A View of Quality and Ethics of Teacher Research in Public Schools

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There is an old adage that the best way to learn something is to teach it. If "learning" is a state of more deeply understanding an issue or a concept, then I would agree with this maxim as it relates to my knowledge of quality and ethics in teacher research. While I have wrestled with issues of quality and ethics as a teacher researcher, only after encountering numerous challenges while instructing others in teacher research methods have I begun to better understand the ways in which they intersect and impact the entire research process. Determining how to respond to the experiences and issues my graduate students faced in their schools as they began to undertake teacher research forced me to define more clearly where I stand on these matters.

I was first introduced to teacher research as a first-grade public school teacher in a rural school district outside of Washington, DC. Teacher research was a primary component of my master's degree program. I had the opportunity to conduct two yearlong teacher research projects, one of which was a collaborative project. The experience transformed who I was as a teacher—the questions I asked, the knowledge I co-constructed with my first-graders, the ways I observed and made sense of the learning in my classroom, the ways in which I collaborated with colleagues, and the empowerment I felt to make well-informed pedagogical decisions in my classroom. Fourteen years have passed since my initial foray into teacher research, during which I earned my doctorate in early childhood education and began teaching those courses that were so influential in my own development as a teacher researcher. The landscape of public schooling has changed drastically in those fourteen years in ways that challenge the work of teacher researchers and directly relate to issues of quality and ethics. This profoundly impacts the role of the teacher educator.

In this article I will explore two of those challenges:

- the tension that exists between qualitative and quantitative frameworks for understanding teaching and learning, and

- the deficit model that drives much of K–12 teaching methods and leaves little space for educating the whole child.

Both stem from the current culture of public schools, which includes a narrow definition of "knowledge" and unexamined assumptions about how to "measure" that knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2006; Ravitch 2011). The teachers with whom I work are immersed in this culture and frequently struggle to develop their identities as teacher researchers in a space that often does not honor the multiple ways of knowing inherent in the teacher research process. This disconnect raises troubling questions about how to ensure both quality and ethics in teacher research.

One cannot discuss issues of quality without also considering ethics, as these two issues intersect in profound ways (Reybold & Maxwell n.d.). As Waltz contends, we cannot measure research quality merely by outcomes; we must also consider the data collected through an ethical lens (2007). A good example is the "Texas Miracle," a plan where Texas schools gave all students the same tests, the results of which were used to channel resources where needed so that eventually all students would be successful. This model for the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 reported that children's test scores improved dramatically. However, the reality was that many students were left out of the testing count and dropouts were not reported at all (Darling-Hammond 2004). While the outcomes of the interventions initially looked promising, there was an entire group of students who were marginalized in this process. Considering the ethical issues of this study certainly impacts the quality of the findings. Research, and teacher research in particular, requires a careful consideration not only of what the data reveals but also of how that data is acquired. What counts as data? Who is included and who is excluded in the data collection process? What assumptions drive the data collection and analysis?

I have featured vignettes from my experiences here in order to explore real quandaries related to these questions faced by both teachers and myself (as a teacher educator) within the context of public elementary schooling. My hope is to articulate my own ethical stance and commitment to quality in teacher research, and in the process encourage dialogue regarding these issues among other teacher educators.

Qualitative thinking in a quantitative culture

The purpose of teacher research is "to identify and study a problem in the teacher's school setting" (Hendricks 2006, 4). The ultimate hope is that through a focused study on a particular issue, one can take informed action to improve teaching and learning in powerful ways. An assumption embedded in this

methodology is that the teacher wants to deeply understand learning *processes* and improve school experiences for *all* students, not just a select few. Quantitative approaches can inform the teacher's understanding of the process and can provide valuable insights when used in concert with qualitative methods. However, only qualitative approaches such as teacher and student reflection, observational notes, dialogue, journals, and various types of student work samples can make visible a richer and more detailed picture of the learning process in context, including the teacher's contribution to that process. Teacher research is a deeply personal approach to inquiry, where the reader is privy not only to the details of the teaching and learning process but to the teacher's thinking as this process unfolds. This requires more of a qualitative mindset. For example, my own collaborative research into children's writing that appears in this journal would not have yielded the powerful insights about children's development as writers if we had not used multiple methods, particularly qualitative methods, of collecting and analyzing data (Stribling & Kraus 2007).

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A teacher research mindset grounded in critical reflection and the exploration of learning processes is often at odds with the structure and culture of the schools in which most primary teachers work. Teachers are ushered to in-service programs and conferences that advertise to "Get Those Struggling Learners Reading." While these professional development opportunities are advertised as ways to improve children's performance, they are mainly designed to raise test scores and leave little room for considering the specific classroom contexts in which teachers work and the ways in which instruction should be directly tied to those contexts. Teachers are bombarded with comparisons and quick fixes, rather than empowered to ask their own questions and seek insights that mesh with their teaching style and philosophy as well as with the unique populations they teach.

> It is the first summer of a two-year master's program and the students have been introduced to the idea of teacher research. After journaling about issues they have faced or continue to face in their classroom, there is a group discussion to brainstorm potential teacher research questions. Kristen shares the tension she feels between using the county-approved math methods and her own hands-on approach that has proven effective to teach math concepts. She indicates her bias toward the use of her own approach and her desire to research this tension by using the county math approach with half of her class and her unique exploratory approach with the other half in order to determine which method is more effective in teaching the required math concepts.

This vignette illustrates a common problem I face when supporting teachers as they explore meaningful questions about their practice. As demonstrated by Kristen, teachers' understanding of good research on learning is often limited to the idea of

comparing one teaching method or strategy with another in order to "prove" that one way is best by dividing their students into "control" and "experimental" groups.

The obstacles these teachers face in fully embracing teacher research can be connected to the continual emphasis on using quantitative research methods. When asked to reflect on previous experiences with research, teachers report assumptions on the importance of being "objective," and providing concrete answers to specific research questions raised by those outside the classroom. Policy makers perpetuate this perspective; they "seem to be committed to standardizing what counts as valid inquiry. The Institute for Educational Science, the research arm of the Department of Education, will not fund studies that are qualitative in nature unless they are part of an experimental design" (Ryan 2007, 63). Embedded within this experimental design is the idea that the researcher removes her/himself from the setting and becomes an "objective" observer. Teachers have had little experience exploring the role of objectivity and subjectivity in qualitative inquiry, let alone a "participatory mode of consciousness" where there is no distance between the self and the other (Heshusius 1994, 15). For teacher researchers this means letting go of a focus on themselves in order to be more attentive to what the participants have to say and uncovering the meanings the students bring to the teaching and learning process. It means beginning to break down the privileged status of the teacher in order for her/him to become immersed in the experiences of the students. As Rust contends, "in qualitative research the study of human beings *as human beings* is the focus as opposed to an attempt to quantify different aspects of human belief and experience [and knowledge]" (2007, 96). Some teachers resist the notion of participant observation, attempting to distance themselves from the research process in order to identify "the *real* results."

Embracing qualitative thinking in a quantitative culture presents an obstacle for me as I introduce teacher research projects. I do what I can to scaffold teachers' learning and help them understand this research method. However, it is difficult to introduce teachers to the methods and issues inherent in teacher research while simultaneously expecting them to conduct a study using these methods. I recall meeting with a student to discuss her progress with her teacher research project; she was exploring ways to help children better connect and engage with the curriculum. This was particularly important to her because she worked with a large immigrant population that was not used to seeing their identities reflected in the curriculum. This particular teacher came to the meeting carrying a huge binder full of paper with a look of defeat on her face. She proceeded to show me the "data notebook" that her school required, which included multiple spreadsheets containing information about which standards were addressed daily and whether or not students met those standards, followed by evidence mostly in the form of multiple-choice exams. This was the reality our public school teachers

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faced: valued data comes in the form of standardized tests. With so much pressure and time devoted to prescriptive standardized data sets, there was little time to collect observational notes and anecdotal records of children's thinking and growth as learners. Further, she could not see the long-term benefits since she was not rewarded for this way of thinking about the teaching and learning process in her school setting. What counts as data becomes an issue not only of quality, but of ethics. How can we possibly understand children's learning if we do not gather multiple "types" of data? How can we be sure that we are fairly assessing knowledge and growth if we don't look at the whole child and her context?

Our teacher education program's emphasis in teacher research is on the teachers learning about themselves and children, not necessarily disseminating that knowledge to a larger audience. While we do not expect large-scale dissemination of their research findings, we do require that the teachers write a research report to share their research process and insights with faculty and fellow students in the learning community. In my experience, teachers are often frustrated with this writing process. In some senses, classroom teachers are natural researchers in that they continually implement a plan, assess its impact, and make changes based on their assessment with the ultimate goal of creating positive and effective learning experiences for their students. It is difficult for them to slow this process down and systematically record their reflections and actions along the way. It is even more of a challenge when they operate in a culture that does not necessarily value the learning that comes from teacher research. Teachers want to share the growth and change they have seen in children; school systems want to know if the children have passed the test.

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Resisting the deficit model to focus on the whole child

In order to practice the qualitative research skills of collecting and analyzing data, the teachers in a master's program have been asked to conduct a case study of one child. They are to choose a child who presents a particular challenge (academic, behavioral, etc.). The teacher is to gather field notes as he or she engages in various school settings (e.g., classroom, playground, lunchroom, hallway, etc.). The teacher is also asked to interview a family member in order to learn more. While this is an assignment aimed at practicing research skills, it has a secondary goal of encouraging teachers to build reciprocal relationships with families. When discussing the assignment, one day I reiterated our program policy of telling the case study child's parents about the project. Faye raised her hand and stated that informing the parents would be detrimental to the success of her project. She felt that the parents would never agree to the case study. She also assumed that the purpose of looking carefully at this child's performance was to focus on all of the things he was doing

"wrong" in order to find the root of the "problem" and to "fix" it. Therefore, she did not want to have to share her findings with the parents as they would paint a negative picture of the child that the parents just wouldn't want to hear.

One of the issues raised in this vignette is consent, which can be a tricky issue in teacher research. On the one hand, teachers conducting teacher research projects "are doing only what good teachers ought to be doing, so they don't need informed consent from parents or assent from students" (Hatch 2006, 3). On the other hand, they do need informed consent if they plan to share the findings beyond individual classroom or program requirements. Hendricks suggests to "make it clear in the consent form that the intervention is part of your normal instructional activities that all students will be a part of and that you are only seeking permission to *use/report* data collected on participants" (2006, 111).

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Consent forms aside, however, there are ethical issues inherent in a project where children's actions are observed and recorded. The teacher has a responsibility to treat all students and colleagues with respect even when their actions differ from what has been established as "the norm." The Statement of Ethics written for the Teacher Research Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association states, "[Teachers] respect those with whom they work, openly sharing information about their research. While they seek knowledge, they also nurture the well-being of others, both students and professional colleagues" (as cited in Hubbard & Power 1999, 64). I might add to that statement the responsibility of nurturing the well-being of parents and families and enlisting their help in addressing the learning issue.

Teachers are in a unique position as participants in their own research and must consider the relationships that are established in school settings and that continue long after the research has officially ended. In the vignette, Faye does not indicate an understanding of the importance of these relationships. She has positioned herself as the knowledgeable one who already knows that the results of her case study will paint the child in an unfavorable light and perhaps even place blame on the parents (a disturbingly common scenario in schools). In my ethical opinion, Faye is not respecting the child or his family by keeping them in the dark about the challenges he poses in the classroom and the ways in which she, as the teacher, is attempting to address them.

The scenario with Faye brings to mind the larger argument posed by Christians (2005) and Lincoln and Guba (2003). Christians argues for a transformation of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process where "research methodologies that have broken down the walls between subjects and researchers ought to be excluded from IRB oversight" (2005, 157). He contends that open transformative relationships between researcher and participants satisfy the principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. Lincoln and Guba (2003) echo this senti-

ment and argue that this shift from a quest for "truth" to an open relationship with participants would eliminate the need to objectify participants in the name of science. In other words, Faye shifts from a focus of studying the misbehavior to place blame to gaining a better understanding of the child in order to build new relationships with him and his family in order to support and to hopefully transform his learning through those relationships.

Furthermore, Faye is viewing this particular child through a deficit lens. She is focused on what he is *not* doing and finds it difficult to remain open to the positive qualities he brings to her classroom as a learner. In the current accountability craze, teachers are forced to "fix" children so that they successfully meet a standard set by outsiders who often have no background in education (other than being students themselves at one point in time). This narrow view of education leaves little room for understanding the complexity of the teaching and learning process that comes to light through teacher research endeavors. The value of a holistic view of the child—strengths, learning preferences, experiences, struggles, cultural influences, etc.—is lost when teachers are pressured to focus on the negative aspects of children's performance in order to target and improve them in the name of accountability. This mindset has the effect of compromising the teacher research projects our teachers produce. Quality suffers from this narrow focus and I question whether approaches have been fair to the unique developmental needs and experiences of each child. I find myself continually prompting teachers to question and resist the status quo not only to produce quality research projects, but also to take an ethical stance on what it means to educate young children for a democratic society.

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Conclusion

In my experience as an instructor of teacher research, I have encountered challenges particularly related to nurturing an inquiry stance within the current public school culture. Facing these (in some cases many times over) has helped me shape my ethical stance toward the process of teacher research. I believe in teacher research approaches that closely examine learning processes and are inclusive and potentially transformational for *all* of the participants. I believe teachers should create relationships that promote participants' awareness of the research agenda and invite them as collaborators in the project; in many cases transformation grows from these relationships. Finally, I believe in approaches that value and nurture the whole child rather than those that focus on "fixing" a perceived deficit. While these beliefs drive the work that I do with teachers as they develop as teacher researchers, I do recognize that there are many layers of complexity embedded in each. These layers are revealed in each new relationship I forge with a teacher and the myriad of contexts in which each one works.

Surely many other teacher educators also face these conflicts while helping classroom teachers develop as teacher researchers. It is important for teacher educators to engage in continuous dialogue regarding these challenges in order to provide appropriate support for the cultivation of ethical and quality teacher research projects.

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