

Postpositivist Research and Pre-service Teachers: The call to
advocacy.

Erica McWilliam

School of Cultural and Policy Studies

Queensland University of Technology

Locked Bag No.2, Red Hill Queensland 4059.

A Paper Presented at the Annual Conference of the Australian
Association for Research In Education, Surfers Paradise,
Queensland, 26-30 November, 1991.

Postpositivist research and pre-service teachers: the call to advocacy.

Presenter: Erica McWilliam

This paper challenges the dominant tradition of research in pre-service teacher education, and the epistemological assumptions on which it has been based. It is argued that this tradition has silenced the voices of pre-service teachers by failing to address the unequal relations of power in the research act itself. While recent challenges to the whole tradition of social scientific inquiry have brought the practice of research forward for scrutiny, this appears to have had little impact on teacher education at the pre-service level. The particular postpositivist methodology used in this study is a move towards educative rather than educational inquiry, inasmuch as it is a move towards an experience of research that is interventionist, interactive and humanly compelling for participants. The model of research which is elaborated applies neo-feminist theory, in particular the work of Patti Lather, Nancy Fraser and Elizabeth Ellsworth, to analysis of pre-service needs, attempting to work with and for pre-service teachers rather than on them.

Notes on the presenter:

Erica McWilliam is a sociologist currently lecturing in Cultural and Policy Studies in the Queensland University of Technology. She is completing a Ph.D. entitled *In Broken Images: A post-positivist analysis of student needs interpretation in pre-service teacher education*, at the University of Queensland.

'The Master's Tools will never dismantle the Master's House'
(Lourde, 1984:112)

I wish to begin by declaring my assumptions about research in general and educational research in particular. Research has been and will continue to be 'a value constituted and constituting enterprise' (Lather, 1991:156). The 'rules' that we apply to educational inquiry, as with any other social scientific research, are social conventions through which 'the regularity of our beliefs imposes itself on the world', rather than vice versa (Collins, 1985:148). Nevertheless, despite a new mood in social analysis demanding educative rather than educational research, there is little evidence that much has changed, particularly in my area of interest, pre-service teacher education.

'Legitimate' teacher education is still very much conceived of as staying within one particular paradigm, rather than 'risky' experimentation across, and even beyond, traditional paradigms. The conclusions of Tisher and Wideen (1990:256), in assessing the past decade of teacher education research worldwide, are depressing testimony to this methodological conservatism, and the resultant impoverishment of teacher education research:

We see a disconcerting set of studies with no coherent objectives and a lack of balance; poor anchoring to the practical, day-to-day problems in teacher education; a pre-dominance of surveys with minimal experimentation on new ways of delivering teacher education; unwarranted overkill with sophisticated statistical analyses; studies

designed and driven by persons who are often not involved in educating teachers; little or no compelling effect on policy or practice...in a number of cases, projects of dubious rigour. Researchers appear to pursue their own interests...investigatory samples draw on captive groups of teacher trainees with no relevant theoretical frameworks serving as substantive scaffolding for studies. The adjectives 'exciting', 'stimulating', 'barrier-breaking', 'trend-setting', 'knowledge-expanding', and 'innovative' can hardly be used to describe research of this nature.

The last decade has witnessed important epistemological challenges that allow us to transcend the binary logic of research methodology which understands the 'subjectivity' or 'reflexivity' of ethnography (eg, Geertz, 1973) as the alternative to positivism (Wexler, 1987:43). However, there is little evidence in practice that teacher education research has moved out of its traditional location, 'a species of educational psychology' (Eisner, 1983:14). The concerns expressed by Popkewitz over a decade ago are still the agenda of critical teacher educators:

The technical definitions of educational problems and the procedural responses to reform in teacher education are legitimated by much of the research in the field. Most research tends to view teaching as a form of human engineering and teacher education as the most efficient way to provide new recruits with the specific behaviours and attitudes of the people who practice teaching...what is ignored are the ways in which teacher education imposes...patterns of work and thought (1979:1-3).

Continuing to privilege objectivism in teacher education research will exacerbate some already disturbing trends. 'Studying down' on teachers, and particularly pre-service teachers, has constructed them as the passive recipients of educational knowledge, and so contributed to their disempowerment rather their emancipation (Tripp, 1990:64). Further, it inadvertently fosters among teachers the sort of anti-intellectualism that is characteristic of 'ignorance ...produced as a defence against hopelessness' (Simon, 1988: 4).

Research on teachers eventually comes back to haunt academics when partnerships with the teaching profession are needed to prevent a further widening of the 'school/university' gap, or when academics' traditional role is undermined. Teacher educators can expect little support from teachers in fighting federal moves to shift pre-service teacher education out of our universities and into their schools. I would argue that, at least in part, this bifurcation of interests has its roots in the extent to which pre-service teachers are set up for powerlessness in their

status as research 'captives'.

Another trend which must be challenged is the tendency of pre-service teacher education research to congeal into a folkloric tradition which is tacitly accepted as the 'truth' about teacher education. Among these propositions are the following:

- students will always differentiate between 'theory' and 'practice' and eschew the former.
- the more 'practice' the better (quantity and quality being usually held to be synonymous when considering the role of the field experience).
- school culture will always be in opposition to and win out over university culture in the 'battle for hearts and minds' of pre-service teachers.
- pre-service teachers themselves enter idealistic or 'soft' and leave realistic or 'hardened', an attitudinal change in which the main ingredient is the practicum experience.
- pre-service teachers are basically conservative in their failure to comprehend the political nature of the teaching act.
- pre-service teachers are less competent/skilled than they used to be.

This folklore has solidified into 'facts' about pre-service teachers, regardless of contrary evidence or context. For example, despite studies that contradict Fuller's (1969) oft-quoted analysis of a 'proven' developmental sequence of concerns around 'self' and 'survival' (eg. Maxie, 1989), such propositions, founded as they are on time-honoured positivist studies, generally go unchallenged in teacher education forums and policy statements. This is not to reiterate 'anti-positivist' arguments, but merely to suggest that we have been limited for too long in our powers of explanation by our own methodological conservatism, a product of the hegemony of positivism in the social sciences.

Further evidence of a tendency for pre-service educational debates to congealment is a gradual decline in the academic interest shown in teacher socialisation itself (Atkinson and Delamont, 1985: 307). The point is made by these same critics that this is not the result of a surfeit of studies appropriately geared to the complexities of the process of teacher socialisation itself - quite the reverse is true (Atkinson and Delamont, 1985:308). Zeichner (1986:32) sums up the impoverished thinking about teacher socialisation thus:

Although the socialisation of teachers clearly entails more than the simple expressions of the ideas, characteristics and capabilities that teachers bring with them to the workplace, the strength and direction of teacher development is also clearly influenced to varying degrees by the purposes and intentions of individual

teachers who do not simply acquiesce to the forces around them. The dominant practice of describing only the central tendencies in teacher socialisation and the effects of institutions on individuals has not illuminated the diversity and interplay of forces that unquestionably characterises the socialisation of teachers and the occupational group itself.

It is time, therefore, that we moved from 'treat(ing) the symptoms and leav(ing) the disease untouched' (Ellsworth, 1989:306). This does not mean continuing outworn quantitative/qualitative debates which remain caught up in the liberal Cartesian traditions of inquiry, but rather adopting a postpositivist approach to research, one in which debates are enlivened by new understandings of the nature of educational knowledge. Such an approach demands much more of 'valid' inquiry than positivist methodology, in that issues of 'face' validity and of 'catalytic' validity are included in the methodological agenda (Lather, 1986). We must indicate how we work with and for, not on, pre-service teachers. This means pushing through to the implications of our research for our own practices, not just looking to others to carry out our good intentions.

A critical assumption for the postpositivist researcher is that the process in which she is engaged can never be neutral. For Gadamer, the implications are not that the researcher 'suspend bias', for the growth of understanding is not about freedom from bias but its reconstruction. Indeed it is 'the recognition that all understanding inevitably involves some prejudice' that gives the hermeneutical problem 'its real thrust' (Gadamer, 1975: 239). Rather, the researcher's reconstruction must be able to include the 'truth' of those whose observations, interpretations and judgements ought to inform the research. Methodology must allow the discrepant data of outsiders 'as insiders' (Elliot, 1988: 164).

The part played by feminists in informing educational research of this 'postpositivist' type is a crucial one. In seeking to 'give voice to the experiences of women usually unheard in theories of learning' (Lather, 1991:28), feminists have shunned the more rarefied atmosphere of traditional data generation and analysis in favour of an approach which is much more focused on daily 'factory floor' realities. Their refusal to proceed from commonsense distinctions such as 'theory/practice' in education (Yates, 1990), has paved the way for much more dynamic understandings of educational processes than previous modes of inquiry have allowed, including action research. For feminists, radical feminism itself is not understood as a 'theory', but is embedded in and coalesces with practice, a dimension which gives their work much more transformative potential than the 'imagined future' of other social critics. In the words of Gail Chester

(1979:14-15):

Because Radical Feminists do not recognise a split between our theory and practice, we are able to say that the revolution can begin now, by us taking positive actions to change our lives...it is a much more optimistic and humane vision of change than the male-defined notion of the building towards a revolution at some point in the distant future, once all the preparations have been made.

In a domain such as teacher education, where the theory/practice rift' has been identified as 'a public source of embarrassment' (Hogan 1988:187), there is much to be learnt from such a perspective. Further, Tisher and Wideen's portrayal of 'captive groups of teacher trainees', quoted earlier, indicates that the issue of outsider/insider relations, while being addressed to some extent in research with practising teachers, is not being attended to in teacher education at the pre-service level.

This new focus on disclosure and advocacy rather than prediction or prescription is characteristic of 'postpositivist' challenges to positivism's hegemony in the field of social sciences (Lather, 1991:7). Such perspectives on research processes are providing new insights for educational inquiry, not only in their perceptive critiques of what have stood for some time as definitive studies but also in constructing new contextualised models of research which can help teacher educators to discover 'what it is we have been incorporated into and what it is we have been unable to ask' (Sholle, 1988:38).

This type of critique seeks to enable, not merely to deconstruct. 'Enabling critique' or 'critique and construct' (Gunew, 1990) is most evident in education where research is understood as 'praxis' (Lather, 1986). Such research demands 'interactive, contextualised and humanly compelling' modes of inquiry, (Lather, 1986:259). The democratisation of the research process, through negotiation and reciprocity, is a central tenet of feminist inquiry.

To seek to make an intervention which is informed by this sort of imperative is to embark on research that eschews both research 'objectivism' and the passive non-interventionism of interpretive ethnography (Gitlin, Siegel and Boru, 1988). Yet, despite its suspicion about the tendency for certain sorts of interpretive work to slide into subjectivism, the approach to knowledge building in this piece of research is nevertheless in keeping with broad 'interpretive turn' (Rabinow and Sullivan, 1979) in the social sciences, a trend away from 'grand theorising' and towards a reinvigorated interest in hermeneutics and the production of open-ended, dialogic work. For Giddens (1987:47):

[S]ocial research cannot just be applied to an

independently-given subject matter, but has to be linked to the potentiality of persuading actors to expand or modify the forms of knowledge and belief they draw upon in organising their contexts of action.

In the research that I have carried out over the last three years, I have attempted to develop a model of pre-service educational research which is responsive to the imperatives briefly outlined above. It is informed out of a 'new contextualism' in which 'knowing' is an historical and cultural practice, and where research methods are historically and culturally produced 'tools' for the production of knowledge (Wexler, 1987: 84). Further, in its adversarial stance, it leaves no doubt about my own 'prejudgment', committed as it is to the development of a change-enhancing and interactive approach to knowledge building that is theoretically and methodologically provocative (Lather, 1986: 260). Such provocativeness is essential if the research model is to respond to calls for eliminating the dichotomy between educational research methodology and the construction of emancipatory theory, and between emancipatory theory and 'factory floor' practices (Yates, 1990). It means signalling overtly its own political character, by working within/against the 'legitimate' discourses of positivist research methodology as well as its own radical feminist social critique (Lather, 1991).

I have sought to replace the linear articulation of theory, methodology, method with an elaboration of a research strategy. Strategy involves recognising the situation and alignments of power within and against which it operates. It needs to know its adversary intimately in order to strike at its most vulnerable points (Grosz, 1990:59). It must also seek certain (provisional) goals and future possibilities with which it may replace prevailing norms and ideals, demonstrating that they can be superseded (Grosz, 1990: 59). For my own work, this has meant becoming familiar with a positivist tradition of teacher education research which writes teachers in a technocratic, behaviourist idiom, and in turn militates against the likelihood of their acting as agents of educational change. Nevertheless, it has not been a process which allows the researcher 'off the hook' in terms of her own prejudgments'. What must be acknowledged is that my own versions of teacher needs are 'inventions' which can be and ought to be critiqued.

In my inquiry into the needs of pre-service teachers, there have been three distinct research 'moments' which, though inter-related, are all necessary to a 'postpositivist' study.

The first 'moment' is one which brings forward my own prejudices for scrutiny. It is not that these are to be 'abandoned' in favour of some pose of neutrality, but I had to acknowledge and critique my own beliefs as narratives which

are as partial and open in nature as the narratives of my students, if I was 'to work together across differences' (Lather, 1989:20) between my stories and theirs.

I termed this phase The Researcher as Subject. It involved two distinct tasks. The first was to deconstruct the very sort of avant garde teacher education discourse to which I was committed. Because the ideas expressed in the work of Smith and Zantiotis (1988a; 1988b) were very much the driving logic of my own inquiry, it was their analysis of the discursive traditions of teacher education, and in particular their identification of a 'discourse of practicality' as the dominant discourse of teacher education, that I subjected to scrutiny. Secondly, I was concerned that about my own tendency to negative presumptions about the pre-service teachers who would become part of the study, in terms of their ideological conservatism. Like many other sociologists, I felt that my own concerns for equity and social justice would be marginalised in the consciousness of in-coming candidates as a result of an increasingly anti-welfarist, market-oriented cultural context. I presumed that their linguistic practices would be overwhelmingly a-political. Through the deconstruction of avant garde teacher education text, and through a discourse-theoretical study of 313 pre-service teachers, I was forced to confront my own mythologies both about pre-service teachers and socially critical educational discourse.

Having opened up to the possibilities that might exist outside my own pre-conceptions of pre-service teachers and 'what was good for them', I then proceeded to analyse the written and oral texts a small number of pre-service teachers produced over the duration of their course. I was particularly interested in the meanings that they generated around about the nature of teacher work through their own 'needs talk'. It was Nancy Fraser's (1989) conceptualisation of types of welfare needs talk, generated by and for a number of different publics, their re-creation and contestation in the highly political struggle to define welfare needs, which provided the theoretical framework for analysing these texts. This phase was termed The Researched as Subjects.

The third research 'moment' was to engage the pre-service teachers who had generated these texts as co-theorists in the analysis of their own needs talk and its implications in terms of the contradictory and contesting 'versions' of teaching constructed in their discourse. Through dialogic engagement in a reflective and reflexive 'moment', it was possible to remove the traditional distinction between the research process and the pedagogical process in teacher education. In understanding their talk as 'speech actions', I was able to conceptualise this final reciprocal phase, Playing out Critique in the Real, as a form of action research a model usually reserved for professional practitioners.

The rationale for engaging in this final research phase is embedded in the notion that traditions which are distorted by coercive power relations can be resisted those who are oppressed by them. In different circumstances which allow self-reflection and critique, 'insiders' can reconstruct new traditions of practice and of understanding.

Elliot's (1988) elaboration of what these 'different circumstances' might be, in terms of teacher education research, was useful here. His conceptualisation of action research in which 'the outsider (acts) as reflective teacher educator' and 'the insider as reflective teacher' (p.163) was the most appropriate in that it does not exclude 'insiders', in this case pre-service teachers, from processing each other's observations or from engaging in dialogue about them. It is the 'insider' who therefore acts as 'broker', in exchanging information, who seeks out alternative understandings of practical situations when 'traditional' values and belief appear to fail, and thereby reconstructs traditional values and beliefs, albeit in a necessarily limited and partial way (p.164). This model differs from 'outsider as critical theorist/insider as self-reflective practitioner' (p.161-162), because it does not recognise the 'outsider' as having a privileged vantage point above beyond her own or the insider's practical tradition. This represents a departure from the tendency of socially critical teacher educators to understand the problem of pre-service teachers as a failure to accept 'their' version of the truth.

During the lengthy and demanding process I became aware of the reasons why such work is so rarely attempted. I came to understand the difficulties of ensuring that such a study was rigorous, validated, accessible and coherent. I came to realise how much I was challenging, from ontological and epistemological 'givens', to methodological traditions and writing conventions. I came to apprehend the sort of disquiet such work can produce in those for whom postmodernist and poststructuralist theorising is an incomprehensible distraction to 'real' educational work.

What I also came to understand, however, is that research which involves change for all the participants, including the researcher, has a 'catalytic validity' Lather (1986:272) which is enriching and rewarding. Further, it is work which allows 'border crossings' (Giroux, 1991) between teaching and our research, between thematic schemas in teacher education such as curriculum theory and teacher socialisation, and between disciplinary boundaries such as sociology and psychology and between sets of research techniques. Transcending these traditional differentiations can allow us to operate in spaces where new meanings and new relationships become possible in our work. It is not that such research can solve all educational dilemmas, nor that it will displace all past

research findings. What it does do is work meaningfully within teacher education instead of issuing another report on it.

References:

Atkinson, P. and Delamont, S. (1985) Socialization into Teaching: the research which lost its way, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 6, (3), 307-322.

Chester, G. (1979) I call myself a Radical Feminist, in *Feminist Practice: Notes from the Tenth Year*. London: Theory Press.

Collins, H. (1985) *Changing order: Replication and induction in scientific practice*. Beverley Hills: Sage.

Eisner, E. (1983) Anastasia might be alive but the monarchy is dead, *Educational Researcher*, 12 (5), 13-24.

Elliot, J. (1988) Educational research and outsider-insider relations, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 1, (2), April - June, 54-62.

Ellsworth, E. (1989) Why doesn't this feel empowering: working through the repressive myths of critical pedagogy, *Harvard Educational Review*, 59, (3), 297-324.

Fraser, N. (1989) *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Fuller, F. (1969) Concerns for Teachers: A developmental conceptualization, *American Educational Research Journal*, 6, 207-226.

Gadamer, H. (1975) *Truth and Method*. Translated and edited by G. Barden and J. Cumming, New York: Seabury Press.

Geertz, C. (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

Giddens, A. (1987) *Social Theory and Modern Sociology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Gitlin, A., Siegel, M. and Boru, K. (1988) Purpose and method; Rethinking the use of ethnography by the educational left. Research Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association. San Francisco, April.

Giroux, H. (1991) Border Pedagogy and the Politics of Postmodernism, *Social Text*, 9, (3), 51-67.

Grosz, E. (1990) Contemporary Theories of Power and Subjectivity, in S. Gunew (ed) *Feminist Knowledge: Critique and Construct*. London: Routledge, 59-120.

Gunew, S. (ed) (1990) *Feminist Knowledge: Critique and Construct*. London: Routledge.

Hogan, P. (1988) Communicative Competence and Cultural Emancipation: reviewing the rationale for educational studies in teacher education, *Oxford Review of Education*, 14, (2), 187-200.

Lather, P. (1986) Research as Praxis, *Harvard Educational Review*, 56, (3), 257-277.

Lather, P. (1989) Deconstructing/deconstructive Inquiry: Issues in Feminist Research Methodologies. Paper presented at the New Zealand Women's Studies Association Conference, Christchurch, August 25-27.

Lather, P. (1991) *Feminist Research in Education: Within/Against*. Geelong: Deakin University Press.

Lourde, A. (1984) *Sister Outsider*. New York: The Crossing Press.

Maxie, A. (1989) Student Teachers' Concerns and the Student-Teaching Experience: Does Experience Make a Difference? Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, March.

Popkewitz, T. (1979) Teacher education as socialisation: Ideology or social mission. Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, San Francisco, April.

Rabinow, P. and Sullivan, W.M. (eds.) (1979) *Interpretive Social Science*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Sholle, J. (1988) Deconstructing equality-versus-difference: or, the uses of post-structural theory for feminism, *Feminist Studies* 14, (1), 33-40.

Simon, P. (1988) For a Pedagogy of Possibility, *Critical Pedagogy Networker*, 1, (1), Feb., 1-4.

Smith, R. and Zantiotis, A. (1988a) The Practical: Teacher Education's Systems Virus, *Critical Pedagogy Networker*, 1, (4), 1-5.

Smith, R. and Zantiotis, A. (1988b) Practical Teacher Education and the Avant Garde, *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 8, (2), 77-106.

Tisher, R. and Wideen, M. (1990) *Research in Teacher Education: International Perspectives*. London: The Falmer Press.

Tripp, D. (1990) The Ideology of Educational Research, *Discourse*, 10, (2), 51-74.

Wexler, P. (1987) *Social Analysis of Education: After the New Sociology*. London: Routledge and Kegan-Paul.

Yates, L. (1990) *Theory/practice dilemmas: gender, knowledge and education*. Geelong: Deakin University Press.

Zeichner, K. (1986) Teacher Socialisation and the Practice of Teaching, *Education and Society*, 3, (2) and 4, (1), 25 - 37.