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Linnea L. Rademaker
National-Louis University

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Writing for Journals as a Way of Sharing and Participating in Reform

Linnea L. Rademaker

National Louis University, Chicago, USA

National Louis University continues to promote and support action research in teacher development and teacher practice. Here at *i.e.: inquiry in education*, we believe that practitioner research, particularly teacher action research, can be a powerful force for teachers to use, as a tool to become empowered to speak out for what is needed in their classrooms to improve teaching and learning.

The idea of teacher empowerment is not new, and can be traced back to the work of such philosophers and thinkers as John Dewey (1916/1994) and Paolo Freire (1970/1995). Dewey wrote of the need for education as a means to prepare children to eventually participate in a democratic society as adults. Freire promoted the idea of “libertarian education” (p. 53) as being one that strives for “reconciliation” between the oppressor and the oppressed, as evidenced in the reciprocal relationship between the student and the teacher. At once they are both “simultaneously teachers *and* students” (p. 53). In connecting these two authors to empowerment, we assert that: 1) to expect teachers to educate students to participate in democracy, yet to not include teachers’ voice in how that teaching takes place is contradictory and tantamount to oppression; and, 2) to position oneself as the student, the teacher must constantly be in a cycle of renewal and reflexivity—in a state of inquiry; that is to say, “How can I make my teaching better and improve the learning of my students?”

To say teachers are living in a current state of “oppression” would be to recognize the events of the past several decades, with regards to government legislation and the usurping of power from teachers over curriculum and pedagogy decisions and giving that power to a small group of individuals, though elected, who largely represent a single socio-economic class of wealthy citizens. Nichols and Parsons (2010) in a recent paper spoke of the threats of “1) accountability, 2) the intensification of teacher responsibilities, 3) a shift towards a technical approach to teaching, and 4) the negative public image of teachers” (p. 1) as being disturbing trends noted over time that are working to “limit teachers’ institutional power and have become obstacles to teacher voice” (p. 1). Nichols and Parsons suggested that policy makers could learn much from teacher insight and teacher research. We would concur, believing that action research has more than just implications as a tool with which teachers can empower themselves professionally in the classroom; but, perhaps more significantly, action research is a way for teachers to “raise their voice” to participate in the creation of everything that is school-related. Teachers are, after all, members of this society for which we educate children, and as such merit equal participation in this democracy.

Teacher research, action research, practitioner research—are all terms which are used to describe inquiry undertaken by teachers for the improvement of teaching and learning. These are

inherently political undertakings. Noffke (2009) included a discussion of the “political dimension” in her essay updating “personal, political, and professional dimensions of action research” (p. 6-7). Ravitch (2010) wrote of the political and the competitive emphasis being placed on schooling:

Businesspeople love the idea of a “race to the top.” But schools should be collaborative organizations, where successful teachers share their secrets and mentor other teachers . . . Shorn of the human element, professional judgment, and an ethos of caring, schools may become faceless corporations. They may produce higher test scores, but they won’t produce better education or better-prepared citizens. (para. 13)

Ravitch’s condemnation of the “limited picture” testing gives of education, and the continuous blaming of teachers for these low test scores is a detriment to students and teachers, and the future of our country.

Bales (2002) indicated the narrowing of influence on education policy in her analysis of policy recommendations to legislators that were influenced only by quantitative research, criticizing the omission of qualitative studies that illuminated specific contexts. Canfield-Davis and Jain (2010) investigated specific influences to policy makers (legislators), finding that no legislators consulted education resources or research as a first line of information when voting on policy. Bales, along with Canfield-David and Jain, illuminate (as others have) the insufficiency of voices included in the actualized policy debate.

All education contexts are unique with changing students, and reflectively growing teachers. Therefore, all education contexts contain marginalized voices, via that uniqueness—students, their teachers, and others involved in education. By participating in practitioner research, educators can give voice to the marginalized—themselves and their students. This week, I returned from an Action Research Conference in San Diego at the University of San Diego. While there I heard presentations from impassioned and empowered teachers working to improve their classrooms and schools. I heard from school counselors working together to provide students with an environment for emotional and academic success. I also heard a group of high school age girls from “Khmer Girls in Action” (<http://kgalb.org/>) who conducted their own action research in their community. Their mission is to “contribute to the movement for social, economic, and political justice by building a strong, progressive, and sustainable community institution led by Southeast Asian women and girls” (Mission section, para. 1). The girls used Action Research to conduct a needs assessment about the concerns of Cambodian youth in Long Beach, CA. They plan to use their action research report to advocate for social improvement in their community. The girls spoke at the conference of how Action Research became a tool for self-empowerment that allowed them the confidence to speak out against injustice.

We at *i.e.: inquiry in education* wish to give practitioner researchers the space to raise their collective voices in a way that perhaps will allow a more democratic conversation to occur about current education policy in our schools and in our communities, and inform decision makers and impact these processes.

In this issue, Laurie Lehman, Jessica Trubek, and Lauren Wong write of how their collaborative inquiry gives voice to the story of a new teacher (Lauren) who completed alternative certification. Through reflection, this teacher offered her perspective about the many aspects of her developing teacher identity, and helped the teacher-educators gain a “substantive picture of her experience” (p. 3). While Lauren’s experience was one of “disconnection,” this inquiry not only illuminates that disconnection, but the teacher-educator collaborators offer ways to re-connect learning spaces, and offer ways that “teacher-educators can support new teachers through the first years in the profession” (p. 18).

In Zachary Casey’s article, he describes a fight in his student teaching classroom and articulates how practitioner research embodies a reflective process for examining the complexities of classroom events in ways that not only provide sense making, but can also serve to challenge oppression and domination that exists in classrooms. As such, Casey describes the obligation he believes teacher educators have in developing their own and their teacher candidates’ dispositions of reflexivity. By critically reflecting on personal experience through the lens of theoretical constructs, one can internalize the process of asking complex questions and develop a habit of practice to “work against structures of oppression in both schools and classrooms” (p. 11).

Russell Binkley explains to us how he has given his students “a taste of democracy” by providing “a respectful classroom community” (p.2). Choosing to give voice to all the students he teaches, he infused new life into his classroom meetings when he engaged in an action research project through a doctoral course. Not only did the students help create a new democratic community; they assisted with a quantitative study to assess the efficacy of the rejuvenated class environment. Although he criticizes himself for not doing enough to foster democracy, we get a clear picture of the engaged classroom through snippets of journal entries.

Lyn Bird gives us a glimpse of “one school’s approach” to “teaching as inquiry” in New Zealand (p. 1). The inquiry cycle employed at Ilam School helped the teachers build community and develop a collective purpose as they deepened understanding about their teaching and learning practices. As a direct result of their inquiry into their teaching, the teachers grew as educators and promoted a “culture of trust, partnership, and professional accountability” throughout the school (p. 8). This reflective cycle has empowered the Ilam teachers to more actively participate in powerful school improvement.

In our book review section in this issue we offer a unique, multi-disciplinary view of Richard Sagor’s (2010) *Collaborative Action for Professional Learning Communities*—two reviewers offer their perspective of this book. Judith Slater is an Emeritus Professor of Education, who spent much of her career focused on school-university collaboration. Rekha Rajan is an early-career teacher educator in Early Childhood Education. Both offer substantial insight into Sagor’s writing.

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