of feelings than teachers and therefore unwilling or unable to institute processes that value teachers' feelings.

Constructivist Listening

There are many ways for people to handle their feelings constructively—talking with friends, meditating, going for long walks, doing relaxation exercises, seeing a therapist, etc. The author's work with teachers emphasizes the importance of creating opportunities to be listened to attentively and with care. Because listening means different things to different people, the process advocated here needs some explanation.

Forms of listening. Listening requires that one person, the talker, sends a message and one (or more) listener(s) receives that message. It is possible to distinguish several different forms of listening. (A) Active listening—the term used by Gordon¹³ for the process developed by Carl Rogers. A listener reflects back her or his "impression of the expression of the sender" by paraphrasing or interpreting what the talker is communicating. Active listening is often recommended by management consultants and marriage and family counselors for problem solving in relationships. (B) Passive listening—the listener doesn't say anything, but indicates interest and attention by maintaining eye contact and periodically nodding or smiling. (C) Inattentive listening—e.g., listening while reading the newspaper. The sounds enter someone's ears, but there is little or no attempt to comprehend or respond. Although some people claim to be able to listen while reading a newspaper, most spouses do not agree. (D) Pretend listening—a person maintains an interested facial expression but is actually thinking about something else. This happens frequently when students are listening to lectures or when the listener is preoccupied with another concern. The only difference between inattentive listening and pretend listening is that with the first the talker is sure the person is not listening while with the second the talker may not realize that attention is lacking. (E) Conversational listening—the roles of talker and listener alternate—often frequently, and the person listening is allowed, even expected, to interrupt and express a point of view. (F) Argumentative listening—similar to conversational listening but more passionate, with the listener looking for flaws in the talker's argument. Argumentative listening can be beneficial if it does not degenerate into an attempt to blast the argument (and the talker's self-esteem) to bits. This sometimes occurs in academic and political circles, as well as in personal relationships. (G) Informational listening—this occurs when a person wants information that someone else possesses and attempts to make sense of the information that is received. The listener may ask for advice or help, or attend a lecture. Informational listening sometimes changes to conversational or argumentative listening if the listener does not agree

THE EDUCATIONAL FORUM

with the information or point of view, to active listening if the listener wants to use that technique for problem solving, or to pretend listening if the listener is overwhelmed by too much information. Classroom lectures come to mind as a ready example.

Constructivist listening. This article, meanwhile, is concerned with a different form of listening, one that is for the benefit of the talker. The goals are to encourage the talker to reflect on the meaning of events and ideas; express and work through feelings that are interfering with clearer thinking; construct new meanings; and make decisions. Constructivist listening acknowledges that both cognitive and affective processing are necessary for increased understanding, and that at times it is not easy to distinguish between the two. The term "Constructivist" is used because "from the Constructivist perspective, learning is the product of self-organization"¹⁴ and the goal of Constructivist listening is to facilitate this self-organization. Constructivism is based on a view of intelligence as a flexible adaptive characteristic of human organisms—different from instinct, the ability to memorize, or the capacity to be conditioned to respond to stimuli. Most Constructivist educators however have limited their concerns to cognition. They have not realized that the same principles that guide cognitive learning can be applied to understanding oneself and one's emotions. The strong relationship that exists between the cognitive and emotional aspects of humans has not been adequately recognized or researched.

Constructivist listening is based on the principles of constructivism and two additional beliefs. First, distress (the accumulation of emotions left from hurtful experiences) is a primary source of unintelligent and uncaring behavior. Second, the natural physiological processes of expressing emotions contribute to recovery from the effects of distress, making sense of experiences, and thinking more clearly.¹⁵ The Constructivist listener aims to enable the talker to express feelings, construct personal understandings, and use his or her full intelligence to respond creatively to situations rather than rely on habit or rigid strategies. It is not important in Constructivist listening for the listener to understand completely what the talker is expressing. In fact, it is unlikely that anyone can completely understand the thoughts and feelings of another person. What is important is that the listener communicate interest, caring, and acceptance. Interest is communicated by maintaining eye contact and asking thoughtful questions; caring, by facial expression and, when appropriate, by holding a hand or touching an arm or shoulder; acceptance, by not criticizing, giving advice, or interrupting with one's own story, and by reassuring the talker that it is beneficial to express

CONSTRUCTIVIST LISTENING

feelings. Over a period of time, a listener learns which actions and questions help the talker express and explore thoughts and feelings and which tend to cause the talker to intellectualize or retreat into superficiality. These helpful actions and questions and the talker's innate desire to construct meaning, rather than the listener's interpretations or comments, keep the talker focused on expressing thoughts and feelings.

Constructivist listening differs from active listening in that the listener does not paraphrase or interpret the talker's thoughts or feelings. Although active listening is often useful in solving relational or organizational problems, interpretations by the listener usually interfere with the talker's fully exploring the thought or feeling, expressing emotion, and developing understanding. If the listener is allowed to interpret, he or she may, perhaps unwittingly, cut off the expression of feelings or manipulate the talker into avoiding emotions with which the listener is uncomfortable. Interpretation may also lead to the talker becoming dependent on the listener for meaning or approval. Constructivist listening is not passive listening. In Constructivist listening the listener actively thinks about the talker and helps the talker to explore extensively his or her thoughts and feelings by asking appropriate questions that focus the talker's attention. The listener also provides reassurance that it is permissible to delve into murky areas and to express feelings.

The importance of expressing feelings. The emphasis on the expression of feelings is based on the belief that these processes reduce stress and assist in the construction of new meanings, that is, in making sense of the world. The therapeutic effects of emotional expression were first advanced by Aristotle in his defense of drama.¹⁶ He claimed that drama had the effect of purging pity and terror through catharsis. The beneficial effects of emotional expression were rediscovered and reported on by Freud and Breuer in the last part of the 19th century.¹⁷ Freud later rejected these findings and developed a more intellectual approach to psychotherapy. Modern proponents of the value of emotional expression see it as leading to heightened sensitivity, clearer thought, and greater creativity.¹⁸

My experiences with emotional expression, both as a "talker" and as a "listener," lead me to believe that there are natural, complex physiological responses that enable humans to release tension, recover from distressing experiences, and construct deeper understandings. The processes that are advanced as being beneficial to human functioning are manifested outwardly by crying, trembling, sighing, laughing, sweating, yawning, and talking. These processes assist in the construction

THE EDUCATIONAL FORUM

or reconstruction of the meaning of distressful experiences as well as in the recovery from the physiological and emotional tension they produce. In developmental terms, emotional expression can be considered as an adaptive response that the organism makes to a disequilibrating situation, either at the time it is occurring or at a (perhaps much) later time when it is safe to do so.

There is another reason for encouraging teachers to express feelings. If teachers have appropriate opportunities to express their own feelings they will become more comfortable with, and have more attention for, others' feelings and act more caringly. Sarason has pointed out that teachers as well as physicians, psychologists, and lawyers often do not act in a caring, compassionate manner.¹⁹ He distinguishes between feeling compassionate and acting that way, and discusses possible reasons for this unfortunate situation—inadequate professional training and supervision, economic factors, and the bureaucratization of the profession. There is, however, an additional possibility. If one acts in a caring way with a distressed person, that person may express her or his emotions. As I explained earlier, this makes many people uncomfortable, and they try to avoid it. As a result, they often act in a detached, rather than caring, manner in emotional situations.

It is important to realize that most educators will not express deep emotions in the early stages of using constructivist listening. Instead, they will probably talk and sometimes laugh about situations, thoughts, and feelings. As trusting relationships are developed and it becomes more acceptable to express feelings, they will take more risks, particularly when crises arise or emotional issues are being explored. Some educators, however, may never feel safe enough to express deep emotions with colleagues—that is to be expected and accepted. Constructivist listening is not a tool for coercing people to express emotions or for manipulating them into exploring feelings they are not willing to share. It is not meant to serve as a substitute when psychotherapy is needed for severe distress or dysfunction. It is a method for allowing people to talk about what they think is important and to regain access to inherent human capabilities of healthful emotional expression at a rate and in a manner they choose. Educators spend much of their professional lives in situations where it is not appropriate for them to express feelings of distress. Constructivist listening attempts to provide an appropriate place for the expression of emotions and the in-depth exploration of issues involving personal or professional change.

Learning constructivist listening: Dyads. Constructivist listening differs significantly from the kind of listening and talking engaged in by

CONSTRUCTIVIST LISTENING

most educators. The profession promotes conversational or argumentative listening. Advice and opinions are freely given. Interruptions are commonplace. Even educators who are good listeners, and there are many, rarely listen carefully to each others' feelings or the expression of emotions. Therefore it takes some time and effort to learn constructivist listening. Although constructivist listening can take place as part of conversational listening, the best way to learn how to do constructivist listening, as well as experience its benefits, is in a more formal structure where two people (a dyad) take turns listening to each other for a fixed amount of time. In a dyad, the talker has the opportunity, indeed, the responsibility, to talk authentically about his or her thoughts and feelings. The person might talk about problems or successes, situations that one would like to handle better, one's thoughts about an educational issue, feelings about one's job or prior experiences that may be affecting her or his present functioning. Although a group leader might suggest a topic for a dyad, the talker is always in charge of his or her time. The talker takes responsibility for deciding what to talk about, at what rate to proceed, and what conclusions to draw. The listener is there for assistance, to help the talker focus on feelings, and to reassure the talker that the expression of feelings is beneficial.

Because criticism (and sometimes ridicule) have made most people reluctant to openly express their feelings, a formal structure is deliberately provided that allows and even encourages such expression. Although this structure may seem artificial, the method and guidelines for dyads were not formulated in order to promulgate a set of arbitrary rules or technical exercises for anyone to follow.²⁰ Rather they are based on experience and beliefs about people. Because everyone deserves attention, each person is given *equal time to talk*. Because people are believed capable of solving their own problems, *the listener does not interpret, paraphrase, analyze, give advice, or break in with a personal story*. Because a person needs safety to be authentic and because one's feelings at any moment are not representative of one's rational thinking (or perhaps even of one's feelings five minutes later), *confidentiality* is required. The listener does not talk about what the talker has said to anyone else or even bring it up to the talker afterwards. Because the process works best when the listener is not feeling attacked or defensive, *the talker in turn is not to criticize or complain about the listener*. Problems or disputes between partners are to be addressed in a different setting.

It is appropriate when learning constructivist listening to start with a short dyadic experience—perhaps one or two minutes for each person.

THE EDUCATIONAL FORUM

Having a topic suggested by a leader is useful. Because it is easy to deceive oneself about whether one is truly listening, in the beginning stages of learning the listener is instructed to listen attentively and not ask *any* questions. Very early each person is given the opportunity to reflect on his or her role as listener in a dyad. This is usually accompanied by a group discussion of people's past experiences in being listened to or not listened to. Talking regularly about perceptions of oneself as listener and one's feelings about listening to and talking about emotions is an important component of learning constructivist listening. It is also valuable if teachers who are parents talk about their perceptions of how their children express emotions when they are listened to attentively. The difference between expressing emotions in a dyad and in social situations is also addressed. It is explained that expressing emotions in a dyad is not an indication of how emotions should be expressed in social situations. On the other hand, dyads are not a means to avoid confronting troublesome situations.

As people become more comfortable with constructivist listening, the time allotted each person is increased to five or ten minutes in a small group and perhaps ten to fifteen minutes in a dyad. The participants can assess their readiness to listen and talk for longer periods of time. As people gain understanding of constructivist listening and become better listeners, the possibility of asking questions to assist the talker in expressing feelings is introduced. It is strongly emphasized that the role of questions are always for the benefit of the talker, not of the listener.

Constructivist listening in support groups. Fostering teacher collegiality and reducing stress by means of support groups is not a new idea. Wangberg, for example, reports on the value of support groups in reducing teacher isolation.²¹ Kirk and Walter promote support groups to assist people in crises and to prevent maladaptive responses, but emphasize that the purpose of a support group is to provide therapeutic support, not psychotherapy.²² They see support groups as reducing isolation and promoting productive change. Both articles offer some useful guidelines on punctuality, long-term commitment, non-competitiveness, and confidentiality. While the importance of listening is being acknowledged, the kind of listening envisioned is either conversational or informational.

A constructivist listening support group is somewhat different. It does not permit advice or constructive criticism. Instead it allows for each person to talk in turn while the group listens. The group does not attempt to solve the talker's problems, to try to make the person feel better, or to "apply band-aids." The same guidelines are followed in support groups

CONSTRUCTIVIST LISTENING

as in dyads, and for the same reasons. It is important for members of support groups to refrain from complaining about other group members or gossiping to or about the group. Often there is a designated leader who suggests a topic to talk about or a question to address. This leader takes the responsibility of asking focusing questions when necessary. The talker is always free, however, to choose what to talk about. The leadership role can be rotated, or the talker can choose someone to play that role during her or his turn. It is better to have one person with that responsibility than to have everyone asking questions. In practice, the time for each person is so short that focusing questions are rarely necessary.

Obviously no one can adequately explore the meaning of their lives, even their professional lives, in five or so minutes of group time. The purpose of support groups is rather to stimulate thinking about new areas; to raise awareness of thoughts and feelings that may have been ignored; to allow expression of feelings about successes and problems; and to develop a sense of community, an awareness of each person's vulnerability, and a desire to support each other in struggle and in triumph. More in-depth exploration of issues can take place in longer dyads, among friends, or in private reflection. The benefits of participating in a support group of this type are that one learns about oneself, understands others better, strengthens alliances, and improves one's ability to listen.

Implementation issues. The strategy used to introduce constructivist listening will depend on the group of teachers, the setting, and the person introducing the process. If teachers come together voluntarily with the specific purpose of improving listening or leadership skills, for improving collegial relationships, for learning about how feelings affect teaching and learning, dyads can be immediately introduced. If, however, it is desired to integrate dyads in other professional activities, be aware that this form of interaction may cause discomfort. School faculties may not have a high level of mutual trust. Teachers at in-service meetings on subject matters may think that talking about subjective meanings and emotions is a waste of time. Some teachers almost certainly will object to using a timer or watch to ensure equal talking time. This section will discuss experiences the author and others have had using dyads to promote constructivist listening.

On the first day of a four-week summer institute in mathematics education for K-12 teachers, I ask participants to pair up and each take a turn to talk for a minute about their goals for the institute. I do not introduce any rules or theory. I just say, "Let one person talk for about a minute and then the other person. I'll tell you when to switch." Later

THE EDUCATIONAL FORUM

on that day, as part of a discussion on mathematics education, I ask teachers to take a turn each telling a memory of a good or enjoyable mathematical learning experience. During the first three weeks I will use this informal process frequently, to promote reflection both on mathematics education (e.g., How does this hands-on mathematics activity compare to the way you learned mathematics as a student?) and on their feelings (e.g., How do you feel about giving grades?). Partners are chosen by having people turn to somebody next to them. Sometimes I ask them to pair up with someone they have not talked with yet. At times I comment about the importance (and difficulty) of listening well, but there is never any criticism if people have a conversation rather than listen to each other. Eventually I introduce some theory about constructivist listening and ask them to discuss it. It has been important in this situation (teachers coming to an institute to improve mathematics instruction) to proceed slowly. It is only with a group (five to eight teachers) that returns for a second summer to participate in the leadership training that I extensively use dyads. During a one-week leadership seminar we discuss the theory and use dyads and support groups extensively to reflect on ourselves as learners, teachers, and leaders.

The reaction to dyads varies. Two teachers who attended the institute and eventually became teacher leaders in a school-based project to improve mathematics instruction were interviewed about their experiences with dyads." Jean, a female elementary teacher recounted:

To speak and not to have anybody interrupt you for two minutes or to ask you a question or to give you advice was very interesting. I remember the very first time [at a leadership retreat] that I had a real lengthy dyad, thirty minutes each way, and I remember after about fifteen minutes thinking about how life had come together. I started looking deeper than I had previously. And the person that I was dyading [sic] with was very tender and it was a non-interrupted location where I wasn't distracted by anything else and I remember the feeling that I had of somebody sitting and listening to me for that length of time without giving me advice or without interrupting me and then the feeling that I had inside myself about just getting in touch. And it's not talking and writing things down. Sometimes when I have a problem I write down the pluses and the minuses—it doesn't do the same thing. But talking to someone, the presence of another person that cares about you made a big difference. And since that time I have had lots of experiences like that. There are sometimes when I am not sure which direction to go and things aren't apparent. I'll ask a friend "Do you have time for a dyad?" or "Do you have time to listen?"

CONSTRUCTIVIST LISTENING

Bob, a male elementary teacher, had a different reaction.

I could sit and listen real easily. It didn't seem like that big a deal. I don't think after the summer I gave it another thought. [T]he whole first week of our orientation [at the leadership seminar] was doing dyads a lot. And I remember at one point talking for ten minutes while someone listened and I was just absolutely petrified—ten whole minutes! [T]he middle of the second summer, important things came up for me and I began to see the dyad as something that brought emotional issues up for me and then I was left with them. And I was very angry about it. I've had that awareness brought up, but what do I do with it now? I think maybe my issue was that I wanted a solution. I would start to verbalize about a problem and I didn't want to just stop until I had a solution to it. I'm real goal-oriented so if a problem comes up I want to figure out a way to solve it. So I was not a proponent of dyads for the first couple of years. I opted to not get very deep when the time came up to talk about things. I opted to keep it on the surface where it wasn't so scary. So it was like that for a while. Two years ago ten minutes seemed like, how could I possibly talk for that long. And now there are days when we have thirty to forty minutes where we each talk and that just seems enough. I couldn't have done this job [teacher leader] without it. There's no way.

Jean described how she uses dyads with her staff, a very different situation than a summer institute.

We usually have a topic for the support group. At the beginning we take maybe the first ten or fifteen minutes and have a dyad usually with the person sitting next to you, but sometimes if people look around and say, "Well, I haven't talked to you for a while," they'll get up and change seats and dyad [sic]. We usually state the topic for the support group and then have the dyad And they always know that they're free to talk about anything else that might be important. They don't necessarily have to stick to the given subject. And lots of times they don't. [A]t the beginning I asked people to reflect back on their learning and their experiences when they were younger, experiences they'd had with people of different color, experiences they remember with their family. A lot of them centered around learning. And in reflecting on their own learning, they began to make these generalizations about the learners that they were with each day. There is a series of questions at the end of each of the sections [of the manual²⁴], and I just used all of them.

Commenting on the receptivity of the faculty, Jean said:

I haven't experienced any problems. There are some people that don't "buy into" the process as much. I use that term, a colloquial term, "buy into," but they don't use it as much as others. They use it here, they don't decline to use it, but if given a longer time to dyad [sic], they would decline. I don't know whether it doesn't meet their need or they're not giving it an opportunity to meet their need, or they're afraid of it. I feel like that's their choice, and I don't feel we need to manipulate them to have them do things. Some people only dyad [sic] when they have our support groups and some people dyad [sic] because it's done something for them so they take it away from the support group.

Bob's faculty has not been as receptive:

I'd say the first however many, five, ten, twenty times I did dyads with the teachers at my school, half of the people said, "Do we have to do this? I don't want to do this. Alright, we'll do it." It evolved to some people not doing it — just carrying on a conversation. And I still have a lot of people who don't see that as part of what we're doing. [Their attitude is,] "It's an interesting thing, probably works for somebody, but it doesn't work for me." And I see that the people at my school who can handle that structure, it really helps them, and the people who can't, my perception is that they need it the most.

Constructivist Listening, Empowerment, and Educational Change

Fullan, discussing the failure of many educational change programs, points out that, "The real crunch comes in the relationships between these new programs or policies and the thousands of subjective realities embedded in people's individual and organizational contexts and their personal histories. How these subjective realities are addressed or ignored is crucial to whether potential changes become meaningful at the level of individual use and effectiveness."²⁵ Later he also states that "it is possible to change 'on the surface' by endorsing certain goals, using specific materials and even imitating the behavior without specifically understanding the principles and rationale of the change. Moreover, in reference to beliefs, it is possible to value and even be articulate about the goals of the change without understanding their implications for practice."²⁶

CONSTRUCTIVIST LISTENING

Educators aware of the need to address subjective realities have begun to discuss empowerment of teachers (and sometimes empowerment of students). The term "empowerment," however, often goes undefined. To me, empowerment is the process of supporting people 1) to construct new meanings (i.e., re-evaluate what has happened to them, why they are who they are, why they teach the way they teach, why they relate to children and colleagues the way they do) and 2) to exercise their freedom to choose new ways of responding to the world. The two components are obviously related. Constructing new meanings and clarifying thoughts and feelings increase the likelihood of making new choices. Making new choices produces new information that results in the construction of new meanings. Both components are assisted by constructivist listening. Talking and expressing emotion about experiences facilitates the construction of new meanings and reduces the influence of past experiences on present actions. For example, the process can lessen the tendency to teach as you were taught or to parent as you were parented. The support of a caring listener can deepen the commitment to carry out decisions to act differently. Furthermore, when new courses of action are taken or new understandings achieved, there is a need, often intense, to talk to another person. Such sharing often produces additional meanings.

Mandating educational change is the antithesis of empowerment. It sends a message to teachers that they are inadequate and unappreciated for their efforts and that people outside the schools, often people who are rarely in classrooms, are the experts with the answers. It leads to teachers feeling bad about themselves and creates resistance to their thinking through issues for themselves. The use of constructivist listening rests on the assumption that educational change cannot be mandated; rather, it occurs when individuals and groups come to new understandings, decide to do things differently, and follow through on these decisions. Educational change that is sustainable requires that educators be empowered; that they examine their values and views about schools, teaching, learning, students, and the various subject fields; that they acknowledge their implicit theories, think about the problems they face, and see the full range of choices available; that they develop new understandings and take responsibility for deciding what and how to change. It is a complex and lengthy process. Constructivist listening is a tool for facilitating that process.²⁷

Practical applications. It is *not* intended that constructivist listening replace other methods educators use to learn, communicate, or solve problems. Constructivist listening does not fill the need for discussion

THE EDUCATIONAL FORUM

or dialogue, and it does not eliminate the need for other kinds of support. It is intended as an additional tool for assisting professional and personal growth, one that can be integrated into the other activities of a reform effort.

As mentioned earlier, constructivist listening in dyads can be used for both affective and cognitive processing, although in practice it is difficult to separate the two. In the cognitive area for example, teachers might have a dyad on how they define learning, or what their assumptions are about learning, and then discuss the issue as a group. At an in-service seminar, a dyad might follow a learning activity. Possible questions are:

What did I learn from this activity? What might children learn? What aspects of this activity are valuable for future learning? At the start of the year teachers can have a dyad on their goals for the school year, take time to write them down, and then everyone can relate one or two goals. A dyad can follow the reading of an article or hearing a report about current research. The talker can be asked to reflect on what the research means to him or her as a teacher or what his or her questions or doubts are.

In the affective area, a dyad might be used for teachers to reflect on their own learning experiences, inside and outside school. What were their good learning experiences? How did they learn outside school? How was that different from school? What was mathematics (or English or social studies) like for them? How did they feel about grades? What did teachers do to make them feel good about school? What made them feel bad? In a seminar on writing, participants might be asked to have a dyad on a meaningful or pleasurable experience in that area. Later on they might have a dyad on a difficult experience. Leaders who tend to overwork might explore what is driving them or how they feel about saying no to new responsibilities. A group of teachers attempting to implement cooperative learning might have periodic dyads on their successes and difficulties, how they feel about their efforts, and what the next steps are in helping their students. Because all educators need to be reminded of what they do well, a dyad could be devoted to talking about what they like about themselves as a teacher or how their presence is good for children.

Dyads are useful in heightening adult awareness of children. After teachers observe children they can reflect on their observations, their feelings about the child and his or her actions, how the family life or culture might be affecting the child, and whether there are obstacles to their expressing caring to the child. A teacher who works with children who do not adapt well to school or who have experienced considerable distress can use a dyad to express any emotions about that situation.

CONSTRUCTIVIST LISTENING

Teachers could also address their reactions to different types of students—what is annoying or attractive about each, how do these feelings interfere with their teaching or nurturing functions, etc. Dyads can also be used at planning meetings and conferences to enable participants to clarify their thinking and get their feelings out of the way before a group discussion of the issue. They also meet peoples' legitimate need to talk about themselves, their ideas, and their experiences without taking up everyone's time. A planning meeting can begin with a dyad on the participants' goals for the event or what they have learned about conducting similar events from their prior experience. These can then be discussed. Leaders planning a conference on equity, for example, might have dyads on how they experienced unequal treatment, how they saw others being mistreated, how they feel now when someone mentions racism, and how they feel about the current situation. If in the course of a meeting there are unresolved problems, a dyad can be used to generate ideas or work through feelings that have been stimulated. At a conference participants can be asked to share, at length, their personal experiences with the topic in dyads, and distill the major thoughts they want to share with a larger group.

Constructivist listening support groups can likewise be integrated into planning meetings and in-service seminars or classes. At an in-service class with a theme, support groups can address the group's experiences related to the theme. For example, if the theme were the role of play in children's learning, one or more of the following questions might be addressed: How did adults react to your play as a child? Are you comfortable or uncomfortable now with children's play? What makes you feel that way? How do you feel if children direct the play in a different direction than what you intended it to be? How do you feel when they do not follow the rules? How do you feel when children get silly? If the theme were problem-solving, teachers might be asked to relate times they were successful in solving problems, times they were unsuccessful, what their feelings were, and how others reacted to them. In addition, for any group that will be working together over a period of time it is productive of group unity to have each person take 10 or 15 minutes to share their life story and at a later meeting talk about how their family backgrounds (ethnic, economic, national, etc.) affected their learning or teaching.

The lack of opportunity for educators to express and work through feelings about learning and teaching leads to accepting the existing regularities of the school culture rather than thinking through beliefs and

THE EDUCATIONAL FORUM

assumptions and changing rigid and counterproductive patterns of behavior. A common outcome is "burn-out." It is essential that any reform effort provides educators with the opportunity to reflect on, and express, their feelings about their current situations and the proposed changes, either (or both) of which may have deep emotional content. Constructivist listening is a means for providing that opportunity. When considering complex issues that may produce tension (e.g., racism, sexism, tracking, testing, sex education, and poverty), this form of listening will allow educators to think more clearly and develop effective policies and strategies for change. An additional benefit is that they will have more attention for listening to parents' and students' feelings about these issues. Although our projects have used constructivist listening mainly to help teachers, it is important to point out that students and parents can benefit from using constructivist listening, and many teachers have indeed used dyads in their classrooms. As teachers understand the approach and receive attention for their feelings, they will be more able to pay increased attention to others and help them develop their abilities to listen to each other.

Constructivist listening is, at its very core, a tool for empowerment, community building, and educational change. It enables teachers and principals to think of themselves and their schools as centers for learning and change rather than as the target of change efforts developed by others. It enables people to assume responsibility for their actions and feelings, to construct new meanings, and to change old behavior patterns. It assists schools to become communities that recognize and nurture the humanness of their members. Constructivist listening is non-hierarchical and non-authoritarian. It promotes the formation of meaningful alliances based on shared visions and commitments. Although there are difficulties in having teachers accept and use it regularly, when it is used it can lead to the development of mutual support networks of teachers who are able to listen to each other's thoughts and feelings and work together to make schools better learning environments for young people.

References

The author was supported in part by NSF grant TEI-8550283. He would like to thank Theresa Liebscher Weissglass for her assistance in writing this article, and Fiona Goodchild and Marilyn Watson for their helpful suggestions.

1. E.g., John I. Goodlad, *The Dynamics of Educational Change: Toward Responsible Schools* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1975); Paul Heckman, "Understanding School

CONSTRUCTIVIST LISTENING

- Culture," in *The Ecology of School Renewal*, ed. John Goodlad (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Seymour B. Sarason, *The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1971).
2. E.g., Michael Fullan, *The Meaning of Educational Change* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1982); Gene E. Hall and Shirley M. Hord, *Change in Schools* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1987).
 3. Fullan, *ibid.*, p. 26.
 4. E.g., Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession, *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century* (New York: Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986); John I. Goodlad, *A Place Called School* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1984); Holmes Group, *Tomorrow's Teachers* (East Lansing, Michigan: Author, 1986); National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983); National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, *Curriculum and Evaluation Standards for School Mathematics* (Reston, Virginia: Author, 1989); National Research Council, *Everybody Counts: A Report to the Nation about the Future of Mathematics Education* (Washington, D.C.: National Academic Press, 1989).
 5. One definition of teacher stress is "the experience by a teacher of unpleasant emotions such as tension, frustration, anxiety, anger, depression, resulting from aspects of his work as a teacher." See, Chris Kyriacou, "Teachers Stress and Burnout, An International Review," *Educational Research* 29 (June 1987): 146-151. Quote from p. 146.
 6. *Ibid.*; Donna B. Raschke, Charles V. Detric, Marlene I. Strathe, and Richard R. Hawkes, "Teacher Stress: The Elementary Teacher's Perspective," *Elementary School Journal* 85 (March 1985): 559-564; Daniel W. Russell, Elizabeth Altemyer, and Dawn Van Velzen, "Job Related Stress, Social Support and Burnout among Classroom Teachers," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 72 (May 1987): 269-274; Richard L. Schwab, Susan E. Jackson, and Randall S. Schule, "Educator Burnout: Sources and Consequences," *Educational Research Quarterly* 10 (1986): 14-30.
 7. Fullan, *The Meaning of Educational Change*; Hall and Hord, *Change in Schools*.
 8. Holmes Group, *Tomorrow's Teachers*, p. 23.
 9. Fullan, *The Meaning of Educational Change*.
 10. Judith Mumme and Julian Weissglass, "Improving Mathematics Education through Site Based Change: Preliminary Report." (Paper presented at the International Congress on Mathematics Education, Theme Group on The Profession of Teaching at Budapest, July 27-August 3, 1988).
 11. The term "feelings" is used in this article to indicate the general quality of one's mental or physiological awareness. It is more inclusive than "emotions," which refers to "a physiological departure from homeostasis that is subjectively experienced in strong feelings (as of love, hate, desire or fear) and manifests itself in neuro-muscular, respiratory, cardiovascular, hormonal and other bodily changes." (*Webster's Third New International Dictionary*)
 12. David H. Ost, "The Culture of Teaching: Stability and Change," *The Educational Forum* 53 (Winter 1989): 163-181.
 13. Thomas Gordon, *Leader Effectiveness Training* (New York: Bantam, 1977).
 14. Ernst von Glasersfeld, "Cognition, Construction of Knowledge, and Teaching," *Synthese* 80 (July 1989): 121-140. Quoted from p. 136.

THE EDUCATIONAL FORUM

15. The development of constructivist listening owes much to the theoretical framework and practical methods developed by Harvey Jackins. See, *The Human Situation* (Seattle: Rational Island Publishers, 1973). The author is also grateful to Judith Mumme for pointing out that, since this type of listening allows the talker to construct (or reconstruct) understandings, it could be referred to as "constructivist listening."
16. Aristotle, *Poetics* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1968).
17. Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria* (New York: Avon Books, 1966).
18. Jackins, *The Human Situation*; R. A. Pierce, M. P. Nichols, and J. R. DuBrin, *Emotional Expression in Psychotherapy* (New York: Gardner Press, 1983); Thomas J. Scheff, *Catharsis in Healing, Ritual and Drama* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1979).
19. Seymour B. Sarason, *Caring and Compassion in Clinical Practice* (San Francisco: JosseyBass, 1985).
20. Julian Weissglass and Theresa Liebscher Weissglass, *Learning, Feelings and Educational Change* (Santa Barbara, California: Kimberly Press, 1987).
21. Elaine Wangberg, "Helping Teachers Cope with Stress," *Educational Leadership* 39 (March 1982): 452-454.
22. William Kirk and Glen Walter "Teacher Support Groups Serve to Minimize Teacher Burnout: Principles for Organizing," *Education* 102 (Winter 1981): 147-150.
23. These interviews were conducted by Dr. Fiona Goodchild. Teachers' names have been changed.
24. Weissglass and Weissglass, *Learning, Feelings and Educational Change*.
25. Fullan, *The Meaning of Educational Change*, p. 35.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
27. An example of how constructivist listening enhanced teachers' abilities to foster student communication in the mathematics classroom is described in Julian Weissglass, Judith Mumme, and Barbara P. Cronin, "Fostering Mathematical Communication: Helping Teachers Help Students," in *Transforming Children's Mathematics Education: International Perspectives*, eds. Leslie Steffe and Terry L. Wood (Hillsdale, Illinois: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1990), pp. 272-281.