

FOREGROUNDING POLITICS IN ACTION RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT. Action research has presented progressive academics, those interested in challenging oppressive structures and group relations, with a dilemma: whether to impose a political agenda on those conducting action research projects and thus violate a basic tenet of this research methodology, or leave the adoption of a political agenda optional, thereby running the risk that the action research project will neither examine nor act on schools' role in reproducing social inequities. We argue that, in part, this dilemma is the result of the empowerment orientation that focuses the process on the "other" and the lack of continuing attention to the research relationship. To foreground politics in action research without being impositional, we suggest that a collective orientation replace an empowerment perspective. With this "we" relation in place it is possible to integrate politics into the action research methodology by examining and acting on constructed relations of power within the action research relationship.

RÉSUMÉ. La recherche-action place les universitaires progressistes (ceux qui s'intéressent à la remise en question des structures oppressives et des relations de groupe) devant un dilemme: imposer un programme politique à ceux qui mènent des projets de recherche-action et enfreindre ce faisant un principe fondamental de cette méthodologie de recherche ou rendre facultative l'adoption d'un programme politique et courir le risque que les projets de recherche-action n'examinent pas le rôle de l'école dans la reproduction des inégalités sociales et qu'ils n'agissent pas sur ce rôle. Nous prétendons que ce dilemme résulte notamment d'un penchant pour l'habilitation qui axe le procédé sur "l'autre" et de l'absence d'une attention soutenue sur les relations au niveau de la recherche. Pour intégrer la politique à la recherche-action sans faire preuve d'autoritarisme, nous suggérons que l'habilitation cède la place à une perspective collective. Il sera alors possible d'intégrer la politique à la méthodologie de la recherche-action en examinant les rapports de pouvoir construits dans le cadre des relations de recherche-action et en agissant sur eux.

For a half-century or more, action research has been part of a variety of reform efforts, all of which make some promise of bringing about change in educational practice. Progressive educators, in particular, have seen in action research a promising venue for political change – actions that in one way or another challenge oppressive structures and group relations. Because progressive educators see schooling as inherently political, exposing the political nature of schooling is a central part of the progressive agenda for school reform.

Foregrounding politics in action research, however, has presented progressives with an apparently insoluble dilemma: whether to impose the political agenda, and thus violate a basic tenet of action research – to make teachers the central authority in the research process – or whether to leave the adoption of the political agenda optional, and thereby risk having no political impact whatsoever. Gore and Zeichner (1991), in describing their use of action research with certification students, speak directly to this dilemma. On the one hand, they are clear that action research should examine the way classrooms and schools contribute to “inequities in access. . . for certain children” (p. 125). On the other hand, they consider the imposition of a political agenda unacceptable. “Our commitment to an ethic of care and a fidelity to persons has caused us to refrain from trying to manipulate students to work on our agendas through their action research” (p. 125). Unfortunately, when Gore and Zeichner assessed the results of their use of action research, they found that “more than half of them [action research projects] revealed no explicit concern for moral or political issues at all” (p. 129). Gore and Zeichner have not been alone in this concern with resolving the dilemma of how to foreground politics in action research. As we see it, this dilemma describes much of progressive action research.

In this essay we consider the dilemma by examining both the aim of action research and the epistemological assumptions of various progressive approaches. We argue that the difficulties of making action research political are related, in part, to the empowerment orientation of action research that focuses attention on the “other” and to the desire of action researchers to move quickly beyond the research relationship and the relations of power it embodies. Action researchers thereby overlook a way to integrate politics into action research methodology. To consider these issues, we begin with a discussion of the aim of action research: empowerment.

THE AIM OF EMPOWERMENT

Action research is a method of inquiry that brings academics and teachers together such that practitioners move in a cyclical manner between understanding, action, and assessment of alternative practices. By bringing academics and teachers together in this way, this approach to inquiry challenges the assumption that knowledge is only produced by academics housed within universities (Winter, 1987). In action research, practitioners usually play a central role in conducting research on teaching. Academics, however, often have an important part to play, since action research typically occurs within a university context, where teachers are introduced to action research either as part of a preservice certification program or as part of an inservice or graduate program. Most often, the action research method and the related theories used to interpret the data are introduced to teachers by academics, so that action research brings academics and teachers together in quite specific ways. One important dimension of the relationship between the two groups is the emphasis on empowerment. In progressive approaches to action research, empowerment usually refers to a process that helps teachers resist the various ways in which schools tend to undercut teachers' agency. Thus:

action research may be one of many strategies employed to empower teachers. . . . It may help us avoid the tendency of teachers to fall prey to the deadening routinization of school, the anti-intellectual culture of school. . . and the victimization motif which induces teachers to see themselves as powerless objects. (Kincheloe, 1991, p. 108)

For other types of action research, including traditional approaches, empowerment is a fact-finding process that relies on the use of scientific methods. For example, Lewin (1948), who is often referred to as one of the pioneers of action research, argues that a scientific approach to action research is the basis for empowerment. This method empowers because it enables those who make decisions within institutions to abandon their over-reliance on emotion and authority, and instead base their decisions on reason – “on a fact-finding process” (p. 206) – thereby enabling practitioners to “gain the power necessary to do a good job” (p. 213). Objective decision making, according to Lewin, not only empowers individuals but also empowers a society to better serve democratic interests.

To believe in reason means to believe in democracy, because it grants to the reasoning partners a status of equality.

It is therefore not an accident that not until the rise of democracy at the time of the American and French Revolutions was the goddess of "reason" enthroned in modern society. And again, it is not accident that the first act of modern Fascism in every country has been officially and vigorously to dethrone this goddess and instead to make emotions and obedience the all-ruling principles in education and life from kindergarten to death. (p. 83)

To help achieve this sort of empowerment the social scientist introduces practitioners to the methods needed to enter into the fact-finding process. It is a misconception, according to Lewin, to hold that social scientists will tell the local community members "exactly what to do and what not to do" (p. 213); instead he views the relationship between the social scientist and practitioner as that of equals with different areas of expertise. "The practitioner will usually have the choice between various methods of treatment and he [sic] will require as much skill and ingenuity as the [social scientist] in regard to both diagnosis and treatment" (p. 213). For Lewin, empowerment is not tied to a refiguring of the relationship between the social scientist and practitioner because he does not think of this relationship in hierarchical terms. Instead, his focus is on the "other", the practitioner who can benefit from fact-finding. Empowerment is directly linked to method and therefore the issue of power differences within the research relationship is not given serious attention.

Current champions of action research also see action research as a form of empowerment. However, they are for the most part more aware of the power inequities between academics and practitioners than is Lewin. Elliott (1991), for example, sees academics as imperialists who have taken what teachers often do naturally in their classrooms – that is, generate theory from attempts to change curriculum practice – and have named this process as their own, as action research. Not surprisingly, he is wary of how academics try to control practitioners and of how practitioners at times become dependent on the so-called experts. To challenge this historical relationship, he argues for a form of action research wherein the goal is autonomous reflective practice: the teacher utilizes her insider status to theorize practice and the academic is for the most part taken out of the relationship.² Empowerment, in this case, is two-fold: first, it is a taking away of a source of limitation or even oppression, and second, it is a process whereby teachers unencumbered by outsiders articulate tacit theories by subjecting them to critique in a free and open professional discourse (p. 6).

While most approaches to action research take on empowerment as an implicit if not explicit aim, there are significant differences in how action research is constructed. This is the case even when looking at various progressive approaches. Because we are interested in the dilemma of foregrounding politics in action research, in what follows we focus directly on differences between some of the more important *progressive* approaches. To illuminate those differences we have divided them into three categories: the political, political humanist, and humanist.³ In considering each category, we concentrate on how practitioners and academics approach knowledge production, thereby providing a framework to look at the roots of the dilemma.

PROGRESSIVE ACTION RESEARCH

Political approach

In the political approach, method is a small part of a larger political project. The university researcher in this case knows the political situation and necessary strategies for change, and tries to instill knowledge of them in others. Action research becomes a way to achieve this result. Carr and Kemmis's (1986) work on action research best illustrates this approach. For Carr and Kemmis, the larger political project is the development of a critical social science. A critical social science is an approach to inquiry that not only investigates the practical as a way to make prudent decisions, "because the practical experience of teachers is the source of the problems under consideration" (p. 126), but adds to this view the notion that prudent decision making may be distorted by ideological forces and institutional structures. A critical social science, in their view, "must provide ways of distinguishing ideologically distorted interpretations from those that are not" (p. 129). In doing so, critical social science enables teachers to become more enlightened about the ways in which their own self-understandings may prevent them from examining the social and political forces which distort and limit their educational conduct (pp. 31–32). This corrective in understanding allows practitioners and others to act on schooling in ways that go beyond an improvement orientation and to work toward a transformation of education and educational institutions (p. 160).

An academic operating within this framework serves as a "critical friend helping [practitioners] act more wisely, prudently and critically in the process of transforming education" (p. 161). The success of the critical friend is measured by the extent to which s/he "can help those

involved in the educational process to improve their own educational practices, their own understandings, and the situations and institutions in which they work” (p. 161). The critical friend is both helper and critic. As friend, the academic enables teachers to enter into a process of theorizing practice; as critic, the academic focuses the practitioners’ attention on political issues and corrects distortions such as instances of what might be referred to as false consciousness.

Political humanist approach

In the political humanist model, politics are important, but they do not determine the nature of the project that teachers undertake. Politics may be expressed in a variety of ways, including issues of social justice (schools’ role in disadvantaging particular groups) and “voice” (the attempt by disenfranchised groups to assert their legitimate authority to have a say in local decision making and the formation of educational policies). In each case, however, the political orientation is tempered by humanism, a form of caring, whereby academics defer to teachers or others centrally involved in the action research process and allow them to determine whether the political arguments they have been exposed to will inform their own self-reflective process. The work of Gore and Zeichner (1991) and Gitlin (1992) fits most easily within this category.

Gore and Zeichner, for example, are quite insistent that action research do more than encourage reflection on school practice and policy. Their aim is political — to enable practitioners to identify and act on issues of social justice.

We see our work in the elementary teacher education program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison as located within the social reconstructionist tradition in U.S. teacher education. This tradition is the only one that brings the social and political context into focus and considers whether our work in teacher education is contributing toward the elimination of inequalities and injustices in schooling and society. (p. 121)

Gitlin (1992) also sees his work with action research, in a vein he refers to as educative research, as a political process wherein voice as a form of protest is a central aim.

The notion of voice can go beyond the exploration of issues and the opportunities to speak; it can be about protest. Understood in this way, voice is inherently political; its aim is to question what is taken for granted, to act on what

is seen to be unjust in an attempt to shape and guide future educational decisions. (p. 23)

While both these approaches express political aims, they differ slightly from the political approach Carr and Kemmis take in that the political ambitions of the academic are mediated by a strong sense of humanism. In Gore and Zeichner's work, this humanism is expressed as the need to establish relationships within the program that are based on "fidelity to persons" (p. 122). In practical terms, this translates into a commitment to respect the questions teacher education students ask in their action research projects. Gitlin also tries to combine an ethic of caring with a political stance by arguing for the establishment of a dialogical process wherein reciprocity is the guiding principle.

One way Educative Research attempts to restructure the relationship between researcher and "subject" is to alter research from a one-way process where researchers extract data from "subjects" to a dialogical process where participants work together to negotiate meaning at the level of question posing, data collection and analysis. (p. 20)

The difference between the political approach of Carr and Kemmis and the political humanist approaches of Gore, Zeichner, and Gitlin is that the latter group is less comfortable being a "critical friend." While the initial interactions between the academic and teacher may be critical and even follow the ideals of a critical social science as outlined by Carr and Kemmis, in the final analysis the focus for the research study and the analysis undertaken is determined by the teacher. Within the political humanist orientation, the academic relinquishes the critical role when it comes to selecting the focus for the action research project and the analysis of data that follows.

Humanist approach

The intent of the humanist approach to action research is to help teachers make their implicit practices and assumptions explicit, and to uncover or recapture what they do when they theorize their practice on an everyday basis. The outsider or academic really has a minor role – to enable teachers to do what they naturally would have done before the university exported their method and coopted it for its own purposes. Politics, if considered, are a matter of personal choice. Ethical and moral issues, however, are an inherent part of the process. Stenhouse and Elliott best exemplify this approach.

Elliott (1991) and Stenhouse (1985), even more than the political humanists, are adamant about the need for teachers and other participants in the action research process to have complete freedom in conducting research. In the opening chapter of his book, *Action Research for Educational Change*, Elliott, for example, reflects on his own involvement in action research projects and determines that even in the best situations, university researchers often do not like the feedback given by teachers and respond by trying to reestablish their expert status. As a consequence, Elliott gives university faculty a much smaller role in the action research project than do the others who have been mentioned. There is no talk of a critical friend or even of a caring friend; rather, emphasis is placed on teachers taking back their everyday approach to solving educational problems.⁴ The importance of teachers doing so is clearly articulated by Stenhouse (1985). "The basic argument for placing teachers at the heart of the educational research process may be stated simply: teachers are in charge of classrooms" (p. 15).

It would be an overstatement to suggest that Elliott's and Stenhouse's humanistic approaches are free of any political agenda at all. However, Elliott and Stenhouse are less explicit about the politics of their projects than either the political humanists or those in the political category. Instead of talking about issues of equality, social justice, or voice, Elliott, for example, talks about ethics as an inherent part of making choices at the level of practice. Action research as inquiry into practice, therefore, is inherently ethical and, according to Elliott, any more explicit political determination is likely to transform the process from one centrally undertaken by teachers to one shaped by outsiders.

In sum, the political approach to action research addresses the power hierarchy between academics and practitioners by viewing the "outsider" as both critic and friend: one who can provide a helpful and critical accounting of the assumptions and pronouncements made by practitioners when they fall onto ideologically distorted practices and views. The political humanists, on the other hand, address the power hierarchy between academics and practitioners by balancing political ambitions, such as those associated with social justice, with the establishment of a caring relationship that affirms teachers' individual interests and purposes. Teachers are introduced to political theories, but in the end practitioners must choose their own research question and interpretive framework. The humanists address the power hierarchy by trying to remove the academic from the situation as much as possible and by insisting on an open and free discourse between practitioners.

Their aim is to place teachers at the center of the knowledge production process and to find ways for them to share what they know with each other.

THE ROOTS OF A POLITICAL DILEMMA

Deficit conceptions of the "other"

In making their claims for empowerment, all progressive approaches to action research accept some version of a deficit theory: teachers are characterized as lacking political knowledge, as lacking a problem-solving method, or as considering themselves to have a need of one sort or another. The political approach, for example, assumes that ordinary beliefs may reflect false consciousness or other distortions. Here, remediating the deficit on the part of teachers is explicitly identified as requiring intervention by critically informed theorists. The political humanist orientation focuses less on distortions and more on the need for teachers to identify political issues such as those associated with social justice. The need or deficit in this instance is understood in terms of a set of political issues or questions that tend to be excluded from teachers' everyday discussions. Action research as a form of self-reflective practice is a way to encourage the exploration of these issues. However, simply remediating the deficit is not an option, since this is seen as imposing change upon teachers. Instead, this model tends to cast professors in a "caring" mode through which teacher choice is protected. Teachers or student teachers are exposed to critical theories but are not required to use these theories to inform their action research projects.

At first glance the humanist approach contrasts with the deficit view found in other progressive approaches to action research because teachers are viewed as having important knowledge and academics are seen as having coopted this knowledge for their own purposes. But even this model buys into a form of deficit theory insofar as teachers/students are the focus of the reflective process; it is teachers who need to inquire into what they do and who need to change. Elliott, for example, says that in order for action research to work, teachers must have a "felt need to innovate and change" (p. 53). Elliott himself, however, does not have to change. Instead, the academic serves as the unchanged changer, the catalyst or therapist. Thus, the academic stands to the side, having neither need nor obligation to learn or change. The practitioner, in contrast, is at the center of an intensive reflective process that

requires learning, innovation, and change. Others who have followed Elliott's humanist vision, but are less concerned with ethical and moral issues, are often explicit about this focus of action research. In drawing upon Elliott's view of action research, Altrichter, Posch, and Somekh (1993), for example, articulate their own role as unchanged changers:

Throughout our book we aim to encourage teachers to investigate those aspects of their practice that they want to improve and develop in their classrooms. . . . We want to provide a range of methods which can help them to gain a more comprehensive view of the situation. (p. 5)

By directing attention to the other as having a deficit of one sort or another, progressive action researchers lay the foundation for their political dilemma in that they construct action research as a compensatory project. Because the project is compensatory, if practitioners ignore the politics underlying educational issues, the academic may seek to impose a political framework. In contrast, if the project were to be seen as a collective endeavor wherein the intent was for all participants in the action research project to learn, then discussion about politics would be a group decision. Imposition, of course could still occur, but the basis for making a decision would be the need for *all members of the group* to learn, not the need to compensate for the deficit of a particular individual or of teachers or students as a group. In sum, one way to begin to challenge the political dilemma in which progressive action researchers find themselves is to view action research as a collective endeavor wherein the articulated aim is to enable all participants, including the academic, to learn and benefit from the process of inquiry.

Moving beyond relationships and positing right relationships

Progressive approaches to action research implicitly recognize their assumption of a deficit theory; they try to get around the problem by moving past the research relationship or by defining and proceeding in terms of a corrected or "right relationship" between professional researchers and classroom practitioners, so that abuse of power is no longer an issue. Rather than seeing power inequities as an ongoing issue for action research, in other words, they seek to solve the problem of power in academic/teacher relationships at the outset. Such once-and-for-all solutions, we shall argue, misunderstand the problem of power in relationship – and thereby fail to take up a key component of the process of inquiry.

The particular solutions progressive action researchers have envisioned vary. Humanists seek to eliminate the power imbalance between teachers and academics by minimizing the power of the academic. Since the power hierarchy is seen as basically fixed, the only solution, from this perspective, is to relegate the academic partner to as minor a role as possible. By contrast, political and political-humanist approaches see caring as alleviating or avoiding the coercive and authoritarian functions of power in action research relationships. Whatever the particular form right relationships take, the trouble with such solutions is that they assume that relationships can be corrected by agreeing to a set of guidelines. But relationships cannot be understood simply in terms of contracts between individuals. The meaning of any relationship is also partly a matter of context, including economic and institutional factors. Indeed, what counts as a right relationship depends in important ways on what appears appropriate from within a given institutional and historical context. "Critical friendship" appears to offer a solution to researcher/teacher power differences insofar as we accept as given the notion that researchers know best; "caring" seems to offer a solution insofar as we take for granted the "helping" status of the academic researcher vis-à-vis teachers. If we attempt to apply these solutions to other relationships in other contexts, however, their problematic character as solutions becomes obvious. Invoking critical friendship or caring and trust as ways of resolving power inequities between oil corporations and environmentalists, for example, or between school administrators and teacher unions, throws into relief their insufficiency. Setting unequal relationships on a "correct" footing would involve institutional and other structural changes; it cannot be accomplished by fiat.

Even moving past relationships, as humanists do, whether by more or less eliminating the researcher from the equation or by insisting that the relationship is structured by "free and open discourse," is problematic. Minimizing the role of the academic in the research process suggests that under these circumstances the academic has no significant authority over the practitioner. This stance, though, ignores the ways in which constructed notions of expertise and differences in work conditions shape teachers' as opposed to university researchers' participation in the production of knowledge (Apple, 1986; Gitlin, 1983). The assumption is that, since the group in power (academics) has been removed from the relationship, issues of power can be set aside and inquiry can proceed on a common footing. What this assumption

overlooks is that one can remove the academic from the action research relationship without challenging the assumed “expert” status of academics. This is because the expertise of the academic and the role of the teacher are organized *institutionally* in terms of one another – to borrow Dorothy Smith’s (1989) term, the concepts are coordered. Leaving the idea of expertise itself unchallenged, in effect, means that the power continues to reside with the academic even if that power is voluntarily shared with teachers.⁵ In short, if moves to empower particular members of the group do not also entail a shifting of the balance of power *away* from its dominant members, then any sharing of power is likely to occur under the terms set by the dominant parties.

Unless we attend to the ways that relationships are linked to institutional contexts, we will tend to overestimate the possibilities of refiguring unequal relationships. Judgments as to what is appropriate in a relationship depend on assumptions about the relationship, its institutional framework, and changes within the relationship over time, among other variables. Since relationships are always in process, they cannot be treated in absolute terms. None of the action research models we have discussed treats the relationship as an intrinsic or continuing part of the problem; instead, their focus is on either getting past the relationship or else correcting it and establishing a right relationship so that “legitimate” knowledge can be produced. This kind of knowledge is supposed to be unproblematic because the source of the problem, the relationship, is removed. Removing the problem, however, eliminates the means of gaining insight into how relationships are linked to wider sources of power. It treats relationships as merely an incidental obstacle and not as intrinsic to the ways that knowledge is constructed; as a consequence, the knowledge produced is grounded in and reflects these problematic relations of power. Furthermore, because the research relationship does not become a focus of continuing concern, researchers lose an opportunity to integrate politics into the action research methodology.

REWORKING ACTION RESEARCH

As we have suggested, a starting point for foregrounding politics within action research projects is to relinquish the aim of *empowerment* that focuses attention on the other, and replace it with a collective process in which all involved in the research relationship are expected to learn and benefit. (This would include the students upon whom teachers often focus in their action research projects). In short, research deci-

sions would reflect a “we” orientation. Working towards such relations is likely to require addressing the relationship as a continuing focus for inquiry and change. But how does keeping the research relationship in the foreground, as pivotal to inquiry, enable politics to be integrated into method and how do members of groups linked hierarchically develop “we” relations?

If we think of we-ness in action research relationships in terms of an emergent process of construction rather than the implementation of right relationships, the issue of power differences in relationship can itself serve as a site of inquiry. From this perspective, problems are not something to be gotten past; rather, they offer us the possibility of rethinking our working assumptions by reworking the relationship. We come to know the meaning of relationships in part through our frustrations and disappointments, and not simply through what is best about them (Thompson, 1990); in the more uncharted terrain of “we relations” in action research, acting to achieve good working relations in the face of distinctive difficulties may offer the best source of relational understanding. By learning how to respond to one another in action research relationships and by developing new assumptions regarding what is appropriate in the relationship, we shift the ground of inquiry and problematize what counts as knowledge.

By focusing (in part) on constructions of appropriateness within the research relationship, the inquiry process begins to incorporate questions of power as both local and structural. Examining the relations of power – the embodied character of power in relationship as well as its location in a system of institutionalized relations – allows action research to place politics at the forefront of inquiry without predeciding the analysis to be undertaken. Participants in such a process would ask, for example, how institutional contexts, specific histories, and prevailing assumptions regarding expertise have helped to shape what seems good or natural or obvious. It thereby becomes possible to recognize the legitimacy or illegitimacy of distributions of goods, claims upon others’ services, decision making authority, and descriptions of “reality.” What we consider to be legitimate, appropriate, realistic, fair, necessary, and even desirable is shaped with reference to what best serves the interests of those in power (Sedgwick, 1988). Insofar as these assumptions are questioned and insofar as the relationships within the research project are altered to allow for (re)imagining the good and the useful, new constructions of knowledge become possible.

If, for example, a particular action research team comes to see caring in the form of excessive helpfulness⁶ as a significant issue for the group (it need not be central), team members might undertake certain shifts to resist help, to refrain from offering it, or even to move in the opposite direction and make things *harder* by raising new questions. Such moves are likely to be counter-intuitive insofar as they take up the problem for exploration rather than trying to get rid of the problem. But they perform a vital function in unsettling our expectations and thereby shifting what will count as knowledge. In the example just offered, the shift away from excessive helpfulness as a mode of relationship could politicize and reframe familiar educational questions concerning demands on teachers to be caring, assumptions about teacher control, and the problem of teachers "helping" students with different backgrounds from their own without first asking *how they know* that such efforts will count as helpful. While any of these questions could be addressed independent of inquiry into the research relationship, focusing action research on the relationship itself – changing the relationship in order to know it – opens the possibility for knowledge generated from the basis of new, jointly arrived-at assumptions, interests, and standards of the good.

Once the question of appropriateness is raised, the action research participants are in a position to begin to act on them. By doing so, participants intentionally shift relations of power to create a space wherein alternative views of appropriateness can be tried and assessed. Georgia Johnson and Mike Haluska provide a case in point (although they don't identify their work as action research). They describe their evolving conception of their research relationship as one in which, initially, they had conceived of their collaboration in terms of a quasi-contractual agreement (Johnson & Haluska, 1992). Johnson, as the university professional, would provide curriculum materials and research expertise; Haluska would provide the research site (a sixth-grade classroom) and would test-run the curriculum. Only gradually did they come to problematize their roles as expert and as classroom practitioner. At first, Johnson sought merely to undercut her role as expert by deferring to Haluska's authority as the teacher of *these* children at *this* school. Yet this acknowledgement did not in itself change their relationship. Not until Johnson began to teach some of the lessons, grade some of the students' papers, and work with small groups of students, were the conditions created so that a space for a shared project could emerge. The research collaboration then became a partnership in which

both partners saw themselves as working towards a specifically shared goal which was referenced to a mutual good. Such shifts on the part of the more powerful partner in the research process are not a matter of equalizing the relation, since the structures of power remain in place; but they help create a space in which the roles and relationships involved may be problematized and new possibilities envisioned.

These shifts are always limited because embodied relations of power are linked to institutional structures that constrain (without fully defining) what is possible. Altering what is appropriate between male and female researchers, for example, will not transform or set aside patriarchal relations, since the meaning of male/female relations is not contained within individual relationships but is referenced to a larger social and institutional network of relations. Nevertheless, shifts within relationships can problematize what is considered appropriate within the relationship and thereby produce a type of knowledge that illuminates alternative possibilities and considers how they might be realized. Thus, by examining and acting on constructed notions of appropriateness, action research can undertake a form of inquiry that is inherently political and that meets the progressive action research goal of uniting inquiry and critique with actions directed towards challenging oppressive group relations.

CONCLUSION

The change of focus we recommend is neither a prescription for teacher empowerment nor a methodological panacea but an alternative approach that may work only under a particular set of conditions. However, because it offers the possibility of foregrounding political knowledge without imposing a particular framework of analysis, we believe that it meets the goals of progressive action research as an approach to inquiry that addresses political problems and that works towards egalitarian relations. Making such an approach workable, of course, depends upon the possibility of identifying some distinctively shared concerns, issues, and problems. Only if university researchers see themselves as implicated in the professional problems identified within the action research projects can a deficit framework be avoided. When this is the case, a foundation for entering jointly into "we" relations is established in which "we-ness" is not assumed but instead constructed such that co-participants in inquiry can operate from a distinctive mutual space *created* explicitly to challenge longstanding and narrow notions of

appropriateness. Insofar as such challenges are successful, co-inquirers can construct forms of knowledge that at once take up the political dimensions of inquiry and produce alternative political meanings.⁷

NOTES

1. This paper represents a joint and equal collaboration between the authors.
2. We use the term "her" both because most teachers are women and because all teachers, regardless of sex, are subject to the gendered assumptions associated with teaching as a feminized profession.
3. The categories we use are not hard and fast. They serve mainly to point to some important differences in the assumptions underlying the approaches and the goals and aims of action research, as a reminder that action research is not woven from a single pattern. We utilize these categories, therefore, to try to suggest the diversity of approaches without claiming that these types of action research are rigidly demarcated.
4. It should be noted that other humanist approaches to action research ask the university participant to play a collaborative role within action research projects. For example, Oja and Smulyan (1989) note that collaborative action research "brings together teachers, staff developers, and/or university faculty, with the goals of improving practice, contributing to educational theory and providing staff development" (p. 24). In these approaches the academic plays a much greater role than in Elliott's conceptualization of action research and the inquiry process is seen as a way to help *teachers* improve their practice.
5. This point is nicely made in Carole Pateman's *The Sexual Contract* (1988) in connection with male-female relations. Marriage, Pateman argues, cannot be seen as undercutting sexual inequality if the only thing standing between women's parity with men and their subordination to men is that their husbands *voluntarily* refrain from exercising their authority.
6. Note that the question of what counts as excessive is one of appropriateness and thus not, in our view, something to be treated as obvious.
7. We are indebted to Nick Burbules, Harvey Kantor, and Frank Margonis for their thoughtful responses to earlier versions of this paper.

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