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Resisting the Impositional Potential of Student Voice Work: Lessons for Liberatory Educational Research from Poststructuralist Feminist Critiques of Critical Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

Early 21st century cautions regarding student voice work in educational research echo in striking ways some poststructuralist feminist critiques of critical pedagogies that proliferated in the early 1990s. Both warn against totalizing, undifferentiated notions of and responses to oppressed, marginalized, and/or disempowered individuals or groups while sharing a commitment to the encouragement of critical analyses of existing social conditions (within and beyond classrooms) and the advocacy of changing dominant arrangements of power and participation. In this article, I explore how conceptions of and cautions regarding two key foci of liberatory efforts—identity and voice—throw into relief the impositional potential of those efforts. I offer the conceptual framework provided by “translation” to support a rethinking of students’ and researchers’ identities, roles, and participation in educational research as one of many necessarily ongoing efforts to resist the impositional potential of student voice work.

Educational research efforts that identify as student voice work take many forms but are generally premised on the following convictions: that young people have unique perspectives on

learning, teaching, and schooling; that their insights warrant not only the attention but also the responses of adults; and that they should be afforded opportunities to actively shape their education (Cook-Sather, 2006c). And yet, like uninterrogated versions of critical pedagogy, efforts to attend to, re-imagine, and re-position students within educational research have, ironically, the potential to reinforce rather than disrupt existing social conditions and dominant arrangements of power and participation. Even while challenging traditional and conventional roles and representations of students in educational research, student voice work runs the risk of essentializing student experiences and perspectives and, as Orner (1992) warned regarding certain forms of critical pedagogy, perpetuating relations of domination in the name of liberation (p. 75).

In the following discussion I take the warning against totalizing, undifferentiated notions of and responses to oppressed, marginalized, and/or disempowered individuals or groups issued by poststructuralist feminists in the early 1990s and again at the turn of the 21st century and explore the ways that this caution is echoed by some of the leading proponents and practitioners of current student voice work. I concentrate on two key conceptions that both feminist scholars and scholars of student voice work focus on—conceptions of identity and voice—drawing most extensively on discussions offered by Kathleen Weiler (1991), Mimi Orner (1992), and Frances Maher (2001). Throughout this primarily conceptual exploration, I refer to instances from my own and others' research in which the issues I explore have surfaced to highlight the parallels between this feminist critique and current concerns about student voice work and the importance of continually striving to resist the impositional potential of liberatory efforts.

My Own Position and My Goal in This Discussion

I am an advocate and practitioner of pedagogies, research, and theory building that strive to recognize and reposition students as authorities on and authors of their own educational experiences and representations of those experiences. However, like others who have struggled with the complexities of challenging traditional models of learning, teaching, and research, I am cognizant of the dilemmas that are potentially encountered in and created by this kind of work. Thus, whereas I have written elsewhere primarily in advocacy and description of student voice work (see Cook-Sather 2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2007; Cook-Sather & Youens, 2007), in this article I focus on its impositional potential and on what we can do to avoid realizing that potential.

My goal in this discussion is not to call into question the importance of encouraging critical analyses of existing social conditions within and beyond classrooms and advocating the revision of dominant arrangements of power and participation in student voice work or in any educational research. Rather, it is to remind us of cautions offered a decade and a half ago when a chorus of voices warned against the impositional potential of an ostensibly liberatory impulse and to offer a new conceptual framework within which to relearn the lessons those voices—and current reiterations of their messages—still have to teach.

Common Origins, Complicated Developments

The liberatory intentions of critical pedagogies, of poststructuralist feminist critiques and revisions of those pedagogies, and of student voice work are all grounded in a reaction against the exclusion of particular groups based on misperceptions of and discrimination against their members. Building on earlier radical movements focused on the role of education in social

change, Freire's critical pedagogy—the most widely known and embraced form of critical pedagogy—had its origins in the political and social inequities in Brazil during the 1960s. Feminist pedagogies had their origins in the United States in the women's movement of the same period. The peasants with whom Freire worked in Brazil and the women in the Western world who developed the first wave of feminist theories and practices had both previously been conceptualized more as passive than as active subjects in naming and creating their worlds—just as workers, women, children, and people of color have generally been portrayed as lacking capacity and civilization—and therefore rightfully silenced and subjected to various forms of domination. The emergence of critical pedagogies and of poststructuralist feminist critiques and revisions of those pedagogies was driven by a “vision of social justice and transformation” based on recognition of oppression both in people's material conditions of existence and in consciousness and on the notion that human beings are “subjects and actors” in history (Weiler, 1991, p. 450).

Likewise, the current student voice movement, what some call the new wave student voice movement (Fielding, 2004b; see also Cook-Sather, 2006c; Rudduck, 2007 and 2002; Levin, 2000), arose in reaction against the traditional exclusion of young people from dialogue and decision-making about issues of schooling. Like the workers and women in critical and feminist pedagogies, respectively, students were assumed to lack “capacity to take initiatives and to reflect on issues affecting their lives” (Rudduck & Flutter, 2004, p.1). The kinds of critiques and questions early proponents of student voice work posed challenged this exclusion and silencing. Working in England, Rudduck, Chaplain, and Wallace (1986) argued that if teachers view young people as adversaries to be managed, “then it is unlikely that they can unravel the power relationship and convince students that they genuinely want to enter into dialogue with

them about learning, or to hear and take their views seriously” (p. 2). In the United States, Kozol (1992) was among the first to draw attention to the fact that “the voices of children...have been missing from the whole discussion” of education and educational reform (p. 5). And writing in Canada, Fullan asked, “What would happen if we treated the student as someone whose opinion mattered?” (1991, p. 170).

Many efforts within the recent student voice movement claim to be driven by a vision of social justice and transformation based on recognition of oppression and an insistence that students be recognized as subjects and actors. However, those of us involved in these efforts must heed the warning issued by poststructuralist feminist theorists regarding the danger of totalizing, undifferentiated notions of and responses to oppressed, marginalized, and/or disempowered individuals or groups—including students—captured in the following statement and question offered by Maher (2001): “Feminist and other contemporary theorists have taught us to suspect...universalizing narratives. Is progressive educational theory another ‘regime of truth’ whose practices silence some students and teachers in the name of including everyone under a universalized rhetoric of social and educational progress?” (p. 14). Like Maher, critics of some aspects of research that identifies as student voice work worry about that work’s impositional potential; one can substitute “liberatory educational research” for “progressive educational theory” in Maher’s question above. In particular, critical practitioners of student voice work worry about the potential of obscuring the diverse experiences of diverse students and reinforcing the disabling status quo. A revisiting of two key concepts—identity and voice—throws into relief persistent challenges of this work.

Identity

To claim that a group—such as workers, women, or students—is oppressed and in need of liberation is to assume a collective experience among members within the group. In an article that offers both a reaffirmation and critique of Freire’s critical pedagogy, Weiler (1991) argued that the goals of liberation as embodied in Freire’s critical pedagogy do not “address the specificity of people’s lives” and, in particular, “they do not directly analyze the contradictions between conflicting oppressed groups or the ways in which a single individual can experience oppression in one sphere while be privileged and oppressive in another” (p. 450). Because “‘the child,’ and ‘the oppressed,’ are neither singular nor universal” (Maher and Tetreault cited in Maher, 2001, p. 20), one can apply this argument to student voice work and question whether a student who is discriminated against in some cases based on his race might, in other circumstances, discriminate against or oppress another student in response to her gender. As researchers attempt to access and represent students’ identities within and experiences of school, we need to keep such contradictions and conflicts in mind. Just as the categories of “worker” or “woman” must be complicated, any unitary notion of student identity must be questioned in the process of educational research.

Individual students illuminate the differences among ‘students’ as a group and the complexity of identity. Within the context of a research project based in a course I teach at Bryn Mawr College, an African-American female and a white male had this exchange during a discussion of how students experience racism at their high school:

F: [Racism] might not affect you but it affects me because it happens to me and not to you and you can’t tell me what it feels like. You have no idea how many

times I've wanted to go over to a white person's house to study for mid-terms or finals and how many parents say 'No.' Flat out 'No.'

M: Are you serious?

F: Yeah. You don't have to worry about that.

M: Is outward racism brought on you?

F: What? You want to know the names? Every year. On so many levels.

M: You're right. I'm not in your position. I'm sorry.

Although different students claim and are assigned different identities within their schools, as well as within the larger culture and society, the ways their different identities and positions can come into relief when educational researchers invite them into critical dialogue must be carefully attended to. When educators ask students to speak, we must, according to poststructuralist feminist theorists such as Orner (1992), not only avoid presumptions of “singular, essential, authentic, and stable notions of identity” (p. 86)—presumptions made, Orner and others suggest, by some critical pedagogues—we must also actively listen for and consider how to represent the complexities. Illustrating her sensitivity to students' complex identities and experiences of being positioned within school, Silva (2001), who worked with a group of students to change their schools' structures, practices, and culture, points out how the students

became concerned with “the group’s position within the school and how this position might represent or misrepresent their identity and intentions” (p. 96).

In regard to women’s experiences in consciousness raising groups in the 1960s and 1970s, Weiler (1991) asserted that examination of lived experiences “reveals not a universal and common woman’s essence, but, rather, deep divisions in what different women have experienced” (p. 468). So too with students: they do not make up a monolithic group, they do not have any “single, uniform and invariable experience” (Silva & Rubin, 2003, p. 2), because they have very different identities and respond and are responded to differently based on those. Indeed, students’ identities are “precarious, contradictory, and in process” (Weedon in Weiler, 1991, p. 467), and they are constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time students speak.

Thus, as Ellsworth (1992) argued, identity might be understood as starting point rather than an ending point: a vehicle for “multiplying and making more complex” possible, visible, and legitimate subject positions (p. 113). And within student voice work, it is with students’ own assertions of their identities that we must grapple. In educational research, any interpretation of identity must be informed by multiple sources and undertaken from various angles. The numerous dimensions of diversity that go into composing an identity are a manifestation of the multifaceted nature of being a socio-cultural entity, and while all must be taken into account when rendering an interpretation and representation, student voice work highlights the importance of the generally missing dimension: the perspective and experience of the young person claiming or being labeled with a particular identity (Cook-Sather, 2007).

Voice

The complexity of identity as asserted in poststructuralist feminist critiques of critical pedagogy is played out both metaphorically and literally in the term “voice.” Echoing Weedon’s point above and evoking the words of Ellsworth and Selvin, Orner (1992) has contended that discourses on student voice within critical pedagogy do not adequately recognize that one’s voice can ““at best be tentative and temporary given the changing, often contradictory relations of power at multiple levels of social life—the personal, the institutional, the governmental, the commercial”” (p. 79). Not only is voice always necessarily inflected in these various ways, it is also created—both deliberately and unconsciously—in dialogue with other voices, and, according to hooks (1994), it should be so: “The engaged voice must never be fixed and absolute but always changing, always evolving in dialogue with a world beyond itself” (p. 11).

These assertions about voice are echoed in recent cautions regarding student voice work in educational research. Not only must we remember that there is no single student voice, we must recognize and acknowledge how hard it is to learn from voices we don’t want to hear (Bragg, 2001; Johnston & Nicholls, 1995) and to learn to hear the voices we don’t know how to hear. Indeed, as Fielding (2004a) reminds us, drawing on Lincoln: ““Traditional epistemologies and methods grounded in white androcentric concerns, and rooted in values which are understood to be inimical to the interest of the silenced, will fail to capture the voices needed”” (p. 299). And finally, proponents and practitioners of student voice work argue that we must beware of the potential for tokenism, manipulation, and practices not matching rhetoric that characterize some student voice efforts (Atweh & Burton, 1995; Fielding, 2004a and 2004b; Holdsworth, 2000; Lodge, 2005; Thomson & Gunter, 2005).

Students themselves have different takes on the efficacy of their voices and the relevance of their words. Some claim that ““the best way to master the art of teaching is to really listen to

student feedback and to change based on what students say” (Cook-Sather, 2006a, p. 345), and they believe that their input is going to be taken seriously and acted upon by those who solicit it. Other students are more dubious: ““We got squeaky wheels and flat tires....Some smooth white walls rollin’ their way right to college, gettin’ oil all the way. And then the rest of us...flat tires! Bumpin’ on down the road, making all sorts of crude noises. Probably fall off real soon anyway. Ain’t worth the grease”” (Silva, 2001, p. 95). It is no coincidence that the first student quoted above is a white female who attends an affluent suburban school and the second is an African-American male who attends an under-funded urban school.

These two student voices throw into relief the importance of poststructuralist feminist theorists’ cautions about eliciting student voice that are echoed in some of the more recent cautions cited above: “Does the demand for student voice ‘welcome selective inhabitants of the margin in order to better exclude the margin?’ (Spivak, 1987, p. 107)” (Orner, 1992, p. 87). This is exactly the caution against temporary tokenism that sanctions ultimate exclusion that several theorists of student voice raise (Atweh & Burton, 1995; Fielding, 2004a and 2004b; Holdsworth, 2000; Lodge, 2005; Thomson & Gunter, 2005). Maher answers, indeed: “To simply encourage the expression of everyone’s experiences, or voices, is in fact to encourage the more privileged voices, and often to contain the marginalized voices within the terms set by the most privileged (Maher and Tetreault 1997)” (Maher, 2001, p. 20). Thus, while it is essential to work to gain access to those voices that most often go unheard and unheeded, such as those of students who are failing (Mitra, 2001) or cutting class (Sanon et al., 2001), attend under-funded (Wilson & Corbett, 2007, 2001) or vocational (Nagle, 2001) schools, or who leave school (Smyth, 2007; Smyth et al., 2004), we need nevertheless to heed the cautions of poststructuralist feminist theorists: “What must the ‘oppressed’ speak? For whose benefit do we/they speak? How is the

speaking received, controlled, limited, disciplined, and stylized by the speakers, the listeners, the historical moment, the context? What is made of the ‘people’s voice’ after it is heard?” (Orner, 1992, p. 76).

From Analysis to Action

Recognizing that students’ identities and voices are multiple and always in flux (Kamler, 2001) and that those eliciting the voices are in similarly complex, and potentially oppressive, positions complicates liberatory efforts in educational research to encourage critical analyses of existing social conditions and to change dominant arrangements of power and participation within schools. Critical and feminist pedagogies share the assumptions of earlier revolutionary traditions—that “understanding and theoretical analysis were the first steps to revolutionary change, and that neither was adequate alone; theory and practice were intertwined as praxis” (Weiler, 1991, p. 458)—and both emphasize the interrogation by the oppressed of their own experiences as the means by which to come to “an understanding of their own power as knowers and creators of their world” and thus as “potential transformers of their world” (p. 463). Creating opportunities for students to gain critical distance on their experiences and inviting them to analyze those experiences with an eye toward changing them are key components of student voice work as well. Like critical and feminist pedagogies, student voice work supports the interrogation by the oppressed of their own experiences and sees this interrogation as the means by which to come to an understanding of their power as knowers and creators of their world and, in turn, as potential transformers of their world. This work can yield different outcomes and different results for different students.

One high school student who participated in the project I facilitate said, “[Participating in this project] made me step back as a student and just look at how everything was going on in the classroom. It made me look at how I was being taught and how teachers worked” (Cook-Sather, 2006b, p. 353). For students like this one, the opportunity to step back and see how things work and to have input into how things might be different directly affects their experience of school for the better and inspires them to further engage in reform efforts: The experience “forced me to think about certain complaints I have had about teachers, and think about how that could be improved upon” (Cook-Sather, 2006b, p. 353). For other students, such opportunities prompt the realization that empowerment and change within the school is not worth their effort—that, indeed, perhaps the school’s efforts run counter to individual student’s or group’s own priorities. One student who participated in Silva’s (2001) student outreach group explains his choice to drop out of the group: “I am not so much about empowering the school. I’m more about empowering myself and my people” (Silva, 2001, p. 97). His response implies that what would benefit the school would not necessarily benefit him or others who share his identity, and thus it highlights the possibility that some efforts to increase student participation in the work of researching and reforming schools “can actually reinforce a hierarchy of power and privilege among students and undermine attempted reforms” (Silva, 2001, p. 98).

Fourteen years ago Orner (1992) asked: “What are the sins of imposition we commit in the name of liberation?” (p. 77). Maher (2001) echoed that question in her more recent one: “Is progressive educational theory another ‘regime of truth’ whose practices silence some students and teachers in the name of including everyone under a universalized rhetoric of social and educational progress?” (p. 14). Such questions reappear in critical analyses of current student voice work. For instance, Fielding (2004a) asks: “How confident are we that our research does

not redescribe and reconfigure students in ways that bind them more securely into the fabric of the status quo?” (p. 302) and “Are the results of our research likely to be part of an elaborate means by which the powerful are reaffirmed in their superiority and the disadvantaged confirmed in their existing lot?” (p. 303).

These questions and my brief revisiting of the lessons poststructuralist feminist critiques have to re-teach us about the impositional potential of student voice work reinforce the fact that issues of identity and voice are complex and cannot be addressed once and for all. Rather, in each new context and with each new group of participants, we need to revisit these complex issues and rethink why and how we conceptualize and enact student voice work.

Lessons We Need to Keep Learning: A New Framework for Analysis

Because the challenges of liberatory work consist in large part of recognizing and responding to the ever-shifting, contextual and relational, and language- and culture-based nature of identities and voices as they are constructed and played out within various webs of power and practice, we need conceptual frameworks within which to analyze the impositional potential of student voice work that foreground those same qualities. I have found the conceptual framework offered by translation a useful one for illuminating and encouraging careful attention to these issues not only because it insists on attending and responding to the complexities of identities and voices but also because it deepens and complicates our understanding of education and of research as processes of interpretation and representation that must be particularly attentive to students’ languages, lived (context-specific) experiences, and how and by whom those are represented (Cook-Sather, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2006d, 2007). The conceptual framework translation offers re-raises, in productive ways, questions of how we as researchers interpret and

render ourselves and how we can work with students to interpret and render themselves in educational contexts and in analyses of those.

While translation is most often understood as the act of making a new version of something by rendering it in one's own or another's language, in my recent work I emphasize the term's more nuanced forms, where it means to bear, remove, or change from one place or condition to another; to change the form, expression, or mode of expression of, so as to interpret or make tangible, and thus to carry over from one medium or sphere into another; or to change completely, to transform (*Webster's New International Dictionary*, 2nd Edition). I apply these definitions to the researcher here: In order for a researcher to attend and respond to the ever-shifting, contextual and relational, and language- and culture-based nature of students' identities and voices, she must change herself from one place or condition to another, carry herself from one medium or sphere into another, and potentially change completely or transforms herself (Cook-Sather, 2006d).

If a researcher fully engages in these processes of translation, she can relate to students in a way that isn't impositional; she can translate herself rather than focus on translating the students; and she can support students translating themselves. These definitions and applications of translation can inform a process of research within which we carefully attend to, interpret, and render students' experiences, perceptions, identities, and roles in collaboration with students and thereby learn a new way of thinking and a new language, develop an understanding of new practices, and form new kinds of relationships and modes of engagement based on those. This is not simply a matter of critically interrogating from another angle who speaks and who listens or rendering in another language what is heard. Rather, it is a matter of becoming different selves as researchers and people through the process of opening ourselves to students' diverse identities

and perspectives: As we translate—*with* students—those students’ experiences and perceptions, we are ourselves translated (Cook-Sather, 2006d). Indeed, if we wish actually to engage with the unfamiliar rather than simply redefine it according to the givens of our own outlook and in our own terms, we must conceptualize students not only as informants but also as co-interpreters and expand the frame of reference in research to include student as well as adult perspectives and interpretive frames (Cook-Sather, 2007)—changes that both require and prompt translations of ourselves as researchers.

When, a decade and a half ago, Ellsworth (1992) suggested that rather than being fixed, identity might better be understood as “a vehicle for multiplying and making more complex the subject positions possible, visible, and legitimate at any given historical moment, requiring disruptive changes in the way social technologies of gender, race, ability, and so on define Otherness and use it as a vehicle for subordination” (p. 113), she articulated an argument that has bearing on current student voice work in educational research. Translating ourselves into different versions of researchers such that we conceptualize and collaborate with students as co-interpreters has the potential to help us resist some forms of imposition and subordination. As Fine et al. (2007) explain: “Repositioning youth as researchers rather than the ‘researched’ shifts the practice of researching *on* youth to *with* youth” (see also Fielding, 2001, 2004b; Lodge, 2005). Such a shift requires and constitutes a change in the identity and role of both researcher and student and a change of relationship between them. Research ‘on’ positions the researcher as distanced, authoritative—indeed, sole author of the meaning derived from qualitative research approaches such as observations of and interviews with students and others. Likewise, it positions students as subjects of study but not subjects in the more grammatical sense—as primary actors or what Delamont (1976) calls “protagonists.” Research ‘with’ calls upon both

researchers and students to conceptualize themselves, to act, and to interact differently than what many are used to in school or in research relationships that are more hierarchical and distanced (Cook-Sather, 2007). It calls upon students to see themselves and adults to see them as protagonists and analysts, legitimate participants and critics, articulating starting not ending points for understanding and acting from their subject positions.

An example of such an approach can be found in Connolly's (2007) discussion of how working-class and middle-class boys in Ireland "come to assume very different schooling identities." Not only does Connolly translate the term "boy" in far more diverse and varied ways than the single, supposedly inclusive term would evoke (Cook-Sather, 2007)—just as Weiler (1991) asserted that "woman" has no "universal and common...essence" (p. 468)—he also insists that one way we need to do that translation is to look beyond single dimensions of diversity, such as gender or class, and develop "a more thorough-going programme of work that encourages young boys and girls to critically engage with the issue of gender and to reflect upon and deconstruct existing dominant forms of masculinity and femininity" (Connolly, 2007). Here Connolly meets Weiler's (1991) challenge to analyze "the ways in which a single individual can experience oppression in one sphere while be privileged and oppressive in another" (p. 450). Connolly asks us to complicate our understanding of "boy" identity and to work with students to achieve and respond to that understanding. Both kinds of complicating are supported and illuminated by the conceptual framework translation provides.

If we strive to conduct research with rather than on students, and when we translate our notions of those students' identities and roles, we must also shift the frame of reference from within which students' experiences of school are analyzed (Cook-Sather, 2007)—a shift that is not only about how and who sees but also what is seen and how it is represented. Erickson and

Shultz (1992) pointed to the need for such reframing over ten years ago when they wrote: “If the student is visible at all in a research study she is usually viewed from the perspective of adult educator’s interests and ways of seeing” (p. 467). If students’ experiences are viewed from the adult perspective, it is that perspective that provides the frame of reference, which in turn leads to what Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2007) call “adult-centric constructions of youth” and their experiences. When students are not only informants but also co-interpreters, researchers must also look through a different frame at the students’ experience (Cook-Sather, 2007). Within this repositioning and reframing, however, we must pose critical questions, such as Fielding’s (2004a): “Are we sure that our positions of relative power and our own personal and professional interests are not blurring our judgements or shaping our advocacy?” (p. 303). Applying Orner’s (1992) critical questions quoted earlier—“What must the ‘oppressed’ speak? For whose benefit do we/they speak? How is the speaking received, controlled, limited, disciplined, and stylized by the speakers, the listeners, the historical moment, the context? What is made of the ‘people’s voice’ after it is heard?” (Orner, 1992, p. 76)—we must interrogate our positions, purposes, and processes within educational research.

Even if we translate ourselves, students, and our frames of reference within educational research, we still must remain cognizant that it is not a simple thing to invite “the voices of children and adolescents who have been expelled from the centers of their schools and the centers of our culture [to] speak” (Weis & Fine, 1993, p. 2). We must be on our guard against efforts that indulge in and ultimately dismiss student perspectives—the “aren’t they sweet” attitude that reflects the patronage of adults but does not “contribute to understanding or analysis of the issues and concerns which are of importance to pupils” (Pollard, Thiessen, & Filer, 1997, p. 2). We must not only avoid efforts that are “benign but condescending” but also those that are

“cynical and manipulative” (Fielding, 2004b, p. 200), that keep students passive, their voices “only audible through the products of past performance” (Fielding, 2004b, p. 201). Orner (1992) cautioned fourteen years ago against calls for student voice as a central component of student empowerment because they do not sufficiently consider the intersection of identity, language, context, and power that inform all pedagogical relations (p. 75). The conceptual framework of translation not only allows but actually insists on consideration of that intersection: A good translation insists on attending and responding to the ever-shifting, contextual and relational, and language- and culture-based nature of identities and voices as they are constructed and played out within various webs of power and practice. It also acknowledges that any single representation of a voice can, like that voice itself, “at best be tentative and temporary given the changing, often contradictory relations of power at multiple levels of social life” (Orner, 1992, p. 79).

Translation thus also highlights the fact that “who is speaking to whom turns out to be as important for meaning and truth as what is said; in fact what is said turns out to change according to who is speaking and who is listening” (Alcoff in Fielding, 2004a, p. 300). Drawing on the work of Alcoff and Spivak, Fielding (2004a) suggests that “the advocates of the oppressed (or, in this case, students) retain their discursive role and work for the construction of dialogic encounters which allow for ‘the possibility that the oppressed will produce a “countersentence” that can suggest a new historical narrative’ (Alcoff, 1991/92, p. 23)” (p. 305). The framework of translation, with its focus on multiple informed interpretations and multiple iterations, has the potential to foster such dialogic encounters: Being open to new input and changing in response to that input in a dynamic process make one less likely to be an unwitting tool of oppression. Engaging in the ongoing work of translation that is responsive to the complexities and ever-

shifting nature of contexts, participants, and relationships among those helps us guard against the further production of totalizing notions, of “universalizing narratives” (Maher, 2001, p. 14).

Within the conceptual framework translation provides, there is also room for imposition, however. For instance, when research does not include opportunities for students to engage in “translating student explanations into language that adults would understand” (Mitra, 2007), then adult researchers transform student responses into analytic themes and draw conclusions from their assumptions—an approach, Mitra argues, that is particularly problematic when adult researchers attempt to fit youth responses into preset (i.e., adult) categories. Gallagher and Lortie (2007) describe this process as “our raced, classed, gendered translations of [students’] ideas.” However, if researchers who seriously engage in the work of seeking out, taking up, and re-presenting students’ experiences of school “not only translate what they gather but are also translated by it” (Cook-Sather, 2007) in the ways described here, we have a better chance of not turning our liberatory efforts into impositions.

Conclusion

Using the revisiting of one of the key poststructuralist feminist critiques of critical pedagogy as a frame for considering current critiques of student voice work highlights for me issues I have been exploring in the challenges researchers face when they strive to enact the positive and avoid the impositional potential of student voice work. My recent exploration of translation as a conceptual framework further illuminates the complexities for me. As I have only scratched the surface in this brief discussion, it is my hope that as we continue to try to find ways to encourage critical analyses of existing social conditions and advocate changing dominant arrangements of power and participation in educational research, we will remember to re-learn

the lessons offered by earlier critical analyses as well as find new frames for interpretation that keep our vision as clear as it can be and help us avoid the potential for liberatory efforts to become impositional.

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