

Notes on One Particular Qualitative Research Project

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Knowledge-Power Formations in Literacy Teacher Education: Exploring the Perspectives of Two Teacher Educators

Hinchman, K., & Lalik, R., 2000. The Journal of Educational Research, 93
(3), 182-191.

The Research is Critical Research in Two Senses

- First and foremost, the work is concerned with the production and distribution of power; in the case of this study, we used the concept of knowledge-power formations, derived from the work of Foucault (1979).

The Research is Critical Research in Two Senses

- ▶ Second, through our method we strove, not to celebrate our efforts but to critique them. We derived this approach from the work of feminists, such as Stacey (1991), who encourage researchers to incorporate reflexivity in their research. Reflexivity is self-critique infused into the research by the researcher. When infused, reflexivity allows the researcher to reveal partiality, contradiction, paradox, and other problems and issues in the research. In this case, Kathy and I strove to be reflexive in our analysis and interpretation of our teaching, through a study of our language about teaching.

The Research Is Auto-Ethnographical Research

- The work examines the meanings and behaviors of the researcher, herself, or, in this case two researchers, Kathleen Hinchman and Rosary Lalik (2000).

Support for Auto-Ethnographical Research

- Reflects views of feminists, such as Harding (1987), who argue the personal is a site for understanding significant political phenomena;
- Follows from Alvermann's (1993) argument that ignoring or masking personal desires and perspectives results in distorted knowledge; and
- Follows from Ellis' (1997) challenge that we university professors critique our own work.

Rationale for the Study of Our Language

- Like other forms of cultural representation, language is one means by which we think and feel.
- Through language we both reflect existing meanings of our social group and create new and altered meanings.
- Local communities, such as university class groups, participate in discursive practices that accept, as well as resist and transform, more broadly distributed discourses, thus our language influences the circulation of knowledge-power formations.

Rationale continued

- Our language then is a site for exploring the extent to which we, as literacy educators, may wittingly or not, circulate knowledge-power formations that perpetuate inequity by unevenly supporting children's success at literacy in general and school-based literacy in particular.

Rationale continued

- This examination is especially important because various social institutions use children's reported success at school-based literacy as a significant criterion for distributing rewards and conferring punishments on students, teachers and others.
- It is further warranted because success at out-of-school literacies may be essential to children's long term success in life.

Method: Research Questions

- We conducted a critical auto-ethnographical analysis of conversations we orchestrated with each other and others to discuss our teaching.
- We asked:
 - What knowledge-power formations were visible in our talk about our teaching?
 - How were those formations distributed in our talk?
 - What patterns of social affiliations were apparent in our reference to those formations?

Method: Participants

- In qualitative research of this type, the idea of one perfect interpretation is rejected in favor of the notion that all interpretations are partial and perspectival (Lather, 1991). Thus knowledge about the researcher is one criterion for such research.

Method: Participants

- We included an extensive auto-ethnographical account of our lives to help readers develop their own interpretations of how our lenses as interpreters of data may have influenced us. Thus we described our experiences, especially focusing on social constructions; three reverberate throughout our culture: gender, race, and class.

Method: Data Generation

- Using e-mail, we generated weekly logs in which we pondered our teaching over the course of a year. In these logs we:
 - Described our classes;
 - Addressed issues that arose in our teaching;
 - Reflected on documents we used in our teaching;
and
 - Reflected on earlier entries and scholarly articles we read.

Method: Data Generation

- We interviewed 24 of our former and current students to gather a sense of the ways others saw our teaching.
- We conducted study groups with whom we discussed interpretations of our log entries and the scholarly articles we read together.
- We accumulated 1,500 pages of data, including transcribed interviews, e-mail logs, notes from study groups, course documents and copies of scholarly articles we'd read.

Method: Data Analysis

- We read and reread the data to identify themes that were reflected within and across data types, and we reexamined the data for confirming and disconfirming evidence.
- The analysis processes for this study were burdensome. Each of us had a complete copy of the data, and we focused on the analysis processes daily, working face-to-face, over the internet, and separately through three summer months.

Interpretations

- Our language may be characterized as “heteroglossia” in that we reflected an array of knowledge-power formations that were being circulated and validated as scientific knowledge at the time.

Interpretations: Being Practical and Being Fair

- We found an underlying dynamic in our language—one that reflected a tension between two themes—being practical and being fair.

Being Practical

- We explained ways to help our students get along in the gendered career paths of teaching. Getting and keeping a job was an underlying theme in our talk.

Being Practical

- Our focus on being practical seemed to suggest to our students that they needed to behave in ways they thought their principals and other teachers expected them to act.

Being Practical: Knowledge-Power Formations

- In these aspects of our language we circulated a utilitarian discourse that construes success in life as one's ability to get and keep a job. We engaged with this discourse by reading mainstream media and reports and analyses from state and national governmental agencies, including the US Department of Education. We were also influenced by this discourse as part of the regulatory practices used to constrain teacher education programs.

Being Fair

- ▶ We shared a commitment to equity as we repeatedly raised and explored questions such as: “How do we ensure that differences of culture, language, and gender are not barriers to educational success? And what are the implications of these differences for literacy pedagogy?” (The New London Group, 1996, p. 61).

Being Fair

- We sought to invite new teachers to the insights that some methods might be considered oppressive for some children (e.g., mismatch between a child's culture and text content, mismatch between a child's perceptual abilities and decoding tasks.)
- We rejected the notion that reading failure was a matter of individual deficit in favor of the notion that failure is a social construction.

Being Fair?

- Our talk held many examples of concern for gender- and class-based inequities. Yet we found something absent from our discourse that was a surprise: neither of us explained in a developed way how teachers can counter the obstacles that children of color typically face in White-dominated public schools. Instead our talk of race was general, resembling the colorblindness described by Thompson (1989) and other critics of white liberal behavior and perspective.

Being Fair: Knowledge-Power Formations

- We were particularly influenced in our language by the knowledge-power formations from social reconstructionism that construed success as ability to transform ourselves and our society toward interests of social justice.

Being Fair: Knowledge-Power Formations continued

- This discourse circulated through presentations at professional conferences, such as the National Council of Teachers of English, and publications from media, such as the National Coalition of Educational Activists, the Seabury, Taylor and Francis, and various university presses, including the State University of New York Press.

Discussion

- We are working class “do-gooders,” compromised in our efforts toward equity by our social positions as white, working class, liberal women who are sometimes diverted by our needs for getting along with the reigning powers.
- Our work as literacy educators will require continued vigilance of our practices and the support of allies and critics who can help us to examine and transform our pedagogy in the interests of social justice.