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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a collaborative action research study involving a university professor/researcher and novice teachers (final sample of seven) in classroom-based inquiry to enhance personal practice that would impact on student outcomes. As the teachers were coached and mentored through the various stages of the action research process to understand the effect of their actions on their students better, the researcher looked at how reflective classroom inquiry enhanced these teachers' levels of self-efficacy and feelings of empowerment. The research design was structured according to an action research protocol, and a variety of qualitative data collection techniques were used. Relevant themes were identified, coded, and analyzed to uncover the findings related to intended outcomes. Implications of this study point to the need for greater collaboration between university researchers and classroom teachers to improve school culture. (Contains 23 references.) (Author/SLD)

Empowering Beginning Teachers Through Action Research

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Abstract

This paper describes a collaborative action research study involving a university professor/researcher and novice teachers in classroom-based inquiry to enhance personal practice that would impact on student outcomes. As the teachers were coached and mentored through the various stages of the action research process to better understand the effect of their actions on their students, the researcher looked at how reflective classroom inquiry enhanced these teachers' levels of self-efficacy and feelings of empowerment. The research design was structured according to an action research protocol, and a variety of qualitative data collection techniques were utilized. Relevant themes were identified, coded and analyzed to uncover the findings as they related to the intended outcomes. The implications of this study point to the need for greater collaboration between university researchers and classroom teachers to improve school cultures.

Empowering Beginning Teachers through Action Research

Introduction

The literature is replete with books and articles citing the benefits to students and teachers of classroom-based research strategies, specifically action research. Yet, the policy positions that daily affect classroom teachers are those emanating from research conducted on teachers, not by them (Fruchter & Price, 1993). In the past, teachers, who wield the most influence on students' learning, had the least to say about what went on in their classrooms, oftentimes leading to practices more harmful than helpful. One method of counteracting this is to involve teachers in the design and implementation of their own classroom based research endeavors, or action research.

In an age of "teacher bashing", where confidence in the public schools and the individuals responsible for educating society's children is rapidly eroding, methods that engage practitioners in the collection and integration of classroom data to improve teaching and learning are sorely needed (Sagor, 2000). Teachers involved in classroom based inquiry have a positive impact on their work cultures. Their involvement leads to a professional ethos grounded in the wisdom which was derived from the teachers' own research questions. This in turn leads to an increase in the practitioner's sense of self-efficacy and empowerment related to the impact on student outcomes. Engagement in on-going classroom inquiry informed by the collection of compelling data, becomes "a vitally energizing force" (Sagor, 2000, p. 10) and enhances the teacher's belief in being able to make a difference in their students' lives.

Educators and researchers in many sectors of the education community are beginning to see the benefits of immersing teachers in classroom based inquiry that

directly targets the issues that are critical to students' achievement and success in school. Classroom practitioners are more likely to identify the critical issues and concerns that they struggle with daily rather than individuals far removed from the actual classroom. Policy makers, Schools of Education, as well as school districts seeking to increase student achievement, are beginning to include action research courses and initiatives in their programs of study, and in district-wide opportunities for in-servicing teachers (BATE, 2000; Mills, 2003).

This paper reports the changes in beginning (1-4 years of experience) teachers' feelings of empowerment and self-efficacy, which resulted from their involvement in collaborative action research with a university professor/researcher. Case studies were developed to provide an in-depth look at individual university/school collaborative partnerships that formed as novice teachers conducted their studies. In each case, the teacher investigated ways to change her classroom environment to increase student success and achievement. At the outset, the study's central purpose was developing a community of learners for the novice teachers. However, as the study progressed, the focus shifted to coaching individuals in reflective practice and classroom leadership and to describing the evolution of the researcher's knowledge.

Area of Focus Statement

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of classroom-based action research on beginning teachers' self-efficacy and empowerment and the subsequent impact on their students. Thus, the study's purpose satisfies Sagor's (1992) three criteria for action research:

- The issue pertains to teaching and learning and is within the scope of the researcher's authority.
- The issue is one which the researcher is passionate about.
- The issue focuses on an area of teacher or student performance that could be improved upon.

Research Questions

1. Will beginning teachers who utilize an action research protocol to improve areas of their practice show gains in levels of self-efficacy?
2. Will beginning teachers who utilize action research to improve upon their own practice feel more empowered in terms of their impact on student outcomes?

Theoretical Framework

The benefits of school-wide collaborative action research as a tool for staff development and to change the school culture have been widely documented, and touted as opportunities for changing the nature of research as related to practitioners (Lieberman, 1986; Finnan, 1992; Sirotnik & Clark, 1988; Oakes, Hare & Sirotnik, 1986; Sagor, 2000). Central to many of these studies is the notion of using teacher research as a tool for professional advocacy and teacher empowerment. Teachers who engaged in classroom-based research have cited several personal and professional benefits such as greater collegiality, an increased sense of empowerment, and an increase in self-esteem; all of which translate to higher levels of self-efficacy (Bennett, 1993; Sagor, 2000).

Teacher empowerment is comprised of three interrelated components: (a) increased teacher access to decision making, (b) increased teacher status, and (c) increased teacher knowledge. Action research has attributes that promote these

components. The first component, increased teacher access to decision making, is promoted because an action researcher makes decisions that directly impact the environment of the research study, i.e., the teacher/researcher's classroom. As the teacher engages in reflective processes that force her to look directly at classroom practices and the solutions to dilemmas, she is called upon to make decisions that will impact on students' success and achievement. This involves questioning of assumptions and values, the context of the institution, and curriculum development leading to school reform (Zeichner & Liston, 1996). These are all aspects of reflective practice and cannot be separated from the dispositions and skills required for engaging in action research. The ability to make decisions that directly affect one's environment promotes empowerment. Hence, teacher participation in action research promotes professional empowerment.

Necessary to the teacher's feelings of empowerment is one's perceived sense of self efficacy. This plays a critical role in the teacher's functioning because it has a direct effect on behavior and other key determinants, such as her goals and aspirations, outcome expectations, affective proclivities, and perceptions of opportunities and impediments in the social environment (Bandura, 1997). Beliefs about one's efficacy will influence whether the individual's outlook is optimistic or pessimistic. It will not only determine their course of action, their challenges and their goals, but also their commitment to keeping these. Efficacy also influences the effort one invests in the project or activity, the expected outcomes, and the length of perseverance in the face of obstacles. When individuals face adversity, high levels of self-efficacy help them adjust easily, minimizing their potential stress and depression and aiding in realizing their

accomplishments (Bandura, 2001). According to Sagor (1992), efficacy is the be all and end all of school improvement and these two concepts are intricately connected. Individual and collective efficacy are necessary ingredients in efforts to affect change within the school environment.

In the past, teachers have often been the recipients (or in some cases, the victims of) research directly impacting them. Fruchter and Price (1993) contend that:

> School teachers are directly and significantly affected by policy positions that develop from research. Yet the bulk of policy-shaping classroom research has been conducted not by teachers, but on them. In practical terms, this has meant that those with the most direct influence on children's learning outside of the home – namely teachers – have had little if any voice or influence on the policies that define the limits and, to a very considerable extent, the very content of their teaching. In the worst cases, teachers have been the victims of the results of research that they didn't control. (p. 60)

Action research addresses this concern because it involves teachers in making decisions about topics of direct relevance to them and their students.

Teams of teacher/researchers from four middle schools in collaboration with University of New Hampshire faculty and consultants from the New Hampshire State Department of Education employed action research to enact changes in the teaching of mathematics and science. The following effects occurred because of this collaborative effort. First, the teachers became more involved in issues faced by them, their students, and their schools. More importantly,

> The teachers see themselves as having more of a stake. They no longer look at things as, "Well, there's nothing that I can do about it anyway." Instead they have begun to see that they have a voice, that they have important contributions to make to the school, and it matters to them what happens. (Oja et al., 1995, p.7)

In other words, these teachers felt professionally empowered.

Teachers participating in the New Hampshire study moved along a continuum of attitudes from skepticism to action and from risk-taking to a sense of self efficacy. Their progress along this continuum happened because of a belief that they owned the changes they had helped to enact. These teachers believed "that change is not something that is happening to them but instead is something that is happening because of them...Teachers thus empowered through belief and action are more likely to be effective in institutionalizing change" (Oja et al, p.10). There was a paradigm shift in the way the teachers viewed themselves as professionals; the teachers' self-concepts evolved to viewing themselves as experts and empowered agents of change. This leads to a discussion of the second component of teacher empowerment -- increased teacher status.

Increased teacher status is a byproduct of teacher participation in action research. The first step in improving teachers' status is improving teachers' self-perceptions. Many teacher-researchers believe that their action research efforts have resulted in multiple personal and professional benefits including increased levels of self-esteem (Bennett, 1993). Part of this increase stems from the increase in teachers' knowledge accruing from participation in an action research project:

> ...I am more aware of current trends and the need for reform. I now identify problems with more confidence and apply more logical analysis to problems. I

> now read research-related literature when attempting to solve a problem. I am more objective and confident. I talk less and observe more. My salary has increased, and I have been asked to do several workshops (Bennett, 1993, p. 69).

This quote affirms the interdependent nature of two components of teacher empowerment: increased teacher knowledge and increased teacher status. Knowledge is a form of power. Teachers' beliefs about their self efficacy compose a large part of their self- knowledge (Bandura, 1997).

Increased teacher knowledge, as an aspect of teacher empowerment, is promoted through engagement in action research. Bennett (1993) states that teacher researchers believe themselves to be better informed than they were prior to engaging in action research and often perceive themselves to be expert in their fields. As stated earlier, this positive change in the teachers' self-concepts will play a significant role in increasing the teachers' status. Teachers involved in action research generate new knowledge of classroom life, leading to increased understanding and improvements in students' experiences (McNiff, 2002).

Engaging in the action research processes forces the individual to examine one's practices, values, beliefs, actions, and subsequent impact on students' achievements. This self-examination requires taking responsibility for one's choices and actions. Oftentimes these actions involve taking risks and challenging the accepted way of doing things, as well as challenging one's own patterns. The teacher must be honest in examining classroom practices, and have the ability to build on strengths and take action to improve what is not working. This process is intricately connected to the beliefs held

by the teacher/researcher and is embedded within ideas centered in social justice, respect for other perspectives, and empathic practice (McNiff, 2002).

Part of the increase in teacher status accruing from their participation in action research involves the participants' increased involvement in leadership roles in the education profession. Bennett (1993) contends that "research empowers teachers to become leaders" (p. 70). Swanson and Finnan (1996) provide information about the South Carolina Accelerated Schools Project, which used an inquiry approach with teams of teachers involved in action research to enact positive school wide changes. Due to their involvement in the project, several of the teachers have emerged as active and vocal leaders in school decision making. According to the authors:

> All of these teachers talk about their increased level of involvement in shared decision making. The teachers made decisions about their own staff development activities and the materials and equipment needed to enhance their instructional efforts.... The teachers now take an active part in presentations to the school board and the upper level administrative staff. (Swanson & Finnan, 1996, p. 10)

These statements support the interrelatedness of the teacher empowerment components of increased teacher access to decision making and increased teacher status.

Method

Research Context

Two School of Education faculty members at a mid-sized, private, urban university, working together on a committee to study and enhance the "climate for success," originally conceived the study as a collaborative research endeavor. They were interested in looking at teaching as a scholarly pursuit and teaching as worthy of

scholarship. It was determined that this was synchronous with recent scholarship focused on the use of action research as a method for involving teachers in "scholarly work as researchers", as well as advancing the notion of teaching as an endeavor worthy of scholarship. The participants were chosen from a group of beginning teachers enrolled in various Master's programs, based on interest in enhancing their sense of efficacy as well as gaining a deeper understanding of their practices and how these could be connected to student outcomes. Each professor recruited participants from their respective programs. As the study progressed one of the researchers made the decision not to continue as his participants had dropped out due to extenuating circumstances. The remaining researcher modified the research questions based on the areas of inquiry of the remaining participants. The study employed a collaborative action research methodology, coupled with an emphasis on each of the participants as individual case studies.

After being oriented to the action research model, individuals were mentored as they decided upon areas of inquiry, developed their research questions, and planned their classroom intervention. The teachers were afforded the opportunity to work through the problem identification phase along with their peers, while the professor/researcher offered support through group and individual coaching. Throughout the phases of action research, which included formulation of research protocols, determination of theoretical contexts, data collection plans, analysis and organization of data, and reporting on results, the participants were mentored by the researcher, as well as being included in an on-line research forum designed to share questions, concerns, insights, etc., with their fellow teacher-researchers. Collaboration between the researcher and participants was central to the study.

Participants

Initially, the study consisted of 11 participants, 2 males and 9 females, ages 22 – 58, with 0 – 5 years in the classroom. Participation was on a voluntary basis, with an understanding that they could drop out if they felt too much pressure. As the study progressed a few of the participants did bow out, due to personal reasons involving family, health, and job-related stress. The remaining 7 participants were all female, ranging in age from 22 – 34, with 1 to 4 years of classroom teaching experience. All except one were working in public elementary schools, with one working in a private P-6 setting.

This paper focuses on three specific cases that were examined in depth, and used to highlight the sample. The following descriptions are snapshots of some of the participants intended to convey an image of who they are so the reader may follow the progression and development of each individual. Each case illustrates the impact of the professor/researcher's intervention (immersing, coaching, and mentoring the participants in action research) on the individual's levels of self –efficacy and empowerment.

Elizabeth, a recent graduate with a B.S. in Elementary Education with ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) endorsement, teaches 7th grade Reading in an urban middle school with an ethnically diverse population. When the project started she had completed six months as a permanent substitute and was beginning her first year as a full-time teacher in her own classroom. Initially, Elizabeth's frustration with the school system provided the impetus for her participation in the research project. Later, her desire

to motivate her students and to increase their confidence in their own abilities fueled her interest. She really wanted them to "want to learn".

Raquel, a native Spanish speaker of Hispanic descent, grudgingly teaches Spanish in a suburban elementary school. Like Elizabeth, she holds a B.S. in Elementary Education with ESOL endorsement. Although Raquel wants her own self- contained classroom, this is unlikely to happen in her current position because she is a valuable resource in a predominantly Hispanic school community. This was her second year of full time teaching. She is working towards her M.S. in Elementary Education and agreed to participate to help enhance her own knowledge and understanding of classroom research. Raquel believed her participation would act as a first aid measure to resuscitate her waning desire to stay in the classroom beyond the current academic year. Initially, she described herself as "that teacher who leaves the classroom in the first few years because she feels powerless" to make any changes in her classroom or practice that might lead to gains in student achievement. Raquel was quickly on her way towards being a statistic, an example of early burnout.

Miriam, who also holds a B. S. in Elementary Education, teaches fifth grade in an urban elementary school that is comprised of a fairly large Caribbean population, plus Hispanic- and African-American children. With four years of teaching experience, Miriam had learned to "play the system" and was successful at operating on "auto pilot". Her teaching had become anesthetized as she loyally "drilled and skilled" her students. Miriam's interest was piqued when she realized that through inquiry into her own practice, many underlying questions could be further explored. Miriam decided to focus on science, a subject area where she lacked confidence. Her goals were to find and

implement methods that would motivate and inspire her students, and in the process re-kindle her own flame.

Data Collection and Sources

Qualitative data collection techniques were utilized as the primary methods for this study. Data sources included; (a) teacher journals which were coded and analyzed by the researcher; (b) interview/feedback sessions; (c) indices of self-efficacy administered pre- and post-intervention; and (d) transcripts of on-line discussions between participants.

Throughout the study participants were asked to keep reflective research journals of their progress, noting connections between what they were doing and the effects on students. The reflections were emailed to the researcher who then responded with various probes, such as: How are things going? What is going well? What is presenting a problem for you, or your students? Have you noted any changes in your students? Can these be correlated with your intervention? What changes have you noted in your own practice? How do you feel about this? Five of the participants chose to only send their reflections on-line, while the other two kept hand written journals which were given to the researcher at various times throughout the course of the study. The researcher responded to the journal entries. All journal entries, on-line and traditional, were coded by the researcher to identify the themes and perspectives that emerged which were characteristic of the experiences of the participants and the influence of involvement in action research on their professional practice.

The researcher interviewed the participants throughout the project, sometimes meeting them on-site in their respective schools, or at other locations. The researcher recorded data from the interviews as hand written field notes. The interview protocol first

asked the participants to share their progress thus far in the action research process. Naturally, these responses included their perspectives on how the intervention was proceeding. The interview included a discussion about ""best teaching practices" as related to the teacher's specific research questions and her intervention. During this interview segment, each teacher asked questions about specific teaching strategies. In response, the researcher used a dialogic approach, which included probing to guide the teacher to discover her own solution. One primary question asked how engaging in action research was affecting each teacher's professional practice. During the interviews the participants were prompted through various stages of self-reflection specific to each one's areas of foci, to try to enhance their self- knowledge and find their inner voice (Costa & Kallick, 2000, p. 60).

The instrument used to measure increases in self-efficacy amongst the beginning teachers was Bandura's Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale, an unpublished measure used by Bandura in his work on teacher efficacy (2001). He noted that teachers are asked to perform many different types of tasks and their sense of efficacy is not always uniform across these tasks or different subject areas. The 30-item instrument used in this study was constructed in response to his observations, and consists of seven subscales: efficacy to influence decision making, efficacy to influence school resources, instructional efficacy, disciplinary efficacy, efficacy to enlist parental involvement, efficacy to enlist community involvement, and efficacy to create a positive school climate. The instrument uses a 9-point scale to measure items, giving the following choices as anchors to guide respondents' choices: "nothing, very little, some influence, quite a bit, a great deal." The instrument attempts to provide a multidimensional picture of teacher's self-efficacy

beliefs. Validity and reliability information are not yet available on this instrument , but it was chosen due to alignment with Bandura's theory. The instrument is intended to provide a glimpse of teachers' beliefs from multiple perspectives.

From the transcripts of on-line discussions between participants, the researcher coded emerging themes. Then, these themes were compared to those noted in the reflective journal entries, with attention given to participants' levels of confidence, their issues and concerns. Similarities and differences were noted in how participants responded in each context -- during the group on-line discussions and in their individual interactions with the professor/researcher.

Triangulation was used in order to distinguish between observations gleaned from various data sources as each related to the two research questions to strengthen the integrity of the interpretation. Consideration was given to the issues of validity, reliability, generalizability and ethics using a combination of Guba's (1981) criteria for qualitative research and Maxwell's (1992) criteria for validity. Ethical considerations were applied to Flinder's (1992) conceptual framework.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed in light of the research questions, specifically for any increase in participants' levels of empowerment and self-efficacy, as well as identifying their increased knowledge construction. The researcher determined that the criteria used in analyzing the data would emanate from the perceived levels of confidence, efficacy, and empowerment observed by the professor/researcher, in addition to the perceptions of the teacher/participants. This framework served as a basis for organizing and categorizing data into themes for analysis. Reflective journals were compared with statements made

during interview/feedback sessions and to the transcriptions of on-line discussions. Once themes were identified, they were coded by categories derived from specific areas on the self-efficacy scale that related to the research questions, as well as themes surfacing from the data.

The analytical procedure used in the study was based on the coding process, more specifically to the "making of comparison" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Students completed written narrative reflections. These reflections were broken down and conceptualized by themes throughout their writing. The researcher identified particular emerging themes from the data source collection. Then, the researcher analyzed each narrative reflection by taking the entire document and identifying commonalities and similarities.

Procedures

Initially, the teacher/participants were introduced to the action research model by the researcher in a classroom type setting, using a PowerPoint presentation and lecture, discussion framework. The teachers were told of the direct benefits of action research to them, including the impact on their sense of efficacy and empowerment, leading to greater awareness of one's professional practice. At the time, some of the teachers expressed feelings of dissatisfaction with their present teaching circumstances, and disillusionment with the profession in general. They were informed that participation in this action research study could lead to changes in their attitudes, resulting in changes in their professional practice. The correlation was drawn between their practice and the effect on student outcomes. The teachers all agreed that their involvement could only

have positive results for them and their students, thus they willingly volunteered to participate.

In the next few weeks, participants were guided through the problem identification phase, as they participated in reflective interviewing and analytic discourse (Sagor, 2000) with their peers to uncover areas of inquiry. The professor/researcher coached each teacher, individually and in small groups, as they fleshed out their research questions, prompting them to focus on an area of inquiry that they could influence, were passionate about, and needed improvement. Once research questions were formalized, action plans were developed and data sources identified.

From the beginning, the professor/researcher mentored individuals and coached each teacher throughout the process, helping them implement the approaches they selected to address their research questions. The professor/researcher collaborated with all participants as they began their classroom research. She worked side by side with some of the teachers and their students in their classrooms as the interventions began. With others, coaching was provided in several forms -- via email, telephone conversations, or in feedback/interview sessions. Varying levels of coaching and support were offered, depending on individual needs. Coaching in classrooms supported those who were inexperienced and helped build confidence in using their new approaches. With others, the researcher needed to revive them or to rekindle the flame that they had when they began teaching.

Findings/Interpretations

The results are based on analysis of individual cases to illustrate a range of outcomes conceptualized in the study. The professor/researcher has been a passionate

student of, teacher of, and coach in action research, and all its related offshoots for the last few years. She held a strong belief in the use of this methodology for improving schools from within, through the nurturing of reflective classroom leaders. Her assumption was that if she wanted to mentor and coach beginning teachers in their initial attempts to operationalize various nuances of "best practices" and "habits of mind," action research was the natural bridge to link process and practice. One of the natural benefits of being immersed in action research, especially when it is collaborative, is that it engages and grounds the researcher in the cyclical processes of reflective practice.

The original research questions addressed the themes of self-efficacy and empowerment, as two separate, but related variables. It became evident during the study that these two variables were better described as interrelated variables, both dependent on the actions of the teacher/researcher.

As the study progressed, the emergent themes and issues confirmed the professor/researcher's initial assumptions about the relationship of inquiry, reflection, and action in improving one's professional practice to the teacher's ability to participate in action research. Further, the results revealed the impact of teachers' levels of experience or in-experience on their feelings of efficacy. The statement below reveals how a less confident teacher felt at the beginning of this study:

> I was hesitant to start the action research project because of the unknown. I didn't like the idea of doing something without knowing what the final result will be. However, I finally understood that whether or not the results came back as expected, I was going to affect my student's

learning. If the results from the project come as expected, I can continue using it. If not, I can come up with a new and different approach.

-Elizabeth

Over the duration of the project some key themes emerged from the teachers' reflective journals and from the interviews. Individual cases are used here to highlight some of the changes that occurred in relation to the original research questions.

Increased Self Efficacy

For the first research question, participants' responses on the pre- and post-Teacher Self- Efficacy Scale were compared for changes in levels of perceived self-efficacy. The responses to three specific subscales related to the dimensions of the research question were examined. The subscales used for this analysis were a) efficacy to influence decision making, b) instructional efficacy, and c) efficacy to create a positive school climate. Most participants (4 out of 7) rated their efficacy to influence decision making as "very little" in the beginning of the study. On the post- administration, their responses ranged from "some influence" to "quite a bit". All participant scores had increased on this subscale.

In the area of instructional efficacy, there were large increases in participants' perceived levels. When asked how much they can do to motivate students who show low interest in schoolwork, five out of the seven responses increased by 3-4 intervals on the rating scale. The responses went from "very little" to "quite a bit" or "a great deal". Increases of 1-4 intervals on the rating scale were seen when asked how much they could do to get students to work together. When asked how much they could do to get children to do their homework, five out of seven responses increased by intervals of 2-3 on the

rating scale. Increases of 2–3 intervals on the rating scale were also noted when participants were asked how much they can do to keep students focused on difficult assignments. Similar shifts occurred when teachers were asked how much they can do to increase students' memory of what they had previously been taught. Across cases, perceived levels of instructional efficacy increased in all areas. Elizabeth's focus was increasing critical thinking skills through cognitive coaching and the use of literature circles. As these excerpts from her reflection show, Elizabeth's gains in self-efficacy stemmed from helping her students become more persistent:

> After a mini-intro to the new novel, I introduced a brand new type of graphic organizer which I called a "Why Tree". It worked and they loved it! They used it to organize their ideas and then defend their thoughts and explain why. I assigned one for homework, and today we picked up on this... Students were volunteering without a problem to share their thoughts, as well as explain HOW they came up with this idea and WHY. It seemed like in all the classes all of the hands went up to share, it was very positive especially since most of the time when I do specifically just direct instruction they are like lumps on logs tuning me out. At first, their responses were (superficial), but I kept asking them WHY. They were getting frustrated, but eventually, with my hand-holding, they got it... I think it was the first time in a long time that I did not get frustrated and tired with them when trying to make them think. They are only at the beginning stages, and have a great deal to learn about themselves, and how they think...and, what you probably already know would have happened

> is happening. As the day went on, yesterday and today, and things got better...I got better too! I was more enthusiastic, motivated, creative, etc. And I LIKE it when I have these good "teaching" days. I came home tonight, did some extra research about the themes and topics in this novel to get some real background information because the kids are just soaking it up! I feel good about waking up tomorrow to start my classes
>
> -Elizabeth.

Likewise, many participants increased their self-efficacy as they gained greater awareness and control of their teaching practices through classroom inquiry.

When asked about their efficacy to create a positive school climate, all participants showed increases in all subscale areas. When asked how much you can do to make the school a safe place, four out of seven moved from "very little" to "quite a bit" or "a great deal". The same increase was seen when they were asked how much they could do to make students enjoy coming to school. All of these subscales on the Teacher Self-Efficacy index are directly correlated with the individual's beliefs about their own abilities and levels of self- confidence. The gains in feelings of self-efficacy and increases in self- confidence are best summarized by one of the participant's reflections:

> Science has never been one of my strongest subjects. That is the reason I chose science instruction as the topic for my action research. I have always been somewhat reluctant to delve too deep into science, and often even shied away from it all together. I now realize my insecurities are a tremendous disservice to myself as well as my students.

> Now, because of my research, I remember how good it feels to teach. I am introducing new scientific topics and having meaningful discussions with my students. Together, my students and I are having a blast making scientific discoveries ... Now when I tell my students to take out their science books they no longer moan and groan, instead they smile, which makes me happy.
>
> -Miriam

Increased Empowerment

For the second research question, data were analyzed from the reflective journals, interviews, and transcripts of on-line discussions. As these sources were read, and re-read, common items emerged. In the initial stages of the project, the data showed participants' concerns to be related to outside influences, lack of support, dissatisfaction with the system, hesitancy to "take a risk", and lack of enthusiasm. These influences only added to the teachers' lack of self-confidence and self-efficacy previously described. Some of these themes are evident in an early reflection from Raquel, as she initiated her study:

> I had several issues to overcome when attempting to begin my action research. The administrators were not very supportive, and that is crucial... because I teach Spanish and I wanted to do something related to Reading and Writing I felt I had to talk to my administrator and explain the great things that I wanted to do in my class. She began to tell me what she wanted from me. She wanted me to work on Saturdays (for free). I jumped on it – recognition plus action research, great! ... (could this be

> taking advantage of a rookie teacher who wants her own class?!)... So, my research begins. I am very excited about this project, but I still feel like being a teacher in this system is inhumane...But I know I can make a difference with this project.
>
> -Raquel

As a whole, the participants' responses indicated a strong relationship between their increased levels of self-efficacy and subsequent feelings of empowerment. Four out of seven said they can do something to get students to believe that they can do well in school. As the teacher's feelings of empowerment increased, so too did their ability to empower their students.

> I have noticed that the children are happy and learning because they see that I have an interest in them personally. Teaching is personal! Who cares what others say! It is personal and children need nurturing both intellectually and emotionally... The combination of doing action research and trying to be a reflective educator has influenced me tremendously. I have been forced to take another look, to search and inquire...through this process I am continuously questioning my purpose as an educator and how I relate this to my students...in turn this helps one to become a passionate individual who makes an impact and a difference in children, no matter what obstacles one may encounter.
>
> -Raquel

Implications

These findings have several implications for university and teacher researchers. It was anticipated that the strong support offered through the mentoring and coaching by the university professor would be a contributing factor to the positive effects realized by the practitioners, ultimately enhancing their feelings of professionalism, and allowing them greater raison d'etre to continue building on and enhancing their respective professional knowledge bases. While the participants tapped their primary resource, the professor/researcher, quite readily, they did not establish the community of learners commonly found as a central ingredient in collaborative action research. Although it was initially central to the study, the development of a community of learners amongst the participants did not occur. Therefore, any changes in self-efficacy and empowerment resulting from teachers' participation in this study cannot be attributed to this concept. There may be several reasons for this. Perhaps this was too much at once for these novice teachers. Everything was unfamiliar. The participants were new to action research, new to peer collaboration and support, and most were relative newcomers to teaching as a profession. It is the researcher's belief that this was also due to the novice status of the participants, and their reluctance to rely too much on their peers due to their collective inexperience. All participants used the professor/ researcher to share concerns, questions, brainstorm ideas and develop action plans, but did not seek out support or advice from their peers. As a result of the analysis and interpretation of the data, and on-going interaction with the participants, it is the researcher's belief that the strong modeling of the reflective aspects of critical classroom inquiry to improve one's practice in order to "make a difference" was the essential ingredient for these teachers.

Educational Importance of the Study

Engaging in action research compelled these teachers to inquire into their own teaching, to question their methods, and to engage in creative problem solving to enhance their practice. This is a necessary step in helping to create passionate, efficacious, and empowered educators. In order for this to happen, a system needs to be in place where novices at all stages can be guided and supported as they are coached in the process of classroom action research. If the notion of "teaching as a profession worthy of scholarly research" is to be accepted and advanced, there must be a significant effort on the part of university based researchers to engage in collaborative efforts that seek to empower individual teachers, in order to build school communities focused on positive school change to benefit students.

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