

Positioning Teachers as Researchers: Lessons in Empowerment, Change, and Growth

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Abstract

This inquiry explores the impact of an action research course, taught at a university laboratory school, on the teachers involved as researchers, professionals, and practitioners. Through action research coursework and project design, teachers in this project worked together to plan, conduct, and analyze their individual action research projects over the course of a 15-week semester. Guided by the question: “What is the impact of an action research course experience on teachers’ perceptions of their role as researchers and practitioners?” this manuscript brings together teachers’ written reflections to shed light on the empowering nature of teacher research.

Keywords: action research, teacher research, collaborative action research, laboratory schools, university partnerships

Introduction

This inquiry explores the impact of an action research course, taught at a university laboratory school, on the participating teachers as researchers, professionals, and practitioners. Collaborative action research between universities and schools, if properly and wholeheartedly conducted, is a useful strategy in strengthening school-college linkage that ultimately helps each institution to learn and benefit from the other (Yayeh Worku, 2017). These partnerships can enhance practitioners’ knowledge, skills, and confidence in performing action research, making it an important practice in the schools (Torrance & Pryor, 2001), and encourage university members to remain connected to schools and classrooms to gain a better sense of what needs to be researched (Fisher & Rogan, 2012). Mertler (2014) highlights four distinct ways action research can be used in education: “to effectively connect theory to practice, to improve educational practice, to empower teachers, and as a means for promoting professional growth” (p. 22).

The collaboration discussed in this manuscript illustrates how teachers felt empowered and grew as professionals through their action research experiences. Through action research coursework and project design, teachers in this inquiry worked together to plan, conduct, and analyze individual action research projects. When action research serves as a means for collaboration, there can be an increase in professionalization as well as socialization (Schoen, 2007). Not only do teacher researchers become more comfortable with the research process, but the use of action research in classrooms continues to support their development as a professional, and can, as a result, be a vehicle to help transform the profession (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). Goodnough (2011) adds that it is the “ongoing professional dialogues” that provide a “context for sharing ideas and generating, as well as enhancing the professional development of the teachers involved” (p. 82). The current project is guided by the question, “What is the impact of an action research course experience on teachers’ perceptions of their role as researchers and practitioners?” Within this project, we explore the research journey taken by the teachers in an action research course. We examine the shifts that occurred in their perceptions of themselves as teacher researchers and the impact of their research on their students and practice.

This manuscript also showcases how action research can strengthen a collaborative and equitable university-school partnership. Beneficial partnerships are fostered as collaborative inquiry presents solutions to the challenges or hesitations that are typically associated with university-school research endeavors. Often, university-school research projects are believed to clash with teachers’ instructional goals, produce findings that are withheld from teachers, or lack overall relevance to teachers’ practices and students’ needs (Knight, Wiseman, Cooner, 2000). Such challenges can be avoided when teachers are positioned as researchers within environments of meaningful, collaborative inquiry, which is evident within existing research. For example, collaborative teacher research has been used to guide the design, implementation, and evaluation of elementary school writing and math programs (Knight et al., 2000). Implementing new programs through collaborative inquiry enabled participating teachers to increase reflection and thought on their practices, engage in meaningful discussions with professors, build new relationships, and ultimately, impact student learning. In addition to students’ heightened writing and math achievement, inquiry facilitated a collective culture of professional growth (Knight et al., 2000). To further highlight the value of positioning teachers as research, Cutler et al. (2012) capture their journey of collaborating with two laboratory schools. They identify the significant benefits of collaborative inquiry to include the ongoing continuous reflection on practice, ongoing intellectually challenging dialogue, building a community of practice, and creating catalysts for change. Through collaborative action research, studies are not imposed on teachers. Instead, research is created by and with teachers to ensure there is an obvious and meaningful connection to the teachers’ needs and the needs of their students.

Inquiry Design

This on-site course grew out of conversations about how to best meet the research needs of teachers within the school. As a university laboratory school, all teachers have the option to take courses at the university at no cost. This course, titled *Teacher as Researcher*, was designed to support teachers in conducting individual action research projects in their classrooms. The course met once a week in one of the participating teachers’ classrooms. As part of the course design, each teacher studied action research as a methodology and implemented an action research study within their classroom based on the needs of their students. Teachers wrote their own unique research questions, covering topics such as behavior management, reading strategies, and technology integration while also addressing broader school issues like student success rates and creating a climate for social justice conversations. We worked together each week through a 15-week semester to tackle problems of research design, data collection, and data analysis. Teachers read fundamental studies within their own topic areas and synthesized their new learning and the

results of their research in a final action research report. Each teacher also presented the outcome of their project to the rest of the faculty and administration with a research poster session.

As part of the final project report in the course, teachers were asked to reflect on what they learned about action research as a methodology and its role in education, their experience as a researcher, and the impact of the project on their students. This manuscript brings together key themes within the project reflections to discuss the impact of this collaboration on their perceptions of themselves as researchers and practitioners as well as the impact on students. The analysis of those reports was conducted by the course instructor and a doctoral student who supported the teachers in their coursework throughout the semester. Following the initial review, the findings were shared with the participating teachers through an early version of this manuscript. Their written feedback validated the results and further contextualized their experiences within the course.

Description of the Educational Context

The context of this inquiry is the laboratory school located on the campus of a public state university. Within this public elementary and middle school, students in kindergarten through eighth grade are accepted and enrolled through a lottery selection process to fulfill a diverse student demographic profile as outlined by the state. The school aims to be a demonstration site for teacher education, curriculum development, and research implementation in efforts to improve education for diverse student populations through innovative faculty-developed research and curriculum approaches. Located on the same campus is also a dual enrollment high school program that serves students in ninth grade before they begin taking college courses on site.

The participants in this course and, as a result, the overarching inquiry about their experience represent a group of nine teachers of varying positions within the school site. Table 1 outlines the teachers who were involved in this collaboration as well as the self-selected areas of study for their individual projects. This manuscript focuses on the research experiences of the teachers within the courses, not the results of their individual studies, however, it is helpful to see the chosen areas of study to provide additional context for their own experiences.

Table 1. *Participants and Self-Selected Area of Study*

Grade/title	Area of study
Second grade	Technology integration in math
Third grade	Reading conferences with students in the “middle”
Third grade	One-on-one behavior intervention models
ESE teacher	Explicit strategy instruction within reading workshop
Fourth grade	Social justice curriculum in morning meeting
Fourth grade	Differentiated math rotations
Data specialist	Validating algorithm for admission process
Ninth grade language arts	Self-selected book clubs and reading motivation
Ninth grade history	Metacognitive strategies and critical writing

Findings

Guided by the research question, the findings of this inquiry reveal the teachers’ perceptions of themselves as researchers and practitioners as a result of their action research experience. Teachers noted significant growth as researchers and professionals, and expressed desires to

continue implementing the changes they studied within their individual projects through further cycles of action research. In this section, excerpts are included to exhibit how teachers recognize and characterize their growth as a result of this collaboration as well as how they view the role that research can play in their classrooms.

Teachers Grow as Researchers

Within the action research experience, teachers grew as researchers by demonstrating a shift in perspective on what it means to be a researcher in their educational context, as captured within their course reflections. Initially, teachers felt uneasy toward the research process. However, through personal moments of epiphany, teachers began to realize that they were becoming or were always teacher researchers. The process of growing as a researcher is exemplified in one teacher's reflection:

Research is such an intimidating word. When I first started the research process, I was overwhelmed and didn't know if I would be successful in completing an action research project. After going through the process, I see that action research is something teachers do daily. The difference is with action research, one has data to support the decisions that are being made.

In this reflection, she begins to blur the line between research and teaching by focusing on the role that data can serve in both. The demystification of the research process was a common theme in reflections, which her colleague also expressed in the following excerpt:

I feel that this project helped me learn that research is not something that should only be conducted by scientists or students in a doctoral program but instead through classroom teachers. I learned the power and the clarity research can give me as a classroom teacher. Many times, we are wondering if what we are doing in our classroom is actually the right thing, research gives us those answers. Research also can help educators who felt powerless due to mandates, testing demands, or constraints from administration. It can allow for them to have a tool to explain to others the importance, success, or even failure behind a program or instructional strategy.

This reflection also characterizes action research as a form of empowerment, or as a tool that teachers can use to enact change but also to resist change by owning the type of data that is representative of the work they are doing in their classroom.

Teachers Grow as Professionals

In becoming owners of data that is meaningful to their classrooms, teachers further expressed their growth as professionals within their context and the educational field. Within the reflections, teachers began to position themselves as professionals, as depicted in the following excerpt:

Professionals strive to improve their vocation each and every day with professional development, with fine-tuning their crafts, with continuous search for better, more effective methods of working. As a professional in a new job, I feel obligated to improve on what was done before. This can only be accomplished with systematic questions/answers cycle: action research.

Teachers Improve Student Learning

Overall, participants in this course recognized the more significant role that action research can play in the professionalization of the industry, and through their own projects they were also able to see the direct impact on their students. One teacher captures the multilevel benefits of action research in the following excerpt:

This class showed me that the research process is not that difficult and it is a continuous process that helps teachers grow in their profession by involving the most important subjects in the classroom, the students. I realized that in order to have an impact on the students, their needs and participation should be at the center of the research.

By shifting the student needs to the “center of the research,” many conversations in class embodied the theme of how to be better teachers while also improving student learning. When implementing new practices with their students, teachers further expressed that “even a ‘negative’ finding will benefit the researcher, as identifying things that do not work is sometimes as important as discovering those that do.” The research projects helped teachers address students’ needs, which personalized their course experiences and created a heightened level of ownership over their data collection and analyses. Through personalized data collection and analysis, many teachers uncovered new knowledge about their students or confronted assumptions they may have had about student learning, as one teacher describes below:

In addition, my research opened my eyes to some of the preconceived assumptions I had about my students, and instead, the research allowed me to learn and get feedback directly from my students and hear their voice that challenged my assumptions, making me a better teacher.

In the course, there was much discussion about the role of student voice in the curriculum and within the teachers’ projects as exemplified in the above reflection. Often, teachers discussed how they began to recognize the importance of collecting data regarding their students’ views of instruction and curriculum. This new source of data unveiled information that the teachers were normally unaware of. Moreover, understanding how students felt about their classroom practices and community was useful in the teachers’ unique research projects. For example, one teacher explained:

Not only does the action research process improve my teaching, but also I feel it has a positive impact on my classroom community because my students feel they are valued and have a stronger voice. This process has empowered both students and me as a teacher by positively impacting the learning environment within my classroom.

Being able to conduct our course on-site with the teachers created a culture of inquiry within the school site and allowed teachers from a variety of grade and subject levels to come together with a shared purpose. By bringing research *to* the teachers, the hope is that it becomes more sustainable within their school community. In the next excerpt, one teacher reflected on how the design of this course impacted their growth as a researcher:

Throughout this action research project, I have learned what it truly means to be a teacher researcher. I have grown and bettered myself by becoming more inquisitive and continuously reflecting on my practice...Having classmates who are coworkers, and a professor who collaborated with administration, opened up this opportunity for research and allowed it to be part of the culture in our classrooms.

Teachers within this course reflected on their growth as professionals through their increasing comfort with the research process. They also spoke of the need to create spaces for student voice and teacher-generated data in the daily decision-making process of the school community. Providing access to a research course on-site, with the support of the administration, created a culture of inquiry and support for these teachers to develop in their role as teacher researchers.

Implications

Providing a space for research that is conducted *by* and *with* teachers is key to ensuring that classroom data is well-represented when educational decisions are made. Publicly sharing their work and highlighting the value of insider knowledge is critical in understanding the context of education today. Additionally, arming teachers with research skills is essential in the continued goal of professionalizing education. Becoming fluent in the discussion of data has further implications in the role teachers can and should be playing in educational research. Teachers within this inquiry talked about their misconceptions about educational research as well as their hesitancy to call themselves researchers at the beginning of this course. Providing space for teachers to own the production of their own data supports the empowerment of the teaching population and the continued fight for professionalization. In many educational decisions, the unique data that is produced by insider teacher research is absent from the decision-making process. The overreliance on standardized data can produce a skewed version of what takes place in a classroom, leaving out key pieces of information that can be produced through quality action research projects (Vaughan & Bogotch, 2017).

Not only does this inquiry support strengthening the role of teacher voice, but many teachers also commented on how researching their classrooms had an impact on the role student voice played in their classroom. Each project conducted by the teachers in this course collected data on student perception. By focusing on how students felt about a particular program, strategy, or curriculum, teachers learned more about the needs of their students and also confronted some misconceptions they had about their students. Just as teachers should be represented in educational decisions, students also need to play a role in classroom and curriculum decisions that significantly impact them.

Lastly, there is a broader implication of how research universities and schools can and should be partnering. Collaborative action research should foster contexts of co-learning in which continuous dialogue and exchange of ideas and interpretations are central. Such settings of co-inquiry must strive to facilitate asking questions, enacting agendas, and producing outcomes that are of mutual interest to everyone involved (Baumfield & Butterworth, 2007). Moreover, the work that emerges from action research projects must be disseminated in valuable ways that reach audiences beyond the immediate context (Cutler et al., 2012). For instance, the recent development and significant growth of a teacher inquiry strand at the annual meeting of the Florida Educational Research Association (FERA) provides an additional space for teachers to share their work and connect with others who are engaged in similar inquiries within their state. As a result of this inquiry, teachers engaged in sharing their work beyond the classroom with administrators and the rest of the faculty by hosting two poster sessions. It is the hope of the researchers in this project that the interest in their work is a starting place for more conversations about the role action research can play within their school culture. As a laboratory school, this context is well-positioned to be a model for surrounding schools by showcasing the professional growth that occurs when teachers are positioned as researchers and empowered to own the data of their classrooms. These implications further promote the notion that university and school partnerships are catalysts for change that meet the needs of students and recognize teachers to be competent researchers within their classrooms.

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