

Ethnography

Copyright © 2006 SAGE Publications (London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi)
www.sagepublications.com Vol 7(3): 329–356[DOI: 10.1177/1466138106069524]

Teacher, teach thyself Teacher research as ethnographic practice

■ Mark Dressman

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA

ABSTRACT ■ This ethnography examines the potential of having teachers study their own practice in order to ‘liberate’ them as an oppressed and ‘voiceless’ group and to raise issues within their discourse communities about social, cultural, and political aspects of education. The study was conducted as part of a graduate program in education in which two courses were organized in a teacher research format. Although the teachers in these courses reported feeling supported and found their experience to have a marked effect on their awareness of their own and their students’ discourse patterns, they showed less apparent willingness to move from the examination of specific instances of teaching to an openly critical examination of their and their communities’ beliefs about students’ home lives or about schools as institutions and their roles in them. These findings in turn raise issues about what these teachers’ resistance to my critical perspective as an applied ethnographer may indicate about assumed relationships in the teacher research literature between the construction of ‘voice’ in teachers’ ethnographic writing and the culture and politics of schooling.

KEY WORDS ■ teacher research, praxis, autoethnography

And then what was really good for me was going back to the rest of my team that I teach with, and to be able to talk about, ‘You know, in my graduate class, we talked about this gal who kind of watched the ...

townspeople and [a rural community]' . . . So we got to talking about where we came from – and we applied it to our own lives, and we started applying it to our students, and [we asked ourselves], 'Will this help us with our students?' This knowledge? Would it really help us? Maybe understand why they do what they do or why they say what they say – you know, to be more open-minded, maybe? (Linda, a teacher researcher in the southwestern US)

This is an ethnography about a group of teacher researchers doing ethnography, and about my attempts as a teacher educator to use ethnographic practices such as the taking of field notes, triangulation, the reading of other ethnographies, and the writing up of one's own data to 'empower' those teachers by raising their awareness of the cultural and political contexts of their work and helping them to 'find their voices' as teachers. When I began this teaching and research, I believed that it would be through induction into the culture and practice of ethnography itself – that is, by means of the participants' own ethnographic practices, rather than via my analysis of their (and our) behavior – that the goals of my own work as an applied ethnographer and teacher educator would be achieved. As such this work departed somewhat from the ways in which applied forms of ethnography are usually conducted because the connection between the use of ethnographic practices and their intended outcome was so immediate and direct. Yet it was the very peculiarity of this situation and the reflexivity of doing ethnography through the doing of ethnography that produced moments in which broader ironies inherent within the politics of ethnographic endeavors were exposed, especially within the politics of 'voice' and the 'empowerment' of participants who are frequently assumed to be powerless within the contexts of ethnographic research.

The setting for the events I will relate was a branch campus more than 250 miles (approximately 450km) from a major public university in the southwestern United States. The area was rural and poor. It had prospered in the 1950s during a boom in uranium mining, but had since fallen on hard times, until by the time the study took place, the only sources of economic growth in the community came from three state prisons and from tourist dollars generated in the motels and restaurants clustered around the transcontinental highway that crossed the region. Demographically, the area was roughly equal thirds Hispanic, American Indian, and White, or 'Anglo', in the local terminology. In these respects the setting was unique, or even 'exotic'; but the 15 teachers with whom I worked led professional lives that were quite typical of most teachers in the United States. Their teaching assignments ranged from early childhood classrooms to the local two-year community college and all taught in programs and in ways that were standard across the US. Except for two volunteers at a local Catholic mission school and two community college instructors, all participants had

their college degree in education and were credentialed by the state. And, perhaps most significantly, these teachers faced the same professional challenges as their counterparts in more urban, industrialized areas. They were held to standards of professional accountability but were often not treated professionally; on occasion they would talk about having problems whose source or solution they could never clearly grasp, and that left them feeling continually frustrated and inadequate; and they struggled, sometimes at very basic levels, to understand and to communicate with students and parents who seemed to them to resist their efforts.

I worked with these teachers over two semesters as the instructor for two graduate courses that led to a masters degree in education. Five times each semester I made the four-hour drive from the main campus of the university, where I was a faculty member, to the branch campus. We met for a long session on Friday evenings and an even longer, all-day session on Saturday, and then I drove back to the main campus in the evening.

Evaluating instructional strategies

In the first minutes of our meeting, I learned that only two of the 11 course participants that semester had enrolled in a graduate course before, and that all were quite taken with their new identities as graduate students. Several expressed a good deal of excitement about the idea of a graduate course, and said they hoped they were up to it. In my introductory remarks, I gave a little speech about the ‘educational pyramid’ that placed teachers at the bottom as consumers and educational researchers and administrators at the top as producers and managers of knowledge. I had redesigned this course, ‘Evaluating Instructional Strategies’, I said, to reverse this situation. It would be about ‘trying out’ some textbook notions of good teaching as described in our text, and then talking back to these authors. I said we would also be evaluating some very interesting research on patterns of communication in classrooms and considering the implications that research might or might not have for us. To do these things, we would need to keep field notes of our own practice and share insights from them during our class meetings. The major project for the course would be a report of what changes were tried and what effects were noted, concluding with an evaluation of what was learned in the process. And I stated that since this sort of course represented a dramatic departure from the lecture-discussion methods I used in my teaching, I would be researching my own practice, too.

At first many of the teachers seemed ambivalent about the course’s design, caught up by my enthusiasm and by the collegial atmosphere I had worked to create by arranging the tables in the room in a circle, identifying myself on my name card by my first name, and speaking in an informal register.

Yet they also seemed concerned, as Araceli, a Latina with many years' experience teaching home economics, had the courage to say, that they would have to 'confess' all their problems as teachers. I suspect, also, that some were concerned whether this was going to be a 'real' graduate course; for as another participant delicately put it the following day during a break, 'So, are you *really* a PhD?' From these and other remarks I surmised that they had been expecting me to take an authoritative if not authoritarian tone, to lecture extensively, to focus on research and theory over practice, and to be demanding in the products I required of them, and so I was glad that I had not completely abandoned the trappings of a graduate course, such as a syllabus, reading list, and a detailed description of assignments. I assured them I was a PhD, and I also guaranteed that what they chose to study and what and how much they chose to record in their field notes and share in class was entirely up to them. At least Araceli was encouraged, and at the end of the first meeting told me she thought this was going to be a great experience.

The following day we began by discussing what field notes were. I showed a videotape I had recorded two nights before of me teaching a class on content area reading at the main campus and asked the students to jot down as they watched what they noticed. Since I had never videotaped myself before, watching my own teaching was quite a shock. Instead of the lively discussion of theories of reading that I remembered, the instructor on this tape was stiff and practically monologic, and he droned on and on while his audience became increasingly distracted. But the others who watched seemed heartened by my exposure as a less than brilliant pedagogue. I was not that bad, they counseled – they had seen worse. They began to point out what they had noticed, and we gradually organized this information into categories: arrangement of the room, patterns of interaction, method of presentation, and so on. Then they split up, found quiet spots around the building, and prepared to present their own practice to each other using the categories of information we had just invented. We spent the remainder of the morning and the afternoon getting acquainted through these presentations.

As the teachers in turn described their practice, it was as though, in a cliché, a dam had burst. Each presented his or her teaching as innovative and geared to the needs of her students, but nearly everyone was also engaged in a struggle of crisis proportions, either with a student or students, with parents, or in the case of Beth's rural, three-room school, with an entire community that just did not seem to 'get' what she was trying to accomplish educationally. None of these teachers knew exactly what the problem was, but each figured its source to lie in individuals' personalities and in their homes and in histories that were completely foreign to their own experience.

At the time, I had a different view of the situation, but I did not offer it. The moment was too pregnant with emotion and precious collegiality, and we barely knew each other's stories to interpret them. On another level, however, the stories were all the same, and all intimately our own: they were the stories of people who had 'made it' and now wanted to share what they had learned, to bring others into this better world, to make that world, The World to us, more present to those we served. Only, for reasons that seemed purely perverse, our students did not or would not (it never seemed, could not) get with our program. And that angered us and threatened us. Listening to this story over and over in its infinite individual tellings, I was jolted into remembrance and recognition of my own career as a school teacher, for this was my story, too, of my own teaching on the Navajo Indian Reservation in my 20s and in the inner city in my 30s, and of my anger at students' frequent indifference to or rejection of the Great White Pearl of My Culture. This is what I read from these stories and the analysis of my own memories, but I did not point it out then. There would be time and moments to make this point with reconstructive effect. On the long drive home from the branch to the main campus that day I felt more alive professionally than I had felt in years.

So, on a mission to bring teachers into alignment with (my vision of) social justice, I found myself entering into a subtle, yet at times very palpable, discursive struggle with these teachers over the construction of their voices – that is, over the terms in which they would speak and write themselves, their students, and their communities. I hoped their common struggles with the people in their service, and the healing effects of being able to come before peers not in one's own building and speak openly about their conflicts, would keep the group's esprit de corps from lagging, while the readings for the course and my own interrogative skill at interjecting a decentering observation or turn of phrase into discussions and field notes would challenge voiced perspectives about why some students fail and others succeed, and about the professional role of teachers vis-à-vis their colleagues, their schools, and their communities. These were perspectives, I believed from my own life experiences and reading, that were often taken too uncritically from popular discourses about why the poor were poor, and why cultural and linguistic others struggle and often fail to succeed academically. Ultimately, I hoped that as a group we might begin to see ourselves as part of broader cultural and historical forces, of which our struggles were only the local enactments; then, my reading of critical pedagogy and theory (e.g. see Denzin, 2003; Freire, 1970; Gramsci, 1991; Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2005) told me, we might organically begin to theorize a practical way out of our, and our students', culturally reproductive dilemma.

For the next several class meetings I had good reason to believe this was

happening. A routine was established during the second meeting in which each student updated the class about her or his ongoing field project for half the time, while the other half of the weekend was spent presenting and discussing readings, first from the standard textbook on teaching strategies and later in the semester from *Classroom Discourse* (Cazden, 1988). For the project that they would report on in their final paper, I suggested that they implement in their classrooms one of the instructional approaches in our textbook and then write about the experience and their findings. As part of the presentations they gave about different teaching and management strategies (e.g. 'conflict resolution'; 'cooperative learning'; 'concept development'), many teachers did, in fact, give their method a try, and reported great success. Beth's class developed the concept of *cowboy* and generated so much information in so many different categories that she planned a field trip to a local ranch; Lisa, a first-year teacher and free spirit who was under pressure to get her day more organized, got rave reviews for her use of one strategy during an impromptu visit from her principal. But when it came to selecting a topic for the major report, nearly every teacher opted not to research a specific strategy; instead, they chose to continue to examine the contexts and nature of their interaction with their students and of the students with each other. The act of keeping field notes – of recording how their day or an event had gone, or in some cases of writing in the classroom as their students worked in groups or by themselves – proved an extraordinary release and a revelation for these teachers. As they explained, it showed them things about patterns of communication they 'had never seen before' and opened up entirely new possibilities of interaction, so that some rearranged their rooms and others began to experiment with new ways of responding to student behaviors – like gum-chewing for Margaret, or side-talk for Jim, or fighting among themselves for Gloria – that had driven them 'crazy'.

This, I thought, was my cue. Back at the main campus, I read the students' field notes and ransacked my own library for articles on sociolinguistics that would 'culturize' their observations. With the help of two other students who worked at the branch campus, I got every member of the class an email address, which also gave them access to the university library's online catalog, and I put my graduate assistant to the task of meeting their requests. For example, I brought copies of articles on Hispanic and Navajo bilingual and special education students to our next meeting and passed them out liberally. As teachers discussed their field notes and problematic interactions, I worked to inject a sociolinguistic, cultural interpretation to discussions that I hoped would provide an alternative explanation to the stories they told of parental neglect and alcoholism and general socio-cultural deficiency.

Slowly, as the teachers heard each other's stories unfold over several

meetings and gained each other's trust, they began to hold themselves to a higher standard of accountability for their own behavior in the crises they described – not placing blame, but raising alternative explanations for why their students provoked them and each other – and to examine the pragmatic consequences of their reactions and consider more constructive alternative perspectives and responses. Margaret, for example, was asked to reconsider both the motivations of a student in her 'Finding and Maintaining Employment' class who rudely modeled the same inappropriate behavior that her course focused on eliminating, as well as the motivations behind her own irritated reactions to this student. Another evening after Linda described her use of sarcasm in dealing with a smart-alecky boy, several students quietly responded with stories from their own lives in which a sarcastic remark left them feeling more angry than corrected. Nor was I exempt from critique. On at least one occasion I was confronted about the stories I told about my own career as a teacher – about irritating experiences with students and colleagues that I thought I had put behind me – and asked to consider alternatives to the conclusions I drew from them. When this happened I found myself simultaneously feeling thrown off-guard and yet supported. To be held accountable without condemnation or reprisal, I now realized, had been a rare experience in my career as a teacher; it felt long overdue.

But for all the class's growing openness about their problems and willingness to consider new interpretations of their classroom interactions in specific instances, students were much less willing to reconsider the systemic theories they held about life in classrooms, or in some cases even to acknowledge that they had theories about how the lifeworlds of their students and their communities worked. Most students initially rejected Courtney Cazden's (1988) sociolinguistic analyses of classroom discourse. In her text, Cazden provided extended transcripts of conversations between teachers and students during instructional moments such as story times and reading lessons that were marked to show pauses and inflections. Some of the students found this practice intriguing; Christine, for example, laughed that after reading the first two chapters she could not hold a conversation with a student without seeing it transcribed in her head using 'those // marks that Cazden used'. But others rejected the Cazden analysis, arguing that the marks made the obvious more complicated than it really was. They found Cazden's description of research on Hawaiian children's communication practices and the Kamehameha Early Education Project (KEEP) interesting after I explained a little about Hawaiian social hierarchies, and most approved of peer group learning and said they understood the necessity of side-talk that Cazden discussed in the final chapters, but in the final evaluations of the course one student complained that 'some of the ideals and beliefs that the author Courtney B. Cazden expressed I could not agree

with'. Others mostly complained, however, that the book was difficult to read and was not very useful to them in their situations.

The class was even more resistant to, and sometimes openly rejected, interpretations of events they reported based in issues of race, gender, or social class. Araceli, for example, was struggling with two swaggering Anglo 'cowboys', Thad and Sam, who used foul language and were verbally abusive toward others, particularly the young women, in her 'Foods and Nutrition' class. Like the teachers in a study conducted by McCarthy (1998), who used a kind of nativist trait theory to account for their students' behavior, Araceli explained these young men's actions as a conflict of 'personalities' – hers versus two teenagers from homes where their mothers, according to her, did not demand respect. I suggested to her that instead, perhaps it all came down to gender – that is, to performances that shored-up their threatened masculinity in a 'sissy home ec. cooking' class through loud public resistance to all appearances of domestication. But Araceli continued to disagree. In our last class meeting she pulled me aside to tell me she had had a big breakthrough with them. She had 'talked rodeo' with one of the boys, Thad, and now they were 'tight'; the other boy was following Thad's lead. 'See,' I said, 'They were threatened, and now that they know they can still be wranglers *and* cook, they will relax.'

'No,' she said. Other macho boys in the class never behaved that way; her brothers were big guys, too, but they never behaved that way at home; it all came down to finding a way to reach their personalities. However, Araceli's final paper for the class strongly suggested to me that she was using 'personality theory' to explain away more than the doing of gender by these boys. She stated that for her research project she had chosen to observe and keep field notes on her interactions with a group of four boys, three of whom she identified in the paper as 'Anglo' – Thad, Sam, and Cody – and another boy whose ethnicity and name she did not mention:

By choosing this group to observe, I was more involved with them than I would have been because my 'heart' just didn't like to be around them. I tried to have as little contact with them as possible. I felt very uneasy with them in class and I noticed that I was beginning to truly not like them on a personal level. Choosing to observe them forced me to jump in there, roll up my sleeves, and get to work. It was a sink or swim situation. I think I was afraid to be around this group. They had too much energy, seemed too healthy, too confident, intelligent, witty, too bonded, handsome, and by all means too immature. All these were my assumptions. Through observation I was forced to break through some of those assumptions.

The emotional tone of this paragraph triggered my memory of an incident earlier in the semester in which Araceli had also used strong but guarded language to express herself. We were sitting around during a break

in class one evening, talking about where we had grown up and gone to school, and Araceli mentioned that she was born and raised in Mexico, but by an unusual circumstance, as a child she had routinely crossed the border to attend a rural public school in the United States. This decades-long border-crossing arrangement within this community had recently come to the attention of the media in the US, and in fact had been the focus of a series of stories in newspapers, magazines, and on public radio, in which the US community and school administrators were always portrayed as heroic in their concern for the education of ‘all the children of the border community’. I mentioned the stories I had heard and read about this community, and asked Araceli if she had been interviewed for them. Oh, yes, she responded sharply, they had called her and even asked her to come back for a reunion, but she refused to participate. She said she did not remember the teachers or the administrators of that district, all of whom were Anglo, behaving heroically at the time at all. She had bitter memories, she told me with a shudder; she did not want to go into the details, but she had been angry for years and ‘didn’t want to be angry anymore’.

Araceli’s own experiences of apparently being treated very badly as a ‘charity case from Mexico’ in a rural US public school run by Whites and the fact that her only ‘problem group’ was one that contained three Anglo males strongly suggested to me that at least at a subliminal level she was aware of the extent to which issues of cultural difference, if not race, probably figured in the ways the boys treated her. Even more disconcerting for her, however, may have been her awareness of how racially motivated the ‘assumptions’ that she made about the three boys were, when she characterized them as ‘having too much energy’ and seeming ‘too healthy, too confident, intelligent, witty, too bonded, handsome, and by all means too immature’ – in short, when she negatively projected upon them many of the characteristics that many Whites in southwestern US culture value positively, even admiringly, in (White) male adolescents. These characterizations contrasted markedly with descriptors of masculine behavior mentioned positively in Araceli’s paper and in her conversation throughout the semester – traits that are often foregrounded in Mexican and Hispanic cultures, such as respecting one’s parents (especially one’s mother), ‘being a gentleman’, and above all, ‘being mature’, that is, having the social grace to perceive and act in complement with a group’s or an elder’s (her) point of view and way of doing things.

Yet there was never any direct mention of cultural difference or of race in Araceli’s analysis of the situation. In accounting for the behavior of the boys in her paper and in describing her own efforts to make peace with them, she consistently attributed their behavior and her success or failure in responding to it as the result of their personalities and home lives and her ability to use her powers of observation, focused by the practice of

taking field notes, to find a way to reach them personally. The fact that some of her interventions ‘worked’ stood as implicit evidence within the text of her belief that ‘personality’ was the central problem and the key to improving her relationship with the boys.

Araceli’s refusal to use cultural frames of analysis to make sense of her students’ behavior extended beyond Anglos to Chicano (Mexican-American) youth as well. In a final interview, conducted the following year, she told me that she had recently had ‘problems really identifying with gangsters’ – working-class, Spanish-speaking, Chicano males who had adopted the dress, language, and music of East Los Angeles ‘hip-hop’ culture. She explained, ‘To me they’re so foreign, I have no clue where they’re coming from, because you know, in my culture ... maybe we had gangsters but they were peaceful gangsters, but these guys are too, too angry. I don’t, I can’t identify with people who are angry, and in a way they make me feel uncomfortable.’ I found this surprising, because it seemed to me that the history and culture of these youths, as well as its angry expression, could be directly related to the *vato* and *pachuco* youth culture of her own generation, and to some of the abuses she had suffered as a student on the border. I asked her if she ever used her own experience growing up to understand her students, but she steadfastly insisted that she could find no relationship between her experiences and her students, that her students had ‘so much more materially’ and that this made their attitudes incomprehensible to her. Then I wondered aloud why the gangsters were so angry. Araceli responded that she did not know, but then added, with ironic sincerity, ‘It’s really crazy. I’m sure they have enough to eat, even if it’s welfare. It’s something to eat.’ Just as ironically in her telling, her discomfort and confusion about these students and their anger did not push her away from contact with them, as it did with other members of the high school faculty: ‘On top of everything else [during lunch supervision], I don’t stay away from them. I just get inside them and I hang out with them ... I’m not really scared of them but I’m uncomfortable ... and I listen to them and I get close to them, but I have to force myself to do it.’

The possibility that cultural difference or race figured into their relationships with their students and their analyses of those relationships was difficult not only for Araceli but for all of the teachers in the class to consider. This was particularly true for the three teachers at ‘Indian schools’. As Doug Foley (1995) has pointed out, Anglos who live in contact zones with American Indians tend to take a ‘classic’ anthropological view of cultural difference, and to think of Indian culture exclusively in terms of its ‘exotic’ aspects. They define an Indian group’s religious and ceremonial rituals, artifacts, narratives, and other colorful differences from Anglo-American life as its culture, while regarding the more mundane aspects of life on reservations – tar-paper homes, dirt roads, no running water, a

frequent lack of electricity – as well as their social experience of reservation life, such as a communitarian economic ethos, the complexities of reservation politics, or even bilingualism, as signs of ‘what has become’ of a ‘once proud people’. Anglos from suburbs where homes are literally built in the cultural image of chateaux and manor houses often read dirt floors and trailers as the signs of an assumed process of cultural decay, rather than as indications that Indians might have different ways of using their wealth or displaying their social standing. In this liberal, guilty colonialist view, according to Foley, Indian culture is seen as ever receding in the face of the White Man’s alcohol and seductive consumerist ways.

Initially, I believed the teachers of American Indians in the class could be characterized as viewing their students through such a lens. Although all three held progressive attitudes toward Indian education and sincerely desired to help preserve and make their own instruction congruent with their students’ cultural ways, in their class comments and writing they took a deficit view of their students’ lives and consistently characterized individual students’ family situations as indicative of a social rot that permeated the entire community. In the stories they told school was depicted as a sanctuary for many children, who were described as being fearful and miserable in their own homes. And yet they also noted that absenteeism was a major problem. Students often chose to go to the closest major city with their families rather than come to school, or to stay home for special events and ceremonies. Moreover, the school curriculum they described (with frustration) generally made only token accommodations to local Indians’ cultures, and school administrators were requiring teachers to focus increasingly on ‘raising scores’ by ‘teaching for the test’, a situation that was not likely to add to schooling’s attractiveness to children. On occasion, I suggested alternative ways of looking at schooling or absenteeism, or I asked if there were not possibly hidden strengths in these Indian students’ family lives, but they did not reply. In accounting for this apparent contradiction between the image of school-as-sanctuary and students’ high absenteeism, these teachers concluded that absenteeism was a sign that parents did not value education.

In a last instance, I seized upon a discussion of the state governor’s attempt to negotiate less than a three percent increase in teachers’ salaries for the coming year. Several students in the class were upset by this, and one, Linda, had a phone number that the state affiliate of the National Education Association was asking teachers to call. During a break this led to a discussion about whether it was ‘professional’ for teachers to organize collectively, and even to strike. Because use of the word *professional* by school administrators has always seemed to me to be duplicitous, I could not resist climbing on my soapbox for a moment. In fact, I pointed out, teachers are only considered professional when it is convenient for

administrators and parents and politicians to label them so. The fact is that no doctor or lawyer, no one recognized by society as indisputably professional, would ever dream of spending six or more hours a day in close contact with 30 clients at a time. So they should not be fooled by that word, because in the case of teachers it was only used to divide and conquer. 'Well!' said one teacher. 'Right on!' someone else echoed. And then Linda remarked with a smile, 'You know, Mark, *you* should call that number. We need *you* to speak for us.'

The overt, immediate responses of these teachers to my interjection of issues of power, gender, and ethnic stereotyping into class discussions led me to question whether perhaps I had not been overly optimistic about what might be accomplished in one course. With only one class meeting remaining in the spring, I began to wonder if I had not pushed my agenda hard enough or openly enough in class discussions to require that it be addressed. The class's final reports, mailed to me several weeks before our last meeting, were lucid, clear accounts of their projects that semester and, true to class discussions, they dealt largely with issues of management and social interaction as opposed to methodology; but as in class discussions also, the implied causes of problems were situated either in issues of 'personality' or in students' dysfunctional home lives. Where attention was paid to historical, cultural, or political issues, it was always elliptical and seldom, if ever, foregrounded.

Christine's final paper is an interesting example of the ways that issues of culture and politics were presented but never made the central focus of analysis. Throughout the semester she had joked about how 'freeing' she found it to teach in a 'portable' classroom, an outbuilding set off from the main school building, and I had encouraged her to observe the effects this had on her teaching. She titled the paper 'A Portable on an Island', and began an introductory paragraph by noting that 'My portable on an island is a fitting title since I am in a portable with not one window high enough for my second graders to look out. I am alienated from the other teachers, principal, and classrooms.' But she did not confront, at least directly, the implications of this situation in the remainder of the paragraph, which continued, '... As I open my door at 8:05, I find all my 24 students lined up against the portable. They are all eager and excited to start a new day. I start the day with thoughts of ... Am I instilling good values? ... And does my classroom size play havoc on their learning?' Similarly, later in the paper she notes, 'My portable on an island is an island where I don't have to teach what the administration tells [me]. I have workbooks and books, but to me [they] can be so confining.' But the paragraph continues, 'I usually (re)arrange the desks every month, usually in rows or in groups of three or four ... Then, I self-direct them in their instruction ...' Her paper stands as an example of the ways that many students in the class seemed to begin

to confront cultural and political issues in their work but then backed off to discuss their work in more instrumentalist terms.

In a last effort to make sociocultural issues a central part of 'Evaluating Instructional Strategies', I brought copies of an article by Lilia Bartolomé (1994) titled 'Beyond the Methods Fetish' to our final meeting on Friday night and asked teachers to read it at home and come prepared to discuss it during our farewell luncheon at a local restaurant the next day. In her article, Bartolomé argued that no instructional method offers a 'magic' solution to student achievement; if there is any 'magic' at all, it is in the ways that students read instruction as an act of *cariño*, or endearment, toward them. It is *cariño*, Bartolomé concluded, that creates an atmosphere of mutual trust in which students can relax and concentrate on instructional content. Bartolomé's work was not addressed to teachers principally, but to teacher educators; still, I hoped they would read the article as an ironic conclusion to a class named 'Evaluating Instructional Strategies'.

But I was terribly wrong, not only about the article, but about other issues, which made themselves apparent the next day during our luncheon at a local restaurant. One teacher, for example, was very concerned about her mark for the course. She pointed out that I had not formally evaluated anything all semester (although I had given plenty of feedback); she had wished she had known where she stood more clearly. '*Was this or was this not a real course?*,' I heard her seem to ask. Yes, I responded quickly; everyone had worked very hard and everyone would get the highest mark; I should have said so before, but I wanted to preserve 'the integrity of the course' as a graduate course; I was sorry, because I never meant to deceive anyone about this. There was a sigh of relief in the room, and I suddenly realized that for all my talk about collegiality, the students still regarded me as The Professor, as, I had to admit, they had every reason to; it was I, I realized, who had deluded himself all along on the issue of authority.

Then, as we were relaxing into cheesecake, I brought up Bartolomé's article. 'So, what did everyone think?' I asked. There was no response; just some talk about personal matters. I pressed again: 'Now, really, what did you all think? What did you think about this idea that it is not the methodology, it's how much caring it communicates?'

'Well,' said Susan, 'I hated it. I can't tell you – I can't tell you how angry it made me. I was furious at first and then as I read on I just thought it was ridiculous!' Stony silence at the table, and then a few attempts to change the conversation.

But I wouldn't let go. 'So what made you angry?' I asked.

'Everything,' Susan said.

I looked around for some support, but there was little. Mary Ann spoke up, said she had liked it; it gave her hope there was not a right and a wrong way to teach.

But Susan continued. ‘How dare that author talk about teachers that way? It was just so insulting, so arrogant.’ I was stunned, because in her final paper Susan had talked about all the ways that she tried to demonstrate *cariño* and cultural relevance in her curriculum, and I had been duly impressed and had written effusive comments in the margins of her paper. I retorted that I was surprised by her reaction, given the final paper she’d written. ‘Well, I hated it,’ Susan said. ‘How could somebody talk about teachers like that? Who did she think she was?’ Or, as I heard it, ‘Who did I think I was?’

We finished our cheesecake talking awkwardly about the fall and I left for home quickly, sure at that moment that everything I had worked and hoped for had been a colossal, arrogant blunder on my part. Reliving Susan’s repudiation as I drove, my face grew hot and I became agitated. No student’s remark had ever stung me with this force. I felt, on the one hand, that my confidence had been somehow betrayed, and that my intentions had been terribly misunderstood; and on the other, terribly guilty and responsible for having been caught by my own pedagogical cleverness – that is, by the assumption that these teachers needed both to see and articulate their social realities as I saw and articulated them through Bartolomé. Almost a year later in follow-up interviews I asked the other participants in the luncheon about their perceptions of what had occurred. Few remembered the incident at all, and none gave it the significance I had. But I wasn’t able to interview Susan. Although she had initially agreed to talk to me, we were never able to arrange a time and place to meet, and she did not register for the second course the following fall.

Curriculum development processes

At the last moment enough students – 10 – registered for the second course to be offered the following fall. Six students returned from the spring; of the four first-time students, two taught in rural, county elementary schools, one was the principal of a small rural high school in the same school district as Beth, and the last was a medical technologist in town who worked with student interns. The plan for this course, on processes of curriculum development, was essentially the same as that for the first course. Students would research a curriculum development process in their own schools or in their classroom, keep field notes, report to the class, and read a combination of standard curriculum textbooks and case studies. I hoped that by moving the site of research away from personal interaction and into the wider arena of the school and community, students might take a more critical, distanced view of schooling as a social process.

To some extent, again, this is what happened. In the early meetings for the course I tried to build a model of curriculum development as a process of community development, in which every member of the community touched by the school – staff and students, parents, community members at-large, and local and state school boards – needed to be included in its processes. I described the dynamics of curriculum development as a *ritual* process (McLaren, 1993; Turner, 1969), in which initiates come in contact with the elders of their community and, through engagement in various parametric rituals – lectures, story times, small-group projects, practice sessions – acquire the traditions, or knowledge, of the group. Such a process ensures the continuity of the social order, but for that order to develop in response to new exigencies, it must also allow for social change, a process that occurs as initiates bring their own agency and experiences into rituals and find opportunities to engage their elders in negotiating their role in that society. What ‘falls out’ of this curricular process, then, are reconstructed knowledge, dispositions, and practices that respond to a changed sociocultural environment. I asked the students to examine their own curriculums and to consider what parameters they operated within, and what hidden opportunities they might find in these parameters that would allow them to negotiate new roles for themselves and their students.

Although most students’ eyes glazed over when I first presented this model and their initial attempts to identify parameters and opportunities remained superficial, once they began to research their own curricular situations they seemed to understand what I was talking about. Vicki and Sue, for example, were on reading and early childhood curriculum committees for their schools, and began to analyze critically the ways in which allowing them a choice about which textbook series to buy did not respond to their real curricular concerns or to their students’ interests or needs. Araceli studied faculty and student opinions about the new scheduling system that had been imposed on the school by the principal two years before with little or no discussion, and found that although its extended periods were supposed to promote innovative instruction, in fact only the vocational and physical education teachers were taking advantage of the lengthened instructional periods; most academic teachers continued to lecture, and then give students an extended homework period. She concluded that a lack of sensitivity toward the knowledge and dispositions of the entire faculty early on resulted in their alienation and resistance. But the epiphanal moment of the course came for me when Beth, during a discussion of the case study for the course, Shirley Brice Heath’s *Ways with Words* (1983), covered her face with her hands and said, ‘There’s my problem – I’m one of the townspeople, but I’m living in Roadville.’ In her ethnography of three communities in the US south in the 1970s, Heath had captured communication practices of three distinct groups – a working-class White

community, Roadville, in which literal meaning was prized and interpretation of texts was discouraged; a working-class African-American community, Trackton, in which performative story telling and language play were prized; and the townspeople who prized the elaborated 'professional' discourse of the college-educated middle class. Beth said she had always known this before in an intuitive way, but Heath's contrast of the linguistic and cognitive dispositions of an urban middle-class with those of an Appalachian working-class community gave her the means to articulate her own cross-cultural situation.

Only a few students, however, tried to use models presented in readings for the course to construct curricular responses of their own. Diane had been working with teachers at her school to revise their kindergarten program to make it 'developmentally appropriate', but after reading some of the literature I supplied her on such early childhood practices, she began to see that the new curriculum they were developing did not reflect any fundamental change in their thinking about young children or their development. She began to wonder how she might interrupt this process and get the staff to rethink some of their assumptions. In Mary Ann's final paper, 'Accidental Curriculum', she described how she took a lesson from my 'parameters and opportunities' exercise, as well as from the chapters of the class text in developing a 'Navajo Performing Arts' class. She reported that although she had known all along that to make the class work she would have to rely on the initiative of the students to find their own dances and costumes and organize their practice, it took her some time to realize that she had a very Anglo view of her own authority as teacher and of theirs as learners, and as a consequence her students often balked or resisted her direction. Then she had a 'breakthrough':

I finally made an announcement and told them flat out that they were expected to be artists who would take responsibility for their own practice needs. This had the greatest long-term impact. It was as if they did not realize that this class was open to their input. They did not know that they had any negotiation power beyond the usual. They did not have to complain to have power.

She concluded that, in her setting, 'I have learned that subtlety is not the way to handle letting students know that they have responsibility in the building of the curriculum'. Gradually, the students' parents began to stop by for practices, and to demonstrate new songs and dances; their performance a few weeks later in a big show at the school was a rousing success.

But except for Mary Ann, no teacher in the class was willing to consider directly how social and cultural variables might play an important role in their students' negotiating process, even though nearly everyone found Shirley Brice Heath's analysis of communication practices in three

communities applicable to their own lives and cultural backgrounds. Linda, for example, was especially taken with Heath's work, and particularly with the final chapters in which Heath engaged the teachers with whom she worked in a series of observational studies of their students and their own practices that were similar in some ways to our own project in the two courses. In her final paper, she seemed to be struggling to reconcile a deficit view of her students with what she had read in Heath and Cazden and heard in class. In describing the 'parameters' of her work, she characterized her students in this way:

Many of these students have nothing more to read at home than the *TV Guide*. The reading and language skills modeled at home do not include the 'conventions of correctness' as defined in the reading and language arts competencies ... I am responsible for teaching ... A large percentage come from single parent homes or are being raised by their grandparents or other family members. Many of these students have parents and/or other close family members that are or have been incarcerated in one of the nearby correctional facilities. Some of these students show a definite dislike and lack of respect for any/all authority figures.

The next paragraph of her paper contained what I read as rather predictable and clichéd extensions of the deficit argument, that '[b]ecause some of the students do not feel safe at home, school has become a sort of haven for them', and that there was 'a percentage of these kids [who] also have a tremendous desire to learn and achieve' – and so, by implication, also a 'percentage' who did not. But then in the same paragraph she also noted:

In some ways, these parameters can create contradictions ... The difference in some of the socioeconomic levels and cultural identities ... of the students can lead to some interesting and meaningful discussions. Students tend to develop the ability to de-center and see issues from not only their own perspective, but also from the perspective of others. I have come to the belief that this is *because* of the mixture of the different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds.

In our final interview, she explained that after reading Heath and Cazden and participating in the two courses, 'I shut up a lot more and I listen a lot more. I really find myself shutting up, like, I'll watch kids and I'll see them do something ... just how they interact with each other ... I sort of stand back and shut up and watch them latch on [to a project] ...' As a result of 'shutting up' and 'listening more', she also found that she was 'preaching less', and that her students were taking more initiative:

'This is the way it *must be done*' – I don't do a lot of that anymore. It's because the kids will come up and say, 'Could I do this instead?' And I say

yes. I do a lot of yesses [now], instead of saying, 'No. What are the rules? Look at the board.' I don't do that as much anymore. (Laughs.) That's going to hurt me, though; portfolio assessment's coming up.

To illustrate the changes that had taken place in her teaching, she told the story of her students' involvement with a children's novel about an Anglo boy who was kidnapped by an Eastern Woodlands group of Indians in Pennsylvania in the 18th century and his struggle with and subsequent embrace of their culture and practices. To follow up the novel, she had planned to spend one or two days making objects – bone needles; models of the boy's and the Indians' homes; 'leather' made of brown paper that had been 'crumpled under water' – but the students had become so interested, had worked so diligently to make the objects just as they were described in the novel, and had begun to bring so many other objects from home, such as dream catchers (wall hangings of yarn and sticks), cornhusk dolls, and the like to include in their display, that she extended the project by more than a week. And yet to me she still seemed to resist explaining her success in cultural terms. As she concluded the story, I interrupted to ask, 'Do you think it might be the subject matter? Because it's about Indians?'

Linda: (shaking her head) No ...

Mark: Do you have Indian kids in your class?

Linda: Yeah, but only like two in each class ...

Mark: But there's Indian culture around ... so maybe it rubs off ...

Linda: Maybe, maybe ... a little bit. But I mean the book was *really, really neat*. I mean, so many specific things about games they play ... so, like, they're applying it to their life, and they were saying, you know, it's really hard to do this [to make a bone needle] ...

In contrast to the mixed ways that Linda made sense of the readings and discussions for the course, however, a number of other students resisted the whole idea of curriculum negotiation, both implicitly and explicitly. Jim and Tom both argued that the parameters of their programs were so tightly fixed that there was little opportunity to negotiate different roles for themselves or their students; curriculum, for them, remained finding ways to transmit content with more efficiency. Maria reported on her attempts as principal to initiate a K-12 math curriculum in her district. She was a staunch supporter of the need for community 'input' to the development process, and believed strongly in a formalized state model for obtaining such support, in which the entire process was rigidly specified from beginning to end. But she could not get community members to 'get with the program'

and provide input where and when mandated by the state model. To the end she refused to consider whether, as I suggested, it was the very programmatic, lock-step nature of the program itself that ensured its lack of participants. As the model of curriculum as ritual process I proposed to the class might predict, the more vested course participants were in the 'official' side of their curriculums as designers and administrators, the less inclined they seemed to be to look for opportunities for change in its rituals.

Problematizing relations between voice and action

How efficacious was the use of ethnographic practices by these teachers as it was realized in the context of these two graduate education courses in providing participants with some practical responses to their problems that were other than reproductive, in raising their awareness about the political and sociocultural contexts and agendas of schooling, and ultimately, in realizing the claim that ethnography provides a reflexive path to their voiced empowerment? Clearly, it depends on which of these questions, and from whose perspective, one asks.

On the question of increased practical knowledge, there is some significant evidence of success for a teacher research approach. Nearly all the teachers I interviewed about their participation in the courses, and particularly those in the spring class, described the act of keeping field notes and recording their observations as giving them some needed distance from what was happening in their rooms, and said they missed the openness and support that meeting and discussing their practice provided them. Moreover, none of the teachers that I interviewed reported the kinds of stress or constant conflict with students, parents, and community that they had had the previous year. Although it is difficult to make a clear connection between these improved circumstances and teacher research, several teachers also remarked that they were learning to relax, and that this ability was new and had something to do with being able to get some distance on their situation. Araceli, who frequently described herself as calm and collected on the outside and falling apart internally during her teaching, did make the connection between her own changed approach to teaching and the classes. She said that talking to other teachers and listening to me talk about my problems showed her that everybody had bad days when nothing went right, and she realized that it was normal when you were teaching to feel a little out of control at times. The courses, she said, had given her permission not to be perfect. With relaxation and self-acknowledgment, several teachers also reported that they were increasingly more inclined to let students negotiate the parameters of their work.

The success of the last two questions, however, about increased socio-cultural understanding and the empowering potential of 'finding one's voice', are more difficult to gauge. The reasons, I argue, are due largely to unacknowledged problems with the way that teachers' voices are constructed within the teacher education literature that not only informed my own work, but the work of most, if not all, advocates of ethnographic research by teachers.

The use of ethnographic practices within teacher research currently derives from two interrelated perspectives. One of these is grounded in a pedagogical model of teaching writing, the 'workshop approach', in which, as a way of developing their own personal voice and overcoming hesitancy and feelings of inadequacy, struggling writers are instructed to write whatever comes to mind fast and furiously and without regard for their audience. This perspective also attempts to reassure teachers (and educators who work with teachers) that they already are where they would like to be, if only they would 'reacquaint themselves', as Garth Boomer (1987: 5) suggests, 'with certain parts of their brains' and take 'repossession of the "secrets" of research with which they were born'. Research in this view is redefined by Boomer as 'deliberate learning', and by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990) as 'systematic and intentional inquiry' (p. 3), and its processes are similarly essentialized in a few easy steps, for example, state a problem; envision a solution; formulate a plan of action; implement it; and evaluate the results. Presumably, once teachers 'get into doing it' they will realize for themselves the complexity of the task of even formulating a coherent problem statement, much less looking for sociocultural causes or projecting a viable response.

A second, related perspective is made by advocates of teacher research who adopt critical pedagogical frames and who see teachers' reclamation of their professional voices as essential to the reclamation of their dignity as cultural workers (for example, see Noffke, 1997). The advocacy of teacher research from this perspective is based on the insight of Brazilian literacy educator Paulo Freire (1970) that those who name the world control it, whereas those who have the world named for them are likely to become the objects of discursive oppression. Rebuilding one's voice (via an interrogation of one's circumstances led by a committed pedagogue) and eventually producing contexts in which that voice will be heard hold the promise of regaining not only the tools of one's labor, but one's dignity as a subject. But more than that, using one's voice as a tool promises that one's emancipated mind/body will then produce contextualized forms of knowledge based in praxis, a condition of reflexivity among words/thoughts/deeds necessary for, in Kincheloe's (1991) terms, 'good work' – that is, work that reconstructs classroom life in more democratic ways.

To anthropologists, sociologists, and cultural critics interested in

ethnography as a form of writing and cultural practice, these promises and the rhetoric that warrants them must sound strikingly familiar. Like the field of social science as a whole, the recent focus on reflexive analysis of one's own practices within teacher education also comes in the wake of considerable criticism of more quantitatively oriented educational researchers' failure to make good on the promises of scientific rationalism to generate any lasting Grand Theories, or explanatory narratives, of society (Lyotard, 1984; Rosenau, 1992) and in particular of life in classrooms (Cherryholmes, 1988; Dressman, 2005; Lather, 1991). In contrast to – or, it sometimes seems, often in righteous reaction against – the failure of scientism to see through its often reproductive, dehumanizing consequences, the very localness of teacher research, combined with its emic, subject/object-healing arguments with regard to the production of action-oriented knowledge, have given it new theoretical viability. From a perspective grounded in the arguments made by cultural and ethnographic critics such as Clifford and Marcus (1986), Atkinson et al. (2003), or Saïd (1993), teachers' research could be construed as the ultimate ironic act of ethnographic reflexivity, in which an over-studied and over-generalized group of subjects individually 'talks back' to its objectifiers about what really goes on in classrooms, and in so doing frees itself from the hegemonic grasp of 'theory' and advances pedagogical and curricular, and also social, cultural, and political, aims.

An argument as grandly, deliciously ironic and as wonderfully cleansing of ethnographic guilt as this ought not to be dismissed or made light of. Yet I will also argue, and I believe the evidence presented here also suggests, that within the field of education at least, such irony and reflexivity does not come without its price for the teachers who remain 'insiders' long after their research is completed and their findings are written up. Nor does it come without a continuing moral and ethical responsibility for even the most socially committed, fair-minded, and altruistic educators and ethnographers who would 'empower' their teacher subjects to add their own 'voices' to the discourse of educational research and practice.

Consider how layered the politics of ethnographic research warranted by a rhetoric of voice are likely to be for teachers within teacher-research groups once they begin to use their voices not only as individual professionals but also as *public servants* – that is, as persons held accountable for their actions not only by themselves and a select group of peers, but also by employers, by colleagues outside their group, and by their communities. As a consequence, the risks that teachers who research and write to 'reclaim their voices' may be taking are risks that advocates of teacher research seldom acknowledge. Unlike the hypothetically insecure or the hypothetically oppressed writers of the teacher-research literature, teachers who research and write not only empower themselves by taking ownership of their practice, they are also likely to be *given* full ownership

of their words as well, and are likely to be held fully responsible for whatever they say and do. If to utter an observation about oneself or others or about one's practice is also to contemplate taking action, then speech acts that challenge accepted practices and beliefs, phrased however guardedly or tentatively within a teacher's research support group, may still constitute an implicit threat to the larger community within which they are uttered. This is because, as that literature also promises, even if they are not openly spoken or heard within this larger community, their effect on actions and attitudes and on the status quo will be felt in time. In tense political settings, even the most trusted and most dedicated public servant might be perceived to be a public threat if she or he were to begin to voice observations or ask questions too directly. With few exceptions, then, most teachers must be implicitly if not explicitly aware of their public position and accountability within their schools and communities, and of the impact that their words and the actions they realize or contemplate might have on themselves, their students, and their communities.

This awareness may also have a considerable impact on the ways that teacher researcher/writers exercise their voices and so use writing to act, or even to contemplate acting, differently. In a manner, then, that I did not foresee and that my reading of the teacher-as-researcher literature did not warn me of, the process by which the teachers with whom I worked 'found their voices' turned out to be a highly political one, in which the voices of teachers that were constructed in their field notes, their final reports, and in class discussions were the product of much evasion, rejection, and other forms of resistance on their part to my attempts to radically interrupt their discourses of deficiency about their students' lives, and about their own sense of professionalism. It is within the context of the full political and professional implications of not merely finding one's voice but using it, I will argue, that these teachers' apparent resistance to sociocultural and political explanations within their own writing and analysis of their experiences needs to be understood.

The 'good sense' of teachers' resistance

As Andrew Gitlin and Frank Margonis (1995) recount in their review of the literature on educational reform movements – of which teacher research, with its own agenda of producing teacher change, can certainly be considered a part – and those movements' continuing failure to have any lasting, widespread impact on schooling, the failure of reform is largely placed on the shoulders of recalcitrant classroom teachers who are repeatedly depicted as myopic, conservative individualists who are either hopelessly unable or unwilling – depending on the bent of a particular

author – to get with ‘the big picture’ as it is painted by administrators and university faculty.

But Gitlin and Margonis have a radically different interpretation of such resistance. Citing the work of critical ethnographers who have studied students’ resistance to schooling, and in particular the work of Paul Willis (1977), they argue that resistance is often a very rational and, in fact, a very creative, strategic response on the part of politically disempowered actors who lack the resources and the political strength to stand up for themselves in more straightforward ways. They also argue that these acts of resistance are often perpetrated by their actors without a full awareness of their behavior’s political implications, and so their motives appear ‘ambiguous’ – a condition that protects their perpetrators from charges of insubordination. In this scenario, it is those in control who are operating in myopic denial of the unseen costs and additional burdens on subordinate teachers that the ‘big picture’ of reform they are advocating would produce. In the illustrative case study of site-based management that supports their argument, they demonstrate that teachers’ resistance to this plan made ‘good sense’, because rather than increasing teachers’ decision-making power and maximizing flexibility in their work schedules as administrators and university advocates promised, the site-based management plan proposed actually resulted in increased centralization of major decisions about curriculum and decreased teacher autonomy. Moreover, the amount of time that teachers spent in contact with students stayed the same, while the amount of time spent in meetings and group planning with no additional compensation (except for administrator-picked career-ladder teachers) increased. In other words, Gitlin and Margonis argue that teachers’ resistance to site-based management was based on a reading of its hidden agenda – to squeeze more work out of them and reduce their professional control with no compensation – that was essentially accurate, and reflected ‘good sense’ on their part.

However, as Gitlin and Margonis also point out, the sensibility of such resistance is often obscured by the forms that it takes. In their study, when asked to ‘list their concerns’ about their work, teachers tended to concentrate on things like balky copying machines or too many meetings, and as reforms proceeded despite these complaints, they made bitter reference to career-ladder teachers and others who sided with reformists as the ‘co-operative learning police’. On the surface, such remarks can be taken as evidence of laziness, incompetence, or worse; but the fact that the teachers did, in fact, have legitimate concerns led Gitlin and Margonis to observe, as did Willis (1977), that resistant actors ‘may not know what they say, but they mean what they do’ (Willis, cited in Gitlin and Margonis, 1995: 392). It is not that teachers lack insight into their own predicaments, they suggest, but that they lack the discursive resources that would provide them with

the awareness and the means to articulate and argue their insights from authoritative positions. Given teachers' lack, not only of discursive resources, but of real authority beyond their own classrooms, popular culture theorists like John Fiske (1989) would probably add that teachers' seemingly whiny, sarcastic objections to reform make brilliant tactical sense because they are just irritating enough to stymie the elders without providing the excuse authorities would need in the court of public opinion to retaliate in forceful, decisive ways that might cost jobs and careers.

What, then, of the resistance I encountered from teachers in two teacher-research courses to politicizing issues of curriculum and instruction along the lines of race, class, and gender? Is there any good sense embodied in such resistance, or do I just shake my head in dismay and mutter words of comfort about institutional racism, hegemony, and the power of praxis – little ejaculations of political correctness meant to restore my composure and soothe my frustration with these teachers?

If there is any 'good sense' embodied in these teachers' recurrent use of a discourse as repugnant and reproductive as deficiency, to find it I will have to identify: 1) what possible insights such a discourse might be used to convey – that is, what teachers might be meaning rather than saying – and 2) why teachers might choose to speak in such an indirect way – that is, to weigh the merits of deficiency as a discourse against the cost of finding and using other terms. With regard to the first point, just as Gitlin and Margonis argue that complaints about copying machines are coded concerns about time and other resources, teachers' stories of deficiencies in their students' backgrounds and behaviors can be read as coded expressions of concerns about their own inadequacies in dealing with children whose life experiences, they see very clearly, do have an impact on their success with the standard curriculum. The fact that each teacher had paid \$300 to take each course, and that during the first meeting each essentially admitted that she or he was having serious difficulties – that *the teacher* was having problems, not the students – is tacit but clear evidence of a felt but unarticulated sense of inadequacy, that is, of a deficiency that they knew they had to meet, were they to fulfill the broad mandate that society and public discourse places on schools and teaching as the vehicles of social advancement. Although the teachers in this study, particularly in the first course, clearly were 'at the ends of their ropes', it was also just as clear that they hadn't given up or stopped looking for explanations of their problems, and that they never wanted anything less than the brightest outcomes for the students in their care. I take it as confirming evidence of their sincere interest in 'getting to the bottom' of their problems that when given the option to research a comparatively safe aspect of their teaching like the implementation of a new method of instruction, nearly every teacher instead chose to study the far more problematic nature of interaction in her or his classroom.

When we consider further that nearly all debate within education, and particularly debates over funding, is driven by the metaphors of deficiency – that is, of who lacks what and of what must be compensated for – rather than by the metaphors of, say, opportunity – that is, of what might be or even of what should be – then it is understandable why teachers would find ‘deficiency’ rhetorically more familiar to them than discourses based on ‘difference’ and the discussion of opportunities, rather than the needs, that such a discourse creates. And so it makes eminently good sense that teachers would find the language of deficiency more ‘natural’ and ‘obvious’ to them than the alternatives I tried to supply. This clear need for teachers to construct their voices within accepted parameters of public discourses of education also underscores one of the fundamental paradoxes of teaching as a profession, namely, that although teachers spend the vast majority of their time ‘on their own’ and in isolation from other educators, in fact they are seldom alone. The effect of this paradox was captured by Christine, for example, whose final paper described how ‘free’ she was in her ‘portable on an island’ – and how she enjoyed escaping the constant observation of peers because she taught in a classroom that was detached from the main building. In contrast, Beth reported the uproar in her community when a parent came by her classroom one day and saw some kids ‘playing with sticks on the floor’ – that is, manipulating sticks of different lengths and colors to explore mathematical relationships – instead of at their desks ‘doing their work’. Still other teachers reported snide comments from colleagues about their participation in our class; when Araceli, for example, spoke up one day at a faculty meeting, her comment was met with a sneer by another teacher, who asked, ‘So, did you learn that in your class?!’

Given these political circumstances, we might then rhetorically ask what teachers would risk to examine issues of curriculum and instruction in their classrooms, their schools, and their communities from sociocultural frames of analysis, particularly in school districts marked by their political conservatism, their large multicultural ‘underclass’ and the high visibility that comes with being a teacher in a small town. What might such an analysis, even when conducted within the relative safety of a graduate course, ask teachers to reveal about their classrooms, about their schools, and about their communities? What would it cost to change their own behavior based on such an analysis – and how would such changes, which would surely be monitored, be read by the powers that be and by their peers, within communities where difference is immediately suspect of deviance? In response, we need only consider the backlash within the US against the teacher- (and not administrator-) driven Whole Language movement, whose rhetoric about the teaching of early literacy is based not on deficiency but on tropes of development and emergence (Dressman, 1995; Dressman et al., 1998), and ask if something as comparatively innocent as literacy

acquisition can draw such fire, what might be the result of teaching which is openly cognizant of race, class, and gender? In answering these questions it becomes apparent why teachers who operate within discursive regimes of truth as potentially wrathful as those dominating education today in the US would want to take cover while they were still making sense of their experience, by finding ways to mean what they say without necessarily saying what they mean.

It is within the paradox of this analytical perspective, then, that I believe that the teachers' response to my soapbox sermonizing about the state of teaching as a profession, that is, that they needed me to speak for them, needs to be interpreted. On one hand it is very tempting, as a researcher concerned with issues of social justice, to read such statements as expressing helplessness in the face of higher authority, combined with a sense of despair; for in doing so a rhetorical path is also cleared for the provision and legitimation of a practical role for university researchers as the ever-principled champions of an oppressed group. But on the other hand, and given the argument I have made above, I wonder if it might not be more accurate to read that teacher's 'plea' as a repudiation of my naiveté about school politics in the state, or even as a warning to me to mind my own business and stop preaching. From this interpretation, these teachers are not 'helpless' and 'voiceless' at all, but are telling me they have made an active decision at this point not to speak, and that I should mind my own business. I lean toward this interpretation because I never really heard or saw these teachers act like victims during the two semesters I spent with them. They do think the system is sometimes unfair and even corrupt; but they also see themselves as players in it who are able to act for themselves when they choose to do so.

Extending this line of reasoning, if we continue to problematize relations between voice and action – between what people say and what they do – in ways that do not see one as merely the reflex or the engine of the other, and as Gitlin and Margonis suggest in their distinction between saying what we mean and meaning what we say, then eventually, given enough time and talk – more, certainly, than can be obtained in two courses over two semesters – we might also begin to see possible ways that these teachers' actions might run in advance of their capacity or willingness to articulate openly changes in their attitudes. From this perspective, then, I wonder whether Mary Ann's rather radical innovations in developing a performing arts curriculum, or Araceli's new outspokenness in faculty meetings and her 'rodeo talk' with two Anglo boys, or Linda's mixed analysis of her own teaching and the opportunities created by the 'deficits' in her students' lives, or even Susan's attentiveness to multicultural issues in her teaching even as she blasted Lilia Bartolomé for her discussion of *cariño*, cannot be read as first indications of changes that, if given time and opportunity to develop,

would lead to more lasting, radical changes in the ways that these teachers choose not to voice, perhaps, but to *enact* their concern for students, themselves, and the practice of schooling in their lives.

References

- Atkinson, P., A. Coffey and S. Delamont (2003) *Key Themes in Qualitative Research: Continuities and Change*. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press.
- Bartolomé, L. (1994) 'Beyond the Methods Fetish: Toward a Humanizing Pedagogy', *Harvard Educational Review* 64: 173–94.
- Boomer, G. (1987) 'Addressing the Problem of Elsewhereness', in D. Goswami and P.R. Stillman (eds) *Reclaiming the Classroom: Teacher Research as an Agency for Change*, pp. 4–13. Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton-Cook.
- Cazden, C. (1988) *Classroom Discourse: The Language of Teaching and Learning*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Cherryholmes, C. (1988) *Power and Criticism*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Clifford, J. and G.E. Marcus (1986) *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Cochran-Smith, M. and S.L. Lytle (1990) 'Research on Teaching and Teacher Research: The Issues that Divide', *Educational Researcher* 19(2): 2–11.
- Denzin, N. (2003) *Performance Ethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dressman, M. (1995) 'Under the Umbrella: Resisting the Reign of Rationalized Educational Reform', *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 27: 231–44.
- Dressman, M. (2005) *Other People's Theories in Qualitative Literacy Research*. Montreal, Quebec: American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting.
- Dressman, M., L. McCarty and J. Benson (1998) '<Whole Language> as Signifier: Considering the Semantic Field of School Literacy', *Journal of Literacy Research* 30: 9–52.
- Fiske, J. (1989) *Understanding Popular Culture*. Winchester, MA: Unwin Hyman.
- Foley, D. (1995) *The Heartland Chronicles*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Freire, P. (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Gitlin, A. and F. Margonis (1995) 'The Political Aspect of Reform: Teacher Resistance as Good Sense', *American Journal of Education* 103: 377–405.
- Gramsci, A. (1991) *Selections from Cultural Writings*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Heath, S.B. (1983) *Ways with Words*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kamberelis, G. and G. Dimitriadis (2005) *On Qualitative Inquiry: Approaches to Language and Literacy Research*. New York: Teachers College Press.

- Kincheloe, J. (1991) *Teachers as Researchers: Qualitative Inquiry as a Path to Empowerment*. London: Falmer Press.
- Lather, P. (1991) *Getting Smart: Feminist Research and Pedagogy within the Postmodern*. New York: Routledge.
- Lyotard, J. (1984) *The Postmodern Condition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- McCarthy, S.J. (1998) 'Constructing Multiple Subjectivities in Classroom Literacy Contexts', *Research in the Teaching of English* 32: 126–60.
- McLaren, P. (1993) *Schooling as a Ritual Performance*, 2nd edn. New York: Routledge.
- Noffke, S. (1997) 'Professional, Personal, and Political Dimensions of Action Research', *Review of Research in Education* 22: 305–43.
- Rosenau, M. (1992) *Post-modernism and the Social Sciences*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Saïd, E. (1993) *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Random House
- Turner, V. (1969) *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Willis, P. (1977) *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*. Farnborough: Saxon House.

■ **MARK DRESSMAN** is Associate Professor of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign where he teaches courses in secondary English education and literacy theory. His current research focuses on the uses of social theory in qualitative literacy research. *Address:* University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 311 Education MC 708, 1310 S. Sixth Street, Champaign, IL 61820, USA. [email: mdressma@uiuc.edu] ■