

Chapter 5

Whose Side Are We On? A Call for Critical Solidarity With Participants in Education Research

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ABSTRACT

This chapter seeks to build a new theory in education research, critical solidarity with participants in education research. The theory uses critical pedagogy as a beginning point as expressed in the work of Paulo Freire and subsequent theorists. In Freirean fashion, the researcher asks the question, but the participant is the questioner of their own experience. In this way, the research, in which the authors attempt to empower participants, is a pedagogical tool.

INTRODUCTION

In their often cited and reprinted essay, Kinchloe and McLaren (1994/2011) redefined the relationship between critical theory and qualitative research. With help from Carspecken (1996) and Lather (1986), Kinchloe and McLaren explored the hermeneutical and ideological placement of critical theory in post-modern ethnographic research. This chapter seeks to extend that work and excavate some of the terms that are buried beneath this beautifully constructed bridge between theory and practice. As with all bridges, there is an expanse underneath that, if one is not willfully observant, will literally be *overlooked* because it is not part of the bridging or, in the case of this monumental essay, it is not expected to be under scrutiny. Who would have suspected that in the 21st century, we would have an overtly White supremacist President whose very political bearing is the clearly stated animus against the *Other*? Who would have thought that there would be torch-wielding Nazis marching on our campuses and towns chanting “Jews will not replace us” in the 21st century? In the days of 1994 when this essay was originally published, these threats would have been the fantasies of a dystopian novel. However, here we are, confronting child concentration camps and immigrant family detention centers, Muslim travel bans, the attempt to rescind DACA, young, unarmed Black men being shot in our streets, and a myriad of other daily horrors from our federal, state, and local governments. Thus, when Kinchloe and McLaren discussed solidarity with

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their participants and qualitative research as part of the overall challenge to the “macro-dynamics of structures such as white supremacy, patriarchy, and class elitism” (p. 296), they are describing these as the expanse under the bridge. When they consider solidarity, it has an assumed meaning of cooperation with groups who have goals that match with liberation pedagogy (p. 288).

This is not a criticism of their engineering; however, it is indicative of the ways that critical researchers approached these topics before the turn of the 21st century. It was not seen as necessary to explain that White supremacy was the force destroying the semblance of democracy in America. It was a time to move on and call out *structures* since the overt rhetoric of the Nazi and the Southern Klansman had been relegated to the ash heap of history. Critical theorists were concerned with rooting out the hidden, larger overarching climate of oppression, not the weather of today’s tweet storms that snap us from one outrage to the next. With the daily in-your-face tweeting and speechifying, and then the gaslighting and lying about those explicit messages, critical researchers are faced with a facile, yet all too real, dilemma in the age of Trump and beyond. We must decide whose side we are on. It seems almost ridiculous to question it because, as critical researchers, we have already chosen. We have taken a stance. Yet in our work, some continue to avoid directly describing the situation. Fear of tenure committees, rightwing trolls, our White colleagues, White students, White community members, or an unnamed feeling of fear that our work will not be well-received keeps us from stirring up *good trouble*. While we share every horror on Facebook, we are timid in our writing, and in our research. We are narrow in our vision. We are light in our walk through the schools and we are afraid to look behind the curtains for fear of seeing something that will make us choose.

This chapter will seek to build a new theory in education research, “critical solidarity” with participants in education research. This theory is based on my work with teachers and students in classrooms using the framework of critical ethnography and the technique of photo-elicitation (Boucher, 2013; 2015; 2017; 2018). The theory uses critical theory and critical pedagogy as a beginning point as expressed in the work of Paulo Freire (1972/2000) and subsequent theorists (i.e., Darder, Torres, & Baltodano, 2017; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Giroux; 1998; 2008; Kinchloe, 2008; McLaren, 2015). It will also build of the work of critical ethnography on education. All with the goal of describing what we mean by the implied term of solidarity. As Lather (1992/2013) explained, in education and, by extension, education research, we, “have failed to probe the degree to which ‘empowerment’ becomes something done ‘by liberated pedagogies ‘to’ or ‘for’ the as-yet-unliberated” (p. 169). Kinchloe and McLaren (2011) remind us of the Freirean call to *name the world*:

Researchers must always speak/write about the world in terms of something else in the world, “in relation to...” As creatures of the world, we are oriented to it in a way that prevents us from grounding our theories amid perspectives outside of it. Thus, whether we like it or not, we are all destined as interpreters to analyze from within its boundaries amid blinders. (p. 294)

In regard to that lens and interpretive vision, being a mostly White researcher of mixed European and Choctaw heritage, I work to interrogate my own privilege and the power relations that are inherent in my position. As a culturally and outwardly White, cis-gendered, middle class male, I am cognizant that this social power can bias my work and even invalidate it (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Ellsworth, 1989; Kinchloe & McLaren, 2011; Lather, 1992). The question has not been sufficiently answered in this new age if the power dynamics involved in research, from the relatively privileged position of researcher, can empower another individual.

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