

Research Directions

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Teacher Research and Learning Communities:
A Failure to Theorize Power Relations?

Our first writing about teacher research (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 1994/2007) evolved out of an ongoing conversation regarding research Herr was conducting in her own school site. Our own graduate school education, while heavy on research courses and requirements, did not include any discussion of the possibilities of action research, of which teacher research is a part. Traditional forms of inquiry, in our case primarily qualitative research, were not sufficient to allow us to adequately address the complexities of insider research.

Now, more than a decade later, the landscape has dramatically changed. A 1999 survey of institutions affiliated with the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) indicated that almost half of them required teacher education candidates to participate in action research (Henderson, Hunt, & Wester, 1999). These teacher education initiatives reflect an impressive body of research on, and advocacy for, forms of inquiry in which practitioners study, either individually or in collaboration, their own practices and educational settings. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) note this renewed interest in teacher research and link it to a number of influential writings originating in both the United States and Britain in the past 20 years.

In its collaborative forms, action research (also called teacher research) has been

referred to as inquiry or study groups, learning communities, or more recently, communities of practice (Wenger, 1999). In one sense, those of us who have promoted these forms of inquiry should be encouraged by their increasing popularity, which we think has given impetus to the growing tendency for school districts to see the use of inquiry groups as a way to build professional capacity in schools. The New York City Department of Education, for example, now requires all schools to have active inquiry groups. The shift to action research as part of both teacher preparation and ongoing teacher professional development casts teachers as generators of new knowledge, both for themselves and their schools, as well as for the field of education (Blintz & Shelton, 2004).

And yet, we feel it is far too soon to celebrate. In reflecting upon action research as a requirement in teacher education programs, Green and Brown (2006) point out that there does not seem to be a clear-cut or unified framework that grounds these experiences. Over the past 30 years, there have been ongoing disagreements over appropriate theoretical frameworks for doing action research (Carr and Kemmis, 1983) and, more recently, for doing action research in learning communities (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2007). As theoretical frameworks that inform action research multiply, there seems to be more confusion about the role

it plays in schools and its potential to be a force for social justice.

There seem to be three main sources of theoretical framing for action research in schools. First, there are approaches informed by cognitive theories of *individual, professional, and organizational learning*, largely from the field of psychology. Second, there are approaches informed by theories of *individual and social empowerment*, largely from the fields of philosophy and sociology, and drawing on critical and post-structural theories. And finally, as action research moves beyond the classroom into schoolwide forms of inquiry and decision making, it is also often informed by theoretical frameworks from business and organizational studies that focus on the use of data-based decision-making "teams" and shared governance schemes to increase production. These three broad frames often exist together in an unacknowledged and often incongruent relationship. It is not uncommon to see, for instance, Paulo Freire invoked with little sense that a Freirean framework is largely incompatible with most business and psychological frameworks, though it might be compatible with some sociocultural theories of learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertch, 1991).

Relatively recent developments in the field of cognitive psychology and learning theory have provided educational researchers and reformers with a rich set of frameworks with which to theorize collaborative learn-

ing. Theories of situated learning, distributed cognition, activity theory, and other sociocultural approaches to cognition show great potential to help us understand how learning occurs among professionals (Lave, 1988; Rogoff, 1990) and between schools and communities (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). However, we will argue that both cognitive theories of situated and distributed learning and business and organizational theories of capacity-building largely leave issues of power under-theorized. We will also argue that action researchers are well served by integrating critical and post-structural theories, particularly those that highlight the importance of the relationship of discourse to practice.

One characteristic of theoretical frameworks is that while they illuminate or foreground some aspects of social life for analysis, they can also create possible blinders. As lenses on reality, we should expect that theoretical frameworks will have both clarifying and distorting effects. In this sense, some theoretical frameworks will understandably be better than others at theorizing power. Also true is the corollary: theoretical frameworks that foreground issues of power may lack sophisticated theories of learning. For example, the theory of distributed cognition, currently popular both in collaborative inquiry and leadership theory (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001), is used as a framework to understand how learning and leadership are distributed across a group or a school. It may be unfair to critique this psychological framework for under-theorizing power since it makes no claims about distributing power, promoting social justice,

closing the achievement gap, or leaving no child behind. Distributed cognition theory illuminates a certain potential for building greater organizational and professional capacity and ultimately school improvement, but does little to illuminate issues of power and conflict.

And yet, it is the lack of attention to power that leaves such approaches to collaborative action research impotent in the face of school reforms based on high-stakes testing that narrow the very notion of learning itself. So-called learning communities are most often incorporated into dominant reforms under the guise of professional empowerment (Anderson, 1998; Herr, 1999a). Our concern is that a focus on how to better conduct business as usual in schools without concurrent questioning and critical problematizing will leave unaddressed fundamental practices that continue to disenfranchise whole groups of students. Miller's (1990) early work on teacher collaboration and inquiry draws attention to this concern:

Many conceive of collaboration as a way in which teachers can work together to improve their teaching practices. While that emphasis certainly emerged as part of our collaborative inquiry, it also has the potential to be posited as the only goal of collaboration. As such, that emphasis has the potential to obscure the possibilities of teacher-centered inquiry that also focuses on uncovering forms of oppression and imposition within school settings. (p. 154)

Because of our concern that teacher research was vulnerable to engaging in the mere reproduc-

tion rather than the problematization (Tripp, 1994) of practices, we developed a set of "validity" criteria (Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen, 1994/2007; Anderson and Herr, 1999) designed as a frame of reference to support researchers attempting to situate their teacher research, individually or collaboratively, within critical frameworks that call power relations into question. We wanted criteria that might help interpret action research to the larger academic and local research communities (Anderson & Herr, 1999), but in addition, we wanted criteria that would hold us responsible, as researchers from multiple theoretical frameworks, to the potential of action research to interrogate and potentially interrupt relations of power.

REDEFINING ACTION RESEARCH "VALIDITY"

In this section, we will first lay out components of the expanded validity criteria that we deem relevant to this discussion. We then draw on an example of their implementation from our own work in an attempt to maintain a critical edge in the process of inquiry. These criteria serve as guides for our role as researchers, prompting us to pose questions that help us assess whether we are constructing an inquiry pathway that adheres as closely as possible to our social justice aims.

As with all research, we felt it was important to have quality criteria for action research that included a rigorous *process* leading to valid *outcomes*, and we elaborated on these (see Herr & Anderson, 2005, for a more in-depth discussion). Yet we found that the action-orientation and insider status of teacher research

created conditions that required serious rethinking of traditional notions of research. Too often, for instance, school professionals address problems by constructing solutions that privilege their own knowledge and interests over those of their clients and communities. Even when school professionals collaborated through “learning communities,” it was often hard to tell if the result was collaboration or collusion. We wondered what was left unquestioned or taken for granted, even when inquiry was taking place. There is nothing necessarily critical about teacher research, and it may have unintended effects that lead to the legitimization of an unjust status quo. This questioning resulted in the incorporation of two forms of validity for teacher research that we have come to consider essential for critical work: *democratic* and *catalytic*.

Democratic validity refers to the extent to which research is done in collaboration with the parties who have a stake in the problem under investigation. If not done collaboratively, how are multiple perspectives and material interests taken into account in the study? For example, is the researcher using action research to find solutions to problems in such a way that the researcher benefits at the expense of other stakeholders? Who is seen as part of the insider community that undertakes the research, and who is viewed as an outsider by the action researchers? The depth and breadth of any collaboration makes all the difference.

Another version of democratic validity is what Cunningham (1983) calls “local” validity, in which the problems emerge from a particular context and in

which solutions are appropriate to that context. Democratic validity views the inclusion of multiple voices in the research process as an ethical and social justice issue.

Catalytic validity is “the degree to which the research process reorients, focuses, and energizes participants toward knowing reality in order to transform it” (Lather, 1986, p. 272). In the case of action research, not only the participants, but the researchers/practitioners themselves must be open to reorienting their view of reality as well as their view of their role. All involved in the research should deepen their understanding of the social reality under study and should be moved to some action to change it (or to reaffirm their support of it). The most powerful action research studies are those in which the researchers recount a spiraling change in their own and their participants’ understandings. It highlights the transformative potential of action research when the everyday is turned on its head via new understandings. These criteria attempt to address what Tripp (1994) calls “problematization.”

While much writing about guidelines for action research makes it sound rather neat and tidy, the reality of schools is much messier (Herr, 1999b). We will provide an example of an attempt by coauthor Herr to participate in collaborative research with both democratic and catalytic validity in mind. Given the impact of macro and micro politics on schools, creating “authentic” spaces in which to do collaborative action research is typically unrealistic. For example, Herr worked closely over a period of several years with a principal who

incorporated ongoing data gathering and analysis into the work of a “School Restructuring Committee” (SRC) that the district mandated for each school. While its mandated nature was less than ideal, it did require the participation of representatives from the various constituencies in the school community—faculty, staff, students, and administrators—as well as the parental and local communities. In this way, the basic conditions for democratic validity were at least present. In the following paragraphs, we offer the narrative of this group to illustrate how it came to utilize action research that pushed into critical areas and questioned the taken-for-granted.

CREATING A CULTURE OF CRITICAL INQUIRY IN ONE ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL

Concerned with low standardized test scores, the principal of this alternative school for pregnant and parenting teens brought this issue to the SRC for consideration. The district had provided each school with a compilation of its latest test results, and the principal projected these onto a large screen for the group to review. The evidence was indeed damning; the school appeared toward the bottom of the district’s rankings for high schools in the city. In fact, when compared to other alternative schools in the district that targeted special populations, its standardized test scores were the lowest.

An animated discussion of the test scores ensued; teachers in particular offered various “hunches” to explain the poor performance. Chief among these was the idea that the school’s

transient student population was “the problem.” Certainly it was a school where students came and went; they would appear for awhile and then get caught up in the demands of their complicated lives and disappear again. Teachers suspected that the test scores of the transient students—those who happened to be in school on the test day but who did not regularly attend the school—pulled down the overall school scores. They were convinced that the test scores of their regular students would be higher than those of the more transient segment of the student population.

The district data, in its current form, could not “speak” to this idea one way or the other; its aggregated format told the overall story but did not offer the nuanced view that would be needed to prove or disprove the teachers’ hypothesis. Sometimes this is the end of the story: administrators or groups accept the generalized analysis of the data offered and the meaning they or others extract from it based on their tacit knowledge or “hunches.” Interventions are planned based on this understanding. In this case, the analysis would indicate a need to focus on the transient students and their test scores. In and of itself, this would not have been a bad thing, but it would have left unexamined the experiences of the other students who were assumed to be doing well.

The validity criteria outlined previously warn against a superficial problem-solving process via one-shot data gathering and interventions. The test scores here indicated that there was a problem, but it was not yet in focus. In action research, insiders’ tacit knowledge can be both a plus as

well as a cautionary tale: how is it we “know” what it is we think we know? In this case, the action research process was poised to accept the hunch that the more transient students were pulling the overall test scores down. The question became, “What data is necessary to confirm or disconfirm this hunch?”

The group decided to ask the district if it could disaggregate the data along the lines of their thinking—separating the data for transient students from that of students in regular attendance. As was the case here, school districts typically have research offices that work with schools by providing reports of data according to specific requests. By the next meeting of the SRC, they had a new cut of the data with the analysis breaking out the test scores: there were no discernible differences between the scores of the students who attended regularly and those who were more transient. This was a genuine surprise to the inquiry group and more than a little disheartening. Now staff members were compelled to more closely analyze their own work as educators.

The more nuanced analysis of the data propelled staff members to question their own assumptions and tacit knowledge; they realized that even as insiders to the school community around the table, their understanding of the presenting issue was only partial. They began a discussion of alternative interpretations: If not that explanation, then what? And how would they know?

It is not unusual that the straight line between the presenting issue and how we understand it shifts with a close analysis of the data. It is also important to

underscore that data collected for one purpose—be it the school’s purposes or the district’s—has limited utility. An action research model poses the question of what other data might be necessary to more fully understand the issue and to consider multiple explanations. This view asks us as educators to take a step back from immediate problem solving in order to get a fuller sense of what it is we are trying to solve.

As a group drawn from various constituencies in the school community—teachers, staff, parents, administrators, students—members viewed the issue through varying lenses. Opportunities for discussion such as this are rare in the day-to-day operations of a school, but they were catalytic in pushing the group to think through next steps. The make-up of the SRC ensured that those who had a stake in the problem were represented at the table and that their perspectives were heard.

The school had a long and revered history of offering an alternative educational placement for pregnant and parenting teens. It was created during a time when pregnant girls routinely left their local high schools or were counseled out. Although the climate in other high schools in the district had shifted some over the years, the alternative school had remained a viable and attractive alternative. This was due in part to the reality that the school was multifaceted: its on-site offerings included a health clinic, developmentally appropriate nurseries for infants and toddlers, and site visits from social workers representing various social services and financial benefits for the young families.

This "safety net" of services inspired a lot of school pride. At the same time, in the course of examining the students' dismal academic performance, or at least what could be inferred by the test scores, one teacher ventured the question, "Are we a school or a social service agency?" In explaining her question, the teacher described the comings and goings of the students during any one school day. In any given class period, the learning environment could be interrupted numerous times by students going in and out for various appointments or to breastfeed their babies. There was indeed a problem with transience, but it was occurring *inside* the classrooms, too.

Essentially, this teacher was putting a spotlight on what was interrupting the learning in the school. If the data indicated that the girls who were coming to school regularly were not performing as well academically as might be hoped, why not? She was positing that the test scores reflected diminished learning on the part of their students and conjecturing that there might not be as much time on task in their school as with regular high schools whose mission was more narrowly defined. The services the school provided and hosted were in competition for time and focus with the academic side of the undertaking. In uttering this out loud, the teacher was offering for examination the "business as usual" operations of the school day as well as exposing various beliefs about the mission of the school.

The school had an extremely stable staff with many long-term employees. A number of them came on board when the school was founded more than 25 years earlier and the mission was per-

haps more one of caretaking than educating. As one staff member observed, they "just wanted to help the girls be good mothers." But in questioning the mission of the school, unexamined views about the students came to light, something along the lines of "these poor girls"—a perspective that hearkened back to the missionary zeal that had guided the structuring of the school. The question became one of asking how well the girls were served by this founding mission. The idea was not that it had to either be a school *or* provide social services, but rather that a clear purpose be acknowledged by all, emphases be established, and institutional structures be molded to accommodate both academic and social service needs. How might the school day change if the learning time was considered sacred, that is, if classroom interruptions were minimized or virtually eliminated? Could the faculty see the girls as students as well as "good mothers"? Just posing these questions gave rise to others: what was it the school was trying to do? What kinds of future possibilities did the educators see for their students? How did their own low expectations of the girls' futures limit what they could foresee for the school? How did the current institutional structures in the school reflect these low expectations?

These kinds of questions came to light in discussions of areas like breast-feeding, which was one of the primary activities that interrupted classes. The issue seemed to put front and center the conflict experienced between the girls as students and the girls as mothers. How to prioritize these roles and, if possible, avoid choosing between class or

breast-feeding invoked passionate debate across the school. It also served as a lightning rod of sorts, exposing the disparate views of the school's primary function: to create "good mothers" or to provide a sound education.

Each inquiry group member was responsible for reporting back to a small group of staff members the minutes or accounts of the SRC meetings and then soliciting their input. This happened in a variety of ways: commonly, groups met during time set aside during the whole-school meetings or via surveys distributed and returned to the representatives for compilation; these responses were then aggregated at the SRC meetings. The small-group questions were typically discussion items or open-ended questions, while the survey questions required more of a vote or checklist type of response. The issue of how to make the classroom time sacred and minimize disruptions became an item for conversation in each small group, and the SRC representatives brought back to the inquiry group meeting suggestions and ideas that emerged from those discussions. At each phase of the data gathering, the SRC considered the data and came up with some recommendations. The ideas were presented to the larger school community for input and refinement.

At the same time, the SRC decided to survey as many of the school's alumni as it could locate. They were curious as to what the young women were doing now and whether they considered themselves prepared when they left the school for what they faced as young adults and mothers. The former students were also asked their recommendations for the

school in terms of the preparation it could provide the current students. Because there were a number of open-ended questions on the alumni survey and these are more labor-intensive to compile, the surveys were analyzed in a university introductory research class.

The SRC also decided to convene a focus group of alumni, to present to them information from the surveys, and to ask them for input on the findings from their own perspective. Faculty were asked to invite any girls with whom they were still in contact or for whom they had current contact information. Many faculty looked forward to touching base with “their girls” again, and welcomed the alumni to that day’s after-school focus group. While there was some time for a “meet and greet” session where relationships were renewed, faculty and staff also remained for the actual focus group. This was important in that not only was the group effective as a method of data gathering, it was also an intervention of sorts. Members of the school community listened intently as the young women spoke with each other in response to the questions posed. They spoke eloquently of their desire for better academic preparation that would have allowed them to enroll in local community colleges or find better jobs. Faculty members were visibly moved as they heard the former students speak of their struggles to survive economically.

In more general terms, focus groups were conducted primarily to check the analyses of the open-ended survey questions. The moderator of the focus group would present some of the data and the interpretation thus far,

asking alumni whether the interpretation was close to their reality. Anyone who wanted to observe the group could sit, fish-bowl style, and listen in on the discussion. Another SRC member took notes on the group discussion so that the results could be reported back to the committee as well as to the school as a whole.

The SRC continued the action research, collectively gathering data, analyzing it, and crafting interventions that were then presented to the entire school community. Data were gathered on any intervention put into place to see if it was addressing the issue in the way it was intended. It was not uncommon to hear, “What data do we need?” when SRC members were examining an agenda item. Their repertoire commonly included surveys, focus groups, discussions in the SRC representatives’ small groups, and whole-school community discussions. Who was included in the various iterations of data gathering depended on the question involved, but at different points included all the constituencies in the school and the school community.

Interventions or innovations resulting from the action research process included:

- a revision of the attendance policy;
- the creation of a re-entry classroom where students who had been absent for extended periods of time would be placed temporarily while they readjusted to the routines and rhythms of the school day;
- a rearrangement of the social services end of the school offerings to minimize disruptions to class time;

- a major overhaul of the curriculum to reflect the aspirations of many of the girls to continue their educations beyond high school.

In addition, the data gathered were used in the school’s presentation to the area superintendent to demonstrate the steps taken in response to the low standardized test scores.

The school’s new structures described above were designed to align with a shift in its mission. The school community’s interrogation of its practices and expectations exposed institutional structures and attitudes that undermined educational efforts. Working at issues such as updating the curriculum to embrace more of an academic emphasis unearthed the assumptions that had come into play in the original design of the school and that were maintained via daily practices. Issues of race and social class, as well as images of pregnant teens, all came into play and were interrogated.

We would not want to give the impression here that the principal was just one more vote in the group. She still had the authority and responsibilities of her position. What this process did, however, was ensure that the various constituencies—the stakeholders in the school’s success—had input. The data gathered also served as a means to both confirm and disconfirm tacitly held knowledge—that of the principal’s as well as others’ understandings of the issues. In fact, the data managed to surprise everyone at various points by shaking long held beliefs. When the principal ultimately made a decision on an item that came to the inquiry group, it more

often than not included a solution crafted in the group itself. At other times, when a decision had to be made, the data trail allowed the group and larger community a window into why the principal decided on a given direction. The decision-making process essentially became more democratic and transparent.

In terms of the validity criteria delineated earlier, the collective inquiry served a number of purposes. First, it fostered a deepening understanding of the original issue through the group's numerous problem-solving iterations of a complex problem. Second, stakeholders across the school community had input, so that solutions were locally based and crafted specifically with this site in mind. Finally, the learning and understanding for individuals and the school itself deepened and grew. We believe that these outcomes demonstrate that setting a tone of inquiry throughout the school, facilitated by the ongoing efforts of a group made up of all the relevant constituencies, helped meet a number of the criteria for valid action research. It also allowed the administrator to be part of a team that disrupted some of the hierarchical arrangements of the school; it did not make the hierarchy disappear, but it did make democratic input more possible.

MAKING POWER MORE VISIBLE

This brief example of collaborative action research demonstrates some of the ways expanding the circle of input (democratic validity) and challenging some long held assumptions (catalytic validity) were achieved through an authentic process of inquiry.

More socioculturally oriented cognitive theories of learning could serve as lenses for understanding some of what occurred here. In fact, sociocultural approaches to learning might have provided additional insights into the disparities between a largely White teaching force and a largely Latina student body.

Even business models of data-based decision-making and organizational learning could offer some insights. For instance, theories of organizational learning seek greater congruence between the theories we espouse and the theories that we use in practice.

For example, the theory-in-use that test scores were low because of students with inconsistent or rare attendance, as opposed to the students who attended regularly, was challenged by contradictory data. This allowed teachers to not only confront this largely unexamined theory, but to eventually loop back to reexamine their underlying assumptions about and expectations for their pregnant and parenting students. So various cognitive theories of learning and some varieties of organizational learning can be helpful in increasing the democratic and catalytic validity of action research. While this example pushes action research into more democratic and catalytic directions, we want to push action researchers, including ourselves, to explore frameworks that more explicitly address issues of power; we are interested in how power works in organizations to limit the depth and scope of change.

Most frameworks that include an analysis of power either attempt to understand how power distorts communication or how

local settings are "structured" through political and economic shifts at broader levels. For collaborative action research through school restructuring councils and other forms of learning communities, a key question is whether groups are being more effectively incorporated into an agenda not of their own making. As a teacher in Miller's (1990) action research study states, "That's what scares me about the phrase 'teacher-as-researcher' these days—too packaged. People buy back into the very system that shuts them down" (p. 114). In the context of a high-stakes testing policy regime, one into which educators had little input, how do we understand attempts to create authentic spaces for collaborative teacher research at local levels? As teacher research moves into collaborative learning communities with links to governance structures, such as leadership teams, Michel Foucault's notion of power not as something imposed on us, but rather as something we internalize, often through self-regulation, becomes a useful tool for analysis.

Although he takes his examples from industry rather than professional organizations, Foucaultian scholar Barker (1993) has developed a theory of organizational control that is useful in understanding how self-regulation works in organizations. He argues that in post-bureaucratic institutions, control is increasingly exercised by shifting "the locus of control from management to the workers themselves, who collaborate to develop the means of their own control" (Barker, 1993, p. 411). Barker calls this "concertive control," which he posits results in the negotiation

of a new set of consensual core values among organizational members. Unlike bureaucratic control, which invests control in supervisors who enforce bureaucratic rules, concertive control through self-managing teams or councils hands over the creation and supervision of rules and norms to organizational members. While this may seem like a positive development—and under certain conditions, such as the one described above, it may be—it can also increase the intensity of control while it hides its sources.

Concertive control is much more subtle than a supervisor telling a group of workers what to do. In a concertive system . . . the workers create a value-based system of control and then invest themselves in it through their strong identification with the system. (Barker, 1993, p. 434)

This strong identification makes the creation and enforcement of rules among themselves appear a natural process, and they willingly submit to their own—often harsh—control system.

The potential exercise of power by subordinates through concertive control has important implications for collaborative action research. Once we view inquiry groups, data teams, and teacher research as potential disciplinary practices that represent efforts to normalize and control individual and collective action, we must reexamine the increasingly subtle ways in which power is exercised in post-bureaucratic organizations (see Anderson & Grinberg, 1998).

While we stand by our attempt to expand participation in action

research through democratic validity, there is no “magic” in collaboration—in terms of leading to a reframing of what it is we collectively “know”—unless it is coupled with critical reflection and data-gathering methods that push common assumptions and understandings. To some extent, the school restructuring council was able to disrupt previous understandings about their students, but they still had to work within the framework of a reform that makes test scores nearly the only way to think about accountability. In subtle ways, school practitioners become incorporated into a larger logic that is embedded in the very language they use.

We turn below to a consideration of discourse analysis as an example of a tool and analytic lens that might be useful in interrogating this “larger logic.” We think that action research, to continue an activist agenda, needs to try on and disseminate examples of tools such as this one that could deepen the critical process.

POWER AND DISCOURSE

How do we interrogate assumptions and practices when they are embedded in the very language we speak? How do we understand how shifts at broader levels of the system penetrate discourses and practices at local levels? Social practices like teaching are viewed by Foucault as discursive practices. Discourses shape practices and practices produce discourses, and some authors use the term *discourse-practice* to denote this circular dynamic (Cherryholmes, 1988). Schools are mostly about language in its many forms. Teaching and leading are largely verbal endeavors.

Schools are also full of written texts: textbooks, worksheets, notes home to parents, email communication, policy manuals, contracts, budgets, etc. By gathering samples of oral and/or written texts, action researchers can approach data that is “objectified,” in the sense that it can be systematically studied as a cultural artifact—even when the language is one’s own.

School practitioners inhabit a reified and naturalized world in which much is taken for granted or treated as common sense. Critical approaches allow practitioners to look at language in terms of the work it does beyond that of utilitarian communication. That is, discourses are often attempting to accomplish such things as the enforcement of certain cultural norms or ideological biases.

Lewis and Ketter (2004) have employed critical discourse analysis in an action research study of a teacher study group focused on the teaching of multicultural literature. Through the study of transcripts of the study group, they were able to better understand how shifts in teachers’ theories-in-use or cultural models occur. They noted “a tendency on the part of middle school teachers to see the inequity characters experience in novels (and real life) as resulting from individual choices or circumstances rather than from structural or systemic forces” (p. 125). Their study analyzed the linguistic strategies teachers used to convey these largely unexamined assumptions, and how they might be exposed and examined. In the example of the school restructuring council above, a fine-grained analysis of school discourses could provide

a more nuanced understanding of its assumptions and how action research produces shifts in the discourse.

Critical discourse analysis is just one of many methodologies that contain theoretical frameworks that attempt to more explicitly address the issue of how power circulates within school settings and between schools and their larger policy environments. While theories of situated and distributed learning have much to offer action research, we suspect they should be supplemented by frameworks that make power in social settings a central concern, because theories of power have evolved greatly in recent years (Luke, 2005). As action research courses in universities proliferate, it is important to begin to provide a wider array of theoretical framings and methodological options to ensure that we aren't merely teaching practitioners to be more firmly incorporated into policies that often narrow their instructional and curricular options.

CONCLUSION

While most action research is used in schools to improve practice and build professional capacity toward the increased achievement of individual students, ultimately the collective empowerment of disenfranchised groups requires changes in social policies and greater community empowerment (Freire, 1970). Action research alone cannot bridge the space between school and classroom practices and the social policy context. However, the example we provide above demonstrates how we can begin to expand participation and interrogate taken-for-granted

assumptions. A greater focus on the nuances of discourse and a greater understanding of the subtle and invisible ways power circulates can provide additional tools for raising awareness and pushing back against policies and ideologies that arrive disguised as "common sense."

Our emphasis on democratic and catalytic validity has also taken us to a rich body of literature on action research outside of the field of education. In areas such as public health or community psychology, action research is referred to as *community-based* or *Participatory Action Research*. The goal in many of these traditions of action research is to build civic and community capacity, often with the goal of affecting social policies that maintain unequal power relations in areas of housing, health, education, and social welfare. The focus of action research in education has tended to mistakenly assume that raising test scores or improving student achievement will *by itself* address larger power relations in society. Expanding the circle of participants through democratic validity and the problematization of assumptions and practices is certainly a step in the direction of shifting power relations within specific settings. However, linking teacher researchers with community-based and participatory action researchers in other disciplines may be a needed next step toward broader conceptions of student and community empowerment.

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