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ABSTRACT

Based on a session at a recent National Reading Conference meeting in which researchers shared the dilemmas they faced and the strategies they developed for coping with the complexity of new forms of research, this paper examines some of the ethical dimensions of collaborative research. Following a discussion of the trade-offs in collaborative research, the report examines some of the problems related to the topic, including those of identifying the specific roles of teachers and researchers, time constraints, and institutional and political constraints. The report concludes with a list of conditions for successful collaboration. (Author/RS)

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Abstract

This report examines some of the ethical dimensions of teacher-researcher collaboration. Following a discussion of the trade-offs in collaborative research, the report examines some of the problems related to the topic, including those of identifying the specific roles of teachers and researchers, time constraints, and institutional and political constraints. The report concludes with a list of conditions for successful collaboration.

Building Teacher-Researcher Collaboration: Dilemmas and Strategies

There was a time when researchers might have made the case for limiting a classroom study to the perspective of the objective observer, that mythical creature who steps briefly into the flux of classroom life, extracts data, places it into preexisting categories, and derives answers to externally constructed questions. That observer would move from classroom to classroom, accumulating evidence, critiquing practice, and invariably ignoring the perspectives of those living within the classrooms. The conclusions would be reported without regard to the knowledge, concerns, or feelings of the subjects of the study--the teachers and students.

Such studies continue today. Increasingly, however, researchers (and teachers, too) are calling for research that draws on all available resources, especially the perspective of those who experience classroom life directly and may be affected by the results of the research. Moreover, researchers recognize the ethical dimensions of entering into the lives of others, analyzing their actions, and making value judgments about their practices.

Calls for respecting the rights and views of others are not new. But they have assumed a central role in recent dialogues across diverse fields. Anthropologists, for example, have questioned the very foundations of their discipline, specifically the assumption that it is both epistemologically sound and ethically proper to objectify and speak for others. This has led to self-critiques of the ethnographic practice (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Rosaldo, 1987) and to an increasing focus on the study of practices closer to home, such as in the work on the social construction of technological systems (Bijker, Hughes, & Pinch, 1987; Bijker & Law, 1992; MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1985). Researchers in other fields, such as history, sociology, political science, and economics have confronted analogous subject/object problems. This trend is evident even in business and industry, where there has been a growing recognition of the need to incorporate the perspectives of workers into decision making, as in quality circles.

In educational research, there is a similar shift underway. Grounded in the work done by anthropologists, educational researchers have begun to focus on the ethical and epistemological implications of the way research has been conducted traditionally. Numerous sessions at recent meetings of the National Reading Conference (NRC) have specifically addressed the need to consider the roles of teachers and researchers in collaborative research. Other sessions have been examples of new relations among the participants in research. Some sessions have also addressed the ethics of collaborative research.

Educational research, however, has not yet developed a code of ethics in collaborative relationships, and we are not aware of any professional organization that has. Yet in relationships where there is an unequal power base, considering the ethics of the issues seems of paramount importance. Katz (1984) suggested that in classroom relationships between parents and teachers, "the more powerless the client vis-á-vis the practitioner, the more important the practitioner's ethics become" (p. 48). This would seem to hold true of the relationship between school-based researchers and university-based researchers[1] as well.

[1]All of the people who participate in the collaborations described in this report are both teachers and researchers. For some, the primary institutional affiliation is a K-12 school; for others, it is a college or university. We refer to the former as "school-based researcher" and to the latter as "university-based researcher," because we do not wish to presuppose the familiar roles during a time of reflection on what these roles should be.

Other ethical concerns in collaborations relate to what is made public out of the data, by whom, and representing what perspective. The traditional paradigm has the university-based researcher deciding what will be written, how it will be written, and actually completing the writing. There is currently a wide variety of practice from having the university-based researcher write, with the school-based researcher's awareness of what is being written (Clay, 1989); to each of the researchers writing her or his own section a paper (Berkey, Curtis, Minnick, Zietlow, Campbell, & Kirschner, 1990); to having writing made public only when the school-based researcher approves (electronic mail discussion on xclass, December 12, 1992).

Clift, Holder, Veal, Johnson, and Holland (1991) describe additional ethical issues that emerged in a school-based research project. These issues arose in the context of individual, group, and institutional relationships. Clift et al. point out that "when a group of people from one institution agrees to participate in collaborative action research with another group from a different institution, the result is a complex set of intersecting relationships that pose ethical problems for all concerned . . ." (p. 18).

This report, based on an alternative format session we organized for a recent NRC meeting (Reimer & Bruce, 1992), examines some of the ethical dimensions of collaborative research. In this session, researchers shared the dilemmas they have faced and the strategies they have developed for coping with the complexity of new forms of research.

Understanding the Trade-Offs in Collaborative Research

Ethical concerns and struggles are not things we normally seek. Why would we engage in activities that call forth the concerns? What benefits do we derive that make the struggles worthwhile? It is worth noting a few of the reasons that we and so many others value teacher-researcher collaboration in classroom research.

One key reason is that classrooms are dynamic, multi-layered, multi-voiced social systems in which phenomena develop in subtle ways over extended time periods. The task of addressing this complexity in a serious way seems to call inescapably for multiple perspectives to register diverse events as well as converging perspectives on the same events. It seems vital that, of all possible participants, the teacher who is in the classroom hour after hour, and whose own values and agendas significantly shape social interactions there be a part of any attempt to understand classroom practices and consequences.

A complementary set of reasons emerges from the fact that differen people bring to the classroom setting different sorts of expertise. A teacher who knows the students over extended periods of time, who understands the school setting, who knows something of the students' experiences with other teachers, who knows parents and community concerns and values, and who participates in the classroom and school culture in an integral way brings invaluable expertise to any study. At the same time, a researcher whose work demands familiarity with scholarly work on teaching and learning, who knows about research designs and publication practices, or who has the opportunity to observe many classrooms also brings special expertise. It seems foolish not to seek ways of sharing and using these rich and often different sorts of expertise.

Finally, there are strong personal reasons for teacher-researcher collaboration in classroom research. Successful collaborations usually result in growth for all the parties involved, because each has to work to understand the perspectives, values, and knowledge of the other. This growth can demand significant amounts of time and energy, but it is ultimately a source of pleasure as true friendships develop.

In spite of these and other reasons for doing collaborative research, many problems are likely to arise. It is often difficult to reach equity in terms of effort and rewards. For example, schools and universities do not value equally attendance at professional conferences. Janet Miller (1992) expressed what this

different valuing means in a recent article in which she described receiving the James Britton award from the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE): "I experienced this moment as poignant, for I was also accepting the award for the other five teacher-researchers who had contributed to the book [Miller, 1990], . . . but who could not leave their classrooms to travel to NCTE's Spring Conference" (p. 20). This is but one example of a large set of issues related to the fact that we operate out of different institutions, with different power bases, with different demands on our time, and with differential rewards.

The issue of fairness in representing what is learned through research is sometimes conceived as an opposition between fairness to truth, with its attendant consequences for a larger audience, and fairness to individual teachers. Many other questions arise in light of this issue: Are there research issues that should not be pursued because doing so might be hurtful to a teacher? Are there findings that ought not be reported? Whose version of the work should be shared with others? What forums are most appropriate for what kinds of knowledge sharing? Who formulates the questions for research and what happens if there are very different agendas?

Questions such as these may not have simple answers. Instead, they may constitute dilemmas in the sense identified by Cuban (1992): "Dilemmas are conflict-filled situations that require choices because competing highly-prized values cannot be fully realized" (p. 6). Dilemmas are not solvable by new procedures, but may be understood, negotiated, and ameliorated through reflection and dialogue among all those concerned.

A recognition of this was what prompted our decision to propose an alternative format session for the 1992 NRC annual meeting (Reimer & Bruce, 1992). If we value teacher-researcher collaboration but encounter dilemmas in this collaboration, we need to find ways of sharing strategies for coping with them. We were well aware that it is essential for such dialogues, in general, to include teachers as well as researchers. At the same time, we felt justified in organizing a session in which participants would most likely be researchers with a focus on the researcher's role. Ethical discussions sometimes devolve into paternalistic concerns about teachers--being fair to them, doing what's good for them, and so on. We believed that it was essential to work toward a reflective understanding of our needs as researchers as one part of the overall process of understanding collaborative research.

As it turned out, the participants in the session represented diverse experiences with collaborative research, and they raised many important issues that went well beyond the role of researcher. Their discussion represents an important contribution to the dialogue on ethical dimensions of collaborative research. We believe that it is important to share this discussion with a wider audience. In the next section, we present a formulation of the issues raised in the alternative format session. In the spirit of the session, we have tried to reflect the diversity we heard and to represent all of the major points made by participants. At the same time, we have incorporated our own issues and organized the discussion to make the ideas more accessible to a wider audience.

Sources of Problems in Collaborative Research

In the session, seven general topics emerged as problem areas. These concerns related to (a) definitions of collaborative research, (b) roles of teachers and researchers, (c) time constraints, (d) expectations of employers, (e) whose voice gets heard, (f) openness and trust, and (g) political and institutional constraints.

Definitions of Collaborative Research

One of the overarching concerns that arose in the discussion pertains to the definition of terms. What is a *collaboration*? What is *cooperation*? Collaboration is commonly used as a synonym for a

relationship that is equal, yet the very nature of our working together with one person from a university and another person from a school system precludes an "equal" relationship--if *equal* implies that we are similar. To the contrary, the reason we want to work together is that we are not similar, we want to work in a complementary way, each contributing the expertise we have. We want to work together because we each have different things to contribute. But those differences mean that our abilities, interests, and needs are not the same, and so the relationship is not an equal one on all levels.

Roles of Teachers and Researchers

Even in collaborations where there seems to be an honest valuing of each other's contributions to the research venture, we often have preconceived notions of roles, including what it means to be a school-based researcher or a university-based researcher. These can easily get in the way. Discussion of the roles members of a collaboration will assume clarifies the shape the relationship will take. Along with notions about roles are perceptions of expertise. In many cases, there is an underlying assumption that the university-based person has more expertise than the school-based person--even in areas in which the university-based researcher might well have little expertise. If this leads to the school-based researcher deferring to the university-based researcher, the collaboration collapses.

Time Constraints

All university-based and school-based researchers are constantly under the pressure of time. This pressure is the source of a number of problems. Building a research relationship does not look or feel like time spent "researching," but it is often a crucial element to working together over the long haul and in the intense and close quarters of a classroom. Time is needed to have discussions and conversations about what has occurred and might occur. Time is needed to develop a common language and shared meanings. Time is needed to think about what is emerging out of the research that might be of significance to others. The nature of research work in classrooms also has the time constraint of school years ending and students moving on to another grade and another class.

Expectations of Employers

A fourth concern involves the product at the end of the research project. University-based researchers are expected to write, present at conferences, and publish. These are not activities that are expected of school-based researchers. In fact, professional paper/article/report writing is often not valued as a good use of time by the school system, and support for travel to conferences is slim or nonexistent. What is required of one member of the collaboration is discouraged by the employer of the other. If an article or presentation is not a desirable result of a project, it is important to determine what will be a useful product for the school-based researcher.

Whose Voice Gets Heard

School-based researchers receive significantly fewer rewards for consistently pursuing research in their classrooms. Because of this, the university-based researcher often initiates the contact or instigates the research project. Many university-based researchers want to have school-based research collaborators' opinions, perspectives, and voice equally present in the research development, implementation, and writing. This becomes complex if the university-based researcher has a clearer agenda, focus of study, or list of questions as a result of his or her respective job description.

Writing becomes a concern here as well. Depending on who writes the research and how the writing is done, the meaning of the research shifts. Shared authorship may not represent the mutual interests of all the researchers involved. If it does not, how the multiple perspectives of the research might be

represented becomes important. If all of the researchers are not involved in the analysis and writing, the reader should be made aware of whose perspective is being read.

Openness and Trust

If school-based researchers do share in the question formulation and the direction of the study, there are likely to be a number of areas where interests conflict. Instead of recognizing the area of conflict and attempting to deal with it, the university-based researcher may try to manipulate the school-based researcher's questions or classroom to match what she or he wants to see. This can directly influence the openness with which both parties talk and the trust the researchers have in each other.

Political and Institutional Constraints

There are political and institutional constraints in both universities and school systems that can significantly influence a research project. For example, university-based researchers have questioned who can afford to take part in collaborative research ventures. University politics dictate that nontenure faculty work diligently to produce as much research as possible as quickly as possible. Collaboration, as discussed above, takes time. School-based researchers also face political implications. At times, these constraints can dominate the research relationship. How do we present work that is an example of changing practice but is simultaneously an example of institutional barriers to change?

Conditions for Successful Collaboration

Although the above problems are dilemmas that have no clear solutions, they are worth discussing in a research relationship, and they seem more manageable if negotiated rather than avoided. Not necessarily requirements for a successful collaboration, the following conditions have led to more satisfying and productive collaborative research relationships and products. Some of the following conditions are ones to be aware of in the early stages of a research collaboration, some of the conditions have to do with the researcher's stance during the project, and some of the conditions speak to what happens at the end of the project. The following list is not exhaustive, but each of the conditions is an example of something worth considering when entering a collaborative research relationship.

1. Recognize that relationships take time

Because the nature of collaborative research usually requires people to work together to an intense degree, successful collaborations seem most often to grow out of existing relationships. If it is a new research relationship for both collaborators, time needs to be invested in developing a relationship in which to work on the project together.

2. Recognize the role of disagreement

Disagreement is not necessarily a sign of a poor or dysfunctional relationship. If disagreements between the university-based researcher and the school-based researcher are seen as a context for negotiation rather than a negation of either person's opinions, they provide for enhanced research and can broaden the scope of the research. Disagreements can help focus and clarify many areas of the research project. They may also point out different agendas or ways the collaborators can complement each other or work in different areas informing each other's work.

3. Discuss all aspects of the research project from the beginning

It is helpful to discuss from the very outset of the collaboration what the relationship will be, what the roles in the relationship might be, and what final products might come out of the collaboration. It is also beneficial to take the time required to develop a common language so all parties in the relationship can communicate with equal fluency.

4. Strive to achieve parity in research relationships

Recognizing the complementary nature of and parity in relationships, rather than stressing absolute equality helps provide for successful collaborations. Research relationships are symbiotic ones in which each member is dependent on the other for the research to be successful. Basic respect for all involved, with everyone's ideas being considered and valued, is foundational.

5. Acknowledge the organic nature of research projects

Relationships and research projects are organic. They grow and change constantly as they are being carried out. Flexibility in adapting to changing situations is crucial.

6. Reach agreements about reporting the research

Even if one of the members of a collaboration will not be present at a conference or will not be listed as an author on a paper, he or she may want to be apprised of what is to be said or published. If this will not be the case in reporting the research to the public, that also must be clear at the outset.

Conclusion

While the listed conditions may define the context for success, it is important to remember that not all schools, universities, and collaborative relationships are situated in a context that would meet the conditions. We may often find ourselves working under conditions that are not ideal for successful collaborations, and we need to understand how to function within those constraints. To revel in the many facets of these relationships is, at times, a frustration, but the pay-off is great enough that those of us involved in collaborative relationships are willing to live with the tensions.

Collaborative relationships are new to many of us and, as such, are still areas where we are exploring "what works." In our attempt to be aware of some areas of the collaboration, we may find that we have neglected others. Whether it is the first or the twentieth collaborative research project we are entering, each new relationship requires that we take a fresh look at our assumptions and roles.

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