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ABSTRACT

A teacher with a new Ph.D. recounts her experience in returning to her previous role as a full-time teacher as she attempts also to conduct a teacher research program. She recounts her previous unsatisfactory experience co-teaching on a part-time basis while doing graduate research and her realization of the need to be the real teacher to conduct such research. In her role as teacher of a combined kindergarten/first grade class, she identifies tensions between the explicit expectations of teachers held by universities and school districts and the implicit understanding parents have of teachers' responsibilities to their children. She found that the demands and expectations of being a full-time teacher impinged greatly on her ability to function as a researcher. Of particular importance were parental concerns when research activities drew time away from the classroom. Major barriers to teacher research are institutional constraints, time limitations, and parental expectations. In order to enable "real" teachers to engage in teacher research, she stresses the need for both the explicit and the implicit understanding of the job of teacher to be broadened to make room for this aspect of reflective professional practice. (ND)

"If you have a Ph.D., then why are you teaching kindergarten?": A Teacher Research Work in Progress

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Introduction

When I wrote the proposal for this AERA paper, I did not know what this paper would be about. I had proposed simply to tell session participants the story of my professional journey from graduate school back into kindergarten teaching, sharing the insights and experiences of the first seven months of a ten month teacher research project, and bringing unanswered questions, challenging issues, and troubling dilemmas for discussion with session participants.

When I wrote the proposal for this AERA paper, I was six weeks away from the start of the school year, six weeks away from the day when I became, somewhat magically, a "real" teacher once again. I made the choice to leave academia and return to full-time kindergarten teaching in order to answer more fully some of the questions that remained unanswered at the conclusion of my dissertation study. My recently-completed research experience had raised questions about professional identity and authenticity that I found provocative and deeply interesting: I realized that the only way I could answer these questions was to go back into the classroom as a full time teacher and engage in a program of teacher research.

When I wrote the proposal for this AERA paper, I knew I would have a story to tell. But I did not know that it would be a story of crisis, failure, anger, and disappointment. I learned nothing much about professional

identity and authenticity in this study. However, I did discover some interesting and problematic aspects of teacher research as a methodology.

What is teacher research anyway, and who can do it?

The main question that sent me back in to the elementary classroom was "What makes a person a 'real' teacher?" When I designed my dissertation, this question did not trouble me. Though I was working as a university researcher and had been out of the classroom for several years, I still thought of myself as a teacher first and foremost. I felt so confident about my professional identity as a classroom teacher that I had no second thoughts about conducting a study that would allow me to research my own elementary teaching practices (Goldstein 1995). I intended to enter into a collaborative relationship with a full-time teacher, much like those described by Ball and Rundquist (1993) and Wilson (1993), in order to investigate the role of love in early childhood education. I observed my partner's teaching and, for a period of time each morning, within the context of her classroom, I examined this particular aspect of my own experience as a teacher. I fully expected to step into this arrangement with ease, and never doubted my ability to engage in an authentic form of teacher research.

Observing Martha, my teacher-partner, and participating in the life of her classroom was fascinating and fruitful. And I was so eager to teach children again. But when it came time for me to be Martha's co-teacher, things just didn't go as I had expected. I made a startling discovery: I could not really co-teach with Martha. I could develop curriculum. I could plan lessons. I could make up class poetry charts, create story frames, type up final copies of students' writing. I could mix paint. I could develop homework assignments. I could lead meeting. I could work with students on

mathematics, writing, art, social studies, anything. I could teach the whole class. I could teach a small group. I could work one-on-one with a child. I could read stories and sing with the class. I could assess student work. And I did all of those things, and more besides. I felt very much at home in the classroom, very much a part of the class. The students even came to think of me as one of their teachers: in the beautiful farewell book created for me when my fieldwork ended, Roseanne, one of the children, wrote "You are one of my favret teachers".

Prior to my time in Martha's classroom I would have thought that doing all of those things were the heart of my profession. But I was doing all of those things, and yet I still didn't feel like a teacher. This was a big surprise, a frightening surprise, one that rattled the very core of my research design.

In a dialogue journal entry written as I was just beginning to co-teach in her classroom, Martha asked me how it felt to be back in the saddle again. I responded, expanding on her metaphor: "I feel like I finally found my saddle (that took a few days and a lot of looking) and dusted it off and oiled it up. And I am sitting in it and it feels pretty good. But the problem is that it's not my horse!" I struggled with issues of ownership and territorialism for most of my time in Martha's classroom. Qualitative researchers can expect to feel like "invaders of someone else's territory" (Glesne and Peshkin 1992, 55), but I felt that there was more to the problem than endemic research anxiety. The fact that the class was Martha's class, not my class made it difficult for me to feel like a "real" teacher. How could I do teacher research if I didn't feel like a teacher?

In our dialogue journal, Martha responded to my concerns with an open invitation to make myself at home, professionally speaking, in her classroom:

"... the bottom line is I don't feel ownership and I don't feel any sense of loss by sharing them [the children] with you. I feel like it is more like a gift to share you with them... (a gift for both you and them), and a gift to me because I value and respect your knowledge, understanding and values as a teacher and I want to become a better teacher for having shared this.... "

I replied:

"I guess I am just really territorial, and I can't understand people who aren't. But if you say that you're not troubled by ownership issues, then I'll have to believe you. I was very aware of not pushing too hard, being too overbearing. (This is also my attempt to keep my... exuberant side in check. You know that I can be a real steamroller when I'm not careful.) I guess that next time I'll just be more direct and not worry so much about boundaries. I'll just act like this is really my class (if that's okay with you!)."

Martha's response should have put the matter to rest:

"As for being territorial and trying not to push too hard-- I may be inscrutable, but I'm not completely passive. I wouldn't just let you run over me. I've co-planned with lots of people. I'm comfortable with it so what we need to do is make you comfortable with it."

Though we tried, I just couldn't get comfortable with it. Our study progressed, and I still didn't feel like a real teacher.

There are many intertwined reasons for this. First, as a guest in Room 4, I had to modify my teaching to fit into the culture of Martha's classroom. I found that I often had to check my immediate, gut-level teacherly reactions and respond to situations in a way that was consistent with Martha's style. So although I was actually teaching during my time in Martha's classroom, the

practices I engaged in weren't always natural or genuine representations of my soul as a teacher. This was also the case in our co-planning: I felt it was important to let Martha take the lead, since it was really her class. The structure of elementary schooling teaches elementary teachers to be soloists, accustomed to having total control, responsibility and ownership of the life of their classrooms (Lortie 1975). It was difficult for me to feel like a teacher without it.

My role as a researcher also led to a lack of continuity that affected my feeling of professional presence. Elementary teachers arrive by 7:30 in the morning and leave hours after the final bell signals the end of the school day. They are with their children all day, and (in California, where this study took place) they teach all subject areas, including art, music, and P.E. They tie shoes, open thermoses, apply band-aids, and wipe noses. Spending only part of the day in Martha's classroom may have relieved me of yard duty, but it also prevented me from attaining the level of deep commitment that I associate with the life of a teacher. Lilian Katz (1981) describes the scope of a teacher's functions as being fairly limited and concentrated in contrast to the scope of a mother's functions. In this situation, I was a teacher with an even more limited and concentrated scope of functions: my research design curtailed my professional responsibilities.

Further, being in an elementary classroom for only a fraction of the day is an alien notion, an irregularity in the fabric of classroom life. Martha's classroom experience, like that of the finest elementary classrooms, is very organic. Each day has a holistic rhythm, an ebbing and flowing all its own. Each day exists as an integrated whole. There are few distinctions between content areas or disciplines, no bells ringing at 45 minute intervals to mark the passage of time, no parade of teachers arriving and departing to teach

different subjects. I arrived with the students at the start of the day and entered the rhythm of the room. And on most days I departed unnoticed. The children were generally so busy finishing up their work and enjoying free choice time that they did not hear me shutting down Martha's computer when I finished my daily journal writing, even though it blared the exuberant closing theme from the Looney Tunes cartoon series: *"Th-th-th-that's All Folks!"*, it seemed to announce loudly, punctuating my time in the classroom with an auditory exclamation point. But as I left Room 4 and walked toward my car, past the open doors and windows of busy, buzzing classrooms, I couldn't help feeling like I was playing hooky. Elementary teachers belong in their classrooms at 11:00 in the morning, not in the school parking lot.

Finally, I was constrained by the time limitation imposed by my research design. Being a teacher, a caring teacher, takes time. Relationships cannot be rushed. Being in Martha's classroom from October till Christmas break meant that I would be leaving just as I would be hitting my stride.

As Suzanne Wilson (1995, 20) points out, "attempting to do research through, on, or about one's teaching necessarily lands one in a complicated epistemological, practical and intellectual bog." I was in a bog, all right. It suddenly seemed impossible for me, a university-based researcher, to do "authentic" teacher research. Though I was able to achieve a level of comfort with my situation that allowed my to complete my study, I was left with a host of questions about professional authenticity. These questions compelled me to return to the district in which I had taught prior to receiving my Ph.D. and accept a position as a full-time teacher in a kindergarten-first grade combination class. Now I was positioned to find out exactly what being a "real" teacher was all about, I thought. I planned to journal daily, reflecting

on issues of professional identity and authenticity. I planned to be the kind of classroom teacher who writes books that bridge the theory-practice divide. When I wrote the proposal for this AERA paper, I had a lot of plans.

School daze

Fast forward to late September. Sitting in a faculty meeting, I open the composition book I'd marked JOURNAL 1. I look at the blank pages. I grab my pen and dash of the following words: "Journal 1..... Ha! I can hardly find time to plan my lessons, confer with parents, attend meetings, mount and hang student work, etc., etc., etc. Daily journalling is a luxury afforded only to university-based researchers, not teacher researchers. New plan: I will reflect regularly and jot notes whenever possible."

That is the only entry in my teaching journal.

Fast forward to October. After writing two days worth of sub plans and making extra child care arrangements for my young sons, I am sitting in a session at an educational research conference. There is talk of Bahktin, the panopticon, the postmodern condition. There is talk of colonialism, post-colonialism, imposition, feminist perspectives. There is lots of talk.

The discussion portion of the session begins, and the room is filled with more talk. Someone mentions the theory-practice dichotomy. And suddenly there is silence. This might be the first silence at the conference since the previous day when some poor soul made reference to Madeleine Grumet and pronounced her name Gru-MET, an understandable but telling error that was met with a sharp intake of collective breath and then a thunderous silence.

The woman beside me groans, shaking her head at the mention of the dichotomy between theory and practice. "Oh no," she mutters. "Not that old

warhorse..." Her voice trails off as a man across the room pipes up: "I think we'd all agree that the theory-practice dichotomy is an artificial construct that doesn't accurately reflect the lived experience of scholars, teachers, and children. We are all theoreticians and we are all practitioners. The theory-practice dichotomy just doesn't exist."

Later that day, I am sitting in another session. It advertised itself as a conversation about intersections between early childhood education and feminist thinking. In fact, the room is full of academics, talking about feminist issues in the training of early childhood educators. The session is really about intersections between higher education and feminist thinking: when participants speak of practice, they refer to their own practices as teachers in colleges and universities. When they speak of their students, they are speaking of adults, not of children. It becomes clear to me that, other than myself, there is no one present who is actively engaged in feminist-inspired teaching of young children. I leave the room disgusted and disappointed.

The conference closes with a presentation whose title suggests the presence of children. The presenter begins his talk with a focus on transitions, and the ways that we are helping our students with their transitions into college, or into their student teaching positions. Later he punctuates a remark about his postmodernist reading group with a humorous and deliberately absurd question about what it would be like to have to hold postmodern parent teacher conferences. "How can you talk about achievement when reality is a constantly shifting construct?", he asks. Everyone chuckles and grins.

Everyone but me, that is. I was too busy wondering how to answer that question. In less that two weeks, I was going to start my actual parent teacher conferences, talking to real parents about the five and six year olds in my

class. When the final presenter used the royal "we", referring to the challenges that all of us were facing as we helped our students with their transitions into college and/or into their student teaching placements, I suppose he did not realize that there were people in the audience whose students were dealing with the transition into kindergarten, not college. Was I the only "real" teacher present?

I wondered whether or not I belonged in that room. I thought back to the comment I heard earlier that day--"The theory-practice dichotomy just doesn't exist."-- and realized that only someone within academia could make such a remark. To this classroom teacher, the distance between theory and practice was obvious and clear. I do think that practicing classroom teachers are theory-builders and theory-users, however, it seems that there is some kind of qualitative difference between the theorizing that occurs in academe and the theorizing that occurs in classrooms.

But where did I fit? I felt like enough of a "real" teacher to bristle at the academeocentric thinking I witnessed at this conference. Yet I also felt like enough of an academic to be taking notes about the issues as they occurred, planning to incorporate them into an AERA paper. I wondered if it would be possible to exist with one foot in kindergarten and one in academia.

Fast forward to November. I have just announced my plans to take a two week leave of absence without pay in order to do some writing-- a book prospectus, a few journal articles, perhaps-- based on my dissertation and on my teacher research experience in the classroom thus far this year. I feel that I have many things to say about the theory-practice dichotomy, and about the ironic difficulty of pulling off teacher research while employed as a full-time teacher. I could not do this writing on top of my daily responsibilities in my

classroom-- the only way to make my teacher research public was to step out of my teaching shoes and into my academic ones.

My principal has approved the leave, and is eager to read the written work that emerges from my contemplation of my work at our school. The parent community, however, is up in arms. The principal receives a fax from one angry father:

> "I like Lisa very much and would like my child to have the continuous benefit of her wonderful teaching. This is very frustrating. I like Lisa a lot as a person and a teacher and would wish her nothing but support in her career, but right now I want her to be my child's teacher. Eight days off may not sound like a lot, but frankly, my first reaction is that [my child] is getting ripped off."

Which career is he wishing to support me in, I wondered. Though it feels obvious to me that researching my teaching and writing about my experience are an integral part of my life as a teacher, it is equally obvious to this father that I am abdicating my responsibility to my students in order to pursue outside interests. Another parent makes a suggestion to the principal: since it's clear that my first priority is not my students, maybe I should quit my teaching job to become a writer.

So I did. I returned from my leave and resigned, staying in my classroom till Christmas vacation.

The job called teacher

This story feels like a muddled, painful mess. I am angry and confused, disappointed in myself and in the parents of my students. And I am frustrated with the nature of a teacher's job, a job so small, with borders so darkly drawn, that I was unable to contain myself and my modest aspirations

within it. I have been out of the classroom for three months now, yet my blood pressure still rises when I read the words of that irate fax.

So what did I learn, in this truncated adventure in the world of teacher research, about what it means to be a "real" teacher? Mainly, I learned about the problematic nature of teaching as work. I learned that when my own children were sick I could not find a substitute teacher at 6:30 in the morning. I learned that there was no time for theorizing, writing, or reflection. I learned that attending to this intellectual side of teaching is perceived by some parents as treason, as irrelevant a part of professional life as belly dancing might be. I learned that the tensions between teachers and parents run deep, deeper than I had ever imagined. I learned that I had successfully held on to the image of myself as a teacher during my years in graduate school, but I had not held on to the mindset of a teacher. These constraints were there before, but they did not chafe as they did now.

My decision to return to classroom teaching after graduating from the Stanford University School of Education was met with a great deal of surprise. But quite a few of my fellow graduate students told me, in strict confidence, of course, that they were thinking of/ wishing they could/ wrestling with their advisor over making the choice to "go native" and forego academia for a return to K-12 teaching. This suggests that many educational researchers are still classroom teachers in their hearts. I, too, had held onto that image throughout graduate school, insisting strongly, even stridently at times, that I was a "real" teacher.

When I wrote the proposal for this AERA paper, I believed that I could happily live the life of a kindergarten teacher. Now I know that I can not. This feels like a very significant finding.

My findings of more general significance relate to what I perceive as a catch-22 inherent in the teacher research paradigm. In a teacher research program focused on broadly conceived themes or issues in elementary school classroom life, such as my dissertation work on the role and contribution of love to the education of young children, coming in from the outside as a university-based researcher leads to an inability to attain a deep and comprehensive understanding of the question under investigation[1]. In other words, if you are not the teacher of record, this type of teacher research project lacks some fundamental level of authenticity: you need to be a "real" teacher to do true teacher research on questions of this nature. However, if you are the teacher of record in an elementary school classroom, then there are institutional constraints -- problems inherent in the job called teacher as it exists at present-- that make teacher research very difficult, if not impossible. In order to enable "real" teachers to engage in teacher research, the job description for the job called teacher, in both its explicit form(as presented by universities and school districts) and its implicit form (as understood by parents), must be broadened and reshaped to make room for this important aspect of reflective professional practice.

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[1] Teacher research programs focused on a specific academic discipline, such as those done by Lampert (1990) or Ball (1993) in the field of mathematics, lend themselves fairly easily to the TR model and have been implemented with great success. The university-based researcher maintains primary responsibility for the subject matter taught in this scenario, and thus maintains a high level of authority and authenticity in the classroom.

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