

Book Review

M. Elizabeth Graue and Daniel J. Walsh (1998). Studying Children in Context: Theories, Methods, and Ethics. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications

by Cathy Compton-Lilly

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Garth Boomer once wrote, "To deliberately learn is to research. As a teacher, I know that most teachers are constantly involved in processes of deliberate learning. We learn about our students. We gain insights on how to present particular topics. We experiment with new ideas and we constantly assess and reevaluate our students alongside our teaching. During the last decades of the twentieth century the term "research has been expanded to include many of the activities that are routine to teachers such as student assessment, teacher self-reflection, documentation of classroom events, and student observation. Current thinking has redefined teaching as a constructive, intellectual, pursuit that has much to contribute to academic discourses about education.

However, teacher research can also involve more than reflective teaching and documentation of classroom phenomena. Many teacher researchers are committed to their role as researchers and understand the significant contribution that teacher research can make to academic discourses. We are constantly seeking resources and opportunities to develop our skills as researchers. However, accessing resources that can support us as researchers is often a challenge to teachers who face over-whelming time constraints and sometimes limited opportunities to interact with groups of like-minded educators. I certainly found myself in this position in the months that followed the completion of my doctoral dissertation.

Studying Children in Context: Theories, Methods, and Ethics by M. Elizabeth Graue and Daniel J. Walsh is a book that offers teacher researchers relevant information and important insights as we work to make sense of the educational experiences of ourselves and our students. The book explores a wide variety of issues related to conducting research with children. These range from moral and ethical issues related to the research process to the role of theory and researcher.

Particularly helpful to teacher researchers are the chapters that focus on organizing and interpreting data as well as a chapter that explores the role of writing in the research process. Specifically, Graue and Walsh present various ways of organizing data that can document events along multiple dimensions. Examples of ways to record dialogue among multiple voices across time, to capture episodes of videotape, and to document children's movement within classrooms are provided. These data analysis and presentation methods are illustrated through case studies that demonstrate the use of these and other data recording possibilities.

Interpretation of data is presented as a "complex, recursive, multistep process that involves initial interpretation as well as ongoing revision and reflection. Unlike traditional texts that present data interpretation as a linear and sequential process, Graue and Walsh compare the interpretation process to a "bowl of spaghetti with data collection, interpretation, analysis, and writing sometimes occurring and reoccurring at various points during the research process. Their chapter on interpretation includes a very helpful example of a research project that demonstrates the ways fieldnotes and transcripts are used along with observations, research memos, and interviews to develop codes during the data analysis process. Two possible interpretations of this data are described reiterating the constructive nature of context-based research.

Perhaps the most helpful chapter is the one that focuses on writing. In this chapter the authors describe different ways of presenting information "to help a reader see relations and themes that arise in interpretive analysis. Various tables and other formats for presenting data are shared. Graue and Walsh also describe the importance of crafting the researcher,s writing "into forms that are persuasive, accessible and finely crafted. It is not enough for the writing to share ideas; good research should tell a story. To assist researchers in crafting their own stories, the authors share examples of fieldnotes alongside the corresponding crafted vignette.

While this book may provide more information than a novice teacher researcher may wish to explore, I highly recommend this book for the teacher researcher who is interested in increasing the range and depth of his/her understanding of possibilities for research with children. The book is filled with methods and ideas specifically focused on the issues related to studying children in real-life contexts, including our classrooms.