

Boys' Literacy Study: The Power of Collaborative Teacher Research

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[T]he experience of conducting self-study research under certain conditions seems to move teachers in a direction of more 'learner-centered' instruction where they become more convinced of the importance of listening to and studying their students and more willing to use what they learn from this 'student watching' to influence classroom events. (Zeichner 2003, 318)

Ortiz et al.'s study, "Teacher Research on Boys' Literacy in One Elementary School" (2014), underscores the power of teacher research to transform teachers' practices in the way Zeichner describes above—toward more student-centered instruction.

The teachers in this study not only learned a great deal about the boys in their school, but also changed their relationships to boys in significant ways. They evolved to address boys' interests even when those interests conflicted with their own ideas about what is appropriate for boys in school. As teacher educators and former early childhood teachers (and teacher researchers familiar with the teachers doing the study), we were in a position to observe the overall study and work closely as the teachers reflected on their results and the application of those results to their teaching. In addition, we encouraged them to write a report of their study to share with a wider audience beyond the teachers at their school. We met with them on a regular basis for several months in after-school meetings of the group, when this writing took place. We were there for moral support, editorial assistance, and follow-through with our own commitment to get their story out to

a wider audience. We felt strongly they had a story that others would benefit from and that was rich in implications for teaching, especially for female teachers working with boys. It also exemplifies the power of collaborative teacher research.

Collaborative teacher research

Annie Ortiz, the lead teacher researcher in the study, is a remarkable teacher leader holding various leadership roles, including in the National Writing Project (NWP) and its Teacher Inquiry Communities (TICS). Locally, she is regarded as a treasured mentor teacher whom other teachers seek out for help. Annie is regarded by fellow teachers in her school district as a trusted and knowledgeable expert. In most teacher research groups there is usually a strong teacher leader who serves as a catalyst and facilitates the work (Mohr et al. 2004). Annie led the other teachers in forming their teacher research group around their mutual concerns about the lack of boys' literacy achievement—not only in their school, but across all the schools in their community. Teacher research is often generated from an impetus that propels teachers to study why some students struggle (Hendricks 2013). Teachers often engage in teacher research to figure out how to correct some problem or difficulty that needs improvement (Perry, Henderson, & Meier 2012).

This group of teacher researchers is highly dedicated to the improvement of education for all students. This is evidenced by the comprehensive way they applied their results to their teaching. Like a stone making ripples in a lake, they were noticed by other teachers, who then began to change their teaching as well. This type of transformation is why we felt strongly that others would benefit from learning about this study. Teacher research of this kind becomes a means to reform education and schooling from the inside by those closest to the situation—the teachers themselves, who work with learners on a daily basis and have the most intimate knowledge of what happens in schools (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2009).

The study

The concern about boys' literacy was what drew the teachers together to study the problem. Annie made wise decisions that also kept them working together, fueled their interest, and provided a level of support for their work. She used grant funds to purchase resources for the teachers that increased their depth of understanding of boys and literacy and enabled purchase of materials for their classrooms and their own professional development. The nature of the books and reading materials obtained helped the teachers search the professional literature for current knowledge and research on

boys' literacy. These resources included such books as *Misreading Masculinity: Boys, Literacy, and Popular Culture* by Newkirk (2002) and *The Trouble with Boys* by Tyre (2008). The teachers were profoundly enlightened by their literature review and had many lively sessions in which they shared what they were learning from reading about boys and literacy.

The review of the literature is often the first thing a teacher researcher does before collecting data in a study. It is through the literature review that teachers become informed on the topic of interest and about what others have found in research studies and teaching practices (Castle 2012). The teachers were energized by the readings and their enthusiasm for the topic spread to other teachers, including us. The teachers also explored teacher research literature sources on how teacher research collaborative groups do their work (Hubbard & Power 2003).

It is significant that Annie labeled the group's approach to working together as "No guilt!" Group members were free to participate in group meetings when they were able, and not expected to feel guilty when they missed meetings. In spite of (or maybe because of) this non-mandatory approach, hardly ever was anyone absent from group meetings. Annie mentioned that one of the drawbacks to working together is lack of time, and others agree as well (Hendricks 2013). Teachers never have enough time to do all that is expected of them—and these were very busy teachers. However, they managed to make a commitment to be there for each other, because they recognized that value and relied on each other to make sense of the data.

When teacher research groups work together, they often use protocols as tools to facilitate their work. Protocols serve frameworks for structured conversations focused on group functions, data collection, analysis, and reflection on the meaning of results (McDonald et al. 2007). This strategy is especially relevant when group members want feedback from others about what puzzles them in the data. Annie is well versed in the many available protocols, each with a specific purpose, and knew when a certain protocol would help the group's work.

In data analysis, each teacher brought data to the group, gaining feedback from what others noticed and viewed as themes. There were multiple data sources, including boys' library book selections, a survey of boys' genre preferences, boys' writing samples on what makes a "just fit" book, boys' artwork using a visual prompt, and boys' prompted writing samples. In addition, teachers kept their own research journals and shared entries with the group. All data were triangulated with themes confirmed across the various data sources, adding to the rigor and validity of the study (Castle 2012). The large amount of data they collected is another sign of a rigorous study. It required a great deal of time and effort to analyze. In processing a large amount of data, a collaborative group is in a much better position to make

the most meaning of the data than individuals working alone. Participation in a collaborative group also keeps energy and enthusiasm for the work at a high level because group members depend upon and help each other.

The findings

The group's findings revealed that boys' literacy interests were similar across what they liked to read, write, and express in artwork: adventures, bodily functions, war, and superheroes, as well as other themes described in the study. The teachers learned from their findings of a mismatch between what they wanted boys to read, write, and draw with what boys themselves most wanted to do. This is not unusual for female teachers and male students. Female teachers are inclined to prohibit certain topics and activities of interest to boys because of what they perceive of as a gross or violent nature (Wien et al. 2014). The teachers realized that they had judged much of the content of boys' interests as not appropriate to express in school, or even "gross" (such as boys' fascination with bodily functions and noises).

The teachers realized that they were working at cross-purposes with their male students. This was truly a significant learning experience for the teachers. They recognized that the message they had been sending to boys was that their interests were inappropriate for life at school, while girls' interests were appropriate and more in line with teachers' own interests and views. Most important of all, the teachers realized they needed to rethink their views of appropriate content to not exclude boys. They began to think about ways to be more inclusive. This realization led to what Annie described as broadening their horizons to include the interests of boys in all areas of the curriculum. Individual teachers—including the library media specialist and art teacher—applied these realizations in many ways, as each describes in their article.

Their findings also transferred to their views of male interests in general; some even spoke of becoming more tolerant of their spouses' choices of media content and clothing colors. The findings forced the teachers to rethink gender and their own gender biases in teaching as well as in their personal lives.

The transformative and generative nature of the study

The boys' literacy study was transformative in that the changes that occurred from the application of the results were qualitative and beyond the mere accumulation of results. The teachers observed that the boys participated in reading and writing with greater investment after their needs and specific interests were considered (Wien et al. 2014). The teachers' thinking changed in significant ways, and they will never go back to their old ways of

thinking. What they learned about their own gendered biases in their teaching has caused them to reexamine their thinking and practices and make lasting changes in the ways they work with boys.

The generative nature of the study can be seen in the ways that it has impacted not only the individual teachers and the changes they have made, but has also influenced their desire to continue doing teacher research. Three new teacher research studies have emerged as spin-offs from their research. In addition, this study has changed their school in many ways, such as increased teacher collaborations, reexamination of the state visual literacy standards and their relevance in the school's curriculum, and the establishment of student writing groups based on interest.

It is not by accident that this study has greatly impacted the school. It is also a reflection of the level of professionalism among the teachers in the study, as well as those who were not participants but benefitted from it. Two important reasons for this are an administrative leadership style that promotes teacher inquiry, and a collaborative school climate that supports teachers' working together (Mohr et al. 2004). Most importantly, we think the impact of this study is primarily a result of the teachers, who took an inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2009) and had the courage to be open to unexpected results. It is never easy to admit the need to change. They were very surprised to find that boys' interests were so different from what they had been teaching. It is to their credit that their high level of professionalism allowed them to recognize their own gender biases and decide change was necessary in their teaching in order to address the needs of boys and of all their students. Some teachers might have acknowledged differences but continued to teach in the same old, familiar ways. These teachers had the courage to change and do what they felt was in the best interests of their students, despite the energy needed to make changes (Palmer 2007).

This study and its impact on the teachers and their school is strong evidence for the role teacher research plays in professional development (Castle 2012). Through teacher research—encompassing question posing, systematic data collection and analysis, and reflection on how results can be applied—teachers take responsibility for educational change and improvements in the teaching-learning process. Literature reviews as part of teacher research studies help teachers remain current on the latest research and practices. The teachers in this study grew professionally as a result of their work together.

We find several ways in which this study is unique. It was a collaborative study involving teachers at all levels of the elementary school. Annie invited all teachers to participate in the study, and that resulted in a group of teachers that represented the entire school. Very few studies have such representation. Impact from this type of research is far more widespread

when many teachers work together, and can significantly improve schools from within like no other reform effort. In creating a teacher research group, it helps to invite not just those teachers who have an interest in the topic, but also those who may impact the most students. The involvement of both the library media teacher and the art teacher in the research insured that all students at the school would benefit from its results, as these two teachers impact all students.

Another rare aspect of this study was the grant support that helped purchase materials. Although Annie is a teacher leader with grant writing skills, teachers with little grant writing experience can still try to tap into existing resources such as parent and community groups whose mission is to support the work of teachers.

Finally, while primarily focused on literacy, this study also incorporated art into its research questions and implications. So many studies today focus only on literacy or mathematics. These teachers recognized the importance of art and also the value of the literacy aspects of art.

Our perspective

We learned a great deal from working with this teacher research group. However, we need to acknowledge where our perspective as teacher educators was different from that of the teachers doing the study. Although the teachers in the group were very happy to conduct the study and learn from the results, they did not have the same compulsion as we did—to generate a manuscript. We felt a strong need for the teachers to write up their research to share with a wider audience. Our major contribution, if it can be called that, was to strongly encourage and volunteer to assist the group to write up the study. We worked with Annie and the group to create a writing schedule, and sent email reminders to the group. We met with the group during each writing session and offered help and encouragement. We viewed our role as facilitating the written account of the study.

We have been teachers, and we recognize that getting results in the classroom is far more important to teachers than writing up results. We think the difference in our perspective from that of the participating teachers is a function of our positions in our university teacher education program (in which Annie had been an advisee), where writing is important and part of the job. It is what we are expected to do. Most primary grade teaching positions do not hold this expectation. In addition, as teacher educators we recognize the value of reported research to those who search for what others have already found. When research results are shared with a wider audience, more impact is achieved. Teachers and teacher educators learn from the research they read about to keep current and to develop their own

ideas about topics to research. The teachers in this study have an amazing story to tell that is of interest to educators everywhere. We will continue to work with teacher researchers and to encourage them to share their studies with a wider audience.

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