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The Initiative Anthology
Conversation with Patti Lather
by
Rosalind Gallaspie with Lisa Weems

Patti Lather is a professor in the School of Educational Policy and Leadership at The Ohio State University where she teaches courses in qualitative research in education as well as in gender and education. On December 6, 2002, during a trip to the Miami University campus in Oxford, Ohio, Patti Lather sat down with Miami's Rosalind Gallaspie and Lisa Weems to discuss the intersection of leadership, culture, and schooling. Because Patti has been closely involved with Miami's Initiative on Leadership, Culture, & Schooling and because she describes her own research and writing as exploring "the implications of the intersections of varying critical, feminist, and poststructural theories within the context of research and pedagogy," we thought that she would be a good choice for The Initiative Anthology's first interview. Their conversation ranged over a wide range including Miami's Initiative, the technical nature of present leadership practices, "ruined" terms, rhetorical optimism, strategic rhetoric, teacher leadership, non-hierarchical leadership, writing "smart" research reports, the "proliferation of multiplicities," Foucault and power, and two skills that leaders must acquire.

Roz: When you hear the phrase "exploring the nexus between leadership, culture and schooling," what thoughts come to mind?

Patti: Well, oddly enough, Miami University. If I were doing one of those Rorschach free association test, I would have to say Miami University. It is one of the few places I know that is making an effort to bring those things together and my particular interest in it is that I think educational administration tends toward a very technicist framework. And so I'm thrilled to see it open itself to a cultural look at things. I think we'll get better principals. We'll get better school leadership.

Roz: How do you think that is going to transform into new schools, new leaders? What kinds of things are going to be different?

Patti: Leaders who have a sense of leadership. I mean, at the very basic level, leaders who have a sense of leadership which includes issues of culture and curriculum. I am always shocked at how many admin programs train leaders without those things as part of their training. But more importantly to displace this sort of rampant technicism with a hopeful lens and use that as how we look at your schools, your communities, your kids, your teachers.

Roz: Let's talk a little bit about the lens of culture, the politics about how that culture is going to play out in schools. What kind of a leader is going to be required in order be to able to think through that new lens?

Patti: Well, I think the lens creates the leader. And then I think you get two things happening. One is a different kind of self-selection in the program. When I talked to Miami's students in this program the other day, it became clear that many folks had *chosen* this program because it did have a social justice orientation. It did have far more interesting looking courses than the more typical ed leadership program does. I was half interested in ed leadership myself as a doctoral student. I went and visited the University ed admin program and was horrified at what I saw. There was no way I was

going to have anything to do with it. So you wonder how many people we lose in ed leadership just because the programs are not very attractive to anybody with a social justice or cultural orientation. So there's that. It will be open to a different kind of person. And then, you get other folks who just want to be ed leaders and then they get shaped by the program. If it's a technician program, then they come out technician. If it's a cultural program, they come out cultural.

Roz: And when they are hired, they are hired into a certain kind of mindset.

Patti: It is increasingly narrow, functional, technician. You see the cultural problems that the technician solution does not address. They just exacerbate. Terrible.

Roz: In that conversation that we had yesterday, one student indicated that he had gotten a position as a principal, and that while he had initially felt that he had a mission to go out into the schools, he is now thinking about staying in the university. Does it pose a dilemma when there is this mismatch in philosophy in what kinds of systems are out there?

Patti: Whether we lose people to the academy?

Roz: Yeah.

Patti: I think the seductions of the academy are always part of higher education. When I went to get my graduate degree I was working on a research project, they said, "Be careful. They'll suck you in. You'll become one of them." And I said, "Oh, no, no. That will never happen." And then it happened.

Roz: And I heard that one comment that you made about the student who said that he was going to go back to teaching, and you made an aside, "We'll get him."

Patti: We'll get him. And I think part of that is because the schools can be a pretty

alienating place to try to do some formative work. And I think programs can do more or less while trying to prepare students for that reality shock. I mean every professional program has the same problem. Here's your training and here's your reality shock of the profession out beyond the academy. So how you negotiate that in such a way that people stay on outside of the academy. You know, nurses drop out, in huge numbers. Every profession. Teachers we lose. We lose such a high number of certified teachers. What is the average? Five years? Shocking.

Roz: I think that's what is really interesting about research in teacher attrition.

Patti: And sometimes I wonder, you know, when you think about teacher attrition you think about administrative attrition. Some of that, I think maybe we should not think that that's such a terrible thing. Maybe that's how careers are these days. That people would move in and out of a variety of positions.

Roz: I'm interested in that because the idea of leadership as a discursive process and keeping dialogue open. One of the things I have noticed having been in the school systems for a long time is that there is a certain dialogue that you get with a particular administrator and that's the dialogue that you have the entire time that he or she has tenure.

Patti: And if they are there a long time that can become quite an oppressive situation. Maybe administrators go sour after, you know, after five years. Maybe we should have upper limits for how long they can stay.

Roz: Like politicians and term limits.

Patti: Yeah, yeah. Fixed terms. And maybe that's not such a bad idea for teachers either. That teachers move, if you think about what a career ladder for a teacher might be, maybe five years of this, then five years of that.

Roz: I find that interesting because until I'd been in my last job that's pretty much what my track record is. And what I find really energizing is going into new districts and establishing my reputation, my course. I think that is the kind of thing that is exactly what I need in order to make me a good teacher.

Patti: When I came to Ohio State, Bill Taylor said to me "You're the hot new thing now." He said, "Enjoy it because eventually you'll be the old hot thing." And there will be some new hot thing that will come along. That's just the way it is.

Roz: So I guess what I do . . . I still need something to shape out my thinking so I try . . .

Patti: So you very deliberately structure it. And maybe we would be better off if we deliberately structured both teacher roles and administrative roles and academic roles so that people were moving around instead of thinking they need to find some place to stay.

Lisa: I think one of the dilemmas though is that because the term "reform" is one of the guru populated terms already within our educational discourse, how do we differentiate between "reform" and "change," putting change at the forefront of what it is we are doing--transformation? How do we prevent that from getting lost in the technician sort of usage of that term? Does that make sense? Well, part of it is because, I think, I'm just worried about being co-opted again.

Patti: Everything gets co-opted, appropriated and sucked into an instrumentalist framework. That seems to be what happens in a capitalist America, or Western culture, or whatever, probably not even just that. That's a dynamic that just is there. So how do you keep those terms fresh or the thing itself happening, given that dynamic?

Roz: Mmmhmm. I think there was a statement inspired by Carlyle Fielding Stewart in the Department of Educational Leadership's joint 2001 AERA paper that talks about

"the stamina learning communities need to accomplish this [transformation] falls outside a purely cognitive or intellectual domain but rather emanates from a spirituality of resistance that embraces and upholds those who dare to inquire and critique with the ultimate goal of transformation" (p. 8). So, so accepting the fact there are always going to be those who dare to critique and inquire, rather than squelch those kinds of impulses, to find a way of supporting those impulses.

Patti: I think one way you keep some of these major terms fresh is to situate them as ruined from the start. Sort of let go of the naïve idealism that cluster around any of our sacred terms. And figure out what becomes possible if we situate them as sort of ruined. Not that we want to live without them, but what would it mean to live with them as, as, full of problems, counter movements.

Lisa: I'm with you there. But I also know that what we talked about, you don't get million-dollar funding talking about terms being ruined. And increasingly, leadership projects, you talk about following the money, and the money is about not talking about . . .

Patti: It's rhetoric of hope, rhetoric of transformation.

Lisa: Right. So if you conceptualize something that is ruined, how do you deal with the fact that (a) that won't fly, that sort of discourse would just not be adopted or funded. And that (b) I'm also thinking of the urban context where it is problematic to theorize schools and its politics as a form of ruin because they are already conceptualized as ruined. And they aren't dealing with the fact of trying to push teachers out after five years, they are trying to keep teachers for *a* year, to keep a superintendent for *a* year. So how can we talk, because discourse matters, so how can we talk ruins in . . .

Patti: in a way that is intelligible and doesn't shut the door on whatever it is you want to do. One standard answer would be strategic rhetorical mobilization

Lisa: I love it! Strategic rhetoric!

Patti: Strategic rhetoric. I mean, sort of training in the rhetoric of whatever the dominant discourses are. Learning to work them to your own purposes. This is what Kate McCoy does a little bit when she gets funded. She's doing all this edgy qualitative work and she has learned how to get the NIH and all that stuff to give her money and she presents the work in such a way that it maps onto their . . . , it's pushing it a little bit because it's qualitative, but it maps onto what they want. And then she gets the money and she's able to give them what she said she would, but it's within what she wants to do. There is a kind of strategic mobilization of rhetoric as a skill, as training and skill. But I think more profoundly that can lead to a kind of cynicism which I think you have to be careful about. I think there is so much rhetorical optimism where we sort of glibly, deal at such a glib level, with deep structural problems, and umm . . .

Roz: You know what strikes me after having joined this program having taught so many years, and I'm reading the kinds of texts in some of the classes I'm taking, I'm saying "You don't have to write this. We don't have to be reading this still."

Patti: This is not mapping on.

Roz: No.

Patti: How do we put it together so that it both portrays the complications and helps us complexify our understanding?

Roz: And moves us.

Patti: So that we can move within those complications.

Lisa: Can you be a little more specific about "we don't need to read this"? Talking about ideas.

Roz: Talking about ideas. The fact that a democratic school would be a good experience for people. The idea that small community schools would be a good idea. The idea that relationships are the core of . . .

Patti: good schools.

Roz: Obviously. Obviously. Obviously. Yet we continually choose architectural designs of huge sites to house kids. And inside these buildings we have all these things going on independently. We know what's best for children, and it's not just something we've discovered in the last five years.

Lisa: Who is the "we"?

Roz: Educators. And the frustration of having the history that we do of what good education would look like and we still haven't moved toward it, it's just a very frustrating thing.

Patti: And it's all the silliness of all this research driven policy. The policy's not doing anybody any good.

Roz: Right.

Patti: And here in the academy we are supposed to show how to make our research useful to policy.

Roz: And that's where I was trying to get. If the EDL department were truly serious about the research that they are going to design around this initiative, the intersect between culture, leadership and schooling, what does that have to look like?

Patti: I think that, I've always believed that you do your research at the local level.

Because at least you're face-to-face. Like if they're working with the local school district and that school district has this drop-out problem, and, these folks could do some research that would help them figure out their local problem and might do some good on the ground right there with this community, then if they want to publish it and other folks want to plug into it or not, fine. [*ed: Miami's Initiative is in the planning stages of just such a drop-out study.*] But at least it has done some good here locally. Plus in a Deleuzean way, and Foucault too, for that matter, you deploy local interventions as a way toward larger, more global changes. This is about responsivity rather than manipulability, on the groundwork with an eye toward inducing counter-effects against the normative.

Roz: So case study kinds of things.

Patti: Yeah. Sometimes I think we need to think smaller and closer to home. Give up on this idea that we're going to go to Washington and be consultants on the national level. And try to do some things face-to-face.

Roz: Okay. So it would be a collaboration between the university and the independent schools. And, do you see it as an isolated school within a district? Or does there have to be buy in by . . .

Patti: It depends on how big your team is and your resource base is. I've always gone very small, by myself. You do what you can.

Roz: And whose story should they be telling?

Patti: Well, I'm invested in the polyphonic text. So you should get as many voices in there as possible. And then your analytic task becomes to try to layer on actually a variety of meanings so that you've got multiple voices, multiple interpretive frames, multiple meanings being made out of it. One thing I like about the Initiative's research design of the drop-out study is they are going to collect their data and then they are

going to set up these discussion groups. I don't know what they are going to call them. But they are going to have groups of students, and parents, and teachers, and administrators who would listen to the data and actually layer on their own meaning from a variety of perspectives. And I think that has praxis dimensions and will get at richer interpretations. I would rather see smaller things, dialogic, done at the local level. And then written up in smart ways. And then that would probably mean doing fewer, longer term sustained things.

Roz: Tell me what you mean when you say "write it up in smart ways."

Patti: In order to get published out of it. I mean, one thing about writing up smart, is you write along the way. You don't wait until it's all done. Because if you're doing a more sustained thing, you can't wait 'til it's all over in order to succeed in academic terms. So you would write along the way. Every so often you would write something out of it, get it published. That would be one smart thing. And then, another smart thing would be to write multiple things for multiple audiences. You might end up with something very readable for the kids, or something for the teachers, or something for the parents, or something else for the more academic audience. So that you have the sense of a multiple audience. That way you would have a big investment in the project that goes in multiple directions. And then maybe there would be something there for policy. Say in this drop-out study, something aimed at policy makers. If you are trying to figure out what to do to decrease the drop-out rate, you might want to look at this for policy makers. Something that is short and sweet. Just cuts to the chase. And gives them whatever insight you gained from the project that might feed their policy deliberation.

Lisa: We read in class *Contradictions in Collaboration*.

Patti: Marilyn Johnston

Lisa: Yes. So I guess I want to go back to when you said that educators know the realities. I think that this is a very productive tension. So, there's this local situation and,

as they explored in *Contradictions in Collaboration*, sometimes even the definitions, terms, values and goals of what that collaborative sort of project are are never agreed upon.

Roz: Right.

Lisa: And are never articulated. And for Patti, that's a good thing. Do educators want the polyphonic text?

Roz: I don't think that the teachers in the districts I've worked in feel as if their voice matters. Even if there is "collaborative decision-making," we already know what the decision is going to be.

Lisa: By whom? The researcher or the administration?

Roz: The administration. And that you will put in the time. You'll put in the energy. And they will do what they want to do anyway.

Lisa: So how can we help teachers?

Roz: Well, I think it goes back to the issue that we were talking about before. If we're looking at what that leader looks like, it has to be one who will not feel threatened by multiple voices. And that's all it really is--other voices.

Lisa: And sees it as a resource.

Roz: Yes, sees it as a resource rather than a power struggle. And it's the same as if you have an ineffective teacher in the classroom who thinks that teaching is about power, an ineffective administrator is one who thinks administration is about power.

Patti: So culture, power, ethics are at the heart of leadership.

Roz: Absolutely. And until we have a really clear idea that nobody is after your power. Power isn't what teachers want. They just want to be heard. And the other issue is, a lot of teachers don't feel as if they were hired to make those kinds of decisions anyway. They were hired to . . .

Patti: to work with second graders.

Roz: Yes. This is my expertise. Don't ask me to become a political mind in this district. So you have those kinds of things coming along too. So it's not *just* those people who are in the administrative tract that you need to talk to about what it is to be a leader. And maybe even the word "leader," there's something wrong with it.

Patti: That word is ruined.

Lisa: Because, we all do this, we start off talking about leadership but I have to keep saying, "Where are the teachers? Where are the teachers?" So somehow leadership gets transpired back into administration.

Roz: But even if you say a "teacher leader." A "teacher leader" now in school systems is one who winds up being . . . they supervise teachers, they . . .

Patti: and leads you right out of the classroom.

Roz: Exactly. Leads you right out of the classroom.

Patti: We have never figured out how to have a career ladder for teachers that doesn't take them out of the classroom.

Roz: Exactly. I believe that teachers want to do their jobs well. And that by adding the word "leader" to it, there is a whole other set of things that go on with that.

Patti: Laid on top of. Nothing else gets reduced. But, you know, there could be. Teachers could be in the classroom half as much time as they are.

Roz: Sure. We could sit here and talk about what that would look like. But I think even the idea of being a leader is presumptuous. Because teachers don't look at a hierarchy.

Patti: Well, what does leadership look like that doesn't reinforce hierarchy? Non-hierarchical leadership.

Roz: Exactly.

Patti: Well, that becomes a terrible misfit. Because we are in a hierarchical, capitalist culture. There is hierarchy everywhere. How can you even begin to think about leadership that can function that isn't this stupid idea? I don't know, transformative is not one of those words I like.

Lisa: I like subversive.

Patti: But again, rhetorically, you can't get away with, they're not going to give you funding for that.

Roz: And you wouldn't get any primary school teachers, I don't think.

Patti: You've got to mobilize the language that is engaging. And then try to move it somewhere and keep it moving. Part of leadership is knowing what kind of rhetoric to mobilize.

Roz: Lisa and I were talking about the title for Miami's Initiative and the difference between "intersection" and "intersections."

Patti: The singular or the plural?

Roz: Yes. Do you see that the research would be very different if we were to play with the semantics there a little bit?

Patti: Well, I always think it's a good idea to put an "s" on almost anything. General principle. It codes for multiplicity. I think we're at a time culturally where we are dizzy with multiplicity so, therefore, we need more of it. There's an excessive strategy for you. A proliferation of multiplicities. And I think the more proliferation the better.

Lisa: I'm going to go back here to the question Roz has, "What do you mean by policy analysis." What would it be like to do policy analysis? I know you taught a policy course . . .

Patti: Well, we didn't necessarily come up with an answer. That was the question of the course. And how would you do research in a Foucauldian framework into this extremely rationalist discourse of policy analysis. I actually think that it would be a benefit to talk about power and leadership if folks were able to draw on those Foucauldian theories of the fluidities of power and the constant movement of power and that everybody has power and that power is always already there, circulating, and one of the skills we want to learn is how to track the play of power that is always there. And how can we strategize to make that work for better leadership.

Roz: I've heard you mention two skills that leaders need to acquire. One is learning multiple rhetoric and then accessing and mobilizing power.

Patti: Yes. Reading power. Wanting to read power. And I don't know how you can do that without Foucault. I think his theories of power are just so . . . powerful. And very persuasive to me. In very micro and macro situations.

Roz: So one of the components in this research might be an analysis of the power in

play in schools. And how teachers, or administrators, or parents, or students, recognize . . .

Patti: Mmmhmm. Let's do a power reading.

Roz: Let's do a power reading.

Patti: Let's work together to do a power reading. If you're talking about drop-outs, where do the drop-outs have power? How do they perceive the power structure?

Lisa: So thinking about *that* as a way of how we might pursue as we were talking about earlier, non-hierarchical forms of leadership, rather than coming in a priori with the idea that we are going to identify . . . One of our strategies is to determine exemplary school sites, and best practices in leadership, so that's a different, what you just proposed, is a different alternative. You are basically saying we could go to local situations, do power reads involving multiple voices and verticality, as well as a sort of non-hierarchical forms and circulation of power that might . . .

Patti: help us understand.

Lisa: I like that idea.

Patti: Foucault, Foucault, Foucault.

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