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The Recommendations: Reactions and Implementation

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Chapter 6

Conclusions



We make the road by walking.
Horton and Freire (1990)

In Chap. 2, we cited researchers who have challenged the traditional academic-centered paradigm within which most of what is considered to be ‘serious’ research takes place in Western society. These sources observe that such ‘top-down’ research is not often well received by the communities that it investigates due to the fact that the objectified populations of researched societies are often not informed about the purpose, results and potential consequences of the research, nor are they involved in any significant way in research design, implementation, analysis and interpretation. These negative attitudes toward research in general are magnified in the case of research done by institutions and individuals identified with the former colonizer in postcolonial societies. Questioning the ethical responsibilities of the researcher in the research process, Smith (1999) observes: “from the vantage point of the colonized ... the term ‘research’ is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself, ‘research’, is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary.”

With such issues in mind, Tollefson (2006: 44–45) concludes that ‘a critical examination of research methodology raises several fundamental questions’. Based upon Blommaert (1996); Pederson (2002) and Ryon (2002), he asks ‘how [do] different discourse communities, including language-policy researchers, establish and maintain their preferred forms of knowledge?’. Making reference to Gegeo (1998), Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo (1999) and Williams and Morris (2000), he also asks ‘what “counts” as legitimate research questions, acceptable research methodologies, and persuasive forms of evidence?’. Finally, following Canagarajah (2002), he asks ‘how are preferred forms of knowledge created and sustained among groups affected by language policies?’ and based on Ryon (2002) he interrogates the ‘role [...] others [should] play in the research process, especially in evaluating research.’ After formulating these fundamental questions, he concludes, with reference to

Williams and Morris (2000) that ‘people who experience the consequences of language policy should have a major role in making policy decisions’.

In order to address Tollefson’s questions and concerns, we find that our experience in Statia has made it more evident to us than ever before that community based research is a framework or approach, rather than a methodology. This means that any given community based research project can, and in most cases should, look very different from any other, in terms of its scope, methodology, description/analysis of results, and the problem solving strategies which emerge from it.

In response to Tollefson’s first question as to ‘how different discourse communities, including language-policy researchers, establish and maintain their preferred forms of knowledge’, we, as academic researchers, and the people of Statia, as a community of researchers, engaged in a process of dynamic and constant negotiation over what we established and maintained as our ‘preferred forms of knowledge.’ One of the most important aspects of community based research is accountability to the facts on the ground, that is, to the multi-layered contexts that shape, and in turn are shaped by, the particular community which serves as the locus of any given study. Another key facet of a community based approach is commitment to the community in their efforts to resolve their problems. One of the most agonizing challenges confronted by academics involved in community based research is the almost predictable head-on collision between what we as ‘professional’ researchers have been trained to expect in an idealized Platonic world of unitary truth, universal inviolable principles, neat mathematical logic, and a single ‘objective’ and infallible ‘scientific’ method on the one hand, and on the other the multiplex, contradictory, unpredictable and ‘messy’ process dictated by the facts on the ground as well as by our commitment to fulfilling our promise to make our research *work with* and *work for* the community involved.

In order to maintain accountability to the facts on the ground and fulfill our commitment to the community, those of us who are academics as well as community based researchers are constantly obliged to reshuffle our traditional priorities in favor of open-mindedness, adaptability, compromise and critical analysis in our thinking and practice. This applies not only to our understanding and critique of traditional academic-centered research, but also to our understanding and practice of community based research itself. Thus, a stance of critical pragmatism is required of us, whereby we are constantly expected to co-create and re-create the research project in dialectical and dialogic interaction with our co-researchers in the community as well as with the ever-changing context within which the community situates itself. Critical pragmatism militates against the projection of any idealized models or expectations on the communities in which we work, thus avoiding the elevation of community based research to the status of just another dogmatically defined ritual in the academic arsenal of ‘expert’ techniques.

In relation to Tollefson’s second question as to ‘what “counts” as legitimate research questions, acceptable research methodologies, and persuasive forms of evidence’ the people of Statia challenged us as academic researchers to transform the nature of our commitment to a community based approach, especially with reference to how that approach might interface with the specific language policy and

planning conditions prevailing on the island. This involved moving away from an idealized set of principles, questions, methodologies and notions of ‘evidence’ to a pragmatic and sometimes contradiction-riddled commitment to doing all in our power to put the community in control of the research process.

When we were originally approached by the Ministry to carry out the project in Statia, we immediately contacted the networks of community workers with whom we had already engaged around the issue of the language of instruction in the schools. We were advised by our partners on the island to accept the offer, but to adopt an attitude of critical pragmatism in our response to the government. We could have easily rejected the project proposal without any further consideration since it was conceptualized and designed according to the traditional academic-centered approach to research. Instead, we attempted to consider the proposal in light of our ongoing commitment to the community and accountability to the facts on the ground. In terms of our commitment, we were acutely aware of the effects of the use of foreign languages as languages of instruction and initial literacy in Statia and the rest of the Caribbean, and we and our partners in Statia saw this as an opportunity to support the island community in making a change which could benefit their children in very concrete ways. In terms of accountability, we also had to recognize that the Ministry and the rest of the governmental educational system was an integral part of the context within which formal education takes place in Statia. Although we were aware that the educational authorities had historically played a major role in the causes of the problem at hand, we were also aware that these same authorities could play an important future role in changing policy and practice as part of a potential solution to that and other problems.

Thus, we decided that instead of behaving like traditional academics and washing our hands of a proposal that did not meet our idealized ‘expert’ standards for community based research, we would get our hands ‘dirty’ and make a counter-proposal designed to reimagine and restructure the government’s proposal, in such a way that it might give us some space to continue to construct a community based framework and retain a community based approach in our work on Statia. It should be noted that, while we were clear in our counter-proposal that we wanted to adopt a more community based approach, we did not completely revamp the proposal. To completely redesign the proposal would not only involve positioning ourselves as ‘experts’, but it would also replicate the ‘top-down’ practice previously adopted in the formulation of the original proposal, whereby the community itself was absent in a crucial area of research design. Instead, in the spirit of critical pragmatism and compromise, we added some components that would allow us to open up spaces and provide platforms for meaningful community input at as many levels as possible, a strategy which proved acceptable to the government.

Of course, in an ideal situation, the proposal itself should have emerged from the community instead of the government, and should have been designed by the community itself, instead of by the academics advising the Ministry or by us as an academic research team. But community based research is not designed for neat and predictable ideal situations. Community based research is instead about the messy and unpredictable real-life processes whereby communities describe, analyze and

solve their problems in contexts that are more often than not saturated with asymmetrical power relations. Given the nature of these asymmetries of power in the small island territories and states of the Caribbean, we found ourselves embarking on our government sponsored work in Stacia with a proposal in hand that had been designed with little or no community input. Based on our previous visits to Stacia, as well as on our previous experiences in community based research, however, the members of the research team felt that it was not too late to incorporate significant input from the community in shaping and steering the research agenda.

This pressing need for community input in the design of the project defined our third field visit to Stacia, which was the first visit where we were positioned as government sponsored researchers. We explicitly avoided creating any of the instruments to be used for the research before this visit and we purposefully avoided gathering data in any systematic way during the visit itself. This visit to Stacia was instead completely dedicated to expanding the spaces and platforms that we and our partners had already established for dialogue about the language of instruction in the schools with as many members of the community as possible in all of their roles in relation to formal education: as students, parents, grandparents, care givers, teachers, school administrative staff-persons, childcare professionals, educational support professionals, governmental education officers, social workers, youth workers, community activists, etc. Our interactions with community members took on various forms, including one-on-one interviews, focus group meetings, town hall meetings, and call-in shows over the mass media. The thematic thread that bound all of this dialogue process together was a focus on what each community member individually and each community group collectively thought were the important questions and problems that needed to be investigated and addressed in relation to the language of instruction in the schools and how best to go about involving the community in the investigative process.

We left Stacia after that visit with a qualitatively better understanding than when we arrived of how the community itself identified, described and analyzed the challenges and problems that they faced in relation to the language of instruction in the schools. We also left with a clear sense of how the community saw our role in supporting them in their efforts to come to grips with these challenges and problems. These insights provided us with an overall framework within which the various components of the research project could function in a coherent and complementary way and guided us in the process of designing the instruments that we administered during our fourth visit. We would have preferred to have community members play a more active role in designing the instruments and eventually administering them, but this was not possible given our limitations in terms of time and resources. In any case, by the end of our third visit, a significant portion of the island population had for the first time in their lives participated directly in a dialogical process with a team of academics designed to acknowledge, valorize and mobilize their understanding of a research problem faced by their community.

With reference to Tollefson's final question as to 'how preferred forms of knowledge [are] created and sustained among groups affected by language policies' particularly in relation to the 'role [...] others [should] play in the research process,

especially in evaluating research,' we find it useful to describe our struggle over how to maximize our contribution to the research process while minimizing our encroachment on community control over it. By the time we arrived in Statia for our fourth visit, awareness throughout the community of what the research team was doing and how it differed from what academic researchers had done on the island in the past had reached the critical mass required to ensure high levels of community involvement and maximal quantity and quality of results. We immediately resumed the dialogue process initiated during our previous visits, but with a new focus, not only on gathering data, but also on deepening the level of critical analysis of the problem at hand on the part of all of the community members as co-researchers. What we learned at this juncture was that our efforts to abandon the traditional 'expert' stance adopted by academic researchers had nothing to do with disengaging from the research process. On the contrary, a commitment to ensuring maximal community control over the process required a much deeper level of engagement, understanding and commitment on our part, especially at the level of critical analysis.

People wanted their voices to be heard and had confidence that the research activities had been organized and designed in such a way as to record and transmit their understandings, descriptions and analyses of the research problem, as well as their past and proposed initiatives to solve it. As the level of problem analysis deepened, it rapidly became apparent that points of underlying community-wide consensus were emerging that helped to transform the polarized polemics of the past around the issue of language of instruction in the schools into a process of healing divisions in the community and mobilizing the population as a whole to work together to bring about changes in the formal educational system that correspond to their common interests and goals.

The robust, complementary and mutually validating results from the surveys, narrative proficiency tests, focus group meetings and classroom observations carried out during the fourth visit can be attributed in no small way to the spaces opened up over the previous year by community workers and ourselves for meaningful and consequential input from the community via the critical dialogue process. While each set of results obtained from each of the research components proved to be convincing in itself, the descriptive, explanatory and analytical power unleashed through the triangulation of the data gathered in all of the components together proved to be decisive in re-affirming and validating the community's understanding of the problem and in convincing the policy makers in government to change the language of instruction in the schools.

By the time we left Statia at the end of the fourth visit, there was a growing sense among the various community members that they could and should assume more control over policy and practice in the formal education system. This new found sense of power was further consolidated when we returned on our fifth, sixth and seventh visits to the island to report back to the community on the final results and to support our networks on the island in their ongoing work. Thus, the community was in an optimal position to assume as much ownership as possible over the eventual changes in the classroom that resulted from the research process. From the

latest reports on the implementation of the new policy on the language of instruction in Statia, it appears that this ownership is helping to make the transition from Dutch to English a success.

Our work in Statia has compelled us to pose some additional questions to those quoted from Tollefson at the beginning of this chapter. We feel that the following three questions are relevant to community based research in general and language policy and planning in particular: (1) What is the relationship between research and social change? (2) Can research be considered separately from the communities impacted by that research and their agendas for social change? and (3) To what extent can the process of transforming researched communities into communities of co-researchers achieve levels of acknowledgement and valorization of the research process and levels of community ownership and mobilization necessary for bringing about social change in the image and the interests of all of the stakeholders? To frame these questions, we make reference once again to Pérez-Milans and Tollefson (2018), who emphasize that:

Despite important work revealing the problematic consequences of the agency-structure distinction, the tension between different approaches in LPP is not likely to disappear any time soon. The challenge for future research is therefore to sort through and make explicit the underlying ontological, epistemological, and personal/social underpinnings for researchers' claims. This effort may involve engagement with approaches that no longer privilege discourse in the study of social change, but instead focus more explicitly on the material realities of people understood not merely as disembodied life forms embedded in discursive systems, but rather as concrete human beings with substantial and inescapable material needs.' (Pérez-Milans & Tollefson 2018, p. 731)

We feel that much of what the people of Statia were able to achieve through the activities described in this volume can be attributed to an approach that strove at all points to minimize the reification of the population and to maximize meaningful input from all groups in society. In order to best meet these goals, the research process became wherever possible an extension of previous and ongoing efforts of community members to identify, analyze and solve problems related to language and education. This process unfolded in traditional community venues for dialogue and consensus building, such as church and town hall meetings where all voices are heard, rather than relying on an exclusive set of key informants, somehow deemed to be representative of the entire island. As a result, the research project became an integrated thread in the fabric of Statian society.

Concerning our first question, 'What is the relationship between research and social change?' the evidence presented in this volume supports the critique that we advanced in Chap. 2 of the artificial distinctions made in colonial and colonized societies between education, research and social action. In that critique, we endorsed the insights of indigenous peoples worldwide who contend that in most human societies throughout most of human history, the agency of every individual was recognized and valorized as educator, researcher and problem solver, and each member of any given community was expected to integrate teaching, learning, the description and analysis of problems and the resolution of problems into a seamless whole, without blind and alienating reliance on a class of 'experts' specialized in any one

of these artificially delineated areas. Such societies could be called communities of co-learners, co-researchers and co-agents for social change, and one way of describing community based research is an approach to investigation that aims to constantly re-create such communities.

The indigenous critique of colonizing research demonstrates how, at the societal level, the official compartmentalization and professionalization of education, research and social action has provided ruling classes in both Western societies and the societies colonized by them with powerful tools to ensure that social change happens in the interests of those dominant classes, rather than in the interests of the community as a whole. This indigenous critique goes further and deeper, however, to open our eyes to how, at the individual level, people everywhere, even in the most colonial and colonized societies, still constantly find themselves obliged to assume creative, holistic and synthetic forms of agency that violate the officially delineated boundaries between learning, investigating and problem solving, in order to survive and create life within death-seeking systems of hegemonic domination (Esteva 2001).

For example, one needs only to examine the countless ingenious and subversive strategies that women everywhere formulate and implement on a daily basis to ensure their own survival as well as that of their families to realize that education, research and social action are still routinely mobilized by them, not as separate areas of specialization, but instead as part of holistic agendas for survival. Unfortunately, such amazing feats of agency are trivialized and rendered all but invisible by the colonial ruling classes and an academic establishment (including 'researchers') which has been created to serve those ruling classes' interests. This process of erasure has been so pervasive and so internalized, that even those who perform these paradigm defying acts on a daily basis normally do so with little acknowledgement or valorization of the incredible feats of agency that they represent. One of the most important tasks of community based research is to support community members in a process of becoming more aware and appreciative of the agency that they still exert in solving their everyday problems, so that they can begin to use this as a foundation for reclaiming greater agency at the societal level.

In relation to our second question, 'Can research be considered separately from the communities impacted by that research and their agendas for social change?' our findings from Statia clearly demonstrate that the more research activities are directly related to the communities that they impact and the more research activities are integrated with those communities' agendas for social change, the greater the chances that such research will be welcomed, owned and taken on board by those communities in the resolution of the problems that such research activities are ostensibly designed to address. Smith (1999) effectively argues that it is not just pointless to consider research in isolation of the impacted communities, it is also counterproductive, alienating and colonizing. Moreover, the evidence presented in this volume suggests that even such traditionally Western academic criteria as validity, replicability and accountability to the empirical facts are better satisfied by an approach that works with and for communities and their social agendas, rather than in some artificial and 'objective' isolation from them. Not only did the results

obtained using all of the different instruments that we designed based on our engagement with the community and their agendas validate one another, they also laid the foundation for opening up and expanding spaces for consensus building and collective social action. The considerable extent to which such spaces and such collective action were firmly grounded in the 'facts on the ground' that is, in the real lives of the people of Statia, is evidenced in the eventual success of the initiative undertaken by them to change the language of instruction in their schools. In other words, real accountability to the empirical facts yields real results.

Regarding our third question 'To what extent can the process of transforming researched communities into communities of co-researchers achieve sufficient acknowledgement and valorization of the research process to achieve the levels of community ownership and mobilization required to bring about social change in the image and the interests of all of the stakeholders?' we consider the evidence from Statia for a positive correlation between these variables to be convincing. The greater the extent to which a given community can become engaged as a community of co-researchers, the greater the chances both for their acknowledgement and valorization of the research process, as well as for their ownership of and mobilization in the social changes resulting from the research process. As the community became increasingly involved in research design, execution, and interpretation as well as with the dissemination of research results, they became increasingly aware and proud of what they were doing to identify and analyze problems related to language and education on the island. This self-awareness and self-esteem increased their confidence and determination in proposing and implementing the changes that they proposed to those problems. More than anything else, this confidence and determination proved to be decisive in convincing those officially responsible for language policy and planning to approve the proposal to change the language of instruction from Dutch to English, and more than anything else, this confidence and determination have proved to be decisive in ensuring that the new policy is being effectively and successfully implemented.

The classroom is a flashpoint for an array of social problems, and a virtual battleground on which the competing agendas of different social forces often clash. Thus, the factors that have made formal education an experience of failure rather than success, and exclusion rather than inclusion, for the majority of students in Statia, the Caribbean and other small island territories and states are many, and the resolution of some of these problems will involve community wide mobilization over many years. The results of the research carried out in Statia were instrumental in bringing about one of the few changes in governmental policy and practice which could actually have an immediate impact on alleviating the situation in the classroom: a change in the language of instruction. But it is important to note here that some less obvious results of this research hold the promise of contributing to the eventual resolution of some of the more intractable problems that manifest themselves in the classroom as well. It is our hope that the process of community engagement that was set in motion during the course of this research will serve as an inspiration to the people of Statia, by demonstrating clearly to them that they can successfully bring about positive social change in their own interests. We also hope

that the mobilization of the community around the issue of the language of instruction in the schools can help to lay the groundwork for continued community organizing over the longer term aimed at grappling with some of the more systemic problems that have had a negative impact on the schools and the rest of Stian society.

In light of the investigative activities and results that it documents and analyzes, it is our opinion that this book provides significant evidence in support of community based research as a robust alternative to traditional academic approaches to research in the field of language policy and planning and other areas that have an impact on issues of social justice in postcolonial societies.

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