
The Unexpected Journey: renewing our commitment to students through educational action research

HELEN MEYER & BENNYCE HAMILTON

University of Cincinnati, USA

STEVE KROEGER

Lokata Junior High School, USA

STEPHANIE STEWART

Amelia High School, USA

MARY BRYDON-MILLER

University of Cincinnati, USA

ABSTRACT This article presents four cases of journeys of discovery and renewal, and the unexpected learning that results from exploring our practice with others. The authors are three classroom teachers – Steve, Stephanie and Bennyce – all of whom took part in a year-long action research sequence and the two professors – Helen and Mary – who co-taught these courses. Taking part in this process, whether as teachers or students, we gained new insights into important relationships that are too frequently taken for granted in busy teaching days, and discovered, in doing so, a renewed commitment to both our students and to the power of action research to bring about change.

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Introduction

There are no roadmaps to guide the classroom teacher interested in conducting action research. That is not to say that there are not some excellent guidebooks (e.g. Kincheloe, 1995; McNiff et al, 1996; Zuber-Skerritt, 1996a; Mills, 2003; Stringer, 2004), and accounts by fellow travelers (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Anderson et al, 1994; Noffke & Stevenson, 1995), but by its very nature action research is an exploration of new territory frequently with a defined starting point, but an unknown destination. We embark on the journey with questions, with concerns, with

some still-developing ideas for the ways in which we might change our practice as teachers. We often take a wrong turn along the way, at times we feel completely lost and we're never sure exactly where the process will take us. However, as with the life of an explorer, the rewards can be great. Whether it's a new way of presenting an idea, a shift in our understanding of our students or a renewed commitment to our role as change agents, action research provides a means for teachers to rediscover what may unknowingly have become lost in the structure of schools and the tumult of the lives traveling within them.

The year-long seminar upon which the journey was based was established as a research induction experience, designed to mentor students engaged in a complete cycle of action research from the conceptualization of a research question through the preparation of a final publishable paper. This was the first year in which the seminar had been offered and the students in the course were drawn from either a newly established doctoral program in urban educational leadership or, as in the case of these student authors, from the existing program in curriculum and instruction.

In the initial quarter of the action research seminar students were introduced to the various theoretical frameworks that inform action research. Through readings and discussions, we focused on the non-positivistic frameworks, such as critical (Freire, 1970/1993; Kemmis, 2001; Giroux, 2003), post-colonial (Spivak, 1988; Pratt, 1991), feminist (Morawski, 2001; Maguire, 2001), and critical race theories (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Delgado, 2000).

As we discussed the different theoretical frameworks and the practice of action research, we also introduced the students to a selection of qualitative and quantitative research methods they could employ in their own studies. Steve, for example, became intrigued with Photovoice, a research strategy in which members of a community use photographs, and individual and collaborative interpretations of these images to generate a shared understanding of critical issues (Wang & Burris, 1994, 1997; Wang, 1999; McIntyre & Lykes, 2004). He used this as a research and learning tool for a group of middle-school students identified by their teachers as being at-risk. Before embarking on the Photovoice process, he and his teaching and research team engaged in a process of sharing life histories, and went on to discuss the cultural influences and values embedded within these experiences (Wallerstein, 1987).

In studying the impact of senior exit projects, Stephanie selected a range of qualitative methods typically used by teachers in classroom action research. In addition to keeping her own journal on her research, she asked the students to keep journals, write reflective essays and engage in class discussions about their projects. In addition, she conducted small group and individual interviews, and used an anonymous survey to gain a deeper understanding of how the students viewed these projects.

Bennyce's action research methods evolved as her journey hit various roadblocks, but all along she had the sense that developing a better

understanding of her own experience might lead her to new insights into the lives of her students. In the end, Bennyce employed personal narrative as suggested by Black feminist scholars (Collins, 1991; hooks, 1994; Mullings, 1994) and critical race theorists (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Delgado, 2000) to explore stories of her experiences as a school child and as a teacher, using her own life stories and reflections as a window to understanding the values and cultural influences embedded in her classroom pedagogy.

As the following descriptions make clear, by drawing on different theoretical frameworks and different methods, each of these three student authors found that action research provided a new understanding of and commitment to the students in their own classrooms.

Steve's Case: Photovoice – transforming teaching practice

My study took place in a middle school, grades 6-8, in a socio-economically diverse suburb of a large, midwestern city. The middle school, designed in line with the National Middle School Standards, incorporated a team approach. In this paper I describe the transforming role of my educational action research project on my team of middle school teachers' practice. In addition to the changes we saw occurring in our students, the research process itself was an empowering force for renewed hope and perseverance among team members.

The teachers on my team included Christine[1] in reading, Beth in mathematics, Cathy in science, Randy in social studies, Andrea in language arts, Cari, a student teacher, and me, a special educator. As a team, we brought diverse experiences and interests to the process, but we also shared a desire to improve our practice. Early in the 2002 school year, I asked my teaching team if they would consider collaborating in an educational action research project (Zuber-Skerritt, 1996b). Christine suggested that we use this opportunity to assist the students on our team who were failing all academic subjects, but did not qualify for special education services. As a team, we determined that this would be an excellent use of our time. We identified the students with the most significant risk factors; they complained of significant home problems, encountered extremely negative peer interactions or were socially isolated in school.

The action research project took place during and became part of our school day. Over the course of the project, we covered each other's duties and regularly negotiated extra time for short meetings with the students. We did this in such a way as to not interrupt academic time. We also met as a team outside of the school building once a month until the end of the school year.

As teachers we knew that when faced with a student who is failing we could revert to a dangerous assumption that says that the student does not want to do the work and does not care. Until the student wants to do something about the problem, the reasoning goes, teachers are powerless to help. No matter how much truth may be embedded in this thinking, it remains only a partial truth. We were concerned that when we had

previously found ourselves in such situations we might have relayed this message to the students. Would the action research process help move us from that negative self-fulfilling prophecy?

As a first step, we decided to change what we had power to change, ourselves. According to Connelly & Clandinin (1988), through narrative we study humans' experience in the world and the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories. Storytellers are characters in their own and others' stories. Life narratives provide a context for making meaning of school situations. By listening we enter into another person's thinking or perceiving making narrative inquiry a process of collaboration, involving mutual storytelling, and re-storying as the research proceeds. Our personal narratives and student Photovoice seemed like a perfect fit for our action research inquiry.

Therefore, as a team we investigated our own value system as a starting point. The decision to explore our biographies flowed from our belief that in order to understand the students on our team, we first needed an explicit understanding of our own values and cultural influences (Harry, 1999). We scheduled monthly after-school meetings outside the school building. Meetings usually lasted 2 hours and began with questions that we created ourselves. At the first meeting, with a tape recorder running, we asked ourselves, 'Why do I continue to teach?' and 'What are the core values that drive my practice?' Later in the year, after we began meeting with students during the school day, student narrative influenced our after school agenda. As the lead investigator, I helped set the agenda, scheduled meetings and transcribed all recordings. As a team member, I was also a full participant in all discussions.

From the moment of our first meeting, something good was happening to us. In spite of our schedules, we had carved out time to reflect on our practice and our students. While the simple act of reflection does not guarantee improved practice, we agreed it was the place to begin. As we rediscovered our own cultural values, we began to change the ways we understood our students. As we learned about our students, we questioned ourselves about our school experiences and how they led us into teaching.

Randy recalled this classroom experience, 'I had an instructor who quickly realized I was bored to tears and he set up an independent study for me. I loved it and learned so much. He was a teacher who saw a need and responded to it in a way that just fit'.

Andrea described it this way:

I was the kid who just sat in the classroom and wanted to disappear. I hated school, could not stand it, except for language arts classes. My teachers [language arts] were so different from the adults in my life. They were so creative, they took risks, and nothing embarrassed them.

Experiences of poor teaching were also significant. 'Mostly they assumed that I would never go anywhere', Cathy explained. 'I remember in junior high, sitting on the half of the class with those that were going nowhere in

their [the teachers'] opinion. Clearly, nobody knew me. They made this judgment based on my background. Because of that I wanted to do something in spite of them'. I described my own experiences of rejection: 'I was rejected by a peer group that I wanted to be a part of. The rejection seemed irrational and yet it had such a negative impact on me as a student'.

Our growing understanding of one another helped us to see the significance of our students' experience when we entered into dialogue with them. We could see commonalities and connections with our students that would otherwise have remained hidden. As we recalled our experiences as students – the times of recognition, alienation and isolation – we began to see our struggling students in a new light and developed an empathy leading to advocacy for our students.

At the same time that we were discussing our life narratives, the students engaged in the process of Photovoice. The photographs provided a forum for them to construct their narratives. Wang (1999) described Photovoice development as a three-stage process: selecting, contextualizing and codifying. In the first stage, selecting, participants choose the photographs they want to share from all the pictures they have taken. The second stage uses the photographs in a process of contextualizing through storytelling. For example, one student discussed a photograph of his dog. He talked about how the animal changed by gradually becoming calmer as it grew older. During codifying, the third stage, participants in a group process create shared meanings for the images. So, when pictures and discussion of pets occurred week after week, it was important to look for the meaning the pets represented.

As I listened to the students, both in Photovoice sessions and after as I transcribed the audiotapes, it became clear that the primary concerns of our students had little to do with our content areas or to our own sense of priorities. During one Photovoice session, I had to step out twice, but the tape recorder kept rolling. During the transcribing I could hear the knock on the door and me stepping out. Back in the room, students shifted the discussion to their pets' pictures. They told stories of the various antics the animals performed. I re-entered the room and the conversation returned to more school-focused discussions. Another knock, I stepped out, the students immediately returned to the discussion of their animals. On other occasions, students had used meeting times to introduce their pets. They explained their pets' personalities and habits to one another. Initially, as teachers, we viewed this talk of a non-school-related topic as a distraction. However, over time the discussion of pets led to new meanings as the students began to discuss trust, trusting the humans in their lives, humans in general and the process of building community in our culture.

After hearing students describe their photographs, Beth reported, 'I really liked getting a better picture from the students, to know where they are coming from, to know more of the whole person. It is eye opening. It reminds you to be very accepting and understanding of where that person is coming from'. Connection to our own vulnerabilities was a key theme in our discussions. As Randy so eloquently put it, 'I think that our vulnerability is

related to how we relate to certain children on the team who have those same vulnerability issues. I want to do something. How can I get involved outside of stopping people from running him into his locker, taking his books, and throwing them all over the room?’ Understanding ourselves was part of understanding our students and became increasingly important to us.

After we finished the research, Beth wrote a note saying:

This was a powerful study that made us stronger educators. Through our reflections and listening to the children’s narratives and voices, we explored new and different approaches to take with each individual child. Without listening to their stories, we would never have thought of or considered these new strategies. Learning in the classroom became true differentiation. As a teacher, I felt empowered to know the children on such a different level’.

Noddings (1999) contends that children need more than a caring decision, children need the continuing attention of adults who listen, invite, guide and support them. Caring favors a differentiated curriculum because, when teachers work closely with students, teachers will be moved by their clearly different needs. One of the greatest gains of our research was not the change we were making in our classrooms or even the gradual improvement of scores, but the deepening of our bonds with students who were at risk.

In our team, there was agreement that the project was worth our time and we began to make plans to use Photovoice the following year. We continued to make connections with students, and think of creative ways to tap student interest and motivation. Understanding the settings and cultural values of the students added a rich layer of insight in daily lesson planning.

Teachers can reach a point where they feel they have done everything they know to help a student. Regardless of behaviors, such as apathy or disruption, when students are not doing well, teachers must do what they can to help. This educational action research study allowed us to deepen our commitments to and become advocates of these students.

Stephanie’s Case: evaluating the Senior Exit Project

Perhaps it was fate. There I was, a high school English teacher struggling to spark the interest of 17-18-year-olds held captive in my classroom several times a day. I also happened to be a doctoral student in Curriculum and Instruction enrolled in an action research course. I had very little idea what action research was, but when I learned that I must find a researchable topic of interest and value to me, the choice was easy. It sat right in front of me everyday.

I was teaching at a predominantly White, middle class suburban high school with about 1400 students located 20 miles east of the city. Few of my seniors would be listed as underprivileged and, other than a few notable

exceptions, most were typical 12th graders, poised on the brink of the rest of their lives, possessing more potential than anything else. Sadly, as I saw it, these students had fallen victim to a common malady that results in glazed eyes, lethargy and semi-consciousness.

I'm talking about 'Senioritis', all too familiar to high school teachers. Senioritis is not just an inconvenience; it's a condition that has ramifications beyond high school (Education Trust, 1999). Three years prior to this action research project, a colleague and I had developed what we hoped would re-invigorate our seniors' interest, the Senior Exit Project (SEP). The SEP, a year-long project, had four major components: research paper, portfolio, original product and presentation. It was a project-based learning experience based on the assumption that if students were afforded the right circumstances, all of them could become enthusiastic about learning.

When I began my action research project I had no real concept of how to go about research, but I knew what I wanted to find out by doing it. It takes courage to inquire into one's professional practice; you may discover what you are not comfortable knowing. Nonetheless, I commenced by looking at the goals of action research, one of which was improving my practice. In order to improve my practice around the senior research project I wanted to learn about its effects. I knew that my research was grounded in the assumption that all students can achieve success (albeit different for every student) and that I needed to listen to as many voices of senior students as possible.

My research question evolved into three ideas I needed to understand from my students' point of view: Is the senior project (1) challenging, (2) meaningful and (3) valuable for all students? I had never conducted a research project before, but based on my new-found knowledge gained in the action research course, it seemed like a qualitative study using a variety of methods was the best plan. I began my data gathering with a research journal almost immediately and later added student journals and reflections, class discussions, small and large group interviews, and finally an anonymous student survey. With an overall research goal, research questions and research methods in hand, I began the process of getting to know my senior students' values about learning and my students, as people, in a new way.

This is what some of my students had to say about learning and the SEP, and this is who a few of my students are. The results of my research showed that the SEP was a challenging project, but the challenge was different for each student. For the general 12th grade English students, including special education students, it was a great challenge. It was a year filled with many firsts for these students – a first time conducting independent and personal research, and a first time documenting their learning. It was their first experience with a formal presentation, and many said that they had to read and write more this year than in all other high school years combined. For example Ben,[2] a low-achieving student, had somehow managed to get to his senior year without ever writing a research

paper and he had not the slightest idea what a bibliography was. It was exciting for me to watch his satisfaction when it all came together. He handed it in accompanied with a high-five and an 'I did it!' His presentation was very well done, since talking came more easily than writing. However, presenting new material that he had uncovered was a different kind of talking and he seemed to enjoy it.

For the advanced students, the challenge varied as well. For example, Lindsay had numerous starts and stops in selecting a topic, finally settling on researching the emotional drawbacks to being a nurse in the delivery room. In order to do this she needed to gain permission to shadow a nurse in the hospital. She sought and received permission to videotape a delivery, although she was only allowed to video the staff, and then designed a video-documentary for her final presentation. Lindsay faced many institutional and technical challenges as she prepared a comprehensive project. Setting their sights high, these high-achieving students faced many challenges rarely arising in classrooms, requiring persistence and problem solving typically not taught in high school.

Did the students find SEP to be a meaningful experience? This proved to be highly dependent on the topic selected and their reasons for making this choice. Students who chose topics based on a current or passing interest later regretted it. For example, Roger selected 'The History of Muscle Cars' as his topic and at the end he commented, 'I learned a bunch of stuff and had some fun but I wish I could go back and choose something more serious'. Another regrettable tactic was the choice of a topic about which the student already knew a good deal, looking for an easy way out. Burt insisted on doing Coaching Techniques in Baseball, which in his final word 'was dumb, I just picked it 'cause it was easy but when my friends were learning new stuff related to their topics I regretted it'. Although the topic choices seem less than significant, the students' reflections on their own learning was meaningful.

Students who chose topics of interest, subjects that were true passions, had experiences that were markedly more positive. Rachel selected astronomy because it truly interested her. She had a marvelous experience, incorporating both myth and science into her research. The most meaningful experiences though were with students who chose topics that related to the future, either college or career plans, or ones that provided them with a new look at what the future could be like if the proper investment was made now. As one student put it, future seniors should 'pick something that goes with your future and have fun with it'. Kevin provided a particularly insightful example of this.

Kevin whose high school career had been troubled and who many teachers thought would never graduate, did his SEP on Police Officers because, as he said in the beginning, 'I want to find out why cops are out to get kids in trouble'. As he progressed through his project, he grew to know himself and understand his future potential as his final journal reflection demonstrates:

Now that I have finished my research paper, my binder and my original product, I realize that I have learned more from this project than any other report or project I have ever had. Being a teenager with a cocky attitude and a bad reputation like myself I always figured that me and a police officer would butt heads. Without having to do this SEP I probably never would have spoken to a cop if I didn't have to. Now, I know I want to be one and I know the steps I have to take to do that. I'm already enrolled and ready to go in the fall. Someday maybe I'll get to talk to some cocky senior and set him straight.

Finally, in terms of value, student remarks and survey comments indicated the students felt extremely proud of their work and/or felt that it would benefit them next year in college or technical school. Some reported that the SEP was valuable because it taught them not to procrastinate or, as one student stated on the survey, 'this project may seem demanding, pointless, and time consuming, until you're done. But it is worth the lessons you learn from it'. Another student wrote, 'I feel that the SEP was very valuable to me. I know I complained a lot, but that is mainly because I complain if I have to do any work'. Others said it was important because it made them feel special when younger students, parents or staff asked about the project. They liked feeling smart enough to pull something like this together. 'Now that I have about completed the entire thing it feels good to look back at my creation of work from my senior year'.

The challenge, meaning and value of SEP came together in very personal ways. This was demonstrated in Linda's project based on her experience of losing a friend in a drunk driving accident. She chose to use her sad experience in a positive way. After researching several aspects of the problem, she gave an inspiring presentation to the junior and senior classes before prom. Enlisting the aid of volunteers, she called the names of 22 victims (she learned through her research that everyday 22 teenagers are killed due to drinking and driving). With the lights dimmed in the auditorium, the volunteers, wearing banners with names of victims, silently walked and stood on the stage while the screen behind them flashed actual photos of victims. It was an emotional experience for all, one that deeply touched other students who learned from her personal experience.

Despite these transformative experiences and the positive remarks at the conclusion of the project, during this action research project I sometimes became discouraged when my efforts seemed only to produce negative responses from students. The process was difficult for my students and myself; however, one of the unexpected outcomes of this cure for Senioritis was what I learned about my students. The students accepted not only the challenges of the SEP, but also let me in so that I could learn about them. They took risks in topic selections and presentations that exposed their interests, passions, hopes and fears. As a teacher, researching with my students, I gained new insight into those sleepy seniors waiting to get out of the door that left me hopeful about the students we are sending forth. This

action research helped me to learn not only about my teaching and the effectiveness of the senior exit project, but to also learn about the challenges that face today's students, the ideas and passions they hold, and the meaning and the value they place in the future.

Bennyce's Case: race is so personal

I am an African American, female and a teacher, and because of this I bring into the classroom experiences accompanying each of these. I never really paid much attention to how each of these parts intermingle and play out in the classroom until I began this reflection. Each of these separate parts makes up the whole me, and each of these parts determines what I bring. I cannot change them nor would I want to, but I choose to be conscious of them, because they determine what I bring into the classroom.

Teaching students of color presents a unique dynamic in the classroom. A number of researchers have offered explanations for this (see, for example, Ladson-Billings, 1999; Nieto, 1999; Smitherman, 2000). Moreover, teachers play a critical role in how children see schooling – whether it's viewed as a place of revolution and growth, or a place that tends to diminish the fire from within.

As an African American teacher of predominantly African American students, I have a firm belief that my lived experiences are the greatest research tool that I possess for understanding what and how I choose to teach the children in my classes. Unlike the posture advocated by traditional research – unbiased and objective – 'lived-experiences' requires one to view oneself as 'situated in the action of research' (Rapp, 1982). According to hooks (1989), subjective experience and theory from personal experience are important because each acknowledges the need to examine self from a critical standpoint.

This narrative presents a critical look at how a few of my lived experiences have shaped my identity as a classroom teacher. Black feminist thought frames this research and requires me to look at past events from my standpoint as a Black woman. By doing so, a consciousness develops that promotes change (Collins, 1991; hooks, 1994). Mullings (1994) holds that women of color engender a 'unique consciousness' informed by the triple consciousness of being at the forefront of race, class and gender conflict.

I chose this project for a number of reasons. First, there was a great deal of soul-searching and questioning about my own pedagogical practices. For years I questioned why I chose to teach and what I could do to help my students learn. In this context of continual questioning, I became more cognizant of my motives and intent in the classroom. Teachers' views are often overlooked in discussions about education. To avoid being marginalized, I must find my voice as an African American female teacher. I must seek answers. I must speak out.

Narration allows me to take you on this journey to finding my voice. We start back in my own childhood and connect it to my present. Ladson-

Billings (1994) and hooks (1994) used narration in research as a way to understand the present as connected to our past experiences. They also discuss 'connectedness', as described by the strong kinship bonds that exist in Black communities and the tendency of non-kin to take on social roles. Studies have shown that extensive kin networks existing in Black communities contribute significantly both to the material and non-material well-being of children (Hill, 1972; Stack, 1974). Collins (1991) extended the concept to individuals occupying institutional roles, like teachers. In developing a Black feminist epistemology, she explored the influence of non-kin women on the social and intellectual development of Black children. She concluded that this influence is embodied in the phenomenon called 'community othermothers' and Black women teachers share in this role.

Two Black female teachers had a profound impact on my social and intellectual development. They were Mrs Backs[3] and Mrs Ellis – my first and seventh grade teachers, respectively. Mrs Backs taught me how to read and encouraged me to do so as often as possible. She introduced me to the school library. I often checked out four or five library books at a time. It was my belief that the more I read the more I would learn, and that the more I learned, the smarter I would become. Mrs Backs continually praised me for my diligence.

By the time I got to seventh grade, desegregation was a way of life in Kentucky, but Mrs Ellis continued to foster my intellect. She was my last African American teacher prior to college. In her class I completed more writing assignments than reading. Mrs Ellis encouraged me to write about my experiences – those things that were important to me. I wrote about my dreams, my family, my friends and my desires. I wrote short stories, poetry and plays. In her classroom I discovered that I could write my ticket to freedom – freedom that came from knowing that I could achieve anything I set out to accomplish.

Mrs Backs instilled in me a love of reading and the power of knowledge through reading. Mrs Ellis set my knowledge free as she empowered me to write in my own voice. She instilled in me a critical consciousness that was inspirational and empowering. Their encouragement, inspiration and praise set a standard for me to reach that connected me to them and to the world in my future.

When I entered the fourth grade, everything changed. During the second week of school the teacher passed out a letter for my parents indicating that I could attend Pleasant Ridge, a predominantly White school in a neighboring community. Bus transportation would be provided from Fallsway, the school I was currently attending. My mother and the mother of my best friend decided that this would be a 'good opportunity' for us. My best friend had two siblings so the four of us made the daily trek to catch the bus to 'the White school'.

At Pleasant Ridge, none of the teachers looked like me. There were only four other Black students in a school of about 350. The stories and books I read had no Black characters nor was any other minority represented. No pictures of Black people lined the room nor was any

reference made that would lead me to believe that Blacks existed outside the classroom.

Pleasant Ridge was a place to learn and prepare for my future. It was also a place where physical and mental competition were encouraged. I remember feeling so alone (even though my best friend was there). Looking back, I also remember feeling like I was under a microscope. My every move was on display.

The connection that I felt to myself, my community and my own learning were gone. I was left to stoke the fire within. As I look at my role as a teacher now, I reflect on these different experiences with the White and Black teachers in my past, and I better understand how connectedness or lack thereof leads to issues of power and control.

Power and control are two factors that impact students and must be considered when teaching students of color. Janice Hale (1986) stated that students should view teachers and principals as significant adults in the community. Too often, however the relationship between students of color and teachers is not a relationship conducive to learning. It is a relationship of oppression, lack of respect and failure. Teachers' fear of losing classroom control often causes a destructive use of power and, for African American high school students, the need for power is immense. They are at an age where they recognize the fact that society views them negatively and that perception plays out in classrooms where they see themselves as powerless. Finding this delicate balance of significant adult authority, while acknowledging my students' place in society, was essential for me.

I now see Dillard's (1995) concept of 'authentication' as helping me to create this balance. Authentication is enacting confirmation and feedback from a place of authority. Lorde (1984) believes the notion of authentication for African American women comes from the African tradition of using and sharing power. This example from my teaching demonstrates how community, connection, power and authentication became part of my pedagogy.

In my third year of teaching, I was teaching eleventh grade, non-honors English and the majority of my students were African American. There were 15 in this particular class – one male and 14 females. Absenteeism was high and the students' attitudes about learning were not good. I had several incidents where students were disruptive in the classroom.

I found an article in the newspaper that discussed how Black students were failing in schools and listed the reasons why. I wanted my students to see what other Black people were saying about them. I copied the article for each of them thinking that perhaps this would get their attention. As I passed it out, one of my Black female students yelled, 'What is this (expletive)?' I explained to her that it was an article expressing the author's opinion, and that we would read and discuss it in class. As we read it, she continued to make comments about how it wasn't right and that it did not apply to her.

As we began to discuss it, I became overwhelmed with emotions. I told her that this was an article written by an African American man and that he was not the only one to feel that way. Finally, with tears streaming down my face, I asked her, 'Don't you get it? What you do in here is exactly what he is talking about. What he is saying is that many of you, both Black and White, don't get it. Either you don't come to school or if you do, you spend half your time giving your teachers grief because they are trying to teach you something that you don't know!' Other students voiced their opinions about being in school to learn and boasted about their low rate of absenteeism. We were a tearful mess. In the midst of our tears, my students were beginning to think critically about their lives.

Black feminist consciousness that promotes change involves engaging students to think critically. hooks (1994) insists that Black students, regardless of class, gender or social standing, must have the capacity to think critically about themselves and their lives. She concludes that engaged pedagogy between herself and her students is crucial to her development as a professional. In order for students to feel that school is revolutionary, they have to feel some responsibility for their learning. They have to experience some freedom, like I did as a schoolchild, to find and explore knowledge with personal meaning that connects them to their community.

Writing this narrative has been a struggle that reflects the need for this kind of work to be conducted. It is a difficult chore to be on the front lines of justice. Here, I have attempted to examine how my experiences as a student influence my practice as a teacher. I am an African American female, teacher and student. Each of these roles has some impact on my classroom pedagogical practice. I value my own experiences as a student and use them to teach my students who are oppressed.

To some, this may seem no more than self-reflection. I strongly disagree. My contention is that this piece is the revelation that I have been searching for since I began my teaching career. It is the foundation or springboard that was absent from my university classroom discussions of teaching. It is my personal epistemology and the creation of a new critical voice born from the experience of my own point of view.

Helen and Mary's Case: sharing the struggles and the success

This year-long action research sequence was also new territory for us. Just as our student co-authors found through their projects, we discovered that in researching our teaching we also learned about our own students and in compiling this manuscript we have re-engaged with them and continued the process. The passion they bring to their teaching activities and the concerns and interests they take in their students' lives are a model of what excellence in teaching looks like.

In reflecting on these descriptions from our students as they engaged in action research we are struck by the fact that such seemingly different paths all led to a common experience of forming deeper connections with

their students as individual learners who bring distinct challenges and contributions to the classroom.

Critical race theorist Richard Delgado has described what he calls counter storytelling, the use of narratives to, on the one hand create 'bonds, represent cohesion, shared understandings, and meanings' among members of oppressed communities while simultaneously being able to 'shatter complacency and challenge the status quo' (2000, p. 61) by representing experience from the point of view of those silenced within the dominant discourse. In a similar vein, post-colonial theorist Gayatri Spivak (1988) has raised the issues of subalternity and representation calling upon academics to question this dominant discourse by actively engaging the experience of the oppressed.

Drawing on photographs, journals and personal narrative, our co-authors have provided their students with just such opportunities to reveal their own lives and experiences, and in doing so have allowed us to hear their unique voices. As Delgado suggests, this process shatters the complacency of both researcher and reader alike. No longer can we see the at-risk student as 'the student does not want to do the work and does not care'. Instead, as Steve's project shows us, these are students with important insights to share with us, students deserving of our support and commitment. Nor can we continue to be complicit in allowing students to disengage from education during their final year of high school when we can now see how transformative an experience like Stephanie's senior exit project can be. Finally, in reading Bennyce's experiences and those of her students we are called upon to take a more active role in challenging continuing educational inequalities that rob young poor and minority students of the opportunity to succeed.

Educational action research is a process of exploration – of ourselves as educators, of the lives and unique perspectives of our students, of the structures and practices of the educational system. The lesson we take from this shared journey then is a revitalization of our commitment to teaching, a deepened respect for the knowledge and skills of the students with whom we are privileged to work and a renewed dedication to working together to bring about positive change in our schools and communities.

Correspondence

Helen Meyer, College of Education, University of Cincinnati,
PO Box 210002, Cincinnati, OH 45221-0002, USA (helen.meyer@uc.edu).

Notes

- [1] The names of the students in this section are all pseudonyms; however, all teachers on the team worked collaboratively and are presented with their actual first names.
- [2] All student names in this section are pseudonyms.
- [3] All teacher and school names are pseudonyms.

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