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ABSTRACT

In an effort to create a polyphonic critical response to the roles of the researcher and the researched in classroom-based literacy research, this paper is formatted as a play--indented parts are direct quotes from others spoken by the speakers. It articulates questions of classroom literacy research as it considers the methods, goals, and purposes of such research. It notes that a survey of articles published in "Language Arts" from 1992 to 1997 indicates that the articles written by teachers, paraprofessionals, college professors, doctoral students, reading specialists, and researchers not affiliated with institutions of higher learning. The survey also shows: a variety of qualitative traditions were included in the articles reviewed; the relationships between the researcher and the researched varied considerably from article to article; and researchers and authors made decisions about who would be presented and re-presented and in what ways. The paper notes that qualitative literacy researchers are still inventing their research traditions. It then discusses researching "in," "for," and "with" and how these prepositions will be useful as researchers make sense of the positions of the researcher, the researched, and the extant literature. Contains 16 references and a figure illustrating the relationship between the researcher, that which is researched, and the extant knowledge base. (RS)

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Positioning and Classroom Literacy Research: A Polyvocal Re-presentational Critical Re-view

Paper presented at the annual conference of the National Reading Conference, Scottsdale, Arizona, 1997.

Running Head: Positioning and Classroom Literacy Research

In an effort to create a polyphonic critical response to the roles of the researcher and the researched in classroom-based literacy research, we have formatted this roundtable discussion as a play. Indented parts are spoken by the authors but are direct quotes from others.

> RISA: To engage in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin as teachers, scholars, and critical thinkers to cross boundaries, the barriers that may or may not be erected by race, gender, class, professional standing, and a host of other differences. (hooks, 1994, p. 130)

RICK: The purpose of this paper is to examine one specific and growing facet of literacy research, classroom literacy research. We will articulate some of our questions of classroom literacy research as we consider the methods, goals, and purposes of the work. We began our study by surveying Language Arts issues dating from January 1992 through 1997, narrowing the survey to classroom literacy research. We defined classroom literacy research as research bounded by place (the classroom), time (the school year), literacy events and processes (of the classroom), researchers and those being researched. At this time there are no specific numbers included in this discussion and no reference to specific articles. Our intention is to consider the nature of classroom literacy research rather than enumerate

the frequency of specific types of classroom literacy research.

> RISA: Hold still, we're going to do your portrait, so that you can begin looking like it right away. (Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," in Brueggemann, 1996, p. 17)

RISA: Our survey of articles indicated that the authors are teachers, paraprofessionals, college professors, doctoral students, reading specialists, and researchers not affiliated with institutions of higher learning. The authors make decisions about whose voices are included, whose are privileged, and whose may be silenced. We know this is strong talk; we believe that articles, treated as data, suggest that it is time to consider how we go about literacy research in classrooms.

> RICK: Ruth Behar looks at the way authors write: (1996) ...What is drawing me and, I believe, other scholars to write personally is a desire to abandon the alienating 'metalanguage' that closes, rather than opens, the doors of academe to all those who wish to enter...

> RICK: Moreover, unmasking relevant aspects of ourselves within our texts signals to our readers that neither we nor those we describe are 'typical or representative'

> individuals from a culture, but rather 'situated' individuals within a particular time, place, and social context..." (in Chiseri-Strater, 1996, p. 120).

RISA: Kathy Short (1993) suggests:

> Teacher educators who do research in their own classrooms offer the profession both a different perspective on the learning environments of preservice and inservice teachers and a way to transform those environments. (p. 155)

RICK: We found a variety of qualitative traditions (Creswell, 1998) included in the works we viewed. Instrumental case studies, intrinsic case studies, collective case studies, ethnography, teacher-research, grounded theory and biography were all represented.

RISA: Methods of data collection included: interviewing, writing and collecting socio-grams, taking fieldnotes, videotaping, engaging in classroom observations, audio taping, collecting computer generated data (typically built into a computer program used in a classroom), and collecting artifacts. Classroom observations consisted of note taking and systematically gathering items from student portfolios and other student collections. Teacher recollections were also a from of data.

RICK: It is the role of the 'outsider' that we began to wonder about. Thomas Newkirk suggests (1996) that even as we initiate our studies processes of seduction and betrayal are also initiated.

> The consent form tends to heighten the sense of importance of the study about to be undertaken, and, most significantly, by being filled with assurances it stresses our own benevolence. Then, in a moment of great irony, the subject signs a form indicating he or she was fully informed-even though the American Psychological Association grants researchers the right to deceive in the interests of science... (p. 5).

RISA: Our reading suggests that there may exist tensions between researchers, the researched (students, informants, participants), and extant knowledge bases.

RISA: Figure 1 serves as a vehicle for helping us think about the relationships between the researcher, researched, extant knowledge base, and the reader. Questions arose based upon what was not explicitly stated in some of the articles. We asked: What do we know about the relationships?

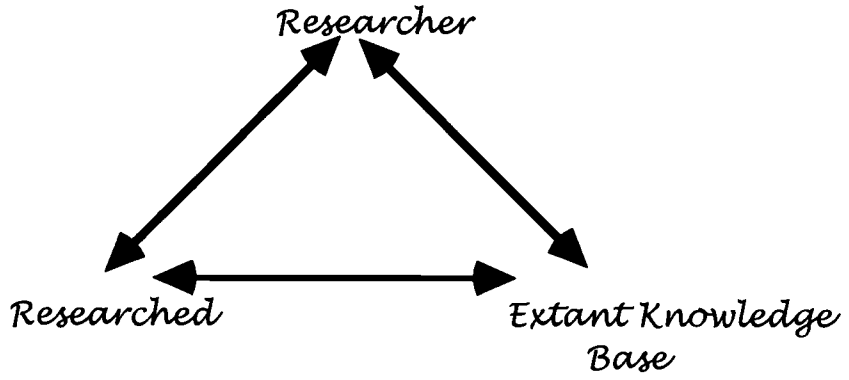

Figure 1. The relationship between the researcher, researcher, and extant knowledge base.

RISA: (Chiseri-Strater, 1996, p. 120) writes

> ...that researcher's positioning relates to (1) theory construction, (2) methodological disclosure, (3) development of the narrative voice, and (4) writing in a polyphonic text. (p. 120)

RICK: Some of the relationships in Figure 1 were explicitly stated, others were left to the reader's imagination. Every researcher that is involved in literacy research at a school setting is complicitous in what their work suggests, what it perpetuates by action at the setting, and what it perpetuates by inaction at the setting. The often opportunistic stance of *objective researcher* does not fit the classroom literacy researcher when viewed in light of what we understand about research and researching.

RISA: Edelsky (1994) describes the distinction between traditional views of literacy research and proactive views as the difference between research *about* and researching *for*. Researching *about* suggests that objectivity is possible and indeed worthy of high prestige in the academy; research *for* is typically viewed as rooted in a political agenda. Edelsky suggests that all research is research *for*; research *for* is research that will,

> help us learn more about ourselves and this complex enterprise in which we are engaged (Edelsky, 1994, p. 69).

She goes on to suggest that research *for*

> aims to transform relationships within classrooms with the intent of transforming conditions for teaching and learning. . . (p. 69).

RICK: Ultimately, research *for* is

> geared to increased democracy and reduced stratification. . . geared to end terrible social imbalances in power and privilege . . .[and aims at] envisioning and sometimes enacting a more equitable, emancipated world (pp. 69-70).

RISA: The relationships between the researcher and the researched vary considerably from article to article. The relationship was sometimes described in a temporal sense,

however the amount of time spent in the setting was not always communicated, leaving readers to assume that time ranged from a single moment to what we gathered to be about three years. Sometimes it was not clear that the researcher was present at the classroom setting. In other cases it was evident that researchers and researched worked together in the collection and sometimes in the analyses of data. In situations in which the teacher was involved as the researcher, issues of time and presence more clear in that we, as readers, assume presence over sustained periods of time.

RICK: The researcher, deliberately or intuitively, makes role choices. . . . (Creswell, p. 103). This resonates with Spradley's (1980) notion of levels of participation and with Agar's notion of the professional stranger (Agar, 1980). How strange are we? "Strangeness" relates to position and role that the researcher assumes. This leads to the question of how strange we are and for whose and what purposes?

RISA: Cheri Williams (1996) helps us understand the complexity of the relationships between researchers and researched:

> . . . I have a responsibility, an ethical obligation, to see that the informants have some understanding of what I am doing and how the research could affect their lives. (p. 51)

RICK: The nature and methods of data collection and subsequent analyses serve as indicators of the relationship between the researcher and researched. The researchers' re-presentation of the researched to readers is something we wish to complicate.

> . . . we have choices to make in terms of how much we should organize our analyses and interpretations to produce the researcher's propositional generalizations . . . or to provide input into the reader's naturalistic generalizations. We will ordinarily do both, but how much of either is an important strategic choice. (Stake, 1995 p. 86)

RISA: One choice that emerged from the articles was that of voice. Researchers and authors made decisions about who would be presented and re-presented and in what ways.

RICK: Gilligan (1993) expresses the intensity of this work.

> In separating the voice of the self from the voices of others, the woman asks if it is possible to be responsible to herself as well as to others and thus to reconcile the disparity between hurt and care. The exercise of such responsibility requires a new kind of judgment, whose first demand is for honesty. To be

> responsible for oneself, it is first necessary to acknowledge what one is doing. The criterion for judgment thus shifts from goodness to truth when the morality of action is assessed not on the basis of its appearance in the eyes of others, but in terms of the realities of its intention and consequence. (p. 82-83)

RICK: The often monovocal nature of an article, the excluded voices or the silenced ones, may make the writing less difficult, but tends to simplify, even romanticize, teachers' voices.

RISA: Hargreaves (1996) submits that

> much of the literature on teacher's voice has made it into a romantic singularity claiming recognition and celebration . . . in a decontextualized way. (p. 16)

RISA: Even when a piece appears polyvocal, it may imply a singularity that is not accurate. As readers, we need to remind ourselves of the often singular nature of the author's voice and that others from the triangle in Figure 1 may not be re-presented.

RICK: And still, the voices of children, the multiplicity of their views of their literacy lives, seem absent from many pieces we read. Corbett and Wilson (1995) have noted that:

> Despite . . . repeated calls for reform aimed at students, young people themselves occupy, at best, a

> minuscule part of the literature on the process of change and reform in education. (p. 12)

RISA: We, as qualitative literacy researchers, are still inventing our research traditions. Cochran-Smith and Larkin (1987) question the relationship between anthropology and education, saying that anthropologists

> are obligated to address the pressing concerns of educational practice. It is not enough to analyze and describe schools and classrooms or to contribute to the general understanding of cultural differences and similarities in the ways various groups transmit their culture to new generations. This is also an obligation to make central a concern for the daily practice of schooling. (p. 42)

RICK: We might also benefit from listening to Moll & Diaz 1987) who express their understanding of their research this way:

> The key point here is that the goal in our studies was to produce instructional *change*, to manipulate instructional procedures to improve the conditions for learning. It is our contention that existing classroom practices not only underestimate and constrain what children display intellectually, but help distort explanations of school performance. It is also our contention that the strategic application of cultural

> resources in instruction is one important way of obtaining change in academic performance and of demonstrating that there is nothing about children's language, culture, or intellectual capacities that should handicap them in schooling. . . (p. 300)

This, again, suggests that research is for change.

RISA: Tom Romano offers us some suggestions as we work to invent a way of researching that is sensitive to the issues implied in the triangle in Figure 1. He wants us to inform our informants of possible bad news; allow co- and counter-interpretations by informants of the data; and intervene if we think ineffective practices are taking place in a research setting. None of these suggestions would come easily.

RICK: We would add that researchers, as we engage in classroom literacy research, need to look closely at Newkirk's idea of intervening. We need to dialogue, questions, and support our research participants by engaging in reflection as well as co- and counter-analyses with them. We may want to consider some form of payback project so that we act responsibly and in a less opportunistic fashion as we engage in our work.

RISA: We may want to consider a hard look at our present practices and work at inventing a tradition of qualitative

research in education that is based in understanding settings and supporting change.

RICK: We may need to, as Newkirk suggests, explain the absence of voices and, as we suggest make our work polyvocal, knowing that this will complicate our jobs of researching and re-presenting.

RISA: And, in light of that, we may need to remind ourselves that we are re-presenting others in ways that may mean that they are being presented for the first time. Might we, then, consider what our responsibilities are relative to this presentation?

RICK: Recently, we have been reading Moustakas (1995). As a therapist, he discusses being <u>in</u>, being <u>for</u>, and being <u>with</u>. Perhaps these prepositions (in, for, and with) will be useful as we work to make sense of the positions of the researcher, the researched, and the extant literature. Indeed, the word preposition is pre and position; it is how we position ourselves and others in our work before it begins which sets the stage for what happens during the work, and subsequent to it.

RISA: Researching in involves becoming a responsible member and, perhaps at the same time, a caring stranger, in a classroom setting. There are some rules and guidelines that

may apply across many settings, but an essential aspect of being in means coming to know that setting and the individuals within it. This is a process that needs to be saturated in caring and concerns for the individuals in the immediate research setting as well as broadly within a democratic society.

RICK: Researching in, as a way of 'being in', means complicating the research setting. It means attention to individual voices at that setting, even and perhaps especially, as those voices unsettle or disconfirm some of our convictions as we enter the setting. Being in, then, requires a deep knowledge of self and a willingness to understand that a researcher researches himself or herself as much as she or he researches others within a setting.

RISA: Classroom based literacy research is also research for. We are presenting and re-presenting some folks and their activities to others. We assume a position and we must work to understand that position and to make our understanding of our position public in our presentation. Researching for was explicated poignantly by Edelsky and we will not reiterate it here.

RICK: Classroom based literacy research that is research with is a powerful area that we have left to explore. The many discussions by the Holmes Group, Goodlad, and others

about simultaneity are important points of origin for further discussions about the nature of relationships that may be mutually beneficial. The moral and ethical issues that research *with* raise may be obfuscated by researchers' opportunism and complicity within a system that may be less than helpful to some of the real problems confronting teachers and kids in schools. Research with, we believe, is a challenge whose time has come. Research with is about ending the objectification of classroom activity. It is about facing the 'otherness' that we may create in our work.

RISA: Often this speech about the "other" annihilates, erases:

> no need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. . .
>
> RICK: And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still the colonizer, the speaking subject, and you are now at the center of my talk. Stop.
>
> (bell hooks, in Brueggemann, 1996, p. 18)

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