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Colliding Theories and Power Differentials: A Cautionary Tale of Conducting Action Research While Student Teaching

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Abstract

Accounts of student teachers engaging in action research are abundant. Few of those accounts, however, provide insights into the challenges that this context might pose for an action researcher. Using narrative research methods, this study shares the story of one pre-service elementary education teacher who, with the permission of her supervising teacher and student teaching partner, made plans to teach a New Literacies Studies unit during her fourth grade student teaching placement and engage in action research in order to reflect on teaching and learning during that unit. Ultimately, philosophical tensions underpinning the student teacher and supervising's understandings of literacy and literacy instruction, as well as power differentials that often define the student teacher/supervising teacher relationship, undermined the student teacher's role as action researcher. Implications for student teachers engaging in action research and their university mentors are discussed.

This paper shares the story of the experiences of one student teacher, Danielle, and her faculty mentor, Jennifer, as Danielle attempted to enact action research during student teaching. A disconnect between the philosophical underpinnings of approaches to teaching reading that Danielle was attempting to enact and those that her supervising teacher prioritized, together with the inherent power differential that characterizes student teacher/supervising teacher relationships (Anderson, 2007; Borko & Mayfield, 1995; Graham, 1999), cast Danielle in a position that was at odds with an action researcher.

Introduction

By the time Danielle was ready to begin her first student teaching placement, she had developed an understanding of literacy that goes beyond a singular, skill-based view of reading and writing. In theory, she resisted traditional approaches to reading instruction

that prioritize print-based, book-bound literacy and that fail to acknowledge the multiplicity of literacy. She was beginning to embrace a New Literacies Studies (NLS) perspective that recognizes literacy as a social practice that involves positioning and issues of power (Gee, 1996; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Street, 1984). Furthermore, Danielle was broadening her conceptions of literacy to account for what NLS proponents call *multiliteracies*, which encompass differing textual forms associated with multimedia and multimodal texts, and necessitate the ability to interpret and construct different possibilities of meanings made available by those texts (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). She hoped to enact some of these new understandings during student teaching. The next section explains our narrative approach to retelling Danielle's story, and describes our methods of data collection and analysis.

Methods

This study is presented in narrative form based on the work of Clandinin (2007), Gudmundsdotti (1997, 2001), and Riessman (1993). We all organize our experiences of the world into differing forms of narratives in an effort to make sense of those experiences (Riessman, 1993). We also develop narratives to help us better understand the behaviors of others (Zellermayer, 1997). Narrative research, which is frequently used as a tool of analysis in the field of education, is a way of reflecting on how people experience the world. It also provides the storytellers/researchers with a way of representing their research. In this case, a student teacher and her faculty mentor are the storytellers.

Data Sources

Data for this study include three sources: field notes, notes from both formal and informal meetings, and a reflective journal. The following list details how data was collected and at what intervals throughout the study:

Jennifer and Danielle's notes from 10 to 15-minute meetings with each of the following people in order to introduce them to Danielle's initial plans for her unit and action research project: (a) Danielle's supervising teacher, (b) the school principal, and (c) Danielle's student teaching partner

Jennifer and Danielle's notes taken during our eight weekly 20 to 30-minute meetings with one another, during two of which Danielle's student teaching partner joined us;

Jennifer's field notes during weekly 20 to 30-minute classroom observations of Danielle and her student teaching partner teaching the unit for four consecutive weeks during the fourth through seventh weeks of their eight-week placement;

Jennifer's notes from four informal conversations with Danielle's supervising teacher (during classroom observation visits), each lasting 10 to 15 minutes;

Jennifer's notes from four informal conversations with Danielle's student teaching

partner (during classroom observation visits), each lasting 10 to 20 minutes;

Danielle's reflective journal, which she kept throughout her eight-week student teaching placement, which described and reflected on classroom observations, her own teaching experiences, planning sessions with her student teaching partner, and conversations with both her supervising teacher and student teaching partner;

Jennifer's notes from formal 20-minute interviews with Danielle, her student teaching partner, and her supervising teacher upon completion of the eight-week student teaching placement, and

Email correspondences between Jennifer and Danielle throughout the eight-week placement.

Analysis

We began the process of "restorying" (Creswell, 2005, p. 408) Danielle's experience by reviewing the entire corpus of data in order to sequence it and collectively begin to identify and frame key events and conversations. Next, we independently developed written reflections on the meanings of those events, relying on the data to support our meaning making. We then shared our reflections and supporting data with one another, identifying common themes across our reflections. In our ensuing discussions, we took steps to problematize and enhance our understandings of our story by looking for discrepancies between our emerging interpretations and the data.

The Context of Danielle's Student Teaching Placement

Danielle completed her teacher education program at a small regional campus of a large state university in the Midwest. Candidates majoring in elementary education complete their program in four semesters during their junior and senior years, advancing from one semester to the next with the same cohort of students. They complete two eight-week student teaching placements during the last two semesters of their program, one in a primary grade classroom and the other in an intermediate grade classroom. For their first

placement, they are paired with another student teacher from their cohort; they complete their second placement during the subsequent semester alone.

Danielle's Burgeoning Plans

Danielle had been assigned to a fourth grade classroom for her first placement in the fall of 2011. Therefore, she knew her second placement could be with children as young as kindergarten age. She had conceptualized her digital advertisement unit for intermediate grade students. So, despite the fact that she would be working with another student teacher during her first placement, she hoped to enact her unit in that placement.

During the summer prior to the placement, Danielle began to outline her unit, which would invite her fourth grade students to create digital advertisements. She wanted to help students understand how advertisers use various techniques to influence the consumer, as well as how the advertisements communicate through the use of multiple modalities.

Needing to purchase materials unavailable at her school placement site for her digital advertisement unit, Danielle applied for a student research grant awarded as part of a campus-wide effort to encourage undergraduate engagement in original research. Jennifer, a literacy professor within the teacher education program, who Danielle asked to be her faculty mentor in the endeavor, suggested to Danielle that she engage in action research as a way to look at and reflect on, in a systematic way, the learning emerging from her teaching (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Sagor, 2011). Danielle was awarded the grant, and Jennifer and Danielle began to make plans for the work that lay ahead.

We (throughout the paper Danielle and Jennifer use the collective we to refer to themselves) had discussed possible challenges of completing an action research project in a co-student teaching situation, but we both agreed that Danielle could still learn a great deal from completing her research under those conditions. We would face any unforeseeable hurdles as they came – and they did.

Jennifer's Role as Mentor

Jennifer's role as Danielle's mentor for her action research project was to provide guidance and support with both the unit and with the process of action research. The nature of that support was up to us. We decided that Jennifer would make four 20-minute classroom observations during the four-week unit, coming once a week during a time when Danielle was scheduled to take the leading role in facilitating the unit. (Danielle and her student teaching partner largely took turns in this role.)

Jennifer would also meet with Danielle on a weekly basis for 20-minutes to an hour at her placement school, either after school or during Danielle's free time within the school day. During the first three visits, prior to the start of the unit, we would work together to develop the unit, inviting Danielle's student teaching partner to join us, which she did during the last two of these initial meetings, to help with the planning. We would spend the four meetings that corresponded with the teaching of the unit reviewing and reflecting on Danielle's daily journal entries, Jennifer's weekly observation notes, and samples of student work that Danielle had collected over the week, discussing any changes that Danielle and her student teaching partner might make to the unit in light of the information we had gathered. During these meetings we would also evaluate the efficacy of Danielle's data collection methods, and discuss subsequent steps in the action research process.

Navigating the Gatekeepers

Danielle's was notified that she had been awarded the grant about three weeks prior to the start of student teaching. The next hurdle would be procuring support and approval for Danielle to enact the unit and engage in research during her placement. There were several gatekeepers whom we needed to engage – including Danielle's student teaching partner, her supervising teacher, and the principal of the school in which Danielle would be student teaching. We both agreed that the first conversation that Danielle should have about her unit should be with Tammy, her student teaching partner. It was important to get Tammy's input and support before discussing the work with their supervising teacher. Danielle approached this conversation gingerly. She did not want Tammy to

feel as though the ideas were being imposed upon her. Danielle worried about how she would discuss the work in a way that was provisional, but also clearly underway. (Danielle would need to tell Tammy about the grant, as well and the unit planning that she had needed to do in order to secure the grant.) Danielle knew that Tammy could play a critical role in the success of her student teaching placement, and wanted to be sure that they began their journey together on solid ground.

If Tammy was receptive to Danielle's plans, then Danielle would talk to Mrs. Pierce, her supervising teacher, about both the unit and the action research project. While Danielle had met Mrs. Pierce before, it was only a cursory introduction; Danielle was not at all sure what to expect from the meeting. She wanted to be careful that she did not suggest any hint of presumption all along that Mrs. Pierce would be in favor of the unit and her plans for her research. But Danielle knew she ran this risk, since she was going to have to tell Mrs. Pierce that she had already been awarded the grant and was in the process of getting approval from the university to work with her students as human subjects. As with Tammy, Danielle was deeply concerned about starting this relationship openly and honestly.

Finally, if all went well with Mrs. Pierce, then we would both speak to the principal in order to get her permission to allow Danielle to conduct research in her school. The same concerns about coming off as presumptuous, given the plans that had already been laid, gnawed at us as we went into this meeting.

Danielle's student teaching placement had not even started yet, and already we were becoming keenly aware of the role of power in our decision-making and planned negotiations. Fortunately, all three meetings went well. No one expressed any concerns about or hesitations regarding either the unit or the action research project, which was a great relief to both of us.

Plans for the Unit and the Action Research Project

With all initial conversations over and all gatekeepers seemingly securely on board, Danielle and Tammy began to plan the details of the unit. Students would start by reading books and discussing them in literature circles; each group

would read and discuss a different book. Danielle and Tammy would support students with traditional reading comprehension skills and group processing skills, as needed. Students would be introduced to the digital advertisement project soon after beginning their books. Each group would need to identify a community-based organization that could have helped one or more characters in their book. They would then create digital advertisements designed to get people to either volunteer for the organization or to use the organization's services. Finally, student groups would present their advertisements to classmates and family members who could attend the presentations, explaining and defending how they created their advertisements, and describing the relationship between the book they had read in their literature circles and the community-based organization they had chosen.

Before creating their advertisements, it was important to Danielle that she be able to give students the opportunity to study both magazine and web-based advertisements to see if they could identify different techniques that the advertisements used to persuade people to buy their product or use their service (e.g., celebrity endorsements, promising happiness, and emphasizing bargain prices). This portion of the unit would constitute the primary focus of her action research project. She wondered how much and what kind of scaffolding her fourth grade students would need in order to successfully identify these techniques on their own and incorporate one or more of them into their advertisements. She also wanted to better understand how and why her approaches to providing this support were or were not successful.

Philosophical Tensions Emerge

Hints of unease on Mrs. Pierce's part about what Danielle and Tammy were planning started to emerge soon after they began to share with her the details of their unit. Early on, Mrs. Pierce had made it clear that the student teachers needed to align the unit with grade 4 academic state standards, which they were working hard to do. However, as our state standards emphasize a skill-based approach to reading, prioritizing the five pillars of reading as identified and defined by the National Reading Panel (2000) (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension), it was a

challenge to find a strong standards base for the work they wanted to do with their fourth graders.

Mrs. Pierce's methodical emphasis on the standards was evident, in part, by looking at the walls of her classroom. The grade 4 standards for English language arts were typed in large font on notecards and taped all around the classroom. Mrs. Pierce explained to Danielle and Tammy that when she was teaching one of the standards, she would point to it on the wall so that the children knew what standard was being emphasized. As part of their pedagogical practice within this classroom, Danielle and Tammy were encouraged to do this, too.

Danielle and Tammy developed lesson plans and began teaching the unit without having decided upon a complete list of state standards they would explicitly teach during the unit. Danielle and Tammy concurred that Mrs. Pierce was uncomfortable with this decision. They *had* identified a few specific standards, but by and large, they had hoped to make instructional decisions based on student needs that emerged. In an informal conversation with Jennifer during the first week of the four-week unit, Tammy shared with Jennifer that "Mrs. Pierce really likes to have everything planned out up front. She really likes it all laid out with all the standards and everything up front... So I don't think she likes how we're doing this."

In addition to tensions regarding planning and English language arts standards, the literature group work had started off roughly. Students were not used to working in groups. Therefore, Danielle and Tammy were finding that they had to work harder than they expected with the students on how to work together. Mrs. Pierce had cautioned them at the start of the unit that she did not believe they would be successful engaging her students in literature circles, attributing the problems she predicted they would have to innate characteristics of the students. Mrs. Pierce explained to Danielle that there were a lot of "low students" in the class, several of whom would "never be able to do this." Therefore, when the literature circles proved to be a challenge, she encouraged them to abandon the literature circles, but did not insist on it.

Danielle urged Tammy to continue to work with her to support students in their literature circles, which she did at first. However, tensions were beginning

to emerge between Danielle and Tammy, and ultimately Tammy turned to Mrs. Pierce for leadership on how to complete the unit. As Tammy explained to Jennifer after the student teaching placement was over, she was not comfortable resisting Mrs. Pierce's advice. While she had embraced the original design of the unit, she felt that her primary responsibility was to Mrs. Pierce. And although she wanted to maintain a good relationship with Danielle, she was significantly more concerned about her relationship with Mrs. Pierce. After all, the stakes were much greater if she lost Mrs. Pierce's favor than if she lost Danielle's.

Ultimately, Danielle succumbed to the pressure. She was beginning to feel overwhelmed by the tensions that were developing, and felt very much like Tammy and Mrs. Pierce had developed an alliance that did not include her. Danielle remained convinced that instruction that would have helped students understand how advertisements position their consumers, and how to communicate using multiple modalities was turned into a single stand and deliver mini-lesson. We tried continually to adjust Danielle's action research question as the unit kept changing focus. Ultimately, however, Danielle did not feel as though the unit itself or the daily lesson plans reflected her own goals and beliefs, and therefore the action research project that she had been wanting to implement, no longer made sense. If her classroom practices did not reflect her own choices, and if she was largely contrary to the teaching practices in which she *was* engaging, then it no longer made sense to reflect on the efficacy of those practices.

Power Differentials in Student Teaching

Though supervising teachers are often considered to be mentors, they are also evaluators (Anderson, 2007). At the end of the student teaching placement, the supervising teacher completes a written evaluation of the student teacher's performance. That evaluation has a significant influence on whether or not the student teacher receives a passing or failing grade for the student teaching placement. This sets up an inescapable power differential between the supervising teacher and the student teacher (Graham, 1999).

According to Muth (1984), "Power is the ability of an actor to affect the behavior of another actor" (p. 27). Student teachers are keenly aware that their supervising teachers will be evaluating their performances, and most student teachers give high priority to receiving good student teaching evaluations (Beck & Kosnick, 2002). This often results in student teachers basing their curricular decisions, as well as their choices regarding how to interact with students, on the edicts of their supervising teachers alone (Barrows, 1979; McNay, 2003). Weasmer and Woods' (2003) analysis of open-ended interviews with 28 supervising teachers found that the teachers held their student teachers "to a strict formula of classroom behaviors paralleling the mentors' style of teaching" (p. 176). In a study conducted by Beck and Kosnik (2002), seven of the 11 student teachers they interviewed reported that their philosophies towards teaching and learning differed from their supervising teachers, making their student teaching placements challenging for them.

For Danielle, her supervising teacher's philosophies differed in a number of ways from her own, but perhaps most notably were the differences regarding their theoretical perspectives towards literacy and literacy instruction. Literacy instruction has been at the forefront of the disconnect between the philosophical underpinnings of practices promoted by university faculty in teacher preparation programs and those enacted in K-12 schools (Allington, 2002; Kim, 2008). The troubled history of the relationship between reading research and practice, and the continued debate over whether reading instruction should extend beyond the National Reading Panel's five pillars has ensured that "the reading wars are alive and well in the 21st century" (Kim, 2008, p. 372). Our state's academic reading standards are squarely designed around those five pillars. At issue for Danielle was not whether she should use or ignore the state standards as a curricular informant for her decision-making. She believed in doing so, and she did. Danielle simply wanted to create a space for students that would allow them to explore new literacies as well; Mrs. Pierce didn't seem comfortable accommodating that space, in part because it was never clear to her what she was accommodating it for. In an interview with Jennifer, Mrs. Pierce explained, "I'm not sure what the digital media

portion was designed to support. I was never really sure." While she did feel that creating the advertisements was "fun" for students, she saw little value in it beyond that. This had already become apparent about one week into the unit when Mrs. Pierce encouraged Danielle and Tammy to incorporate science into the digital media portion of the project, which Tammy explained was because "that's what [our state's end-of-the-year student achieve test] tests in fourth grade and [Mrs. Pierce] wants us to put it in wherever we can." When Danielle shared via email with Jennifer Mrs. Pierce's suggestion to incorporate science into the digital media portion of the unit, Jennifer responded by asking, "How would you do that?" to which Danielle replied, "I have no idea."

Placing student teachers in pairs can intensify the issues of power within a placement. While studies have identified a number of potential benefits to placing students with partners, including additional professional support, and increased opportunities for dialog and reflection (Goodnough, Osmond, Dibbon, Glassman, & Stevens, 2009; Nokes, Bullough, Egan, Birrell, & Hansen, 2008), the model is not without its limitations. A study conducted by Goodnough et al. (2009) found, for example, that when part of a pair, a student teacher can feel as though he or she is vying for the supervising teacher's attention and approval.

Tammy, who had considerably less investment in the advertisement unit than Danielle, had little to gain (beyond Danielle's approval) and everything to lose by resisting Mrs. Pierce's wishes. When push came to shove and alliances were being formed, Tammy joined forces with Mrs. Pierce, who had considerably more influence over Tammy's "success" in the placement than Danielle. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, Danielle and Jennifer noticed that when Tammy felt that she and Danielle had Mrs. Pierce's full support for the unit, she referred to it as "our unit." But when she began to sense Mrs. Pierce's unease with the legitimacy and relevance of certain aspects of the unit to her students, Tammy began referring to the unit as "Danielle's unit." When Jennifer asked Tammy upon completion of the student placement if she was aware of doing this, she said that she wasn't, but admitted that it did not surprise her. The unit had become the white elephant in the room, she

explained, and she no longer wanted to be associated with it.

Tammy shared with Jennifer that, for her, student teaching was just something to “survive.” Surviving meant teaching whatever Mrs. Pierce wanted her to teach, in whatever way she wanted her to teach it in order to get a good evaluation. Research suggests that this tendency is widespread. For example, one comparative case study of four student teachers found that they tend to “imitate, and not experiment, to conform and not challenge, and to accept and not question” (Barrows, 1979, p. 25) in order to procure a good evaluation from their supervising teacher. Danielle resisted this tendency to “imitate” Mrs. Pierce at first, but then later succumbed to the pressure to do so.

In an email message that Danielle wrote to Jennifer early on in her student teaching placement, she explains feeling like an outsider in her placement with regards to her beliefs about teaching. Here Danielle talks about Mrs. Pierce’s insistence that Danielle not stray from her lesson plans, even if Danielle started to feel as though a lesson was not working as intended, or was not meeting the needs of her students:

I didn’t know going into this experience just how different my views of teaching and learning would be from my classroom teacher, or even the other student teacher. Even with the simplest of things, I seem to always be the ‘odd man out.’ ... [I believe] it is my job as a reflective practitioner to do what I think is best... Instead of trying to constantly please [Mrs. Pierce], I do what I think is best and ‘play dumb’ when confronted about it later. In regards to planning, I will not stick to my plans exactly and if that marks my grade down from her, then so be it. I feel that reflecting and re-planning is an integral part of great teaching and to stop doing that just because my classroom teacher doesn’t agree with that philosophy would mean that I would be perpetuating the status quo... To me, that’s not worth it (D. Dias, personal communication, November 4, 2011).

Danielle’s determination to stand her ground ultimately diminished. The daily conflicts were just getting to be too much for her. In another correspondence between Danielle and Jennifer later in her student teaching placement, Danielle says,

“There are layers upon layers of issues this semester and I’m emotionally and mentally drained. So, I quit. [Mrs. Pierce] wins” (D. Dias, email communication, December 2, 2011).

Conclusion

Action research is a process that views educators as professionals who bring their own intellectual curiosity to bear on their understandings of children (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Danielle had identified a research focus that was personally and professionally of interest to her. She hoped not only to better understand her fourth grade students’ critical understandings of the world of advertising, but also to discover and reflect on her own abilities to build and bridge those understandings.

Despite our good intentions, Mrs. Pierce was ultimately resistant to Danielle’s new literacies unit. As a result, Danielle was not able to complete her research during student teaching. (In order to adhere to the requirements of Danielle’s grant and complete a research project, Jennifer and Danielle analyzed the students’ final digital advertisements, in order to better understand how the fourth graders engaged various modalities to communicate their messages.)

Our weekly meetings and frequent phone and email conversations during Danielle’s student teaching placement provided us with some time to reflect on and try to make sense of her experiences. However, during her placement, our efforts were primarily reactive as we worked to keep some semblance of Danielle’s action research project afloat in response to what was unfolding. It wasn’t until her student teaching placement ended that Danielle and Jennifer had the opportunity to truly reflect on her experiences.

Implications

During this time, our thoughts and conversations also turned to what we might have done differently in order to achieve a more favorable outcome. Perhaps Danielle’s action research plans should have focused more narrowly on instructional practices that Mrs. Pierce would have sanctioned. According to Sagor, however, “Action research is to be a disciplined process of inquiry conducted *by* and *for* those taking the action” (Sagor, 2000, p. 3, emphasis in the original). If the action involves

teaching practices that are sanctioned by a supervising teacher but to which the student teacher is philosophically opposed, then whose research is it?

It would be unreasonable to insist that action research and student teaching are incompatible based on our story alone. What our story suggests, however, is that when student teachers embark on action research, they and their mentors need to pay careful attention to ways in which philosophical differences or power differentials within the placements may be impacting the student teachers' projects. In those cases, as with any variables that influence the processes and products of action research, those differences and/or tensions should become explicit points for reflection. Adhering to the pretense that neither exists, when they do (and research suggests that they often do, as we've documented above) not only results in missed opportunities for meaningful reflection on the part of the student teacher, but also shrouds the inherent benefits and virtues of engaging in action research.

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