DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 365 950 CS 011 542

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TITLE Reflection, Resistance and Research among Preservice Teachers Studying Their Literacy Histories: Lessons for Literacy Teacher Education.
PUB DATE Dec 93
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Reading Conference (43rd, Charleston, SC, December 1-4, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; Elementary Education; Higher Education; *Literacy; Preservice Teacher Education; Reading Research; *Student Attitudes; *Student Characteristics; *Student Reaction; *Writing Assignments
IDENTIFIERS Preservice Teachers; Reflective Analysis

ABSTRACT

A study examined the impact of students' researching their own literacy histories upon their views of literacy and literacy learning but shifted to investigate sources of students resistance to the assignment. In the seven sections of a senior-level reading course, taught between 1988 and 1991, data were collected and analyzed to address the initial objectives. The 100 students who were enrolled in 4 subsequent sections of the course became the primary informants. Students were observed and interviewed as they worked both individually and with small groups. Histories (drafts and final versions) were also read and analyzed. Some students' views of their past literacy experiences, of literacy itself, and of research were transformed as they studied their own literacy histories. However, results indicated a strong theme of resistance on the part of many students as they worked in the assignment. Even after the assignment was redesigned to address issues of resistance, elements of resistance reappeared semester after semester. Some felt trapped in a game of guessing what the instructor wanted, others felt trapped by their inexperience as researchers. Signs of resistance were also not always apparent. For possibly one-third of the informants, there was no change in belief or perspective that was apparent. Findings suggest that writing literacy histories can be a useful pedagogical tool, but resistance from students should offer caution to teacher educators who see teacher research as potentially able to transform the profession's knowledge base. (RS)

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Reflection, Resistance and Research among Preservice Teachers Studying their Literacy Histories: Lessons for Literacy Teacher Education

Running head: Reflection, Resistance, and Research

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Background

Initial Purpose and Objectives

Since 1988, elementary teacher education students with an area of emphasis (*i.e.*, 24 hours of course work) in reading have investigated their individual histories as written language users and learners as an assignment in a senior-level reading course taught by the investigator. The original purpose of the study was to assess the pedagogical value of this assignment. The initial objectives of the study were to determine: 1) the impact of students' researching their own literacy histories upon their views of literacy and literacy learning, and 2) the impact of literacy histories on students' views of themselves as teachers and researchers. Following initial data gathering and analysis, the purpose and objectives changed somewhat, and this change will be discussed in a later section.

Rationale for the Literacy History

The rationale for the development and inclusion of the literacy history as a course requirement resulted first from the work of Harste, Woodward, & Burke (1984), who suggest that teachers should examine their own literacy histories in school (p. xiii) in order to avoid leaving untested the assumption that they were universally positive and beneficial for literacy learning. The work of Graham (1991) has since suggested that autobiography can be a useful vehicle for exploration of assumptions across curricular areas. Use of the literacy history as a pedagogical tool also came to be seen as consonant with a view, held by the investigator and others, that teachers can and should be prepared to transform the knowledge base of the profession (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993) through systematic, self-critical inquiry (Stenhouse, in Rudduck & Hopkins, 1985), which "stems from or generates questions and reflects teachers' desires to make sense of their experiences" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990, p. 3).

Informants and Context

Informant Characteristics

The 311 students who were enrolled in 11 sections of the course between the Spring semester of 1988 and Fall semester of 1992 were primarily seniors; almost all were women from 21-23 years of age, and all had completed 12 hours of reading coursework prior to enrolling. Most of them enrolled in a field practicum in reading within one or two semesters after this course, and in student teaching the semester thereafter.

Primary Informants

In the first 7 of these 11 sections, taught between 1988 and 1991, data were collected and analyzed to address the initial objectives and to further develop and refine the histcry assignment. Analysis of these data resulted in modification of the assignment, which reached its present form at the beginning of 1992, and in modification of the study's original objectives to address a theme which had appeared in the data. The 100 students who were enrolled in four sections of the course during either Spring, Summer, or Fall terms of 1992 became the primary informants for this study.

Data Collection and Analysis

Disclosure to Informants

Each class section of informants was advised, as the literacy history assignment was discussed on the first day of class, of the following: 1) that, with their permission, I would study them as they worked on this assignment as well as the histories themselves; 2) that my interest was in understanding both their experience as a written language user and learner and their experience with this assignment so that, in turn, I could better understand the assignment and its impact. I also informed them that I may quote them, but would not use names, and that I would share with them, at any time, all my data and my current interpretations of that data. Finally, I informed them that they could elect to withdraw from participation in the study at any time. No student declined to give permission, and none withdrew

from participation.

Data Sources and Contexts

Working in collaborative groups, which were formed on the basis of common choices of a course project other than the history, the students began researching their individual literacy experiences, reflected on what they had found, used their reflections and group discussions as a source of direction for further data-gathering, shared ideas and questions, wrote and shared draft reports of their inquiries that included implications for both K-12 teachers and teacher educators in literacy, and used input from group members to inform whatever final revisions they wished to make. Data sources included both the products of students' literacy history investigations (*i.e.*, their written histories), as well as observations and informal interviews of students during the course of their semester-long inquiries. Analysis of these data proceeded simultaneously with their collection.

Interviews

I observed/informally interviewed students as they worked both individually and with their groups on the history. Many interviews were student-initiated (questions); others involved instructor sitting in on group sessions; still others were instructor-initiated (How's your history coming along?). Notes from observations and interviews with students were analyzed, and categories of students' actions and responses were developed and refined *via* Glaser & Strauss' (1967) constant comparative method.

Histories

Histories (drafts and final versions) were also read and analyzed. Categories of three kinds were also developed from written histories: *event* categories dealt with the types of literacy events recalled and analyzed by students; *evaluation* categories dealt with the kinds of explicit and implicit evaluations and reevaluations made by students of their previous experience; and *focus* categories dealt with the emphases and/or omissions evident in the written histories.

Member Checks

It was not feasible to hold member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in an especially thorough or a systematic way. The final version of the histories was due on the last day of the course, and since many of the students enroll in either a field practicum or in student teaching in the semester following this course, they are seldom on campus and difficult to contact. However, all histories as well as other written assignments were available for students to pick up, and member checks were conducted with some 57 students as they dropped by to collect those materials at the close of the semester or during the subsequent semester. Peer debriefings were held with a number of colleagues in regard to category construction and refinement as well as the development and interpretation of the major theme of resistance to the literacy history task which emerged from initial data analysis and which was the ultimate focus of this study.

Identification and Development of the Theme of Resistance

Background

I began this study with an implicit assumption that, as the study progressed, proved to be badly in need of examination. My initial intention in creating the assignment was fairly modest. Prompted by a passage from the preface of *Language Stories and Literacy Lessons* which suggests that reflecting on one's history helps avoid romanticizing and then perpetuating a dysfunctional literacy curriculum, I hoped that when students examined their histories as written language users and learners, they would be more inclined to question the value of workbook exercises and more likely to value authentic experiences with reading and writing. I hoped that they would realize that they learned to read and write through engagement with reading and writing, and be less willing to credit instruction that focused on skill development to the exclusion of meaning-making. As someone with a long history of interest in teacher research, I also hoped that by studying their own experience, students would begin to see research in a different light - not as something

forbidding, irrelevant to their own lives, and beyond their abilities, but as something that is feasible, satisfying, and important to both their understanding and their practice in the classroom.

I had unknowingly assumed, though, that all this and much more would happen. Through this assignment, I tacitly believed, students would magically transform themselves into capable (and by now, avid) researchers who had completely liberated themselves from the idea that whatever their teachers may have paraded before them was solely responsible for making them literate, who had gained a new and deep understanding and appreciation for their own literacy resources and efforts, and who would take these insights and their newfound roles as researcher into classrooms where they would revolutionize practice. In short, in making an assignment that I consciously hoped would help students avoid romanticizing their past, I had unconsciously romanticized their future.

There were certainly some students - in fact, a goodly number of them - whose views of their past literacy experiences, of literacy itself, and of research really were transformed as they studied their histories. But such transformations were not easily accomplished, nor did all students experience them; in fact, some students simply confirmed existing beliefs even in the face of data that might be expected to strenuously challenge those beliefs. Those who did reevaluate their past included relatively few who did so in a particularly complete way - while their original interpretations of some experiences were critically reflected upon and subsequently revised, their interpretations of other experiences remained unchallenged.

But while I apparently expected to find an unmistakable theme of complete and painless transformation in these data, I was somewhat surprised to find a strong theme of resistance. In fact, I was more than a little reluctant to interpret things I was seeing, reading, and hearing in those terms, and it took a great deal of thought, peer debriefing, re-examination of data already gathered, and collection and analysis of new data (including

interviews and member checks with students which focused on this theme) for me to embrace that interpretation.

Early Indications of Resistance

Since the first semester of the assignment, in Spring 1988, I had seen the same consistently recurring patterns of behavior among students. I saw *uneasiness with the task* expressed through students' numerous and frequent *how* questions (how to begin, how to analyze data, how to organize the report, etc.); through their many questions about what counts as important experience; through frequent expressions of being intimidated by the thought of having data to analyze, and of actually analyzing that data; and through statements from more than two-thirds of the students that they were overwhelmed by the data they had collected ("What do we *do* with all this stuff?" they often asked) and doubted their ability to "get this all analyzed and written in a way that makes sense", as one put it. I also saw students expressing concern about a *lack of data*; more than a third of them indicated that there was nothing important or notable in their history and that their past literacy experience was, in the words of one informant, "all just routine stuff". Another third of the students expressed a related concern about *lack of access to data*, saying that they couldn't remember anything (or anything they thought would count as being important) about their past, and/or that no one else of their acquaintance could either; that artifacts of their literacy were unavailable, or had been discarded, destroyed, or never kept; that people they needed to interview were unavailable; or some combination of these. I had also seen statements in the written histories, beginning with the first set, that reflected the same recurring patterns. Such statements were often apparently included as an attempted disclaimer to the instructor that the author of the history had been forced to work without assurance that they were proceeding correctly, without data reflecting genuinely important events, and/or without access to important data that would, if available, have enhanced the quality and worth of the investigation greatly.

These patterns are not unambiguously indicative of resistance, and for some time I interpreted them differently. After all, I reasoned, this is a new experience for students - they're being asked not just to remember and document their own experience, but to study it and ask critical questions about it. They're also not accustomed to assignments that leave so many decisions in their hands - decisions about the particulars of how to conduct the research, about what data are relevant and important, about what those data mean, and about how to organize the report of their work, and even about the length of that report. Because so much of this is new and unusual, they're just uncertain and apprehensive; besides, many of them probably *do* have problems of scarce data or with having access to data.

And so I resolved to address these things with students. In revising the assignment and talking about it with students, I would emphasize my confidence in their ability to do credible and legitimate research on their literacy experience, and give them more help in thinking through the process and in conducting the investigation. I would help them see that it is still possible to study one's past productively when either the data or the access to it is limited, or even when both are, and I would be sure to let them know that they would not be penalized for making the best of a limited-data situation.

I did all of these things, and the same patterns continued to appear in the interview data and the histories themselves, semester after semester. I tried harder and in different ways to address these matters; it didn't change a thing. It was after teaching seven sections of the course across seven semesters that I first began to entertain the idea that what was involved here was something not entirely explainable by my own shortcomings as an instructor or by any deficits in ability or experience among the students.

Refocusing the Study as an Investigation of Resistance

A colleague first suggested the possibility of these patterns being part of a larger pattern of resistance to the task among students, and by the

Spring semester of 1992 I decided to investigate that possibility through class observations, interviews with students, and the member checks which occurred after the histories were completed. The investigative procedures I had been using did not change, but the questions I asked (and more importantly, the questions I was entertaining as I observed and listened and read histories) did. I also began to investigate and confirm suspected links across categories arising from student data and those from the histories themselves: the students who expressed uneasiness with the task, through questions in class and in informal conversations and interviews, were often the ones whose histories not only had the characteristics described earlier, but a couple of others as well. These histories tended to focus on their authors' earliest years to the near exclusion of attention to the later years, and included lengthy accounts of the utterance of their first words as well as their parents' recollections of their temperament as infants. Authors of these histories also tended to omit the implications of their experience for classroom practice. Subsequent member checks with 12 of these students tended to confirm the reality of resistance at work, as did member checks with 15 other students whose verbalized uneasiness could not be linked to patterns in their written histories. These students' comments tended to confirm that they, too, were at least initially resistant to the task and, if that resistance was overcome, it happened late in the process of constructing the history.

Sources of Resistance

The data collected in pursuit of the possibility of resistance suggests that students were resisting one or more things. Some felt trapped in a game of guessing what the instructor wants, and were resistant to the idea of risking a grade by making independent judgments about so many aspects of the history when they suspected that there were certain judgments they were expected to make about procedures and results which they were not being told. Some suspected that there were specific practical implications to be drawn,

and some felt unqualified, due to having no teaching experience, to offer suggestions for practice. Others felt trapped by their inexperience as researchers as well as their notions of what counts as research, and unable to do something that could legitimately be called *research* without far more explicit instructions and parameter-setting from their instructor. Still others were very uncomfortable with the idea that their remembered past, once examined, would look different in ways they were not prepared to entertain. For these students, it appeared that they had come to suspect the possibility that their views about literacy and literacy instruction were questionable, but that such questions would be too disquieting to consider. For at least two of the students, the past was very negative territory that was too painful to revisit. Several students' resistance involved more than one of these reasons.

Implicitness of Resistance

This data also suggests that signs of resistance were not always apparent. Six of the students from Fall 1992 that were interviewed indicated having the same thoughts and feelings as described above, although they did not express them in ways described above. These students talked about quietly procrastinating throughout the course of their work on the history, about conveniently forgetting to bring a complete draft on the day set aside for groups to read and respond to each other's drafts, about hoping that other students' questions and expressed concerns would lead to the instructor giving detailed, step-by-step directions for doing the assignment right, and even about hoping that others' questions and concerns would lead the instructor to cancel the assignment altogether. Four of these students, when asked if they would interpret their feelings and actions as resistance, indicated that they would; two were not sure, but none rejected that interpretation entirely.

Views of Research as Examining Beliefs and the Overcoming of Resistance

Some degree of resistance to the literacy history assignment was probably present among a majority of the students. For some, that resistance

gave way in the course of investigating their histories; for others, it did not. For some, the initial resistance was overcome partly by what proved to be enjoyable about the task: such things as remembering past events in the company of parents, former teachers, friends, and neighbors; revisiting artifacts such as favorite books, old pieces of writing, report cards, and self-made greeting cards; discovering the importance of events not taken to be important at the time, and reinterpreting experience in an interesting or even exciting way.

Many beliefs about how they had learned to read and about instructional practices and emphases of their former teachers were called into question as students revisited various past literacy events. Beliefs about the role of television, socioeconomic status, gender, books in the home, parental reading habits, widely-used instructional programs and practices, and an array of other influences on literacy were also explored within the informants' collaborative groups. These beliefs were usually challenged in the course of their investigations, and often abandoned or revised in light of students' reexaminations of personal literacy experience. Many of these beliefs had been long held, and many of the challenges that arose were therefore difficult for students to face. Many who did face such challenges, though, evidenced an increasing appreciation of the importance of examining one's beliefs, and growing willingness to do so, and a more critical stance toward ideas about literacy and literacy education in general.

Some of those who most strongly resisted the task initially had their concerns outweighed by the discovery of new ways to look at their experience and the interest and excitement those discoveries generated. They became, to paraphrase Rosenblatt, lost in the text of their own literacy experience and in the process of reflecting on that experience afresh. Most of the students, possibly as many as two-thirds of them, regardless of their initial inclinations toward resistance, at least began to show some willingness to examine long-held assumptions about literacy and literacy learning when

evidence from their own experience seemed to warrant it. Most began to entertain the idea that they could conduct real research, and that such studies were important to them as teachers. Many were apprehensive at first about whether they could really do research; none thought of themselves as researchers at the outset, and very few even considered themselves to be potential researchers. Most were also more than a little skeptical about the value of research to teachers. The process of working through the examination of some taken-for-granted notions about literacy and arriving at new or revised beliefs based on evidence from their own investigations was instrumental in changing these perspectives. Working through this process also appeared to enable students to critically examine teaching practices they had encountered in the past, and to exhibit some willingness and ability to make suggestions for practice on the basis of their own experience as written language users and learners. But this did not happen for all of them, and it did not happen easily for any of them.

Views of Research as Information-Gathering and the Non-examination of Beliefs

While most informants experienced changes in beliefs and perspectives in one or more of the ways described above during their literacy history experience, such changes did not occur for all of them. For a sizable number of informants, possibly as many as one-third, there was no change in belief or perspective that was apparent either to the individual informant, other members of the informant's group, and/or the researcher. Since these informants also did not show signs of resistance to the task, the minimal impact of the literacy history upon them may well be a reflection of their notions of the nature of research - notions which, for them, remained mostly intact throughout the project. For the most part, the data from interviews and observations of these informants, and from their written histories, indicate that they viewed research as simply the objective gathering and reporting of information about their literacy without any reflection, analysis, or interpretation. Written histories from some of these informants

contained accounts of events that would appear to challenge an existing belief of the informant in question and/or to support an alternate belief, yet there was no evidence, either in the written history or elsewhere, that the events had ever been related to beliefs or considered in light of them. Conclusions drawn in these written histories were sometimes inconsistent with at least some of the events reported, and recommendations for classroom practice typically mirrored those described in the informant's written history, even when the written description of those practices had a decidedly negative tone.

Implications for Literacy Teacher Education

This study has implications for literacy teacher educators, particularly those who are committed to helping preservice teachers become confident, able researchers who can examine their own beliefs and practices in the classrooms and communities in which they work.

The study suggests that the writing of literacy histories, as described herein, by teacher education students can be a useful pedagogical tool for encouraging reflection about literacy beliefs, for gaining experience and confidence in the conduct of research, and for developing an appreciation of the role of research in the profession and for the individual teacher. However, it also offers cautions to teacher educators who see teacher research as potentially able to transform the profession's knowledge base (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993) and who are therefore committed to preparing teachers to conduct such inquiries. For a number of informants in this study, research was a rather sterile enterprise of cataloguing and reporting unconnected, uninterpreted, and sometimes ultimately ignored facts about themselves as written language users. For others, it involved proof in an absolute sense; for these students, and others besides, research was something really beyond the powers of an undergraduate student, and these views of research were linked to signs of resistance to the research task. It seems reasonable to suppose that such notions of research are the artifacts of the sorts of research that students have been asked to do in many courses throughout their

schooling, or of discussions about research in college courses, and that such notions have become well-entrenched in students' minds across multiple research experiences.

It also suggests, then, that as teacher educators we have to get past our own naivete. A good deal of these students' resistance to the literacy history research they were asked to do stems from key features of the situation: this research was going to be graded, and they were largely on their own about the particulars of how to do it and how to report it, while feeling that research was something they could not actually do. Researchers do have to make thei. own decisions, and so it does make sense to ask novices to learn to do that, but we are very mistaken to think that those who see research this way can and will do so without serious doubts and fears that may well be manifested in resistance. Plans for preparing beginning teachers to embrace the role of researcher may therefore need to include ways to encourage at least some students to reconsider their notions of research itself, as well s opportunities to engage in research and to receive guidance in the selection and use of research procedures.

We must further accept that what we know from our own experience about the whole process of research is just as applicable to the novice as it is to us. There are things we don't really want to study because we don't want to entertain the possibility of finding out just how shaky some of our beliefs are. There are also things we don't know how to study, and we also know what it's like to have other, possibly more experienced, researchers judge our work by standards very different from our own. We have all been guilty, at one time or another, to some extent or other, of overlooking or ignoring data that were inconvenient or challenging; why, then, should we be surprised when novice researchers ignore their own evidence or refuse to let it challenge their assumptions?

If we want to help undergraduate teacher education students learn to take on the role of researcher with ability and confidence, it seems that we

need to make that role a much more pervasive feature of teacher education programs. We need to realize that for a number of reasons, a study of one's own literacy history is not the optimal initial research experience for everyone - if for no other reason than the fact that not everyone would choose it as their preferred first research topic. We need to consider seriously the idea of collaborating with students in investigations of their choosing that also reflect our own interests and research agendas, of building in research experiences from the beginning of the teacher education program through the student teaching experience, and of assigning student teachers to classrooms where a researching teacher stands ready to support and help them in their own investigations.

Examining one's beliefs and transforming the knowledge base of the profession is, after all, a difficult and complex business; if we want our students to do these things through their own classroom research, we must create teacher education programs that reflect and respond to the difficulty and complexity of those tasks.

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