

Teacher Research as a Feminist Act

By Mary Christianakis

Like many simple acts, then, teacher research is finally revolutionary. Based on the results of her research project, one teacher quietly drops basal readers and their workbooks, saying 'I didn't do one ditto.' ... These small acts, these little rebellions add up to a quiet assault on the entire educational hierarchy through the actions of individuals and the assertions by teachers in individual schools that they, not their supervisors or textbook companies, should determine the curricula for their subjects. (Bullock, 1987 p. 27)

As Bullock argues above, teacher research is revolutionary; it upsets the educational hierarchy, much like feminism upsets patriarchal hegemony.¹ Though most authors on teacher research say little about feminism and gender explicitly, feminism in "Teacher Research" expresses itself through book and article titles [e.g. *Reclaiming The Classroom* (Goswami & Stillman, 1987), *Teachers Are Researchers* (Patterson, Minnarik-Santa, Short, & Smith, 1993), *Seeing For Ourselves* (Bissex & Bullock, 1987)]. Theories framing teacher research echo themes of oppression, subordination, standpoint, situated knowledge, agency, subjectivity, objectivity and voice—all recurring themes in feminist theories.

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In this article, I interpret the phenomenon of teacher research using feminist theories as a heuristic for analysis. I begin with definitions of teacher research. Following, I employ feminist theories to explain teacher research as an emancipatory act. Other feminist metaphors used in teacher research (e.g., transforma-

tive, collaborative) are detailed elsewhere (Christianakis, in review). Based on an inductive analysis of the literature, I discuss three arguments: (1) Teacher researchers define themselves; (2) Teacher researchers challenge the division of labor in the production of research; and (3) Teacher researchers challenge the primacy of academic research through the situated in the production of knowledge. The three arguments provide an organizing principle that underscores the complexity of the phenomenon and deepens understandings of teacher research and hierarchies in educational knowledge production.

I call upon feminist theories, not only because they are implicit in the emancipatory arguments, but also because they help conceptualize education using a different paradigm, one that includes marginalized voices—in this case, teachers—in the construction of knowledge. In this article, I am not searching for non-teacher villains, nor am I claiming that teachers are victims. Rather, I hope to show how higher education research practices, embedded in patriarchal privilege, serve to advance some voices and limit the validity and possibility of others.

Defining Teaching Research

Teacher research is “systematic and intentional inquiry carried out by teachers” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1993, p. 7). Teacher research serves different purposes. Some perceive it as an instrument to reform teaching practices and improve student performance (e.g. Bonner, 2006; Boomer, 1987; Levin & Merrit, 2006). Others propose it as a tool to reflect on teacher practices (e.g. Berthoff, 1987; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Eraut, 1995; Schon, 1995). Understanding diverse and multicultural school contexts has spawned much interest in teacher research (e.g., Dyson, 1993; Freedman et al., 1999; Heath, 1987). It serves as a vehicle for teachers to participate in a more democratic fashion in knowledge production on education (e.g., Bullock, 1987; Kuzmic, 2002). Common to all purposes is the goal to improve teaching and learning.

Teacher research doesn’t always lead to immediate *action*, as with “action research”; the methods may differ. Teacher research need not “conform to the classic action research cycle: plan, act, observe, reflect, revise, plan” (Nias, 1991, p. 24), because research and classroom life are more complex. While teacher research reflects some of the same goals of action research, methodologically, it is less formulaic than the action research cycle:

Its aim is the improvement of these practices, understandings and situations, so that pupils’ education may be enhanced and the overall quality of schools’ educational provisions can be improved. (Nias, 1991, p. 24).

Teachers don’t have to *do* something with their research. “Understanding” *is* the immediate action.

Methodological concerns (how much data to collect, and the medium used to collect it) emerge when defining teacher research. Teacher researchers have used

data collection tools similar to those of higher education colleagues: field notes, interview protocols, journals, oral inquiries, student artifacts, and anecdotal notes (e.g., Bissex, 1987). However, such methods have proven to be difficult and questions remain as to whether data collection and written reflection need to happen in the *systematic fashion*, as Cochran-Smith and Lytle suggest. Often the teacher work environment is not conducive to systematic data collection (Baumann, Shockely-Bisplinghoff, & Allen, 1997; Threatt, 1992). Though systematic and deliberate inquiry can be time consuming, simply thinking about practice is not enough to be called research (neither for teachers, nor university academics). Teacher researchers equip themselves with analytic findings, which guide their reflections, curricular, and pedagogical positions (e.g., Esposito & Smith, 2006).

A second concern centers around what to *do* with the research. Do teachers have to publish their results in order for their findings to be called teacher research? What *counts* as publication (a question that academics in higher education should continue to consider for themselves). Is it enough to share one's results with immediate staff members at an on-site in-service? Is communication with parents a form of "going public"? Is it enough to present at a district-wide conference? Publication is a difficult conundrum for teacher researchers—while there may be intrinsic incentives for publishing, there may be political costs.

Similarly, is changing pedagogy and outgrowth of teacher research? In the context of No Child Left Behind (2001), curricular change may not be feasible. For example, a teacher researcher may find out that a school program or curricular package isn't working; also, that multicultural approaches to teaching may be more relevant to the students. Her freedom to conduct research, "publish," disseminate such findings, and change curriculum may be controlled by disincentives such as job loss. In Los Angeles, two teachers were fired for teaching an Emmett Till poem in a predominantly African-American school (NPR, 2007). While not all teachers face such extreme consequences, the implicit threats constituted by NCLB (2001), coupled with cases such as these, threaten teacher professional freedom. Academics do not experience such threats, unless they research their own institutional practices.

Teacher research challenges the limited academic freedom experienced by teachers. With empowerment, deeper understanding, and instructional improvement as its goal, who would argue against teacher research? In the context of NCLB (2001), self-determined action and the freedom to make curricular choices may be difficult (Sleeter, 2005). Content standards and high stakes testing may limit teacher freedom to make instructional decisions. In states like California, elementary school teachers are increasingly required to use a scripted language arts curriculum intended to homogenize instruction.² There are, however, differences in the amount of freedom that teachers have to use ancillary materials. Nonetheless, curricular scripts focus instructional time on "covering" curriculum and addressing "the standards" in time for "the test," leaving little time for inquiry.

The political and institutional constraints of teacher research underscore the

Teacher Research as a Feminist Act

complexity of the phenomenon. Teachers often work under the constraints of state licensure and district contracts. Professional decisions that teachers make to improve student learning may conflict with the mandates of the state and their employer. Conflicting agendas and institutional constraints highlight the tensions between standardization and professional judgment. They also threaten teachers' academic freedom. Such messiness challenges the potential of teacher research. I now turn to the emancipatory arguments on teacher research that challenge the exclusion of teacher research in the production of educational knowledge.

Teacher Research as Emancipation

In the literature, teacher research has been presented as an emancipatory act, one through which teachers gain freedom of voice, choice, and power by positioning themselves in contradistinction to researchers and academics in higher education, who have traditionally enjoyed higher employment status (Clifford & Guthrie, 1998). Even within the higher education community, teacher educators, almost universally from the ranks of teachers (and mostly women), are also undervalued. Marxist feminist theory argues that models of production in a capitalist labor market are gendered with men enjoying higher employment status. While the majority of teachers are female, those who maintain power and run universities are men (Benschop & Brouns, 2003; Connell, 1987; Long, Allison, & McGinnis, 1993; U.S. Department of Education, 2005).

Whether male or female, teachers and academics work in relation to a patriarchy governing higher education. The patriarchal stronghold on knowledge production highlights structural institutional hierarchies and relations of power. Teacher research addresses the academic distancing and hierarchy by emphasizing the liberatory function of teacher research as a part of a larger movement for participatory democracy (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). While such an argument was made during a time when there was much less standardization, the current context of NCLB (2001) makes teacher participation even more necessary. Teacher research offers possibility for "authentic participation and not what Anderson (1998) calls "a site for collusion." Test score reporting and NCLB report cards present the nation with a very narrow data set. Teachers are uniquely positioned to contextualize such findings and thus resist "collusion."

Implicit in the emancipation argument is that non-teacher academic researchers' hegemony oppresses teachers, reproducing powerlessness and low social standing. Elite schools of education have long been divided by those who affiliate with teachers and those who see themselves as social scientists (Clifford & Guthrie, 1998; Lave, 1996). Academics have benefited from a hierarchy in education that places them above teachers, thus distancing themselves from teachers and teacher education. Those who write about teacher research as emancipation claim that teachers have the right to challenge such a hierarchy. According to the emancipatory arguments,

teachers should no longer be forced to consume the curricula, theories, and ideas produced by academics. One might argue that the structure of institutions necessitates different roles for teachers and different roles for university based academics. I argue that such ontological arguments are simple and outdated because they rely on role theory and that teacher research serves to work outside of such a paradigm. Teacher research affords opportunity to define new roles for teachers and establish new positions in education.

Self-Definition versus Othering

. . . it is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others—for their use and to our detriment. (Lorde, 1984, p. 45)

In large part, teachers have been written about and defined by university-based academics (e.g., Lortie, 1971). There is a small, but growing number of studies by teacher researchers (Bauman & Duffy-Hester, 2000). Many of those teacher researchers are often affiliated with university professors through graduate work or through University/K12 collaboratives (e.g., Cone 2006; Gallas, 2001). Teachers rarely publish single-author articles in research journals. Also, the “paucity of discussion in the literature *of* teacher research” stands in contrast to the discussions *about* it as an emerging phenomenon (Lytle, 2000, p. 704).

Many who write *about* the phenomenon of teacher research argue that teachers must be included in academic journals to deepen understandings of teaching and to define their work (Zeichner, 2003). As feminist Audrey Lorde suggests, when one does not define oneself, others will oblige for their own purposes. One might argue that many education scholars were previous teachers. And while that may be true, the moment an educator “leaves” the classroom, he no longer has the same positionality as a teacher doing the work. Sometimes, academics write about and treat teachers in derogatory, patronizing ways—in particular those who have never been classroom teachers themselves.

In a case study of one female math teacher, Cohen (1990)³ writes that the teacher *thinks* that she is engaging in progressive mathematics teaching, but according to Cohen, she is not. He uses the pseudonym “Mrs. Oublier,” which translates as “to forget” in French, insinuating that she has forgotten something. Throughout the eighteen-page article, based on his observations and interviews, Cohen quotes the teacher’s words only once. In the remaining text, he interprets her words, ideas, practices and knowledge. Cohen judges Mrs. Oublier’s mathematical knowledge:

So the many things that Mrs. O did not know about mathematics protected her from uncertainties about teaching and learning math. Her relative ignorance made it difficult for her to learn from her very serious efforts to teach for understand. . . She is a thoughtful and committed teacher, but working as she did near the surface of this subject, many elements of understanding and pedagogical possibilities remained

Teacher Research as a Feminist Act

invisible. Mathematically, she was on thin ice. Because she did not know it, she skated smoothly on with great confidence (Cohen, 1990, p. 339)

Cohen's portrayal of Mrs. Oublier as an ignorant, but blissful teacher is at best demeaning. He assumes that he knows the extent of her mathematical capabilities and that he knows how she feels about her mathematics teaching. To believe Cohen, is to accept that a university researcher knows more about his own intellectual capabilities, subject matter, and teaching than this classroom teacher knows about hers. It is the responsibility of researchers to take Cohen to task for being less than professional in his representation of teachers; however this has not been the case. Instead, academic researchers cite his "findings" as part of the "codified" knowledge on mathematics policy and pedagogy (e.g., Lampert & Ball, 1998).

Though the Cohen example may be extreme (most research articles are not as negative as this particular one), Lytle and Cochran-Smith argue that teachers are often the *objects* of academic researchers' studies.

In most of the studies...teachers are the objects of researchers' investigations. Missing from the field of research on teaching, then, are the voices of teachers themselves, the questions that teachers ask, and the interpretive frames that teachers use to understand and improve their own classroom practices. (1994, p. 24)

Multicultural feminist theories help us to understand that "as subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history. As objects, one's reality is defined by others, one's identity created by others, one's history named only in ways that define one's relationship to those who are subject" (hooks, 1989, p. 42). Most educational research on teachers and classrooms are conducted by a researcher studying others.⁴ The researcher acts as subject and the teachers are positioned as objects. I have read no research where the opposite is true, that is teachers have *never* switch from object to subject, unless they study their own practice. Furthermore, with the exception of teacher educators, few academics study their own teaching practices.

Teacher research offers opportunities to change the position of the classroom teacher from object to subject. In defining themselves, teachers construct their own identities, realities, and histories. One could argue that when teachers become researchers, the students become the "others." However, such a characterization is an oversimplification. Teachers cannot be simply the "subject." They are both the *subject* in their study, as well as the *object*. As teachers research their own practice, their students, their schools, they are researching *themselves in others* (e.g., Paley, 2000), thus blurring the object/ subject dichotomy. Such involvement in the research is not solipsistic, but rather, can be a catalyst for change. Bonner (2006) argues: "teacher change, like most human change, must emanate from within" (p. 41).

Self-definition enacted through teacher research has the power to free teachers from the unchallenged academic gaze, and more specifically from generalized outsider expertise:

No longer dispensers of curricula designed by “experts” from universities, textbook companies, or their school districts, these teachers become experts themselves, bringing knowledge and confidence to their teaching and showing that they are professional educators to be respected within schools and without. By becoming researchers, these teachers take over their classrooms and professional lives in ways that confound the traditional definition of teacher and offer proof that education can reform itself from within. (Bissex & Bullock, 1987, p. xi)

From an emancipatory framework, teachers who research their classrooms refuse to accept their “roles” as defined by academic others. They research themselves and their classrooms. They become “experts” as they incorporate their own knowledge into their teaching and look critically upon traditional sources of information. They are no longer represented by other peoples’ words, as was *Mrs. Oublier*.

Through self-definition, teacher researchers free silenced voices and reclaim their work. “Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal” (Cixoux 1981, p. 10). Teachers, too, have been excluded from literature on teaching and learning. Teachers must write about *themselves* and bring teachers to educational research with the hope that research on teaching will change if teachers write from their experience.

Teachers’ voices are silent because there is little support for what they have to say:

... the lack of teacher voice comes from university researchers who are involved in education, who write research papers that influence district policies, yet who don’t ask teachers their opinions, who do not work in the reality of classrooms daily. Teachers are silent because no one wants to hear. (Hollingsworth, 1994, pp. 167)

Academics and policy makers have ignored teachers in the construction of knowledge. They participate in and reinforce the silencing, by working apart from teachers and by using esoteric and academic jargon that marks their higher status (Clifford & Guthrie, 1988). Academics pull rank by claiming to have more access to information on schools, pedagogy, curriculum and children. They do so by discounting individual teachers’ experiences:

Children become “types,” behaviors are placed in categories. As a result, teachers’ daily experience of particular children and of the way in which they adapt and select in order to facilitate their pupil’s learning is undervalued. (Nias, 1991, p. 22)

Professional threats, in combination with academics telling teachers what they should or ought to do, limit teacher opportunity to create knowledge and jeopardize their status (Clifford & Guthrie, 1988; Zeichner, 2003). “Generalizability” espoused by academics often serves to erase particularities and diversity in school communities. True, there are commonalities in teaching. However, teachers in inner-cities, multicultural schools, and historically Black schools define themselves differently than other teachers (e.g., Foster, 1997). Teachers in rural schools have

Teacher Research as a Feminist Act

different concerns and constraints than teachers in affluent suburban schools. Such complexity can never be generalizable. Teachers are positioned to show the particularities of context. Hearing such particularities is important in a pluralistic democracy working for wider definitions of knowledge and influence.

Overall, those who write about teacher research as emancipation, position the teacher as the oppressed, and objectified and the academic as the oppressor. Teachers are degraded and dehumanized through “othering.” “Othering,” as described by Black feminist thought is the outcome when people are objectified and “viewed as an object to be manipulated and controlled” (Collins, 1990, p. 69). Their knowledge is trivialized and devalued under the pretense of a more rigorous “objective” academic stance, their autonomy and choice is taken away, teachers are held hostage to curricula, textbooks, and policies that have little relevance to their particular student populations. In contrast, teacher research is an act of rejection and resistance to “othering.” One teacher researcher, Berthoff, rejoices in the rejection of academics in classrooms:

My spies tell me that it's becoming harder and harder for researchers to get into schools: I rejoice in that news because I think it might encourage teachers to become researchers themselves, and once that happens, the character of research is bound to change. (Berthoff, 1987, p. 30)

Teachers are skeptical of being objects of study and having their work misrepresented. Teacher research offers a mechanism through which research on teaching can change to be more inclusive. When teachers write, they can free previously silenced voices and share valuable knowledge.

Division of Labor

In a general sense, teachers and academics enact their work differently because of what Marxist feminists would call a division of labor in the production of educational knowledge. The division of labor “at its simplest is an allocation of particular types of work to particular categories of people” (Connell, 1987 p. 99). In contrast to university-based academics, teachers’ work is not research-driven. Teachers have been conceptualized as moral agents, craftspeople (e.g., Lortie, 1975), technicians, bureaucratic agents, and deskilled intellectuals (Giroux, 1994). The NCLB legislation (2001) mandates teachers to comply with state standards and administer state-required examinations, which purportedly test the achievement of such standards. Consequently, teachers have become implementers of “others” ideas with little representation. Such a division of labor, however, is not new. Historically, “teachers never did gain control of any area of practice where they were clearly in charge and most expert; day-to-day operations, pedagogical theory, and substantive expertise have been dominated by persons in other roles” (Lortie, 1971). Other roles include government officials, superintendents, principals, and academics.

As it stands, teachers’ work is defined, structured and limited in comparison

to the university work culture. The works of Marxist feminists can help explain the reasons for such a structured division of labor. “By demeaning women’s abilities and keeping them from learning valuable technological skills, bosses perceive them as a cheap and exploitable reserve army of labor” (Lorber, 1994, p. 33). Excluding teachers from educational knowledge production and requiring them to follow curricular scripts demeans their expert knowledge and relegates it to “craft” or “technical work.” Including teachers in educational research honors and makes important their knowledge. But such attention isn’t some paternalistic attempt at false generosity. Including teacher research in the larger education discourse changes the modes of knowledge production, as well as the nature of the knowledge.

In the context of NCLB, teachers’ work is to “implement,” “execute,” or “carry-out” curriculum for the purpose of improving test scores. Teaching can be intellectual work. However, one of the most deleterious affects of NCLB is the chipping away of teacher agency and control over the work (Apple, 2001). “The deskilling of teachers has been happening for some time, but it’s on an accelerated trajectory under the current administration” (Wilson, 2005). Many teachers work through their curricula mechanically to produce better test scores. Then, through the publication of test scores available to the general public (e.g., www.greatschools.com), teachers’ classrooms become “data” for academic research. Academics and the NCLB administration use “scientific studies” based on test scores to create curricula, and, yes, more test materials. As such, educational knowledge is a result of academics and government colonizing teacher workspaces:

The faculty of schools of education, heavily grounded in theory and statistical research methodology, but too often lacking in their primary or secondary teaching experience, not only prepare future teachers for their work in the classroom, but also design teacher preparation curricula, determine what these teachers need to know, and write, edit, and review many of the school’s textbooks, determining what the teachers will teach. School districts hire curriculum specialists to design curricula and administrators to ensure that teachers carry out the dictates of the curricula. (Bullock, 1987, p. 22)

While Bullock’s citation is essentializing, and outright false in the case of teacher educators (often former teachers), it points to the division of educational labor. The division of labor takes away decision-making power from the teachers and puts it in the hands of outsiders who know little about the particularities of the schools or students. Even curriculum specialists, former teachers, are detached from the dailyness of teaching. The system socializes teachers to act as implementers within such a labor structure (Apple, 2001). Even so, in their practice, teachers recognize the disconnect between academics and teachers. Teachers dismiss university faculty as being impractical, inexperienced, and reductive (Connelly & Clandinin, 1994). However, such judgments are given little credence, as there is no incentive to listen to teachers.

Academics maintain hegemonic control in the education labor hierarchy. Many

Teacher Research as a Feminist Act

disassociate from the banal work of teaching and construct themselves as theory-makers who create knowledge for the greater understanding of human learning (Clifford & Guthrie, 1988). While not all academics flaunt their status, their stereotype is persistent both in teacher lore and the emancipatory literature. The division of labor in research on teaching (meaning who does what kind of educational work—and what counts) is most evident in situations where labor lines are perceived to be threatened. For example, Hollingsworth recalls a situation at a research conference when the academic hierarchy was challenged. She was co-presenting with a teacher researcher and recalls how the academics received the teacher.

Mary Dybadahl is still furious that she was patted on the head by a university researcher after a brilliant presentation at a national conference. At another state-level conference, she was asked to sit down, so that the real expert in our group (me) could speak. The “we and they” of many such relationships is unconscionable but not unspeakable. (Hollingsworth & Miller, 1994, p. 137)

Such events are not isolated incidents. Whether in writing, or in person, academics have shown that they can enforce the hierarchy. Teacher research disrupts the hierarchical structure, which structures educational labor. When teachers research their own classrooms, they maintain a presence and a voice in the production of knowledge in education.

Situated and Contextual Knowledge

Another aspect of the emancipatory framework has to do with “knowledge” that is situated or contextualized in the practice of every day life. Teacher research has the potential to provide multiple perspectives that academics cannot. While Western scientific thought seeks “objective” truths, such truths often ignore multicultural contexts and perspectives of participants. Seemingly “objective” truths reflect and support domination of thought, and epistemology. According to Black feminist theory, the standpoint of those oppressed is embedded in a context characterized by domination (Collins, 1991). The contexts in which ideas are nurtured or suppressed matters—as truth cannot be “objective.” In this sense, capital “T-truth”, is replaced by many situated truths—a plurality of truths.

Teacher research offers potential for teachers to create knowledge from their perspectives and situated in their own contexts. Martin (1987) argues that research should be rooted in the experience of those who are there every day, teachers and their students are “essential sources of information.” Teachers are situated within the culture of the school and its community and write from an insider’s perspective. While many researchers, ethnographers—and I include myself here—attempt to construct emic perspectives, their position as non-teachers must be acknowledged.

The teachers’ insider status can be better understood by “standpoint theory,” a central feminist concept. Harstock (1983) argues that women’s unique standpoint

provides unique truths and also provides a methodology for conducting research. She claims that masculinized truths are “partial and perverse” because they oppress. However, those who are oppressed provide perspectives and truths that are “real” and “liberatory.” In contrast, academic researchers, because they are not engaged in negotiating with the school community and administration, have a different perspective.

The Cohen article is a piece of research that fails to take the teachers’ perspective into account—it is partial. Cohen claims that Mrs. Oublier is not progressive because she doesn’t enact all of the trappings of reform. He misunderstands the complexity of the life of a public school teacher. School teachers are often faced with “progressive” reform efforts coming from academics who emphasize teaching for “understanding.” At the same time, they are faced with “conservative” standardized testing mandates that emphasize teaching for “mastery.” To judge teacher’s competence based on how she adheres to particular policies is to misrepresent the complexity of her job and educational contexts—a half-truth.

The epistemological flaw in trying to make grand generalizations about teaching and learning is that one misses the intricacies and subtleties of both the students and teachers. Many argue that research should be generalizable. But what teachers know is that context matters. Knowledge produced by teachers challenges objective generalizability. In defending the lack of universality of findings of teacher research, Leslie argues “Who cares if everybody in the whole world can’t replicate your experience? I think that’s a major problem with a lot of university research. That everybody comes up with something that works, that’s universal, but you know—as a teacher—that it really isn’t” (Hollingsworth, 1994, pp. 185).

Teacher researchers writing from their situated position in the classroom own the research, knowledge, and curriculum—all its successes, as well as the understanding of failures. “Ownership” is in opposition to the colonization of teachers’ intellectual spaces. Boomer argues that teacher research differs from research done by non-teachers because it is not owned:

By “owned” I mean “owned” by the person or the group doing the research. This is their *own* research into their *own* problem so that the consequent action is also “*owned*.” The resultant action will be a modification, however minimal, to their *own* behavior. The research cannot be disowned. ‘Big R’ Research may be in the first instance aimed simply at the generation of knowledge. The problem in this case is to find out more. Personally owned research is always oriented towards a solution to the present problem with respect to the act, although its effect may be to create new knowledge, new problems and new questions by the way. (Boomer, 1987)

Boomer does not necessarily argue that university research isn’t relevant, but rather that teachers need to own their own learning and teaching to become open to the possibilities of “Big R” research. When teachers “own” the phenomenon of interest, they can sift through all sources, including “Big R” Research. “Big R” Research becomes relevant when local problems are defined and understood.

Teacher Research as a Feminist Act

Teacher researchers are positioned to define local problems and provide classroom data to challenge, support, and advance theories.

Some academics claim that teachers lack distance, objectivity and clarity (Lave, 1996). They are too close, too indoctrinated, too biased. But feminists argue that those in power must come “to believe in the possibility of a variety of experiences, a variety of ways of understanding the world, a variety of frameworks of operation, without imposing consciously or unconsciously a notion of the norm” (Brown, 1989, p. 921). Academics have operated under a norm where they’ve enjoyed complete control of authorship.

There is no such thing as objectivity or the ability to see the “whole” picture—all truths are partial. Insiders have unique perspective/knowledge of educational phenomena that outsiders do not. There is no single vision or method that will enable educationists to see the whole picture. We need to have multiple perspectives, both distanced and closer (Bissex, 1987b). Only teachers can study certain aspects of learning:

It is often assumed that the demands of scientific objectivity force this exclusion upon us as researchers. Yet its effect is to deprive us of vital sources of information and understanding: those sources which depend upon asking children questions and answering their questions, exchanging ideas with them, discussing each other’s opinions, chatting and joking, trying to probe their intentions and appreciate their problems offering help and responding to appeals for help—those sources, that is to say, which depend upon teaching. (Armstrong, 1982, p. 53)

Armstrong reminds us that teaching is an act of investigation. Teachers observe children, make hypotheses, ask children questions and discuss issues—all in the context of natural classroom life. Such knowledge must be understood if “Big R” research is to matter beyond academia and if real classroom life has a place in educational research.

When teacher researchers publish their research, they redefine teachers’ “roles” in the knowledge production system. Marxist feminist theory argues that there is differential skilling and training of different people. As such, “skilling and training is one of the mechanisms by which the sexual division of labor is made a powerful system of social constraint” (Connell, 1987). Teachers have been “trained” to consume and implement researchers’ findings, with little voice in how curriculum should be designed. The “roles” available to teachers have more to do with following orders, than helping children construct knowledge. Teacher research offers the opportunity to change the work of teachers and the modes of knowledge production. Through teacher research, teachers can transform teacher’s work to include multiple roles: theory-maker, critic, curriculum writer, resource, and consultant (Goswami & Stillman, 1987).

Conclusions

Conducting teacher research redefines teachers' work. The process of researching in one's classrooms affords opportunities for teachers to listen to students, as opposed to following curriculum guides in dogmatic and mechanistic ways. Teachers learn in their moment-to-moment interactions with students. In talking about how teacher research has transformed teachers' roles, Atwell writes, "we are writing descriptions of our research for educators' journals. We are serving as resources to teachers outside of our district and presenting our research findings at state and national conferences. And we are seeing a change in our community's perceptions of our professionalism and expertise" (Atwell, 1987, p. 91). Such testaments illustrate the power of classroom research for transforming the educational knowledge base.

Teacher research has been presented as a vehicle to transform pre-service education (e.g., Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1994; Goswami & Stillman, 1987). In the past teachers have critiqued pre-service teacher education programs for not preparing teachers for the complexities of teaching, especially in urban areas, where teachers need different supports than in homogeneous suburban areas (Graham et al., 1999; Hollingsworth & Sockett, 1994). Credentialing requirements, teacher and student evaluation measurements, curricular mandates, and even appropriate research paradigms for advanced degree work have been historically established by people outside the classroom in positions of power without benefit of teachers' (mainly women) voices and opinions (Apple, 1985).

[T]eachers need personal and political knowledge as well as disciplinary knowledge to teach literacy in urban classrooms. Yet, it seems they are denied access to the knowledge in many programs of teacher education. It occurred to me that perhaps that phenomena had to do with the preparation (or lack thereof) of teacher-educators. Perhaps teacher-educators, like many teachers themselves didn't know that teachers, as a class, work under less-than-professional conditions with increasingly complex demands for academic, social and psychological expertise in demographically diverse settings. Yet teachers are often asked to conform to a narrow set of ideological standards that denies this diversity and shapes their reflections. (Hollingsworth & Sockett, 1994, p. 215)

Teacher research has the power to transform how student teachers learn information about teaching and student communities and about how they are mentored into the profession (Graham, 1998; Hubbard & Power, 1993). Through teacher research, beginning teachers will have first-hand information regarding the complex demands entailed in teaching in diverse communities. Knowledge discovered through research is added to the "codified" knowledge presented in coursework. Integrating teacher research into pre-service education, a goal of many teacher education programs, re-skills and position teachers to be inquiry-oriented, rather than implementer-oriented.⁵

Teacher research challenges traditional modes of research production. In this paper, I discuss three feminist arguments that frame the phenomenon of teacher

Teacher Research as a Feminist Act

research. The first is that teacher researchers challenge simplistic representations of their work by defining themselves. From their unique insider positions, teachers analyze their institutional realities using their own words. In doing so, they gain expertise and freedom to confront research that wrongly characterizes teachers' work.

Secondly, the act of "doing" research challenges clunky divisions of labor laden with mythologies and hierarchies that operate in the distance between higher education and K-12. Teacher researchers upset the "class" divisions operationalized in higher-ed-driven, top-down patriarchal research models. Finally, teacher research situates findings in real life classrooms with real life constraints. Such positionality challenges "one size fits all" notions, such as those implemented by the Bush administration and the NCLB law. Teacher research broadens and deepens the knowledge base in educating by providing a multiplicity of voices and ideas that contribute to full participation in the educational enterprise.

Teacher research is a feminist act that changes social science inquiry. Teacher perspectives can "play a role in reinventing the conventions of interpretive social science, just as feminist researchers and critical ethnographers have done, by making problematic the relationship of research and researched, knowledge and authority and subject and object" (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1994, p. 29). In essence, teacher research challenges methodologies which silences the inside voices and privileges outside voices. If education is to promote the ideals of a full-participatory democracy, then all voices must be heard.

Notes

¹ According to Gramsci, domination in the industrial West relies on cultural reproduction and distribution of dominant systems of beliefs, attitudes through consensus. He calls this hegemony. It is a manipulation of consciousness, as well as daily life practices.

² California Department of Education supports only two language arts programs for staff development.

³ Cohen critiques "Mrs. Oublier" for following some of the progressive mathematics reform efforts advocating "Teaching For Understanding," but not all of them. He believes that she lacks understanding of both the reform effort and of mathematics.

⁴ Analysis of collaborative research conducted in the last 15 years is discussed elsewhere (Christianakis, in review).

⁵ In California, teachers and teacher educators are mandated to implement the state standards.

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Mary Christianakis

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