

2018

Action Research as a Reflective Tool for Teachers in a Multicultural Education Class

Mohammed Saleem
Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/colleagues>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Saleem, Mohammed (2018) "Action Research as a Reflective Tool for Teachers in a Multicultural Education Class," *Colleagues*: Vol. 15: Iss. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/colleagues/vol15/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colleagues by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.





Action Research as a Reflective Tool for Teachers in a Multicultural Education Class

By Mohammed Saleem, GVSU Faculty

Introduction

My first job as an assistant professor was in a teacher preparation program at a regional university in the Texas Panhandle. After one year, I was assigned to teach the graduate-level course on multicultural education for students in the alternative teacher certification program and in-service teachers seeking continuing professional development credits. My first reaction was excitement because I was passionate about any work involving social justice, but this was quickly followed by panic! As soon as I returned to my office, I looked up the description in the catalog. It described the course as, “In-depth study of our pluralistic society and strategies for implementation of multicultural concepts for creating awareness, appreciation, acceptance and action toward the need to reach unity within diversity in a global context. Course may provide an optional faculty-led travel component designed to accomplish learning objectives of the course.” My panic stemmed from a deep-seated apprehension of not being able to relate

with my students. I started thinking about my own situatedness—how my social and cultural experiences helped construct how I view and engage with the environment around me. These thoughts particularly focused on aspects related to this class, an important consideration that can inform my own reflexivity—my ability to examine my own feelings, reactions, and motives and their influences on my actions in a new situation—as a teacher and researcher (Neumann & Neumann, 2015; Simpson, 2001).

Living in three different countries (India, Saudi Arabia, and the U.S.) gave me a much broader perspective on culture and diversity. As a person from South Asia with a first name of Mohammed, I was no stranger to experiencing prejudice and sometimes even raw hatred. I can relate well with others who have experienced prejudice. As a former K-12 teacher and school principal, I witnessed firsthand the achievement gap created by systemic inequities in our public schools.

My apprehension to teaching the multicultural education course was not because of lack of training or experience, but because I was new to the Panhandle region and still becoming familiar with the sociopolitical and cultural landscape. I was not really sure how my students would receive me teaching a course on topics that tend to elicit a lot of passion and strongly held opinions. I also started thinking about my students' situatedness in relation to my own and how that might impact perceptions and influence discussions.

People tend to easily and absent-mindedly make generalizations about new people, especially before meeting them. Everyone views the world through their own unique situatedness, which shapes the assumptions they make about others. However, my students shared some commonalities that I could identify with some level of certainty and accuracy. Since this was a regional university, most of the students came from small towns in the Panhandle region. The majority of the students were White and all, except two, were female. All but three of my students were in-service teachers. The three outliers were participating in the study abroad program, which would occur towards the end of the semester.

Most of the in-service teachers taking my course taught in racially and ethnically homogeneous classrooms that were predominantly White. However, upon meeting my students, I was surprised to learn several intriguing details about their classrooms. Some were teaching in racially and ethnically diverse classrooms with students from mixed racial and ethnic backgrounds, including Hispanic, Somali, and Burmese refugees (Jordan, 2008). Teachers in these classrooms were also instructing English language learners. All of the teachers in my course had students from families struggling with poverty, a feature common to the Panhandle region (Stiner, 2010). The region also has one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates in the U.S., which was another common concern expressed by teachers (Galvez-Myles & Myles, 2005). Therefore, despite the

apparent racial and ethnic homogeneity in the classrooms, teachers were still engaging with students from diverse socioeconomic levels.

Several questions were running through my head as I contemplated the best way to set up the course. What were my students' views on social justice and multicultural education? What specific social justice issues were my students facing in their own classrooms? What activities could I implement in my course that my students could replicate in their own teaching? Should my course be a survey of literature in multicultural education or an analysis of several case studies? Would my students be able to relate to either of those approaches? And of course, the

most important question of all lingering in the back of my head—will my students accept all of this from me?

The initial questions and consequent restlessness teachers feel as they systematically start preparing a course based on data is a space in which most educators eventually become familiar and comfortable (Cheruvu, 2014).

It is in this space that we must think with a sociopolitical consciousness that does not tolerate the lack of progress

some groups have made in our education system. This is the mindset of “impatient patience” described by Paolo Freire where teaching speaks truth to power and challenges inequality in education and “teaches students the literacies of freedom, citizenship, and social justice” (Grant, 2009, p.40; Freire, 1970, 2007).

Course Framework

I ultimately selected action research (AR) as the framework for my course. AR is a disciplined process of inquiry conducted by and for those taking the action. The primary reason for engaging in action research is to assist the “actor” in improving and/or refining his or her actions (Sagor & ProQuest, 2000). I selected AR because it is a tool that would enable my students to explore the social justice issues in their classrooms, as well as the resulting implications for multicultural education. I did not want





the outcome of the course to be just a bank of tools and resources on multicultural education; I wanted to develop in my students the capacity for caring with a sociopolitical consciousness. In other words, I wasn't satisfied with just giving them the fish, I wanted to teach them how to fish!

The advantages of selecting AR as a framework for my course on multicultural education were quite obvious:

- AR has been used effectively to promote higher-order thinking and performance skills in teacher preparation programs (Honigsfeld, Connolly, & Kelly, 2013).
- AR processes have the potential to help teachers gain insight into their community's culture (Stagg, 2017).
- AR has been used to develop cultural responsiveness and promote reflective practice in a time when the culture focuses on student performance and achievement (Guy Wamba, 2011; Cain & Harris, 2013; Tuncel, 2017).
- AR has been demonstrated to be an effective model for developing teachers as leaders of change in schools and reflective practitioners, as well as an effective model for professional development of student teachers (Hui & Grossman, 2007; Furtado & Anderson, 2012; Moore & Gilliard, 2008; Ulvik, 2014).

On an individual level, my goal was to use AR as "Bildung," the German tradition of self-cultivation that leads to personal and cultural maturation (Kim, 2013).

Course Format

The 15-week course was delivered in a hybrid format, alternating between face-to-face (F2F) and online sessions. The hybrid format was selected intentionally because I wanted to stay away from the constraints of purely online environments. The online setting has a tendency to promote "representation" of entire groups and cultures by individuals, leading to stereotypical understandings of "the Other". They also have a tendency to oversimplify the complexity of social justice issues (Afsari-Mamagani, 2014). The hybrid format allowed me to take advantage of the different possible uses of both the F2F and online environments. Similar hybrid formats have been used successfully to facilitate deeper understanding of cultural diversity in education (Leh & Guiseppe, 2015).

Course Content

There were three major sources of content for the course:

1. **The book**, *Teach! Change! Empower! Solutions for Closing the Achievement Gaps* by Carl Grant (2009). Focusing on the intersectionality of various gaps leading to the achievement gap, Grant takes a hands-on approach to help teachers develop interventions for closing the achievement gap using AR. The book is filled with case studies, personal development exercises, and questions that prompt teachers to reflect and apply their newly gained understandings to their classroom and school settings (Thompson, 2014). Besides serving

“I wanted to develop in my students the capacity for caring with a sociopolitical consciousness.”



as one of the sources for our discussions, the students used this book as a guide to develop their summative AR project.

2. **The students.** Since the majority of my students were practicing teachers, I was counting on them to make significant contributions to our learning by drawing on their own teaching experiences. Students were required to maintain a reflective journal throughout the semester. Students not only used the journal as a primary source of data for their AR project, they also shared it with their research group in a biweekly discussion forum. Students were divided into research groups of five students. Besides participating in online discussions, they also met during our F2F meetings. The F2F meetings were important in maintaining student engagement in the online discussions (Licona & Gurung, 2013). They also conducted peer reviews of each other's AR projects throughout the semester.
3. **The instructor.** I was counting on not only my knowledge and experience regarding social justice but also my own critical emotional reflexivity to facilitate difficult conversations (Zembylas, 2008). This played a significant role in maintaining the quality of the online discussions by mitigating the potentially negative impact of highly emotional online discussions of controversial social justice topics (Licona & Gurung, 2013; Ulvik, 2014). The social capital and trust needed to manage such difficult conversations were rooted in the initial in-person interactions during the F2F class sessions and were maintained through online interactions (Snart, 2010; Barnes, 2013; Francescato et al., 2007). Once again, we see the utility of a hybrid course format as opposed to a pure online course in establishing a community of learners.

I also supplemented the content sources described above with a variety of online learning modules. These modules primarily focused on training students in AR methods



since most of them were unfamiliar with AR. Orienting students in AR methods is time consuming and would not have been possible within the time constraints without the online component of the hybrid course (Ulvik, 2014). The AR project was 40% of the overall grade (the remaining 60% consisted of in-class activities, online assignments, and participation). The project was distributed throughout the semester into the following 13 milestones that

corresponded with the professional development/reflective exercises in the book and the AR online learning modules (see Table 1, pg 18).

The timeline of the AR project allowed the instructor to guide the development of the study and facilitated peer collaboration. My intent was to leverage the power of collaborative AR to build a community of inquiry that would be able to create a “third space”—a space between the university and the K-12 school. In this space, the in-service teachers could collaboratively generate new knowledge and develop interventions to mitigate the achievement gaps that were the result of existing disparities in their classrooms (Arhar et al., 2013; Goodnough, 2016; Howes et al., 2009).

Student Feedback

Student feedback was received through the course evaluations (see Tables 2 & 3, pg 19).

About a quarter of the respondents indicated they would not take another course taught this way. About the same percent indicated that they learn better through other teaching methods. Some related students comments were:

- “I feel like this class was more of a research class than a multicultural class. I wish I would have learned more

Continued on page 19

Table 1: Action Research Project Outline

Milestones	Description/ Guiding Questions
1. Research problem/ questions	Burning question and related sub-questions. A “Research Question Checklist” was used as a rubric to conduct a peer evaluation of the research problem.
2. History leading to the interest in this area of inquiry	What is my history as a learner and a teacher? What are the themes and issues arising from my history?
3. Context and activity setting	Description of school and/or community. Where will I focus my attention— what part of the day, school year, school, etc.? What aspects of practice will I study—what specific teaching/learning engagements will I investigate? If I am implementing new practices, what are they (describe in detail)? Description of the specific activity setting.
4. Ethical concerns	What potential ethical issues do I need to consider? Describe the ethical issues and how you will address them.
5. Resources	Related readings, people, potential collaborators, other?
6. Permissions/ consents	Students, parents, school district, other. Include sample permission/consent form.
7. Review of relevant literature	What can I learn about my topic by reading the writings of others? What are different sources for useful literature? Synthesis of the relevant literature you reviewed.
8. Research proposal	Instructor reviewed the proposal before allowing the student to continue with the study. This allowed the instructor to make any recommendations.
9. Data collection/ construction	What information do I already have that informs my study? What information will be natural parts of the element of practice I plan to study? What additional information will I need to collect? What will key stakeholders count as evidence, if I hope to influence others? Description of the various types of data that will be collected.
10. Data analysis	How might I go about making sense of my data? How will I organize it? Description of how you will organize and analyze your data.
11. Data analysis paper	Presentation of data in an organized manner that makes sense and contributes to the purpose of the research project. Conclusions drawn from data analysis.
12. Final AR paper	What actions/changes do you anticipate as a result of your study? How will you do things differently? Other implications of your research study. This paper is a culmination of all the work done so far on this project and comprises 40% of the final grade.
13. AR presentation	How do I hope to share this information (within school, local or national conferences, presentations, written forms - policy brief, newspaper article, magazine, journal article, book, etc.)? What forms will be most convincing and appropriate to key stakeholders? Students were required to present the action research project as part of the in-class activities.

Continued from page 17

about other cultures and working with other cultures instead of doing a huge research project that doesn't apply."

- "Teach this as a multicultural ed class instead of a research class. As a graduate student a research class is required already."
- "I didn't always feel as though I was learning all I could about the multicultural aspect of education."

As indicated in the comments above, some students' expectations for the class aligned with the traditional model of multicultural education where appreciation for different cultures is achieved through an exploration of that culture through a literature review and case study analysis. Students were also resistant to a non-traditional, peer

mediated, flipped learning approach that can be unsettling to some students who are used to receiving knowledge from an "expert" in the classroom (Guy Wamba, 2011). However, this is only an assumption as I was unable to get any other feedback to further deconstruct this.

The majority of the respondents appreciated the content of the course and agreed it was a worthwhile and interesting course. Some of the related students' comments also indicated this:

- "The course has been interesting. The content covered was enough and easily approached."
- "I enjoyed reading the material. The book will be very useful later."

Table 2: Overall Rating

Item	%						
	V.P.	Poor	Fair	Good	V.G.	Ex	Omit
Content Rating	0	5	0	10	43	29	14
Instructor Rating	0	0	0	0	19	67	14
Course Rating	0	0	5	10	38	29	19

V.P. – Very Poor | V. G. – Very Good | Ex – Excellent | Omit – No response

Table 3: Individual Item Results

Item	%				
	AS	A	D	DS	Omit
1. It was a very worthwhile course.	38	62	0	0	0
2. I would take another course that was taught this way.	29	48	24	0	0
3. I learn more when other teaching methods are used.	5	19	62	14	0
4. The instructor seemed to be interested in students as individuals.	81	19	0	0	0
5. The instructor encouraged development of new viewpoints and appreciations.	81	19	0	0	0
6. The instructor demonstrated a thorough knowledge of the subject matter.	67	33	0	0	0

AS – Agree Strongly | A – Agree | D – Disagree | DS – Disagree Strongly | Omit – No response



- “Very relevant. Showed me how to begin an action research project on a problem in the classroom.”
- “Learned a lot to apply in the future.”
- “Satisfied and valuable. Thank you!”

Conclusion

Globalization and new communication technologies have blurred the boundaries between local and global, leading to “glocal” dynamics (Abraham & Purkayastha, 2012). These emergent dynamics are redefining what our localized mindset has always considered as the “other.” Our nation will not be able to occupy a respectful place in the emergent “glocalized” space without freeing ourselves from the age-old prejudices of the localized mindset.

Action research (AR) in a multicultural education class allows teachers to use existing research and extend their conceptual boundaries to address the challenges they face and create an action plan to close the achievement gap in their classrooms (Abraham & Purkayastha, 2012). The credibility and validity of the research is gained through the reflexivity of the researcher and flexible research designs, making AR a suitable tool for teachers to explore the marginalized in their community of learners (Byrdon-Miller et al., 2003; Dick, 2009). Collaborative AR has the potential to produce research that is more grassroots, inclusive, and participatory instead of driven from the top down. The knowledge produced is not just for the sake of “objective facts” but for social justice and social change (Abraham & Purkayastha, 2012). The production, construction, and use of knowledge through collaborative AR can bring together marginalized and privileged voices, thereby challenging the knowledge hierarchies that contribute to social hierarchies in our society (Patel, 2009).

The course also illustrated the utility of a hybrid format in facilitating difficult discussions on social justice issues. More research is needed in this area as our understanding

of teaching about social justice in online learning environments continues to develop (Grant & Lee, 2014).

References

- Abraham, M., & Purkayastha, B. (2012). Making a difference: Linking research and action in practice, pedagogy, and policy for social justice: Introduction. *Current Sociology*, 60(2), 123-141. 10.1177/0011392111429215
- Afsari-Mamagani, G. (2014). Hybrid identities & MOOCs: The implications of massive open online courses for multicultural civic education. *Multicultural Education*, 21(2), 2.
- Arhar, J., Niesz, T., Brossmann, J., Koebley, S., O’Brien, K., Loe, D., & Black, F. (2013). Creating a ‘third space’ in the context of a university–school partnership: Supporting teacher action research and the research preparation of doctoral students. *Educational Action Research*, 21(2), 218-236. 10.1080/09650792.2013.789719
- Barnes, S. B. (2013). Socializing the classroom : social networks and online learning. Retrieved from <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com>
- Brydon-Miller, M., Greenwood, D., & Maguire, P. (2003). Why action research? *Action Research*, 1(1), 9-28. 10.1177/14767503030011002
- Cain, T., & Harris, R. (2013). Teachers’ action research in a culture of performativity. *Educational Action Research*, 21(3), 343-358. 10.1080/09650792.2013.815039
- Cheruvu, R. (2014). Teacher educators as teacher researchers: Practicing what we teach. *Childhood Education*, 90(3), 225-228. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.gvsu.edu/docview/1528861710?accountid=39473>
- Dick B (2009) Action research literature 2006–2008: Themes and trends. *Action Research* 7(4): 423–441.
- Francescato, D., Mebane, M., Porcelli, R., Attanasio, C., & Pulino, M. (2007). Developing professional skills and social capital through computer supported collaborative learning in university contexts. *International Journal of Human - Computer Studies*, 65(2), 140-152. 10.1016/j.ijhcs.2006.09.002
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Furtado, L., & Anderson, D. (2012). The reflective teacher leader: an action research model. *Journal of School Leadership*, 22(3), 531+. Retrieved from <http://link.galegroup.com>.

ezproxy.gvsu.edu/apps/doc/A320266120/AONE?u=lom_gvalleysu&sid=AONE&xid=5068d1d3

- Galvez Myles, R., & Myles, T. D. (2005). Teenage pregnancy in the Texas Panhandle. *The Journal of Rural Health, 21*(3), 259-262. 10.1111/j.1748-0361.2005.tb00092.x
- Goodnough, K. (2016). Professional learning of K-6 teachers in science through collaborative action research: An activity theory analysis. *Journal of Science Teacher Education, 27*(7), 747-767. 10.1007/s10972-016-9485-0
- Grant, C. A. (2009). *Teach! change! empower: Solutions for closing the achievement gaps*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Corwin.
- Grant, K. S. L., & Lee, V. J. (2014). Wrestling with issues of diversity in online courses. *The Qualitative Report, 19*(6), 1.
- Guy Wamba, N. (2011). Developing an alternative epistemology of practice: Teachers' action research as critical pedagogy. *Action Research, 9*(2), 162-178. 10.1177/1476750310388054
- Jordan, M. (6 Jun. 2008.). Factories Turn to Refugee Workers. WSJ. Retrieved from <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB121271241538150613>
- Honigsfeld, A., Connolly, M., & Kelly, S. (2013). Demystifying teacher action research: Lessons learned from a graduate education capstone experience. *Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin, 79*(2), 15-21. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/ezproxy.gvsu.edu/docview/1265612639?accountid=39473>
- Howes, A., Davies, S., Fox, S., Swann, S., & Davies, H. (2009). Improving the context for inclusion : personalising teacher development through collaborative action research. Retrieved from <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com>
- Hui, M., & Grossman, D. L. (Eds.). (2007). Improving teacher education through action research. Retrieved from <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com>
- Kim, J. (2013). Teacher action research as Bildung: An application of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics to teacher professional development. *Journal of Curriculum Studies, 45*(3), 379;393;. 10.1080/00220272.2012.702224
- Leh, J. M., Grau, M., & Guiseppe, J. A. (2015). Navigating the development of pre-service teachers' intercultural competence and understanding of diversity: The benefits of facilitating online intercultural exchange. *Journal for Multicultural Education, 9*(2), 98-110. 10.1108/JME-12-2014-0042
- Licona, M. M., & Gurung, B. (2013). Asynchronous discussions in online multicultural education praxis retained. *Multicultural Education, 20*(3-4), 89.
- Moore, R. A., & Gilliard, J. L. (2008). Preservice teachers conducting action research in early education centers. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education, 29*(1), 45-58. 10.1080/10901020701878669
- Neumann, C. B., & Neumann, I. B. (2015). Uses of the self: Two ways of thinking about scholarly situatedness and method. *Millennium - Journal of International Studies, 43*(3), 798-819. 10.1177/0305829815576818
- Sagor, R., & ProQuest (Firm). (2000). *Guiding school improvement with action research*. Alexandria, Va: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Simpson, D. (2001). Situatedness, or, why we keep saying where we're coming from. Retrieved from <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com>
- Snart, J. A. (2010). Hybrid learning : the perils and promise of blending online and face-to- face instruction in higher education. Retrieved from <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com>
- Stagg P. S. (2017). Developing a play based communication assessment through collaborative action research with teachers in Northern Canadian indigenous communities. *Literacy, 51*(1), 36-43. 10.1111/lit.12088
- Stiner, Lindsey (17 Sept. 2010.). 1 in 4 living in poverty in Amarillo. KVII. Retrieved from <http://abc7amarillo.com/news/local/1-in-4-living-in-poverty-in-amarillo>
- Thompson, G. L. (2014). Book/Media reviews: Teach! change! empower! solutions for closing the achievement gaps. *The Journal of Negro Education, 83*(2), 184-185.
- Tuncel, G. (2017). Improving the cultural responsiveness of prospective social studies teachers: An action research. *Kuram Ve Uygulamada Egitim Bilimleri, 17*(4), 1317-1344. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/ezproxy.gvsu.edu/docview/1912501515?accountid=39473>
- Ulvik, M. (2014). Student-teachers doing action research in their practicum: Why and how? *Educational Action Research, 22*(4), 518-533. 10.1080/09650792.2014.918901
- Zembylas, M. (2008). Engaging with issues of cultural diversity and discrimination through critical emotional reflexivity in online learning. *Adult Education Quarterly, 59*(1), 82;61;-82. 10.1177/0741713608325171