
Weaving New Understandings of Teacher Research as a Feminist Practice
By Mary Napoli

Teacher research is typically defined as “systematic and intentional inquiry carried out by teachers” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 7). It serves various purposes from reforming teaching practices, reflecting on teaching (Berthoff, 1987), and serving as a vehicle to embrace an emancipatory and transformative stance (Bullock, 1987; Kuzmic, 2002). In this emancipatory framework, teachers research themselves and their classrooms while freeing silenced voices to reclaim their work. “Women must write herself; must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal” (Cixous, 1981, p. 10). Thus, teachers must write about themselves, their journeys, and experiences to find hope and to feel empowered (Christianakis, 2008). In this essay, I choose to explore the lived experience as a window to understand the teacher’s personal history and identities as a faculty member. In fact, this development is not a linear projection or an orderly plan; rather, as Mary Catherine Bateson (1990) indicates, it is a composition.

My aim is to share my continued understanding of the relationship between teacher research and feminism within my role as a faculty member while exercising ownership and liberty in sharing my story. I have included some personal vignettes to explore issues of identity, authority and how this is shaped and understood and to embrace my beliefs that story is the foundation of teacher research and personal and professional change. As Carol Witherell and Nel Noddings (1991) wrote, “Whether writer or teller, the narrator of a story provides further meaning—an even further text-to-

the story being told. The narrator too has a story, one that is embedded in his or her culture, language, gender, beliefs and life history. This embeddedness lies at the core of the teaching-learning experience” (p. 3). I have also included boxed texts to visually represent the knots that create my individual “*lavori all unciento*,” an Italian phrase for a crocheted piece of fabric which has become an important symbol of my identity as an Italian-American woman. The knot metaphor illustrates the uniqueness and strength of individual threads intricately woven by the designer and each thread mirrors the story and history of its creator; therefore, inserting the box provides me a space to pull, tighten, untangle, and loosen threads that have become the fabric of my identity.

For feminist teacher researchers, it is important to create spaces for personal meaning and discovery of voice and to write and reflect toward the spirit of these theories; feminist research recognizes the epistemological value of using women’s experiences as resources for discovering new relationships (Harding, 1987). Thus, for teachers, it is imperative to reflect on public theory (work found in books, articles, conferences, on-line forums, etc.) while also honoring the stories and lived experiences of one’s life. As individuals craft their own stories, they begin to acknowledge the fluid integration of their lives as women, teachers, and researchers in order to nourish inclusiveness, change and growth.

Knot one: *A glimpse at the personal: The weaving of the “lavori all uncentto”*

When I was a young girl, I remember accompanying my mother and sister on many trips to Reggio Calabria, Italy to visit my grandparents and relatives. I recall spending many hours watching my grandmother transform brilliant white cotton thread into intricate and beautiful designs. With delicate ease and precision, my grandmother wove the fine threads for hours while humming tunes and sharing stories about my mother’s youth. My grandmother explained that the art of working with thread reflected the beauty of one’s soul and history. She told me that her hands would become lost in the design and her work was driven by love. She also said, “The ricordo d’affetto (tangible symbol of affection) will be passed to you to share with your own children.” I smiled. And then she added, “You will learn this craft, and one day teach it to your own children so that they too will understand.”

Did I ever learn the craft? Yes, but I failed miserably. However, I continued to watch and admire the skillful movements that both my mother and grandmother displayed as they created these extraordinary designs. Many decades later, I would recognize the entangled meaning and significance of the cloth as it impacted my personal and professional life.

Anna Neumann and Penelope Peterson (1997) describe research as a “personal endeavor, as experiences within and expressions of the researcher’s life” (p.1). When educators embrace this view of research, they can contemplate how the personal elements of one’s life, including historical influences, inform and shape one’s later endeavors; therefore, the feminist teacher researcher creates a mental space where she contests and reconstructs previous images of self, home, and school communities to inform her work. These conversations provide multiple ways of knowing (Neuman & Peterson, 1997) and present new knowledge that informs the research. To illustrate the inward conversations of self-reflection, I offer the following snapshot of my experiences, questions and connections to professional literature.

During childhood visits to my grandmother’s home, I observed the resilience of many generations of Italian women and marveled at the level of religious fervor and pragmatism that solidified their lives. I remember conversations about women, careers, and travel were virtually absent during these gatherings and that the women were always

in the kitchen. I recall experiencing a silent and internal rebellion but failed to utter a word. I wonder what happened to my need to speak about what I saw and how I felt.

Was this silence an act of resistance, oppression, or something else? As Gilligan's (1977) early research noted, women's difficulty speaking publicly in their own voices is grounded in self-doubt and divided judgments about public and private assessments that are fundamentally at odds. For me and other feminist teacher researchers, awareness of tensions among ethnic, gender, and familiar subcultures and reflection on epistemological systems of schooling and the public sphere can strengthen our voices to articulate positions both inside and outside these realms to create change.

Knot two: *A glimpse at the professional*

A few months before receiving my doctoral degree, my friends and I sifted through glossy pages of countless catalogs featuring the latest academic regalia. We reminisced about our past high school and college commencements. As I thought about the tassel, comprised of its 40-70 singular threads bound together, I pondered its symbolic significance in relationship to the threads of the *lavori*. For me, the tightly woven tassel threads defined academic, personal and professional possibilities whereas the *lavori* defined certain expectations of Italian women in my family. Reflecting on professional journeys can help teacher researchers shape a deeper understanding of the personal and professional significance those journeys play in their research.

In my own development as a teacher, the social and cultural rituals I experienced permitted me to revisit, revise, and subvert prescribed ideologies to open up new possibilities for a new sense of agency. As feminist teacher researchers reflect on the multiple genders, social, cultural and educational intersections in their lives, they can weave new understandings as performative effects or constructions to impact change.

Knot three: *Identifying the work of a teacher researcher as feminist practice*

Before entering higher education, I taught kindergarten and first grade. I conducted classroom research exploring social constructions of gender. I recall using children's books to engage students in conversations aimed at critically exploring ideological messages about how girls and boys should act. Little did I know that these conversations would lead to inquiries about gender in early childhood and the impact of images depicted in children's literature. During my tenure as an early childhood educator, I recall questioning, challenging, and refining my teaching to create classroom change. Then during my doctoral studies, I worked with pre-service teachers to document their understanding of gender and children's literature. However, I became interested in their stories and how these experiences can be viewed as critical instruments, a term coined by Teresa de Lauretis (1984) to illuminate ideologies and the stories by which lives and teaching practices are constructed. It was this discovery that added to the unique design of the *lavori* to provide me with an understanding of the interrelationship between feminist teacher research and its role in my work with future educators.

Within the classroom community, a feminist teacher researcher can sustain critical reflections about how self-identity and the identities of students have been constructed by and within the culture. Feminist author bell hooks (1994) reminds us that “a community is required—not just for safety, but because community can sustain a commitment, can nurture individual and community agency and can result in action” (p. 148). As teacher educators embrace the work of feminist pedagogues (Maher & Tetreault, 1994; Middleton, 1993, etc.), they can raise personal and professional consciousness to help students problematize their learning and reconsider their position(s) of privilege, silence, and reinforced home/school relationships. This dialectic and critical gaze into our lives can help us unfreeze current visions of ourselves and consider new ways of acting and being in the classroom. In constructing this narrative, I have created a space to recall my reflections while simultaneously dismantling them toward alternate ways of acting. These sites and struggles within the context of politically charged values, expectations, and assumptions continue to provide opportunities to see inquiry and

research in my teaching as partial, limited, and actively constructed and attributed to conscientization (Freire, 1986).

Teachers are always asking questions. For teacher educators embracing feminist pedagogy, the intersection between teaching and research leads to continued negotiation and reaffirmation of values while simultaneously considering those of their students, surroundings, and individual and collective differences and similarities. Some questions that we ponder include, “What values are evident? How are these understood? Whose knowledge is represented? Whose research is it, after all?” Conducting teacher research redefines teachers’ work and offers opportunities to listen to students. In my work with pre-service teachers, I have learned that teacher research has the power to transform how they learn information about teaching, learning communities, and literature. Moreover, when students reflect on their own lives while situating their new knowledge in practical applications of reading children’s books for gender, they begin to broaden their understanding of their past perceptions. Teacher research as a feminist act challenges and changes understandings and promotes awareness of a multiplicity of voices and ideas that contribute to full participation in the community (Gallas, 2001).

Teacher research provides opportunities that empower classroom teachers to position themselves as both subject and object. We construct our own identities, realities and histories, thus we become not only the subjects but also the objects of study. As teacher researchers who embrace feminist pedagogy, we challenge traditional paradigms in order to advance the voices of ourselves and our students. As Bonner (2006) argues, “teacher change, like most human change, must emanate from within” (p. 41). My roles as a teacher of children’s literature and researcher engaged in study and reflection aimed

at improving my craft have enabled me to continually grow as an educator while I guide future teachers on paths toward becoming agents of change in their own classrooms.

I believe that the art of teaching is rooted in self-reflection and exploration. As bell hooks stated, “When our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice. Indeed, what such experience makes more evident is the bond between the two - the ultimately reciprocal process wherein one enables the other” (p.61). This quotation has served as a powerful catalyst for combining theory and practice within the context of my teaching that has resulted in improvements in my course delivery and instruction. In my undergraduate children’s literature course, teacher candidates and I become co-participants in the learning process. We read, evaluate, and respond to various forms of literature including poetry, multicultural literature, picture books, and expository texts and engage in teaching and learning from each other.

My students and I respond to literature by considering text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections as we explore issues of justice and cultural awareness. We engage in writing personal narratives and then meet in small groups for literature discussions in which we share and compare our responses to and interpretations of texts. We co-construct knowledge, negotiate meanings of books, evaluate ideas and propose new possibilities. For many of my students, these are the first opportunities they have to speak about their own identities and ideas. These experiences build skills that enable them to communicate their thoughts with respect and tolerance of others and empower them to exercise critical inquiry within a welcoming community that they/we have established.

Using children's literature to raise the consciousness of future teachers by exploring justice and engaging in critical thinking is just one way for transforming practice and becoming agents of change. The possibilities of co-creating knowledge about literature and our personal and shared identities also provides us opportunities to explore the gendered nature of schooling and literature, issues of power dichotomies and agency, social dynamics and responsibilities in a community of learners, the value of diversity, and ways of sharing personal and emotional responses to books. Shifting from teacher to co-learner, I put into practice the core of feminist pedagogy and research where both teacher and students interrogate and analyze their own experiences with openness and honesty in order to question, understand and reconceptualize the future of classroom learning.

I hope to add my voice to the collective chorus of others who have shared their explorations of self within feminist teacher research. Documenting my personal journal in this essay also has given me opportunities for archaeological discovery and digging deeper into my home, school and professional experiences for details that connect and move my position and thinking from moment to moment. Like the knots of my *lavori*, my resolutions to embrace feminist teacher research in my classroom become stronger with each exploration. In my *lavori*, commitment, strength, character and hope are woven with personal and professional discoveries of emotion, fear, imaginable contexts, desires, transformations and transcendence.

Final knot: *Questions to consider: Sharing the lavoro with others*

The classroom context remains a place of possibility and change, and, through sharing personal histories about schooling, books, and identities, it can open our students' hearts to honor the voices of others. Asking and conversing about teaching for change is at the heart of reimagining our personal and professional selves. As I consider the lavoro in terms of its connection to the profession, I believe that it can clarify our relationships to our lives, with others, and to the teachers we want to be. Tapping into personal and professional histories about schooling and identity can serve as an invigorating exercise in untangling positive and challenging moments to provide renewal and transformation. Some questions that teachers can consider include:

How do we redefine equity and empowerment in a classroom?

How can we create a classroom community as a safe place to honor all voices and silences?

How can we emphasize the processes over the products of learning while still teaching essential elements and skills of the curriculum?

How can we honor the private, personal and subjective as well as the public, impersonal and objective?

How can we hold onto a vision for a better tomorrow in our classrooms?

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