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## Teacher as Researcher/Researcher as Teacher: Multiple Angles of Vision for Studying Learning in the Context of Teaching

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When I first sat down to write this article sharing some of the ways in which I've experienced teacher research across my career as a preschool teacher, a teacher of 2<sup>nd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades, a researcher outside of the classroom at the university level, and a teacher educator, I stared blankly at the computer screen. Amazingly, words just didn't begin flowing, and there were no bits of enlightening prose immediately emerging about the ways in which these experiences have played and play a transformative role in my professional life, though, of course, they have and continue to do so. I puzzled over which *angle of vision* I wanted to take in this particular article – teacher as researcher, researcher as teacher? Research is central and fundamental to the act of teaching, to studying student *learning* in the context of teaching, *and* to understanding the consequences for students of being in classrooms with particular kinds of *opportunities* for learning (Tuyay, Jennings & Dixon, 1995). How could I both show and tell what that means to me and make visible its implications for other teacher researchers in a short reflective essay? Which part of the story would I tell?

Then, in a most fortuitous interruption to my puzzling, I received a phone call from Danny. A former student in my 5<sup>th</sup> grade bilingual class, Danny had just finished his sophomore year at the University of California, Berkeley. We've stayed in contact over the years and he was calling to arrange lunch so we could talk before he returned to the Bay Area for a summer internship. In the course of the conversation, Danny talked about how he really "liked doing research," including "some

ethnography", and how it contributed to his roles as a student, a future lawyer, and as an advocate for social justice issues.

Daniel, along with his fellow 5<sup>th</sup> graders and me, had also been a researcher, an ethnographer, of our classroom community during the 1996-1997 school year (see Yeager, Floriani, & Green, 1998, for a discussion of linguistically diverse students as ethnographers of their own classroom community). Talking with him about this shared history reminded me that his story, and theirs, played a large part in shaping, or re-shaping, the *driving force* that has guided my life as teacher as researcher and researcher as teacher. The *driving force* or the 'so what' for my research, reshaped by student stories and described in the next section of this article, is what I first share now with teacher candidates in my course on practitioner inquiry as they begin the search for their own 'driving forces'. I share this first, because I want these students entering the profession to understand why classroom research is not separate from the act of teaching for me, but rather central to understanding teaching and learning relationships in the context of what happens for students in my classroom, and in the classrooms of others as well.

**Research is central and fundamental to the act of teaching, to studying student *learning* in the context of teaching, *and* to understanding the consequences for students of being in classrooms with particular kinds of *opportunities* for learning**

In this article, I have chosen to explore some of the ways in which I have taken up teacher research. First, through the stories of Daniel and his 5<sup>th</sup> grade colleagues as telling cases (Mitchell, 1984), I frame the force that drives that research perspective. Then I briefly describe my research journey and the *ethnographic perspective* (Green, Dixon, and Zaharlick, 2003) that underpins that research. In doing so, I make visible some of what it means to me to *look at learning in the context of teaching*.

## Re-defining a 'driving force' for research: Danny's story

To understand how Daniel's 5<sup>th</sup> grade journey, along with those of other students in my classroom, served to shape and re-shape my own journey, I must first revisit some of the public contexts in which part of our histories together were constructed. Over the last several years, there have been numerous changes in educational policy at local, state (California) and national levels that impact or potentially impact what opportunities for learning complex content and disciplinary knowledge or practices that teachers can afford students.

One of the contributing factors to many of these policy changes may have been that teachers have not had a language to talk about what or how students learn, or how to show learning in the everyday work that children do. These issues are often complicated by assumptions that students, particularly linguistically diverse students, may not be able to take up opportunities for learning complex practices and skills in academic discipline areas until they have 'mastered' a variety of 'basic skills' demonstrated on standardized achievement measures, or have acquired a second language at particular levels of proficiency. Pedagogical decisions and placement of students, particularly those who have been labeled 'at risk' (presumably of failure), in academic programs are often made in the context of language about what students *cannot* do, rather than what they *can* do.

The stories of Danny and others enrolled in my 5<sup>th</sup> grade class in 1996-1997, shared below, serve to make visible the potential consequences of not having a language for, and a systematic way of, showing what it is that students *can* do. The roots of and routes to what many teachers and students encounter in their everyday classroom lives today as a result of policy implications from No Child Left Behind and other state and national initiatives became increasingly visible during the 1990s and will perhaps still sound familiar nearly ten years later.

In 1996-1997, Daniel, a native Spanish speaker, was in fifth grade and in his second year of transition from Spanish reading to English reading

(and thus receiving instruction primarily in English within a two-way, bilingual context). He was one of thousands of nameless 'second language learners' being called 'failures' in California newspapers and public forums. Because Daniel (taking standardized tests in English for the first time in 4<sup>th</sup> grade) scored below grade level, he automatically became part of a large group of students for whom the 'system' had "failed."

Significantly, however, according to much of the public discussion about those children who were scoring below grade level on standardized tests in English, the system alone had not failed. Daniel, along with many of his native English speaking and Spanish speaking peers, 'could not read' or write and, by implication, had themselves become 'failures'.

Yet, in spite of this rhetoric of failure and a particular view of his school-defined achievement (as measured on standardized tests in English), as a teacher I had seen Danny act in particular ways as a student that contrasted with this public view of his individual 'competence'. For example, I had seen him complete difficult assignments, in both Spanish and English, and successfully read challenging books, ones often far above school-defined 5<sup>th</sup> grade reading levels. I had seen him revise work to clarify ideas, willingly struggle with complex issues (such as tolerance and intolerance), collaboratively write a history with partners while inscribing himself as a historian, and take an authoritative stance as a group member and as a presenter. In all respects, Daniel was a leader in the classroom and a scholar.

In addition, as a researcher engaged in looking at my own classroom, I noticed changes that students in 1996-1997 demonstrated in their writing of two sets of essays on their classroom community. In the table below, are two essays written by Daniel in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade in his language of choice, one about his 4<sup>th</sup> grade community and one, written as an ethnographer, about his 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom community.

In his essays (see Appendix A), I saw that by the end of 5<sup>th</sup> grade, Danny was able to draw on particular processes and practices as resources in order to write in a multi-paragraph essay about the complexity of his classroom community (Fairclough,

1992; Ivanic, 1998). In doing so, he inscribed, in and through his written text, academic identities (Ivanic, 1998) as “a member of the [classroom] community” and as “an ethnographer”, and was able to tell others what it meant to be a member of the community as an expert *on* that community (Daniel, Community Essay, May, 1997).

Like so many other teachers, I knew that ‘the tests’ did not tell the full story of Daniel and his colleagues. A discrepancy emerged between what Daniel and his peers were able to do in their everyday classroom lives in 5<sup>th</sup> grade and how they were defined in the public discourse, including voices of people that might potentially impact students’ future academic lives<sup>1</sup>. This discrepancy served to define the force that drove my work as a teacher researcher and continues to drive it as a researcher and teacher educator.

### **Our Challenge as Teachers and Researchers**

As teachers we know that everyday life in our classrooms is complex. It is not something that can be seen and understood in the moment (we understand that especially when visitors make snap judgments about what is happening or not happening after only brief observations). Teachers ‘know’ what is happening in their classrooms, but they do not have a language for making visible what they know for others. What they need, what I needed, is a way to talk empirically about what we already see in the everyday life of our classrooms. We need to be able to talk from evidence that reflects the everyday complexity of teaching and learning in our classrooms about what our students like Danny *can* do.

My challenge as a teacher and a researcher both within my own classroom and in a university setting has been to find a lens through which I could look at and talk about what was being accomplished in everyday life in classrooms: how it was being accomplished, what students were doing and learning, with whom, when, where, how, for what purposes, and with what potential consequences (Santa Barbara Classroom Discourse Group, 1992b).

### **Finding a theoretical and methodological lens: My research journey**

Fortunately, in the year Danny wrote his two essays, I had been, since 1991 (through the South Coast Writing Project), part of a collaborative partnership of teacher researchers and university-based researchers (Santa Barbara Classroom Discourse Group) that had informed and transformed the journey I had been on as a teacher and researcher since 1970, my first year of teaching (Yeager, 1999). The model was one of interacting communities with distributed expertise, engaged in classroom research from a common theoretical and methodological base.

The fact that there was a theoretical and conceptual base for what we were doing was a key component. Grounding practice in theory had always been important to me. In this case, a central concept for our work was a view, from an anthropological perspective, of classrooms as cultures or dynamic cultures-in-the-making, in which members (teachers, students, families, others) construct together patterned ways of being, knowing, and doing through their actions and interactions. The concept of classrooms as cultures and the situated, local nature of classroom life (Dixon, Green & Frank, 1999) made sense to me. As a teacher, like many teachers, I had often noted that ‘this group’ of students was not like ‘last year’s group’. I also knew that, even when we planned similar activities or instructional approaches as a grade-level team, my classroom would not look or sound exactly like the teacher’s classroom next door. Years later, I would also know, even when I was asked to use a particular ‘prescribed’ reading program, that my classroom would not look or sound exactly like another classroom, and it didn’t. I also knew that not only did I bring a history and ways of doing and teaching to the classroom, but that each student brought his or her own history from multiple school, family and community experiences. And I knew that we constructed a new collective history each year, drawing on all that we brought and on what we did together.

No year or group was ever ‘exactly the same’. It is not only teachers who understand this. Students understand it as well. Valerie, as an

ethnographer writing about her 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom community in 1995, shared:

*This year our community has been different from other communities I have been in. . . In this community, many things are totally different. We have our own language that we speak and we use it mostly all the time. We use it for writing essays, for investigations. . .*  
(cf. Dixon, Green, Frank, 1999).

Like Valerie, I also later came to understand that, in and through our interactions together, shaping and re-shaping what we all brought to the community, we constructed ‘repertoires of actions’ (such as the practices we talked about “in our own language” of the classroom and used for “writing essays” and doing “investigations”). These repertoires became potential resources for students to draw on to make sense of what was available to them in the classroom and to produce multiple kinds of texts (e.g., oral, written, visual) (Yeager, 2003).

This again made sense to me since, as a teacher, I had come to recognize that lessons weren’t isolated activities. What we did in one context, I hoped, drew on what we’d already done and what we already brought (and drew on as resource) and was connected to what we might do in the future (Putney, Green, Dixon, Durán and Yeager, 2000; Dixon, Green & Brandts, 2005).

My work as a teacher researcher enabled me to construct a theoretical framework for making sense of and talking about what I had come to understand as a classroom teacher and for using what I learned to make informed instructional decisions. Through my new understandings as a teacher researcher, for example, I became more explicit in what I said and did with students to make visible the connections among different contexts, and to reveal explicitly what resources they would need in each new context. In turn, this process enabled me to find the lens I needed to talk from evidence about what students and I were accomplishing.

### **Finding the lens: Taking an ethnographic perspective**

To make informed decisions, to find alternative kinds of evidence for students’ learning, I first needed to actually step back from the everyday moment in order to see what was happening and what was being produced as part of our culture-in-the-making. The common theoretical and methodological perspective that we (teacher, university and student researchers) use to make the invisible aspects of our classrooms visible, to look at how everyday, local, classroom life is constructed, to identify patterns of practice, and to re-present what we come to understand, is an *ethnographic* perspective (Green, Dixon, and Zaharlick, 2003).

Teachers have access to what occurs over time in their classrooms. Experienced teachers know that looking across time is important. Taking an ethnographic perspective, asking ‘who can say or do what, when, where, how, for what purposes, under what conditions, and with what potential outcomes and consequences’ (Santa Barbara Classroom Discourse Group, 1992) over time in my classroom, enabled me to do systematically what already made sense to me as a teacher. Taking an ethnographic perspective asks the teacher researcher to examine life in his or her classroom over time and to engage with data in a reflexive and responsive process (I look at the data I gather, ask questions of the data, analyze and raise new questions).

It enabled me to ask, for example, questions like: What difference does the difference between two sets of essays make? What evidence is there in his essay of the kinds of resources Daniel was drawing on to write his essay? How can the references and the discursive choices he made (what he said and how he said it) help me to understand shifts over time between his two essays? How were the resources Danny may have drawn on constructed in our classroom culture? What kinds of opportunities were available to the group over time that Danny could have taken up in order to write and inscribe himself in the way that he did? What and how did what I said or did as the teacher have to do with any of this?

Asking those kinds of questions became central to finding a way to talk empirically about what students were accomplishing in my classroom, based on the kinds of opportunities they were afforded (i.e., finding evidence of learning in the context of what was available to be learned – learning in the context of teaching). On a practical level, however, these weren't questions that I could address in the moment when I was focused on the act of teaching. How could I find my lens, address my questions, and find time to analyze the data and re-present the evidence in order to make visible what students, like Daniel, *could* do?

During the first several years, being a member of a collaborative research partnership meant that I was joined in my classroom by university-based graduate students and faculty as research partners. We collected hours of videotape data and my partner researchers took pages of field notes.<sup>2</sup> We also collected written and visual documents (e.g., notes home, student work) across each school year. Critically, we met regularly and talked about what was happening in the classroom and about the research – teaching was no longer as isolated as it often had been. What also evolved was a kind of 'habit of mind' so that when university researchers were not in the classroom, my students and I served as our own videographers and collectors of work, continuing to document everyday life in our classroom.

What I could not do as a teacher in the moment at that time was record field notes, find enough time to stand back and observe what was happening, or watch hours of videotape in order to analyze it. While teachers understand what it means to look over time at what is being accomplished in the classroom, what we observe is often in the form of 'head notes.' We cannot necessarily stop in the moment to record our observations as 'field notes.' What teachers can see over time, however, is essential to making visible what is being accomplished in the everyday life of the classroom.

What I found, in taking up an ethnographic perspective was a way of looking and later reconstructing my 'head notes' as a form of written data that helped me when I was outside of the

moment. Taking up an ethnographic perspective on life in our classroom brought a heightened sense of *paying attention* for me, and later for my students, that was different from the ways in which I had paid attention before.

### **Teacher as researcher and researcher as teacher: Shifting angles of vision**

While I used my heightened ways of paying attention everyday, I began my actual focused analysis of data we collected using student written work. This was something, as a full-time teacher *and* a researcher that I initially had more time to do. It was only later, outside of the classroom, that I was able to focus on the oral texts we constructed in the classroom and how we constructed them by looking at and analyzing videotape data. But what appeared to be a forced separation of kinds of analyses, because of time constraints, was actually fortuitous. Having the time to focus first only on student work enabled me to try new ways of looking at written texts as artifacts produced in and through our classroom culture-in-the-making.

That raised new questions, like those I asked about Daniel's essays, about the relationship between oral, written, and visual texts and enabled me, eventually, to examine how texts were 'talked and acted into being' (Green & Dixon, 1993; Yeager, 2003; Dixon, Green, & Brandts, 2005). In other words, finding a particular lens and then having to use that lens in different ways, for different purposes during analysis, initially due to time constraints as a full-time teacher, actually helped me to think more deeply about teaching and learning relationships. While critically thinking about my practice-in-action and making informed decisions was a central part of my research, keeping students and their work over time at the center meant that I remained focused on learning in the context of that teaching.

To maintain that focus as I have moved between school settings and university settings has meant a constant shifting of my angle of vision. At times I have been a teacher researcher in the classroom, at others a researcher teacher distanced from the classroom. I have come to liken the processes in which I have engaged, and continue

to engage, to the zoom in/zoom out functions on a camera. There are times when I 'zoom in' as the teacher in the classroom, relying on certain instances of 'insider' or 'teacher' knowledge and the reflexive process I engage in with students. At the same time, I must 'zoom out' in order to distance myself from that same knowledge in order to question the data. I am aware that I may have assumptions about that data.

When I first examined the two sets of community essays, for example, I focused on the differences in the essays, as my first layer of analysis. But, at the same time, I made some assumptions about how the essays were written when I said to a colleague, "There are all these differences, a shift over time, but it was the *same assignment*." It was only by zooming out, revisiting the essays and the videotapes from a distance (in both time and space) that I was able to see that, of course, the assignments weren't the 'same.' That led me to examine how I, as the teacher, shaped the two assignments with the students in and through what I said and did.

The distancing process enables me to ground my questions in the data, not in prior assumptions. Zooming out and then in again from a new angle of vision makes it possible for me to set aside what I 'knew' as teacher researcher in the moment and to be surprised by what I see as researcher as teacher. "So *that's* what I said!" or "I didn't remember that Danny said that then!"

It is in and through the surprises that new understandings come for me. The zoom in/zoom out lenses mutually inform each other. What I am able to see and understand as a researcher teacher outside of the classroom is absolutely informed by my experience as a teacher researcher *in* the classroom and vice versa.

### **Visions of possibilities: Looking at learning in the context of teaching**

Examining what students do, say, and produce from an ethnographic perspective using multiple angles of vision, as teacher researcher and researcher teacher, can shift the ways in which we think about how that work was accomplished, what students had available to accomplish it, and how they

were inscribing particular worlds within it. From this perspective, teachers can build on what they already know about classrooms and about their students in order to systematically talk from evidence about what students *can* do, beginning with what was *available* to be learned.

Rather than talking about teacher research simply as a way of improving practice, placing teacher at the center, this perspective requires me to place *students* at the center of my research and my teaching. It enables me to search for and talk from evidence about *learning, in the context of teaching* (practice) and to understand and enhance the kinds of *opportunities* for learning afforded students in classrooms. I have Daniel and his friends to thank for this. The choices and decisions we make as teacher researchers and researcher teachers are guided by the forces that drive us to do our research in the first place. <sup>3</sup>

## Appendix A

### Daniel's Essays on His Classroom Community

*[Spanish: First Paragraph only]*

El otro año me tocó con Ms. C. Nosotros dividíamos en tres porque no había tanta persona que hablaba inglés. El primer grupo que era inglés se iba con Juan para leer. El segundo grupo iba con Ms. Craviotto para hacer arte. El tercero estaba en su escritorio haciendo trabajo. Después de quince minutos cambiábamos. En matemáticas nos explicaban como hacer los problemas. Nos ponía dos. Después si no le agarramos la onda de clase y ella nos hacíamos junto las matemáticas después. Cuando hacíamos exámenes nos daba un día para practicar. Eso era la tarea. Después al día del examen nos daba 5 minutos para practicar. También en ciencias si hacíamos un viaje como para agarrar oro teníamos que leer el libro de ciencias sociales o *California Sí*. Cuando hacíamos experimentos ella nos decía que hicieramos un hipótesis. Eso era como si adivinamos que iba pasar.

*[English Translation]*

Last year I was with Ms. C. We divided in three because there weren't enough people who spoke English. The first group that was English went with Juan to read. The second group went with Ms. C. to do art. The third group was at their desk doing work. After fifteen minutes we changed. In math they explained to us how to do the problems. They put us after if we didn't get it in the back of the class and we did the math together with her after. When we did tests, she gave us a day to practice. That was homework. After, on the day of the test, she gave us 5 minutes to practice. Also in science if we went on a trip, like to get gold, we had to read the social science book or *California Sí*. When we did experiments she told us to do an hypothesis. That was like we guessed what was going to happen. I as a member of the Tower community think that being new in the Tower is a great opportunity to be with a community, even if you had one last year. The Tower community is a strong community that doesn't break up, but sometimes it might break. But it's your responsibility to keep it up always. The

community is like a family. When there are problems, the family might start to break and me, as a child, can put my family back. Sometimes the community will not agree to your idea. That's why you might want to learn your community's point of view. Sometimes everyone will think differently. Why? Because it's point of view. That's why each week, you, as I did, will get to be an ethnographer. An ethnographer learns many things. What I am seeing is that an ethnographer learns many points of view. Ethnography teaches you how to do many things. It teaches you how to learn people's point of view and how to put yourself in other people's shoes. When you make your first step into the Tower community, you will do the Bill of Rights and Responsibilities. You will make the Bill of Rights with your own community. Your community writes what they think is best for that year. It means that you will keep your promise for the whole year. In the Tower, everyone counts, especially if you are a part of the community. You must know that the extra work counts. The Bill of Rights especially counts. It is the whole point of what a community looks like. I know and I have learned how to see my class's point of view. One thing I like is that my community will always stay together. For me being in the Tower community is like being in a family. My friends are my brothers and sisters. I will use all this in a different way, because I will have different class communities in middle school, but no matter what, they will be my community forever, like I use it with my class now.



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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> This was, in fact, true of Daniel's first years in middle school, where, in spite of my teacher recommendations, he was initially placed in a 'track' that did not reflect what he was actually able to do. It was through his own activism and willingness to request changes, not through any school-initiated effort, that he was eventually moved to classes that challenged him and met his academic needs. This was not the case for many other students. And in Danny's case, he continued to need to be an advocate for himself and others throughout high school, while at the same time, later negotiating the difficulties of often being the only Latino student in many of his advanced classes.

<sup>2</sup> Data was collected *over time*, across the school year. We began video taping from the first day of school and taped every day for at least the first two-three weeks, often the first month. Then we taped across the year, documenting at different intervals, and later selecting key cycles of activity and events.

## About the Author

Beth Yeager is currently Executive Director of the Center for Education Research on Literacy and Inquiry in Networking Communities (LINC) in the Gevirtz Graduate School of Education, University of California, Santa Barbara. She is also a Lecturer in the Teacher Education Program, focusing on practitioner inquiry and supporting candidates in pursuing their M.Ed. Dr. Yeager taught for 32 years, at both preschool and elementary levels, in the Santa Barbara Public Schools, as a bilingual teacher and has been a member of the Santa Barbara Classroom Discourse Group, a University/School collaborative research partnership, since 1991.