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A Fairy Tale About Teacher Research in Conservative Times

Collaborative Action Researchers for Democratic Communities

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A Fairy Tale about Teacher Research in Conservative Times

COLLABORATIVE ACTION
RESEARCHERS FOR
DEMOCRATIC COMMUNITIES

Collaborative action research involves creating spaces for thoughtful discussion, not only about classroom practices but about schooling in general. The fairy tale created by the authors of this piece raises questions about autonomy, control, and the need for participation in the context of the current conservative climate.

Southern California is experiencing an increase in organized groups seeking representation and control at the local school board level. Some of these groups have clear agendas which derive from national conservative organizations. These agendas often center around a “back to basics” mentality and a return to a type of schooling which the proponents know and understand from their childhood. Other groups seek rigid conformity to narrowly defined viewpoints and practices. In many cases, these agendas develop into policies of control which are not sensitive to the diverse needs of students and teachers in California school districts.

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We are a group of teachers and professors who are involved in collaborative action research projects which are anchored in a commitment to democratic education¹. During the last two years, 1996 and 1997, it became apparent that something unusual was happening in our districts. A shift in beliefs, policies, and practices bumped up against our democratic ethic. At our meetings, there was talk of the attempts by district office personnel to control teachers’ political vocabulary, of the unavailability of funds for teachers to attend politically unpopular conferences, of state and district directives that recognized only one form of learning, of decisions that were made unilaterally by school boards without school site input, of district committees that were dismantled when they did not reflect board members’ viewpoints, and of the sudden release or retirement of progressive administrators. As Collaborative Action Researchers for Democratic Communities (CARD C) discussed and reflected on these happenings, a sense of dismay, a sense of unease, a sense of vulnerability overcame us. A giant loomed in our midst.

A FAIRY TALE

Dear Reader: We share this piece in order to alert you to our “giant sightings” and also to invite you to share your realities with us at the end of the story.

Once upon a time, there was a small group of teacher researchers and friends who lived in a faraway place called Nowhere Land. They spent their days working, thinking, and learning with little people. Once a month, the small group would meet to share with each other the fruits of their labor: questions and revelations about little people and learning. This fed their souls until they met again. Each teacher

researcher traveled many miles to attend the highly valued meetings. They found it well worth their effort to engage in a magical process called inquiry.

Once upon a time, there was a small group of teacher researchers and friends who lived in a faraway place called Nowhere Land.

Inquiry was a special way of talking about their work. They brought “why and how” questions from their classrooms to share with their colleagues. They listened with their hearts and minds to understand the full contexts of each other’s work. They probed to help each other make some investigations more focused, while enlarging the perspectives of others. They connected their lives to the group’s work with personal stories, and, most often, they returned to their classrooms with new thoughts about their work and little people.

One day, one of the teacher researchers reported to the group, “I’ve heard people say a new giant has come to live with us in Nowhere Land. He has been sleeping in a cave for several years and now is awakening. He’s been talking with the people and they say he has a very loud voice! His name is Kun Cir Va Tism.”

“Is he a good or a bad giant?” asked one of the teachers.

“No one knows yet,” replied another teacher.

For some strange reason, whenever the group met, the giant was always mentioned.

“He says we cannot use this word anymore when we write our grants,” reported a teacher researcher.

“What’s the word?” asked a friend.

“Literacy,” replied the teacher.

“Well, what word should we use?”

“We were told to use the word, ‘Reading.’ He said this word is more balanced.”

“What does that mean?” asked several members of the group.

At a subsequent meeting, a teacher ran in and exclaimed, “Did you read in the local gazette that the giant didn’t like the decision made by our textbook committee, so he made up a new committee of his own?”

Horrified, members asked in chorus, “Can he do that?”

“Too late. It’s already done,” replied the teacher.

Another teacher lamented loudly, “Research by Grashen, Koodman, and Cleaver has been banned. Our favorite books are not on the approved list!”

“It will cost our districts extra dollars to buy the best books for our little people,” said another.

Sarcastically, one teacher added, “If we want something we don’t believe in, we can get a **real** deal.”

“That’s nothing,” said a second teacher, “In my district, he stepped all over interactive journals and reader responses. The giant commanded that little people should not be thinking about ‘connections to their lives.’ He said they should be

learning facts. He ordered teachers to stop using techniques that elicited these responses because he said it was no one’s business how kids made sense of what they read.”

“How is it that we have defined learning so differently?” the group reflected aloud.

“Last Friday,” another member reported, “I was told I could not call our new math adoption by its title. Its title is a curse in Giantese. I must call the book by the publishers’ names. At first, I was sure the messenger of this news was joking. But no, not so. I must be careful not to swear in Giantese when I ask the children to take out their Saddison Tesley books and turn to page 35. I feared the children may have trouble with this at first, since the publishers’ names are so much harder to read than the large and handsome title.”

“What is the bad word?” The teachers asked.

“Come close. I will whisper it in your ear, ‘Quest.’”

A sign on the giant’s cave warned, “No constructivists allowed.” Language, science, and mathematics teachers quivered at the thought of what he might do when he found them. One person was so afraid, she did not attend Back-to-School night for fear that he would come. The group became fearful of the giant. Something hurt deep inside their hearts.

Not long after that, the group decided to go for a checkup to find out what was wrong with them. The doctor exam-

The giant commanded that little people should not be thinking about ‘connections to their lives.’

ined each member and diagnosed that they were afflicted with political naiveté. They needed political activity or they would eventually succumb to heart disease. “An apolitical lifestyle is unhealthy,” said the doctor. “You must increase the number of minutes of political awareness per week and drink plenty of water.”

In response, the group charged a member to gather research articles to bring to the meetings. Members clipped newspaper and professional journal articles. Others watched for news over the Internet.

At one meeting, the teacher researchers talked about the history of politics and knowledge. Did progressive practices threaten the giant? Was this like people in the sixteenth century who believed that writing would destroy the oral tradition in Spelling?

“When in history did Spelling become important?” asked group members.

“Looking at original documents, we can see that our forefathers were poor spellers and no one fussed about it, except perhaps Webster of Webster’s Dictionary.”

“The giant is an ancestor of Webster’s!” reasoned one member enthusiastically.

While the group studied and discussed, the giant ravaged the land. He put himself on school boards. He engineered the passing of phonics resolutions. Without faculty input, he unilaterally designated certain schools to become fundamental schools.

"Did you know that a person could be banned from a job for philosophical differences?" asked a teacher.

"It's true," said another.

"Does that mean that I can be fired if I believe in Socrates and my principal believes in Plato?" inquired a member.

"Can this happen in a democracy?" asked the group.

Members grew so anxious about the giant that some resorted to unusual measures. One of the group members bragged that she learned how to write board reports which said nothing so as not to alert the giant. Others hid "hot political" issues on the eighteenth page of a twenty five page report. "This covert action was symptomatic of oppressed people," observed one group member. "When the giant finds out, boy will he be mad!" And she was right. When the giant discovered what had happened, he not only let out a holler but he decided no one else could write anything anymore. And furthermore, if they decided to talk, they may only speak Giantese. No more Spanish, no more Ebonics, only Giantese.

One day, the giant attacked with even greater vengeance. He put his foot down, which made all of the land and the people tremble. From now on, no one would be allowed to leave Nowhere Land. Immigration guards were assigned to the borders to keep people in Nowhere land. The teacher researchers had hoped to attend a very important meeting in a faraway place to share their work and to warn others of the giant, but they were told, "Lose sight of this directive, lose sight of your job!" So instead, they wrote a fairy tale.

The End . . . For Now.

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Coda

Naming these giant sightings has led the Collaborative Action Researchers to become painfully aware that these local giant sightings reflect the larger socio-political struggle. The crisis we experience manifests itself as a general social crisis of economic and political dimensions. Powerful special interest groups have turned to manipulating education in order to bring about what they would see as a satisfactory resolution to current problems (Routman, 1996; Young, 1990).

Our intent has been to provide the reader with our understanding of the power of the giant. We now ask you, is

this phenomenon your reality or do you have a counter-reality? How does the giant affect your daily life? What episodes could you contribute from your classroom? What concrete examples can you offer from your own experiences? Where do you see opportunities for progressive struggle? ●

A group of educators who have come together as the "Collaboration Action Researchers for Democratic Communities" use the form of a fairy tale to tell how they, as a group, are coping with a forbidding giant call "Kun Cir Va Tism."

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We wish to open up an ongoing dialogue centered upon concrete experiences any of us have had in our quest to combat, overcome, and/or neutralize the giant. Please send responses to:

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Notes

1. "A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (Dewey, 1916, p. 87).

References

- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education*. New York: The Free Press.
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- Young, R. (1990). *A critical theory of education: Habermas and our children's future*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Collaborative Action Researchers for Democratic Communities began in 1988 when teachers, principals, and a college professor joined together to inquire about student learning. Out of this partnership evolved a group of teachers and educators who meet regularly to share and design classroom inquiry. The Writing Team consisted of Suzanne SooHoo, associate professor, Lani Martin, lecturer, Tom Wilson, associate professor, and Emily Wolk, bilingual curriculum specialist. Other contributors were Susie Weston, third grade teacher, DeeDee Carr, fifth grade teacher, Chris Byron, middle school teacher, Brenda Babe Brown, fifth grade teacher, and Nancy Jenkins, county office coordinator. We wish to dedicate this article to the great scholar, Paulo Freire, who inspired our participatory research.