

Teachers-as-Researchers: Following Your Puzzlements

Marilynne Boyle-Baise

In 2011, Marilynne Boyle-Baise received the Jean Dresden Grambs Distinguished Career Research in Social Studies Award from NCSS, which “recognizes professionals who have made extensive contributions to knowledge concerning significant areas of social studies education through meritorious research.”¹ As part of the award celebration, she gave a presentation on how to compose a career in social studies research that drew on her 32 years as teacher-researcher at both the elementary and university levels. This article is adapted from that presentation and the Q&A session that followed.

A long time ago, I was transfixed by bell hooks’ story in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*.² Professor hooks, who spells her name in lower case letters, has written about theorizing as a healing practice that helped her make sense out of what was happening in her life. Born in Kentucky in 1952, hooks participated in the change from racially segregated to integrated schools. For hooks, there is no gap between theory and practice. Theorizing is linked to one’s lived experience, arising from it, explaining it, and, possibly, changing it. The process of critically examining pertinent questions helped hooks “find her way home,” or make meaning of her personal journey.³

Like hooks, I think of research as autobiographical; it springs from my lived experience. In order to have something meaningful to write about, I need to involve myself continually in something personally intriguing. Scholarly inquiry stems from a puzzlement that I seek to resolve. It is healing to me to answer confounding questions in ways that make sense to me and to others.

Research as Personal Puzzlement

I begin with a thought-provoking question, like “Why isn’t service learning focused on questions of social injustice?” This query sparked years of investigating, theorizing, and conceptualizing an entity that became “multicultural service learning.” I never worry about whether something I write will be published. I write to the strictest standards of discovery—my own. I ask: Does the work address an authentic puzzlement? Does my investigation genuinely speak to the problem, helping me “find my way home?”

Most of the time, one puzzlement leads to another. To illustrate, these days I am puzzled and worried about the decimation of social studies in elementary schools. It is well documented

that, for years, social studies has taken a back seat to other subjects, particularly reading and math, and that this trend has been exacerbated by the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act.⁴ I wondered: How do teachers renegotiate social studies instruction in a time when elementary social studies is being marginalized? This query spawned field study in seven area elementary schools, culminating in the publication, *Putting Reading First: Teaching Social Studies in Elementary Classrooms*.⁵ In this study, my co-authors and I observed that sharing a nonfiction or historical fiction book often served as a substitute for social studies education. We concluded that social studies too often serves as a handmaiden to reading.

In my own limited way, I sought to revalue elementary social studies. I determined to write a textbook that supported inquiry-rich, conceptually-based, activist-oriented social studies. I became intrigued with the writing of Harold Rugg, who developed the first social studies textbook series in the 1930s. I devoured everything “Rugg,” eventually writing and publishing two articles on his curricular history. I was particularly captivated by his curricular framework for decision-making in action. He urged students to “do” social studies by getting information, making decisions, and taking community action.⁶ This framework underpins the book I wrote with Jack Zevin, *Young Citizens of the World: Teaching Elementary Social Studies through Civic Engagement*.⁷

As you can see, research journeys change as puzzlements alter. Ask yourself: “What are my puzzlements about social studies education? How can I mount an investigation of these personally significant questions?”

Teacher-as-Researcher

Research commonly is conducted by professors at universities. However, research also can be done by practitioners in public



schools, like many of you. Imagine it this way: As a teacher, you are a natural researcher. You commonly reflect on your own practice, wondering things like, “How can I diversify my instruction?” or “How can I increase students’ intellectual engagement?” Also, you try different methods, observe what helps a particular student or class, and then try to repeat your success with new students. In order to turn these queries into research, you need to formalize the process of reflection and share your results with other teachers.

According to Craig Mertler, “Action research is defined as any systematic inquiry conducted by teachers ... with a vested interest in the teaching and learning process or environment for the purpose of gathering information about ... how they teach, and how their students learn.”⁸ Action research is done by and for teachers to improve their own practice. It is a process that encompasses asking a curricular or pedagogic question, collecting data, interpreting the information, developing a plan of action, and reporting the results. Ernest Stringer explains the process quite simply as: look, think, and act.⁹ This process is dynamic, recursive, and tentative — it is ongoing and never finished. Teachers are not looking for a cast-in-stone result; instead the focus is on the evolutionary enhancement of practice.

When I work with teachers, I help them identify research questions and learn data collection methods. Research questions can be descriptive (seeking rich representation), or evaluative (seeking instructional effectiveness). Data can be collected

through observation, interview, journals, and documents, like curriculum materials or student records.¹⁰ It is helpful to request assistance from a colleague to carefully watch an instructional event or to talk with students about it. Teachers and I have found that the website maintained by the Madison Metropolitan School District in Madison, Wisconsin offers sound guidelines for action research, including techniques for developing questions and collecting and analyzing data.¹¹

Alternatively, you might be invited to collaborate with a professional researcher to conduct an inquiry in your classroom. Over the years, I have found it helpful to enter collaborations as a fellow learner, rather than as an investigative aficionado. I encourage you, as teachers, to recognize your professional expertise; you are a full partner who brings practical wisdom to the table. Additionally, a professor, like me, can assist you with an action research project.

Q&A: Research in Elementary Settings

Q: How can researchers alter teachers' practice to be more effective? How can we replace lecture with more intellectually engaging techniques?

A: Lecture can be quite effective, especially in the hands of a dynamic orator. In my experience, teachers choose different approaches for a reason. A good inquiry project might involve discovery of this rationale. Evaluative inquiry establishes effectiveness, while descriptive inquiry illustrates the situa-

tion. For the first approach, you could work with teachers to implement, evaluate, and report the worth of an instructional option. For the second, you could describe and consider instruction in action. Regardless, respect for teachers as consummate professionals is central. Professional researchers should not seek to change teachers, but to learn with them.

Q: Will I have to leave my classroom in order to conduct research?

A: No. You should think of yourself as a teacher-researcher. The conduct of systemic inquiry while teaching is an effective means of professional growth. It is a fruitful addition to graduate course work.

Q: What are the next steps for research on elementary social studies?

A: A number of scholars have been developing a state-by-state database of time spent on social studies. It is vital to document the diminishment of social studies as a stand-alone subject in elementary schools. However, more descriptive study of enacted social studies is needed. What, for example, is happening in schools challenged to make Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) versus those doing well related to NCLB mandates? How do teachers think about teaching social studies in different environments? What does it mean and look like to foster content integration as a remedy for time constraints related to social studies? Teachers-as-researchers can assist immensely with data collection and interpretation regarding enacted social studies instruction.

Q: I am a Puerto Rican educator. How can I promote more instruction about Puerto Rico in U.S. schools?

A: This question raised a significant issue: To what extent do we consider non-conventional U.S. settings in elementary schools? Think about developing a study focused on information about Puerto Rico. Perhaps you could collaborate with a teacher in a stateside school to create, initiate, describe, and evaluate a unit on Puerto Rico. Scrutinize social studies standards and write publicly about ways to integrate content about Puerto Rico into ongoing themes (possibly in a social studies journal like this one). For example, teachers can compare the voting rights of Puerto Ricans to those of other U.S. citizens, contrast U.S. and Puerto Rican constitutions, or deliberate the political status of the territory.

Following Your Puzzlements

Research is a means for social studies advocacy. Research reports can spur conversation, locally and nationally, about what counts as exemplary social education, for whom, why, and in what settings. It can challenge social studies' "back burner" curricular status. At the very least, systemic inquiry can prompt each of us to think deeply about our social studies curriculum and instruction.

Where can you begin? Identify your puzzlements. What do you wonder about in relation to your social studies instruction? Would you like to try specific teaching methods with your students and share the results?

Next, turn your puzzlements into researchable queries. Are you ready to initiate your own cycle of action research? Is there a professor with whom you can work to support your investigations?

For example, can you envision ways to incorporate international studies into your classroom? If so, can you try out different activities, using your classroom as the laboratory, and then report what you did, and what resulted in terms of student involvement and learning? You might find that, as teacher-researcher, you can contribute evidence about what is happening to social studies instruction in elementary schools—and change things for the better.

All of us, teachers and professors alike, are responsible for valuing elementary social studies. Inquiries into what happens, what works, and why motivates appraisal of social studies instruction. More talk about diverse approaches and current trends is a key factor in the campaign for top-quality social studies education. Consider ways in which you can make sense of elementary social studies, helping the field “find its way home.”

Notes

1. NCSS Awards, www.socialstudies.org/awards.
2. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 60.
3. hooks, 60.
4. Katherine A. O'Connor, T. Heafner, and E. C. Groce, “Advocating for Social Studies: Documenting the Decline and Doing Something About It,” *Social Education*, 71, no. 5 (March 2007): 255–260; Tracy Rock, T. Heafner, K. O'Connor, J. Passe, S. Oldendorf, A. J. Good, and S. Byrd, “One State Closer to a National Crisis. A Report on Elementary Social Studies Education in North Carolina Schools,” *Theory and Research in Social Education* 34, no. 4 (2006): 455–483; P. J. VanFossen and C. McGrew, “Is the Sky Really Falling? An Update on the Status of Social Studies in the K-5 Curriculum in Indiana,” *International Journal of Social Education* 23, no. 1 (2010): 139–167.
5. Marilynne Boyle-Baise, L. Hsu, S. Johnson, S. Serriere, and D. Stewart, “Putting Reading First: Teaching Social Studies in Elementary Classrooms,” *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 36, no. 3 (2008): 233–255.
6. Harold O. Rugg, *American Life and the School Curriculum: Next Steps toward Schools of Living* (Boston: Ginn, 1936).
7. Marilynne Boyle-Baise, and J. Zevin, *Young Citizens of the World: Teaching Elementary Social Studies through Civic Engagement* (New York: Routledge, 2009).
8. Craig Mertler, *Action Research: Teachers as Researchers in the Classroom*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009), 4.
9. Ernest. T. Stringer, *Action Research*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2007).
10. Mertler.
11. Madison Metropolitan School District, staffdevweb.madison.k12.wi.us/node/341.

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