

Literacy research, ethics and social responsibility

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ABSTRACT: In this article I examine the ethics of conducting literacy research, beyond what is typically addressed in current ethical guidelines. Using a few studies as examples, I analyse how the conception of research that underlies literacy research is grounded in ethics based on individual autonomy that allow researchers to disregard their social responsibility and often does not yield the kind of social transformations envisioned. Working from principles of social rather than individual ethics, I consider the literacy research community's responsibility to inform policy and practice, to make explicit how the research relates to people's well-being and to make the notion of what is good an explicit focus of inquiry.

KEYWORDS: Literacy research, ethics, social responsibility, policy.

Literacy research is now often portrayed as either collaborative, critical, disciplinary, interdisciplinary, local, transformative, practice-oriented or some combination of these. Although these are noteworthy aspects of research practice, these studies may not yield the kind of social transformation envisioned by the researchers. In contrast, there are few large-scale studies conducted at the system level for the purpose of informing policy, and researchers conducting them are often regarded by their more critical colleagues as making questionable assumptions and “playing the system’s game”. A review of bibliographies reveals that the majority of literacy studies are small-scale studies conducted at the local level with some researchers also taking an implicit or explicit advocacy stance. Many of these studies have no clear implications for teaching or policy, or at least the knowledge claims resulting from these studies are rarely articulated explicitly. While this kind of research might be legitimate, it seems to have left a vacuum that policy makers have been happy to fill by mandating research using a particular methodology – possibly because current research is not providing them with guidance to inform policy.

In this article I examine the ethics of conducting literacy research, beyond what is typically addressed in ethical guidelines and research textbooks, and consider the literacy research community’s responsibility to inform policy and practice and to make explicit how the research relates to people’s well-being as important ethical aspects of its work. I am not making the point here that every study should include some policy recommendation – I actually do not think that in most cases single studies can inform policy – but rather that the issue of what is “good” for people and their well-being should be explicitly addressed and that as a whole literacy research would want to also provide relevant information and directions for policy-makers.

Discussions about ethics in educational research have mainly focused on researchers’ obligations to participants (for example, informed consent, protection of privacy, confidentiality, anonymity), to the research community (for example, avoiding

misconduct) and to funding agencies. While these are important for the conduct of research, the researchers' responsibilities (not simply their obligations) to the individual participants, to society or to the community have rarely been included in these discussions. Yet literacy research is in a privileged position to participate in that shared responsibility as literacy would seem to be a prime condition for social transformation to take place. Furthermore, critical literacy researchers are engaged in advocacy research with social justice (a concept not often clearly defined) as their goal – a goal that could hardly be pursued without some reliance on policy.

The alternative to embracing our responsibility to society and participating in the dialogue of what is “good”, what we ought to do in practical situations to enhance people's well being, and to contributing relevant information and directions to policy-makers is to succumb to “mandated science,” that is “science used or interpreted for the purposes of making policy” (Kettner, 1993, p. 39, referring to Salter, 1988) as seems to be the case in the current political climate of mandated, scientifically based research. Kettner's work is grounded in discourse ethics developed by Apel and Habermas and is concerned with the conditions that would need to be met for consensus formation about public policy decisions.

One of the issues here is the dilemma that scientists face of having their claims used as “objective” certainties – since uncertain knowledge would provide little political weight – by policy-makers for particular political aims, and the difficulty researchers have of coping with their social role and responsibility in this political context. Kettner's arguments are made in the context of the natural sciences but this dilemma is even more acute in literacy research since culture and context play an even larger role. Kettner (1993) highlights three important problems with mandated science and why it “fails as a substitute for morally relevant consensus” (p. 40):

- *Uncertainty* – the translation of uncertain (and I would add “context specific” and “epistemologically unspecified”) findings into universal certainties and final conclusions used to justify policy. Research claims are generally nuanced, complex and contextual and cannot be easily translated into universal claims without major distortions.
- *Communicative irresponsibility* – the difficulty for researchers to remain aware that their findings will be used by others who have different goals and interests. The issue here is the perception that scientists – and for our purpose literacy researchers – are expected by policy-makers and the public to communicate their research findings absent of value and moral commitments. Kettner believes that if scientists (or researchers) are perceived as moral advisors their scientific trustworthiness will diminish and for this reason he recommends – although I do not entirely agree with him here – that different persons take on these different communicative responsibilities. I think that an alternative here would be to change the representations that policy-makers and others have of social research to better reflect the true nature of research as a social practice that includes value and moral commitments.
- *Multiplication of dissent* – opposing policies are supported or undermined on the basis of partial or over-interpreted data easily obtained from reputable scientists. The issue here is the moral responsibility of researchers to reduce the scope of political action and avoid serving the varied and multiple strategic aims of political opponents.

These problems are enormous responsibilities for the research community, and we can only imagine beginning to cope with these by engaging in a more inclusive dialogue about what constitutes “good” in the course of our research studies and among ourselves and by translating our work in policy- and practice-relevant terms rather than letting policy-makers “pick and choose” the research information that seems to justify their policies. This, however, speaks directly to the ethical responsibility of researchers to be aware and concerned about the possible implications (or lack thereof) and consequences of their work. Taking on this responsibility would also enable us to transcend the dichotomy often made between research and practice by explicitly addressing important problems for practice and society. I do not mean to imply that individual researchers taking on these responsibilities alone would succeed in changing research aims, ethics and use. This will also require a collective and vigorous critique of the discourse of research communities and the representations of the scientific world that has shaped social research. Our representations of social research and those of others (for example, policy-makers, the public) as I mentioned above would have to change.

Some scholars and philosophers have taken the position that the social sciences cannot “establish general knowledge claims” as do the natural sciences. Flyvbjerg (1993) argues that the social sciences – including literacy research – cannot be theoretical sciences and sees them as “a kind of applied ethics” that guides our practices and states that “it should rely on the study and analysis of particular cases to discern what is desirable to do” and help us choose how to act wisely. For this, he says, we need to return to consideration of practical wisdom or *phronesis*, which seems to have been forgotten in current conceptions of science. This implies that in our research we return to asking basic questions such as “Where are we going?”, “Who gains, who loses?”, “Is it desirable?”, “What should be done?” (Flyvbjerg, 1993). In other words, research is a social practice embedded in social relationships and is itself an enactment of these relationships. As researchers, our work is bound up with our lived relationship with the social world.

A PARADOX IN CURRENT LITERACY RESEARCH

After reviewing a large number of research publications, it does not seem possible to accurately represent the landscape of current literacy research. I excerpted the following abstracts from an “Annotated bibliography of research in the teaching of English” (Beach et. al, 2006) simply to serve as examples. Later I return to some of these articles (not just the abstracts) to examine the conception of research and ethics that appear to underlie the researchers’ work.

Faulkner, V. (2005). Adolescent literacies within the middle years of schooling: A case study of a year 8 homeroom. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 49(2), 108-117.

Argues that issues surrounding adolescent literacies problematize the relationship between the acquisition of core skills, the need to connect with a more expansive repertoire of literate practices, and a middle-school reform initiative that encourages greater connectedness to the world of the adolescent. Explores the concept of adolescent literacy through the terms *public literacy* and *private literacy* via a case study representing one teacher and one student’s construction of literacy in an 8th-

grade homeroom. Argues that the private literacies of adolescents need to be teased out and embedded within middle-school reform.

Juzwik, M. M. (2006). Performing curriculum: Building ethos through narratives in pedagogical discourse. *Teachers College Record*, 108(4), 489-528.

Analyzes the discourse of one teacher to determine how she used narratives during a Holocaust unit to build an ethos of authority as a teacher. Rhetorical features of the narratives were examined in relation to each narrative subgenre. The majority of narratives were event and experience narratives that conveyed basic information. Hypothetical and dramatic narratives provided a bridge between imagination and historical fact. Implications point to the important function of narrative to shape knowledge and artfully construct teacher authority.

Hicks, D. (2005). Class readings: Story and discourse among girls in working-poor America. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 36(3), 212-229.

Analyzes a group of working-class, late-elementary-age students' literary responses, writing, and identity construction, students with whom the researcher worked with over a four-year period. Finds that her students enjoy writing and sharing horror fiction that dramatizes violence derived from popular culture versions of horror fiction, as well as sharing responses to more canonical literary texts. The meshing of the researcher's own middle-class discourses and turn-taking practices with the students' working-class discourses and language use created a carnivalesque (Bakhtinian), bilingual hybrid discourse for negotiating differences between home and school cultures. Suggests the need to import "the real" from popular culture into the classroom.

These studies exemplify small-scale, local, disciplinary, possibly collaborative, critical or transformative – although not always explicitly so – studies. In all three cases the researchers make some kind of normative claims about what "needs to be done" or what "we ought to do" in practice (that is, "private literacies of adolescents need to be teased out and embedded within middle-school reform;" "Implications point to the important function of narrative to shape knowledge and artfully construct teacher authority;" and "the need to import 'the real' from popular culture into the classroom"), when in fact these claims were not the focus of inquiry in these studies.

Are these legitimate claims given the nature of the studies? Are these universal claims? And if not when do these apply? Who participated in the formulation and support of these claims? Or in other words how do these claims relate to the well-being of the participants? What conception of "good" underlies these claims? What implications do these have for practice? And how do they constitute a basis for policy recommendation? In and of themselves these studies may constitute interesting representations of teaching and literacy from the researchers' perspective, but can they alone sustain the claims made or support the implications that the researchers draw?

I will return to these articles later in more detail but for now I would like to highlight an apparent disjunction between the knowledge claims made by the researchers, the questions they pose and the data that they analyze. These generalizations, even if they were contextualized, are not warranted because the meaning, the importance or the "good" of "private literacy," "teacher authority," or "popular culture" were not the focus of these inquiries. The good in these concepts appear to be tacitly assumed by

the researchers and the readers but rarely debated publicly. Although the researchers present these studies as small qualitative studies, they fail – paradoxically – to do justice to the rich particularity of the situations and people involved. There is a sense in which the people involved in these studies have been hidden in these articles written to contribute to the machinery of scholarship, which requires publications in professional journals unread outside the profession. Researchers are writing for other researchers and to ensure their own recognition. In the current functioning and representations of the research community, publications and citations are important for the researchers' reputation in that community, but in these studies the thoughts, feelings and understandings of the participants that make these studies possible are for the most part absent.

Other studies conducted on a larger scale have other limitations. Consider the following examples from the same source (Beach et. al., 2006):

Ready, D. D., Logerfo, L. F., Burkam, D. T., & Lee, V. E. (2005). Explaining girls' advantage in kindergarten literacy learning: Do classroom behaviours make a difference? *The Elementary School Journal*, 106(1), 21-38.

Explores gender differences in literacy learning using data from 16,883 kindergarteners in the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study to discover which student behaviours contribute most to the differential learning results for boys and girls. Data include demographic information, literacy performance in the fall and spring, and behaviour ratings in five categories from children's teachers. Finds that, on average, girls enter school with better-developed literacy skills that help them learn more during the school year. This is the major variable accounting for the gender gap. The remaining portion of the gap was best accounted for by the group of behaviours labeled "approaches to learning," including attentiveness and task persistence. The category of "externalizing problem behaviours," more common in boys, did little to account for the gender gap in literacy learning.

Love, J. M., Kisker, E. E., Ross, C. et. al. (2005). The effectiveness of Early Head Start for 3-year-old children and their parents: Lessons for policy and programs. *Developmental Psychology*, 41(6), 885-901.

Examines the impact of Early Head Start on three-year-olds from 3000 families enrolled in 17 programs. Compared to control-group children, children in the program performed better in cognitive and language development, displayed higher emotional engagement, and showed lower aggressive behaviour. The parents in the program provided more emotional support and language activity, read more frequently, and spanked less than did control parents. The most prominent impact was found in programs that combined home-visiting and centre-based services.

In these studies the researchers describe systematic differences between groups (that is, boys and girls; Head Start program participants and non-participants) and seem to stop short of making explicit recommendations or normative claims – a position consistent with their epistemological and methodological choices which discourage researchers from making explicit value judgments in their work. But we then have to wonder about the implications of these studies' findings for practice and policy. Would it be possible for policy-makers to use the Head Start study, for example, to both argue for the continuation of the program because differences were found between the participating and non-participating groups and for other policy-makers to argue against its continuation because the differences are not sufficient? The question

here seems to be one of value or of the conception of “good” that underlies this inquiry – an issue that is not addressed explicitly by the researchers. How do these studies contribute to the well-being of the participants? Again, such studies present some information about differences between groups but alone they do not offer much direction for policy or practice – a situation that could easily be exploited by policy-makers.

These inquiries used different methodologies which have implications for the representations of literacy that they yield, but their shortcomings with regard to policy and practice do not necessarily result from the methods used but maybe from the questions that they pose (or do not pose) and from the researchers’ understanding of research, of their role and responsibility with respect to the participants, and to policy and teaching practice. Regardless of the research methodology they use or their epistemological stance, researchers appear to be mainly talking to each other – a situation perpetuated by an academic conception and representation of social research grounded in scientific thinking that privileges the production of ideas or publications to the detriment of social action. Social researchers seem to be prevented from engaging fully with the people and situations that they are studying. In the next section, I briefly review the traditional conception of the researchers’ ethical rights and duties consistent with our current views of research and then consider a more encompassing conception of social ethics or social responsibility to participants and the community.

FROM INDIVIDUAL TO SOCIAL ETHICS

Ethical guidelines and standards developed by professional organizations (for example, Australian Association for Research in Education, American Educational Research Association, American Sociological Association, British Educational Research Association, Social Research Association) and translated in research textbooks have traditionally focused on particular *researchers’ obligations to participants* (for example, informed consent, deception, protection of privacy, confidentiality, anonymity, avoiding harm and negative consequences), to the *public institutions* (for example, respecting the integrity, policy and values of these institutions) in which they conduct research, to the *research community* (for example, avoiding misconduct such as fabricating data, reporting selective or partial findings, conflict of interest, fairness in the review process of colleagues’ work), as well as their rights (for example, intellectual ownership, academic freedom, freedom from undue government or sponsored agencies influence) and responsibilities (for example, accounting of funds, research procedures, findings and implications) to *government and funding agencies*.

Researchers’ duties with regard to research participants are guided by the universal principle of respect for personal autonomy, the idea that individuals should never be used as a means to an end, and that individuals have the right to self-determination – principles grounded in Kantian moral philosophy. Most research textbooks acknowledge the dilemma that exists between the public’s right to know and the individual’s right to privacy and self-determination, a dilemma that seems to be at the core of research practice but one that is rarely explored to consider the researcher’s social responsibility. Educational researchers’ rights as reflected in some of these

ethical standards also seem to be grounded in a similar principle of autonomy, self-determination and academic freedom. Most current codes of research ethics still reflect the primacy that the Enlightenment gave to individual autonomy and its separation from any moral order (Ross, 1991, Christians, 2000) – a view that is consistent with the idea of neutral science. In other words, science is to be preoccupied with the idea of truth not the idea of good. By focusing almost exclusively on individual autonomy and rarely addressing social responsibility, the current code of ethics still supports a view of research that is value-free or at least one in which values are not addressed explicitly. Institutional Review Boards in charge of monitoring researchers' ethical conduct seem more concerned about protecting the institutions than with encouraging researchers' social responsibilities.

My intention here is not to conduct an extensive review of the conceptions of ethics that have been advanced in educational and social research but rather to problematize our research practice as complicit inaction or as a purposeful and explicit practice aimed at social action and transformation. Currently there is a sense in which researchers are satisfied in constructing knowledge by conscientiously following the methodological and ethical protocols sanctioned by the academy, but they appear to have little concern for their social responsibilities and the social consequences of their work. I want to argue here that researchers are responsible for the knowledge or representations that they create and that they cannot simply walk away from these and pretend that they have no responsibility for what others do with these representations. Other researchers speak a rhetoric of social justice and critical literacy but fall short of their responsibility to make their research matter.

Some scholars have articulated a conception of educational research that is quite different from that reflected in the traditional code of ethics (mostly aimed at preventing harmful research) and current research practice. Recognizing that *non-harmful* research is not equivalent to *good* research, Hostetler (2005) states: "For their research to be deemed good in a strong sense, education researchers must be able to articulate some sound connection between their work and a robust and justifiable conception of human well-being" (p. 16). He acknowledges that history and convention have worked against such a conception of research and warned that conventional research practices seem to have conceived good research as methodological and procedural matters. Although he recognizes the importance of methodological debates he believes that good research is ultimately an ethical issue and that questions of well-being should be foregrounded and "vigorously debated". Hostetler points to the complexity of the question of what is "good" but also to the importance of making it an object of inquiry and of developing "an ethical conception of what is good" (p. 21). He concludes that as researchers we need to go beyond our traditional research questions and that

[w]e need to think about how we can make life better for people. We need to think beyond our taken-for-granted ideas of well-being and what is good and make those ideas the objects of serious, communal inquiry. Serving people's well-being is a great challenge, but it is also our greatest calling (p. 21).

Such a conception of ethical research transcends conventional ethical research guidelines in directly addressing the greater social responsibility of enhancing the well-being of individuals, and of improving the community (communal well-being)

and society in general. Hostetler's conception of good research rests on the same universal principle of respect for individuals but broadens it to include people's dignity and humanity and reintegrates this principle with a sense of moral order through an inquiry into what constitutes "good." Ethical concerns here go well beyond methodological and procedural issues and make aims and values (well-being and good) the focus of inquiry – a social responsibility to the others participating in the inquiry.

Other researchers have also critiqued or moved beyond the traditional ethical guidelines described above. Some have argued, for example, that true informed consent is not really possible because of the unpredictable nature of research, the process by which we obtain consent, the myth of anonymity and confidentiality, the problematic relations of power between researchers and participants, and the fact that some research practices may essentially be coercive (for example, Eisner, 1991; Fine et al., 2000; Malone, 2003).

The last few decades have also seen the development of other conceptions of ethics and a transcendence of the traditional code of ethics still used by most researchers. Feminist ethics (for example, Gilligan, 1982, 1983; Noddings, 1984) has taken a radical departure from the simple preoccupation with individual autonomy and avoiding harm by focusing instead on an ethic of care for the others in teaching and in research – an ethic where empathy, nurturance and collaboration with the others are central to the research process. Proponents of social ethics (for example, Siegfried, 1996) have critiqued feminist ethics for equating women with caring – hence making ethics and morality gender-based – and instead advocate for a social morality not based on absolute or universal principles but constructed within the communities in which we work. This essentially calls for reintegrating the care and concerns for others with concerns for the good of communities.

In the work of literacy researchers who take an advocacy stance there is a commitment to serve the interests of the least advantaged, but the conception of what is *good* underlying their research is rarely explicit or debated. Reviewing the work of several advocacy researchers, Cherland and Harper (2007) illustrate how the principles of social justice that underlie critical literacy research are not always articulated or a focus of inquiry. Some researchers focus on access to education and they study and denounce educational practices, discourse, and instructional policies that deny such access for particular groups of students (for example, the poor or bilingual immigrants) and devalue their lived experiences (for example, Gutiérrez et al., 1999; Hicks, 2002). Here education is conceived as the main way to attain social justice. Others focus on cultural and social reproduction of an unjust society and work on individual agency or identity with particular groups (for example, middle-class girls, lesbian teens) using such concepts as resistance and hegemony (for example, Cherland, 1994; Blackburn, 2002). Justice here appears to be in the social order that is reproduced by the individual and that changing the self, the identity and enactment of self will contribute to social change.

Advocacy researchers all believe in the need for social change and in the contribution of their research to make it happen. But, in addition to the lack of clarity with regard to the idea of social justice, Cherland and Harper (2007) also conclude that, "There is no clear agreement about appropriate ethics for advocacy research [but]...[w]hat

advocacy researchers in literacy education seem to have in common is an ethic of responsibility for the other” (p. 221) and feelings of empathy. Referencing Boler (1999) they also caution against the risk of engaging in empathy alone and acknowledge that

... empathy alone cannot sustain an ethic of responsibility to the other, or inspire transformative action in the world....Inspiration to act for change may require seeing oneself as implicated in the social forces that create the obstacles that others confront. More than empathy, it is the awareness of one’s own privilege and one’s own complicity in the system that sustains it, that may produce an ethic of responsibility to the other (pp. 223-224).

The awareness of one’s own privilege and complicity in the system that sustains it, or the power relations that are integral to working with the least-advantaged, remains for the most part unacknowledged or unanalyzed in research practice. Power relations are inherent to current research practice and are mostly unacknowledged – a consequence of how social research is currently conceived and sanctioned by the academy and the research community. Even advocates of critical literacy rarely grapple with the power relations in which they work and this may explain why their claims can be perceived as somewhat rhetorical. Because of this there is a danger of speaking for the other, of imposing our taken-for-granted ideas of good (particularly when these remain implicit) on the research participants and in representing them in research writing. Fine (1994) observed that “[m]uch of qualitative research has reproduced, if contradiction-filled, a colonizing discourse of the ‘Other’” and how “researchers have spoken ‘of’ and ‘for’ Others while occluding [themselves] and [their] own investments ...” (p. 70).

The problem here is the imposition of a particular conception of good on research participants and the absence of the realization of doing so – a problem that can only be addressed through inclusive dialogue and active participation in this dialogue. In addition to their concerns of misrepresenting others and themselves, Fine et al. (2000) later emphasize the researchers’ social responsibilities to the communities in which they work and to public policy.

Because we write between poor communities and social policy at a time of Right-wing triumph, and because we seek to be taken seriously by both audiences, we know it is essential to think through the power, obligations, and responsibilities of social research. Entering the contemporary montage of perverse representations of the poor and working-class men and women, especially people of colour, we write with and for community organizers, policy-makers, local activists, the public, and graduate students. (p. 108).

Although it is clear that there is not a single view of what constitutes appropriate research ethics, a number of ideas have progressively emerged from the writing of scholars who have tackled alternative ways of thinking about the issue. These ideas include concerns for others and their well-being, attention to misrepresenting others and imposing taken-for-granted ideas of *good*, limitation of empathy alone, commitment to social justice and social transformation, necessity to explicitly pose the question of what constitutes *good* and to make it an object of communal inquiry, and responsibility to write our work for many different audiences including policy-makers. Taken as a whole these ideas yield a very different conception of research

ethics than what is typically presented as a professional code of ethics for researchers and graduate students. Let us then re-imagine literacy research in this context as a form of applied social ethics.

LITERACY RESEARCH AS APPLIED SOCIAL ETHICS

Let me now return to some of the studies I discussed earlier in this article and examine them within the framework provided by an applied social ethics. First let me say that the studies presented above undoubtedly meet the current standards of the field and my purpose here is not to question them on these grounds. I also do not doubt that these researchers were well-intentioned and that they may have hoped for their studies to result in better conditions for students and teachers. Yet considering the work of others as well as my own, I continue to be ill at ease with how little research seems to inspire change or motivate social action. It is indeed the case that literacy research does not yield the kind of social transformation that it envisions. Now I want to scrutinize the studies discussed earlier with reference to the emerging principles of research ethics as I am trying to articulate them. What would these researchers have done differently if their conception of research were framed within a conception of social ethics – that is, a concern for others and their well-being and a preoccupation with debating what is good, a commitment to social action and a social responsibility to inform policy.

Faulkner's (2005) study, for example, places a premium on what she calls "private literacy" and implies that this would be a "good" thing to explore. In her article she lists examples of out-of-school activities that adolescents are presumably engaged in and argues that these could inform their conceptions of literacy and could give them better access to "public" or school literacy. What she considers "private literacy" may not be viewed as such by the students. In fact, it appears that the student she portrays in her study only conceives of his own literacy in terms of the teacher's representation of it (public literacy) and his difficulties in developing the skills and understandings that such a representation implies. Faulkner herself states:

Bede [the student] constructed literacy as something that was school based....In fact, it was obvious from comments and observation that literacy was seen as academic. Bede constructed literacy as "reading, writing and all that; spelling better and writing better; writing a sentence pretty good without changing it; spelling tests; writing as much down as we possibly can; listening; essay writing; and better reading skills." Bede presents a snapshot of a student struggling with the school-based academic literacy favoured by his teacher (p. 116).

We do not hear other students' voices about what they consider important literary activities. The question of what is "good" for them and the community in which they live is not posed or debated, but rather a particular conception of "good" appears to be imposed by the researcher's perception of them through her study of the case of one student. How would the students benefit from what she suggests in the implications of her study? How is the study transformative? What social action does it call for? And can it legitimately inform policy? These are some of the questions that we would want to see addressed if we were working from a more social and responsible research ethics.

Juzwik's (2006) study raises similar questions. She focuses on the concept of teacher's authority – a concept that she poses as important and “good” for teachers to develop but one that I presume would not rally consensus in the field. To be fair, she develops an extended theoretical argument to support her position and even anticipates and responds to several possible objections to her position on the issue. Her study is then presented as an extensive analysis of a teacher's and her students' narrative and how the teacher's use of different types of narrative contributes to developing her authority in the classroom. The study is, in essence, a researcher's interpretation of what she observed in a classroom over a six-month period. Although Juzwik characterizes her study as collaborative, there is little evidence of this collaboration in her writing other than she was allowed to be in the classroom for that period of time. But was her interpretation shared with and by the teacher? In other words, does the teacher interpret her use of narrative as an attempt to establish her authority in the classroom? What are the teacher's understandings of her teaching? How do the students react and understand the use of narrative or the concept of teacher authority? Do they perceive it as such and do they place the same value on this concept as the researcher does? How is it good for them and the community in which they live (what does it teach them about their relationship to authority)? We cannot find answers to these questions because the teacher's and students' interpretations of their experiences in the classroom are absent from the study.

Larger scale studies similarly silence participants by imposing on their experiences a way of understanding the world which is not their own. The analytical framework used by researchers in these studies imposes categories of thought and values that are taken for granted. The Love, Kisker, Ross et al. (2005) study poses cognitive and language development, emotional engagement, lower aggressive behaviour and parents' emotional support for their children as “good” outcomes of the Head Start program compared to the level of these variables in the study participants not benefiting of the program. These categories of behaviours are imposed normatively by the researchers on the participants and “objectively” measured to rally evidence in support of the program. Researchers in this research tradition are completely detached from the participants without concerns for their well-being and the community in which they live. Researchers here step back from involvement with the participants and do not recognize their responsibility for the situations they research. Even assuming that the measures used in this study to represent these behaviours are meaningful, they still only give a particular representation of the study participants. While we may all agree that these are important developments for children and parents, how do parents in the study conceive of their own well-being and what conceptions of “good” do they have for their children, for themselves and for the community in which they live? The researchers' methodological choices require their detachment from the study participants and allow them to passively observe differences between the two groups they study – there is no place here for concerns for the others or their well-being, for debating and inquiring about what is good or for social transformation or action. As mentioned before, the good is implied in the differences between the two groups, but these differences are small and could be used by policy-makers to make any decisions they want based on the value they attribute to these small differences.

I could continue analysing studies along these lines. However, my point here is not to specifically target these three studies but simply to use them as examples of how our

current research studies and practices fall short when considered from a social ethics perspective. How or whether participants benefit from our research studies, and how and whether these studies attend to or conceive of the notion of good and participants' well-being are issues that are for the most part tacit and unclear or simply not the researchers' concern. Given these limitations it is therefore difficult to imagine how literacy research could be transformative, call for social action, or legitimately inform public policy.

If, as literacy researchers, we considered these broad social responsibilities as our own and an integral part of our research practices, the questions we pose would also be different. From that perspective it is difficult to imagine what major issues literacy researchers would address because currently many studies are defined from a disciplinary standpoint in which most stakeholders have not participated. So, for example, one could wonder what larger social issue underlies Faulkner's study of public versus private literacy. Is it simply a question of dual conceptions of literacy? Or could it be the alienation of certain groups of students from school-work, the discrepancy between home, peers and school values or some other larger social problems? If conceived of in this light, how would Faulkner's study have been different? Similar questions could be asked of the other studies. What are the larger social issues behind a concern for teachers' authority? And could these broader issues simply be addressed by the use of teacher narrative in the classroom? What social issues were considered in the development of programs such as Head Start? And are these satisfactorily addressed by providing evidence of a few point differences on measures of children's cognitive and language development and parents' engagement?

Addressing these larger social issues would seem to require different research activities than those in which most of us have been engaged. In conducting single studies, researchers can demonstrate concerns for and responsibilities to the participants as well as making the conception of good that underlies their study an explicit focus of their inquiry. But I do not believe that single studies of particular cases as currently conceptualized can alone constitute the basis for social action or policy recommendations. Each field of study (for example, literacy research), however, could take on the responsibility to synthesize and represent its knowledge claims as a whole and sort out the implications that these have for the research community, social communities, and public policy.

While the studies described above might be important for the field if conceptually, ethically and methodologically sound, they provide particular representations and interpretations – mainly those of researchers. It seems critical, however, to seek conversations with people other than ourselves (who merely confirm what we already know), and to enter into dialogue with those who may see the world differently. These other representations (for example, participants', communities', policy-makers' interpretations) are important and together they should be part of a larger dialogue in the field if literacy researchers intend to address important social problems, and inform social action and policy. Such a dialogue among researchers, practitioners and stakeholders would aim at synthesizing the important issues and the research claims – their convergence and divergence – made to address real problems and inform action, practice and policy, and at debating the conceptions of good that underly these claims.

This could be thought of as a dialogical meta-analysis of the issues and knowledge claims in literacy education, although the term “meta-analysis” would have to be reinvented, given its association with statistical analysis and effect-sizes of studies using quantitative data to test similar research hypotheses (Glass, McGaw & Smith, 1981). This meta-dialogue and analysis with a focus on the complex practical and social problems that need to be addressed by practitioners and policy-makers should be an ongoing collaborative project for researchers and an integral part of their research practice and scholarship.

One may question the feasibility of such a collaborative dialogue given the varied perspectives currently taken by literacy researchers and the values that these represent. An open, inclusive, non-coercive and non-strategic (Kettner, 1993) dialogue about these values, guided by principles of social ethics, would seem to be a way to interrogate and transcend the divide of the field and to inform policy in a more socially responsible way. I realize that this kind of dialogue maybe regarded as idealistic and illusory in that all consensual decisions will not always do justice to all who have to live with the consequences of these decisions. The realizations that decisions are never final and can always be reconsidered in light of new considerations as well as the conditions of engagement just highlighted and the maintenance of an ongoing dialogue about socially and culturally just literacy education would seem to move us closer to a more socially responsible research practice.

Another important implication here involves the education of graduate students and future researchers and their socialization into the field. Currently the major focus of graduate education is on theory and methodology – and I don’t want to diminish their importance – and the teaching of research ethics is most often limited to that which is centred on the principle of individual autonomy with very little attention to social responsibility, the common good or well-being of others. Graduate students are socialized to publish research as soon as they can and quantity remains the criteria by which researchers are hired and promoted. Clearly, literacy researchers adopting a social ethics and concern about their social responsibility would need more time to develop their inquiry and engage in a collaborative dialogue with others, which may not yield quick and frequent publications. Currently, research interests often emerge from personal experiences or from the work of mentors or others in the field, and under the principle of academic freedom these interests are rarely debated or scrutinized as to their importance or relevance to others. Graduate education would greatly benefit from more emphasis on practical and social problems faced by students and their communities, practitioners and policy-makers – a clear departure from the current state of affairs.

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