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When Teachers Research: Action Research as Professional Development

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Introduction

Although academics have known the value of teacher-research for two decades, it has developed slowly in schools. Despite an early indication of the positive personal and professional effects that engaging in action research has on the practitioner (Goswami & Stillman, 1987; Lieberman, 1988), analysis of the impact of teacher-research has been largely absent from the literature (Dana, 1995). Teaching, reflecting and research have long been regarded in schools as representing distinctly different activities. Teachers consider teaching as what we do in front of the classroom. Research, contrarily, connotes scientific methods, and reflection evokes an isolated philosophical activity. Yet, we can use the language of research to describe teaching: hypothesizing an activity will help students learn, engaging students in the activity, observing the process, and evaluating the results. Many teachers do this as a matter of course, but typically unconsciously, and alone (CES, 1999). Nonetheless, with the burden on schools to produce positive high-stakes results, there is little time for teachers to investigate practice, move toward meaningful change, document effects of change on student achievement, and share what they learn with other teachers. Nor is there much support among administrators for such activity. Moreover, as schools move toward the scripted instruction that accompanies high-stakes environments, cultures of inquiry may actually be discouraged. Furthermore, current professional development often fails the needs of teachers (Brookfield, 1994). Teacher research could prove to be a more beneficial model for continuous learning and teacher professional development.

Teacher-consultants of the National Writing Project at Florida Gulf Coast University engaged in a year-long action research adventure, investigating issues important in their classrooms. The project provided classroom teachers opportunities to develop research skills through collaboration with colleagues and university mentors and to establish a context for examining knowledge produced by well-constructed teacher-research. Simultaneously, NWP directors were curious about the impact these investigations would have on individual teachers' confidence, motivation toward teaching, and perceptions of professionalism. They embarked on research of their own to examine implications of teacher inquiry as a professional development model.

Method

NWP teacher-consultants were invited to participate in an action research project, with the following explanation:

> Action research is a fancy way of saying, "Let's see what is happening in my classroom, decide if I can make it a better place by changing how and what I teach and how I relate to students and the community, study the effects, and then begin again" (Calhoun, 1994). Action research is conducted by people who want to do something to improve their own situation as opposed to scientific researchers who look at what others are doing. By using action research, teachers can analyse their own teaching . . . [and] take responsibility for their own professional development. As they broaden their capabilities, they help each other along the way.

The inquiry seminar comprise of several sessions, beginning with an all-day "Overview." A university researcher introduced participants to guiding assumptions and the theory behind action research as a methodology for classroom improvement, and participants had opportunities to discuss possible investigation topics. Within the

project's parameters, teachers had freedtom to design their own studies. Additionally, they could work individually, in pairs or small groups. Following the overview, teachers had at least one individual planning session with a faculty mentor, usually at their own schools. Next, faculty mentors held an on-campus session to brainstorm solutions to individual or common problems. Teachers kept reflective journals throughout the project and collected student and teacher work samples. Journal writing encouraged critically examining practice.

A second all day session was held for participants to work through the data analysis process with the university researcher. At the project's end, teachers provided written reflections that included descriptions of what they were trying to discover, what they actually discovered, the impact of the project on themselves and their students, their opinion of the value of action research to their teaching, and whether they would conduct an action research project again. Analysis of these reflections looked at the impact of the experience on three variables: (1) participant confidence; (2) motivation toward teaching; and (3) perceptions of increased professionalism.

eacher Action Research was broadly defined as efforts toward intentional inquiry and experimentation to solve a problem or improve a situation. There were events or phenomena that the teachers wanted to understand better or change, and they used a systematic process to acquire valid and reliable data concerning these phenomena or events. Common guidelines governing the choice of what would be studied included: (1) it must concern some aspect of teaching/learning; (2) it must be within the practitioner's influence; and (3) it must be something that deeply concerned the practitioner.

Results

Eleven teachers began this project. Two dropped out immediately following the first session. Two others developed AR plans and collected data but did not complete their projects. Interestingly, three of the four taught in remote locations: Alice taught in a rural community over an hour from the university; Peter taught at an "F" school, in a poor rural, largely migrant, Hispanic community; Cari taught at the only school on a barrier island. In contrast, project completers were all within close proximity to the university. All but one of the teachers chose "classroom-based" (Henson, 1991) studies, with most viewing action research as a way of increasing their own understanding of an immediate concern to themselves as practitioners, as illustrated by the dialogues below:

Professor: What was the problem?

Maggie: Some students in the class daily disrupted instruction [because of poor behaviour]

Professor: What were you trying to find out?

Maggie: if children who were given the opportunity to work toward changing their behaviour would take ownership and be successful

Laverne: My students' writing is poor, and they refuse to revise.

Professor: What did your project investigate?

Laverne: Whether students' writing would improve if they were given the opportunity to choose which pieces of writing they wished to revise and if they were asked to reflect on the growth they observed from the first draft to the final copy.

Peter was the one teacher who chose to focus on a school-wide problem. One of his duty assignments was after-school detention. Pete noticed the same students showing up day after day. He wanted to know why these students were repeat offenders. He also wondered if the same teachers consistently referred students to detention. He began

recording the data: student's grade, age, gender, ethnicity, GPA, referring teacher, and reason for referral. And, he kept his own journal, recording observations as they occurred. One early observation was that many girls, mostly Hispanic, were in detention for tardiness. Further investigation revealed that the girls in question were responsible for getting younger siblings off to school, since the parent or parents were at work. The girls were habitually late, unable to leave home until the children were on the school bus. Pete recognized the potential of his study to prompt changes in school (and perhaps district) policy. Unfortunately, before completing his study, Peter felt forced to set it aside, as increasing pressure to address the school's "F" status relegated teachers to spend more time preparing students for the state tests, at the expense of other teaching and learning issues.

One problem teachers reported was isolation. Moreover, as noted, the most isolated participants did not complete their projects. For educational change to occur, teachers must be supported in their professional growth (Fullan, 1991). Professional upport and time for collaboration are critical. Journal entries illustrated the importance of support teachers received:

> Stephanie: *Today is a better day [after a visit from the university faculty]. Pat told me that the idea [a strategy she wanted to test in the classroom] did not need to be new for everyone—just for me—and, hey?! That works!*
>
> Maggie: *Wow! What a relief. I was ready to just quit, but the meeting last Tuesday gave me hope and direction.*

Besides support from university faculty, participants supported each other via a web board, which also contained pictures taken in their classrooms as projects progressed. Two teachers collaborated on a single project. They also have continued working together, writing an article highlighting their results. Additionally, two teachers worked in the same school and were able to support each other.

> Stephanie: *I love this portfolio info Kay gave me. It affirms a lot of what I've been doing.*

Without exception, participating teachers noted an increase in their "thoughtfulness" regarding their practice. They unanimously reported having "new" questions, resulting from this project.

> Jan: *Oh, I have a lot of questions . . . like 1) would weekly class meetings improve discipline? 2) Would informative comments improve discipline? 3) How can I get students more actively involved . . . and I could go on and on.*

Teachers' reflections were evident as they (1) wrote weekly journal entries (2) conferred with university, and (3) reported at the end of the project.
All seven completers experienced the project as significant to their own professional development. The research was considered demanding, but valuable and inspiring, and, in retrospect, important to their work as teachers:

> Kay: *It was a lot of work but definitely worth the experience. Besides, this opened up so many more questions for me.*
>
> Maggie: *It [action research] makes you more observant of what is affecting your teaching and your class and gives you some tools to implement change.*
>
> Peg: *I think reflection and research are at the base of any good teacher's constant search to reach all kids.*
>
> Stephanie: *I learned so much—it was invaluable because I honestly thought about what I was doing, something you often* forget to do when you're in the thick of things.

Teachers articulated a belief that they grew personally through their experiences as teacher researchers, but their actions demonstrate that they also grew more confident as professionals, now disseminating their research results at conferences and in publications. Four teachers presented their projects at a Writing Project Spring Conference. Peg submitted a proposal to present her results at the annual Florida Council of Teachers of English conference. Moreover, the two teachers who collaborated on a project travelled 3,000 miles to attend a professional writing retreat to develop an article about their project.

A second theme that emerged was teacher motivation toward teaching. Participants reported a renewed interest in teaching and an increased desire to learn more in order to improve their teaching.

> *Peg: It [conducting the AR project] encouraged me to attend any reading in-service sessions I could find and to try new things.*

> *Maggie: I found that . . . I can change too! Sometimes you get so used to doing what you've always done, that you aren't aware that things could be better.*

Finally, teachers were asked if they would undertake another action research project. Again, without exception, they indicated that they planned to continue using the inquiry process in their classrooms.

> *Sally: I hope to continue to use action research to analyse and clarify my teaching. I treasure the reflection but [previously] spent very little time allowing myself to do it.*

Conclusions

Many reform advocates believe we cannot change schools without focusing on teacher attitudes. Fullan (1993) suggests that change begins with the individual. Tyack and Cuban (1994) believe that an inside-out approach to change, driven by teachers, is most effective. Reflective practice allows teachers to search for ways to improve practice, thinking carefully and critically about new ideas and approaches (Swanson & Finnan, 1996).

Action research questions emerge from areas that teachers consider problematic. As Cochrane-Smith and Lytle (1990) suggest, teachers' questions are unique because they emerge neither from theory nor practice alone but from "critical reflection on the intersection of the two" (p.6). Although our participants' studies were personally chosen by individuals, the potential exists to use the same model to study school-wide initiatives. Indeed, action research could be used to develop, implement, and evaluate the impact of school level reforms. Additionally, project participants were paid stipends upon completion of their projects.

For this model to work on a school-wide basis, other reward systems would be needed to reduce barriers and motivate teachers to carry out such projects as part of their regular duties. Mandated participation would be inadvisable. Time would be needed for all stages of the research. The two teachers in this project with non-completed action research plans illustrate the problem in schools of "not enough time" that stifles potential effects of teacher research. Even those who completed projects cited frustration with continual disruption by top-down mandates often precipitated by the perceived need to address state testing issues. As Sally concluded, despite the availability of money and opportunities for conducting action research, "is it realistic for a classroom teacher to be able to conduct a project in addition to the other demands that are made [on teachers' time]?" Efforts to reform schools and professionalise teaching are not yet a reality when compared to what teachers face daily in the workplace (Darling-Hammond, 1996).

The current school restructuring movement has site-based, shared decision-making at its core. With autonomy comes new responsibilities. Teachers, local schools, and school districts are accountable to all stakeholders for the policies, programs, and practices they implement. It is not enough for teachers merely to make decisions; they

must make informed decisions, decisions which are data driven. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to be much more deliberate in documenting and evaluating their efforts. Action research is one means to that end. It is very likely the emergence of site-based decision-making has precipitated the resurgence of action research; the two seem to be complementary. Action research assists practitioners and other stakeholders in identifying the needs, assessing the development processes, and evaluating the outcomes of the changes they define, design, and implement (Johnson, 1993).

Teacher research is a unique research genre. The range of projects undertaken by teachers in this study is an excellent example of the practical possibilities of action research for examining important school innovations. The majority of teachers reported that they were able to impact student performance in the classroom. Furthermore, they believed they had created better classroom learning environments by empowering students as decision-makers in their learning and classroom behaviour.

Laverne's study empowered 3rd,4th, and 5th grade EH special education students to make decisions about their writing, resulting in significant improvement in both the learning environment and products the students produced, as measured by the state writing assessment rubric.

Action research is an excellent fit for teacher professional development. Adult learners have particular needs and requirements: they are autonomous and self-directed; they have a foundation of life experiences and knowledge; they are goal-oriented and relevancy-oriented; they are practical and need to be respected (Lieb, 1991). Current professional development models rarely are structured with all these needs in mind, yet the action research model responds directly to adult learner needs. Within the AR structure, teachers have flexibility to pursue continuous learning led by their own investigative questions, thus becoming more motivated and involved in the professional development itself. Action research allows teachers to consider their work systematically, and they are richly rewarded for their efforts. Thoughtful reflection translates into enhanced teacher efficacy. And, when teachers are confident, they communicate beliefs of their own efficacy to students. With continued practice, they become able, as Danielson (1996) notes, to draw on an increased repertoire of skills, with expectations of the probable success of different approaches.

Stenhouse is credited with saying, "It is teachers who, in the end, will change the world of school by understanding it." (cited in Ruddick, 1988). Teacher research has tremendous potential to influence what we know about teaching and learning, and what teachers are learning will greatly impact the future of schooling.

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