Promise and Possibility for Aspiring Principals: An Emerging Leadership Identity through Learning to Do Action Research

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This case study explored the promise and possibility of doing action research both for aspiring principals engaged in such research and for professors using it as pedagogy for teaching educational leadership. The study of a class of graduate students aspiring to be principals had a constructivist theoretical framework. The research design consisted of three tiers: tier one: a reflective self-study by the professor evaluating the pedagogy of developing action research team projects; tier two: an analysis of the self-evaluations of the aspiring principals on the pedagogy of developing action research team projects and its effect on their learning; and tier three: the perceived deep learning resulting from the action research topics. The study concluded that for aspiring principals, learning to do action research in teams has the potential for powerful impact on emerging leadership identity; on the focus on deep issues and first steps in transformational leadership; and on individual and mutual reflection and the development of professional learning communities. For university professors, action research melds theory and practice and is effective pedagogy for teaching leadership. Key Words: Action Research; Pedagogy in Higher Education; Team Projects; Educational Leadership; Transformational Leadership, Constructivism.

I arrived for my first day with notebooks and highlighters fully expecting to be lectured for five hours straight. Instead, I found my classes to be based around Socratic discussions and action research – light years away from what I expected.[1]

The above quote from a graduate student in my class expressed her expectations and initial fear and frustration when she arrived for her first course of the principal preparation program. In my class she immediately found the chairs in a circle, the freedom to develop her own ideas about leadership, and the opportunity through developing action research to take the first steps in applying her emerging theoretical leadership lens to practice—not a traditional classroom of rows and lectures. At least symbolically, this was a start to a program that would redefine her understanding of leadership.

Clearly, educational leadership is challenging in today's volatile climate of policy makers' endless blame and constant attacks on public education, including the hidden

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[1] Reflection of an aspiring principal, who was part of the study, on learning and action research.

dimension of a seeming determination to substitute technical management for thoughtful leadership (Bracey, 2002; Giroux, 2009a, 2009b; Goodlad, 2007). My case study to follow will suggest action research as a way to resist this simplistic and myopic thinking about leadership. Leadership in the educational arena has always been difficult to define (Bolman & Deal, 2002; Fullan, 2005; Hargreaves & Fink 2006; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; Sergiovanni, 2005). This difficulty arises from the complexity of the field that reflects disagreement about the philosophical and theoretical stance of educators and policy makers. Within this current climate many seek to dismantle public education in general.

Given the above, within the strict practices of accountability, teaching about educational leadership has its own complexities in seeking to prepare aspiring principals[2] to be effective, let alone transformational leaders. In determining the best way to teach leadership within this current practice, I often reflect upon my own experiences since I have lived in both worlds—that of the practitioner—from teacher to principal to superintendent—and now that of the academic, teaching about educational leadership. This reflection on my leadership experience in the field reminds me of the principals who both excelled and struggled. Those who excelled constantly identified issues to improve and problems to resolve. They understood the value of collegiality and the importance of the school improvement process. They were both reflective about their own ideas and those of others. They were readers and explored the thinking of leaders beyond their own school. Put differently, as I reflect on the qualities of those principals, in fact, they embodied elements of action researchers. Thus, my own study, reflection, and experiences as a professor in educational leadership and public school leader have convinced me that action research is a potentially transformative pedagogy, an avenue for aspiring leaders to mirror both theory and practice in their emerging leadership identity.

Given my action research bent, understanding the history became central to my emerging pedagogy, including the work of Kurt Lewin, who is generally credited with introducing action research and creating the metaphor of the continuous spiral. The components of action research consist of (Neill, 2004):

- Identifying the problem or area
- Reconnaissance or research
- Plan development
- Implementation of the plan
- Evaluation
- Revision of the original plan
- Implementation of the new plan.

Interestingly, there is limited scholarship about the teaching of action research in higher education. Instead existing scholarship focuses on the definition and application of action research, not on how to actually teach doing action research (Greenwood, 2007; Levin & Martin, 2007). I have integrated the development of action research projects as a pedagogy for my leadership courses for the purpose of introducing aspiring principals to doing precisely that—learning how to conduct action research. Given the time limitations

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[2] The terms *aspiring principal* and *student* are used interchangeably in referring to the graduate students in this study.

and impracticality for the schools of having multiple action research projects implemented by graduate students/teachers, the students develop an action research plan, including how they will evaluate the plan, but do not actually implement it. However, in evaluating the pedagogy of action research, the majority of my students express an interest in implementation, and a number have communicated while enrolled in the course and after completing the class that they have implemented their plans.

Examined in this study is the effect of the pedagogy of action research on the course learning objectives intended to immerse students in leadership. Embedded in the action research project is the analysis of deep leadership issues—adaptive issues, not technical ones (Heifetz, 1994; Fullan, 2005). Accompanying that analysis is the concomitant analysis of the definition of leadership itself. From the first day of class, I used action research in guiding graduate students in their emerging leadership identity, challenging aspiring principals to answer the question, "Who am I as a leader?" It was this leadership identity that would inform their creative leadership decisions and capacity for problem solving. The more distinctly defined that identity was, the more insightful the potential leadership would be. Next, this reflective question of identity was linked to action research. I believe that aspiring principals have to first develop, or at least begin to develop, their leadership identity before they can wrestle with deeper leadership issues, those beyond management, which were the focus of the action research projects. In selecting their topics, students were encouraged to grapple with questions of leadership that reflected ethics, equity, justice, and authentic learning, rather than technical and/or management issues. Identifying such leadership issues and adopting virtual leadership roles in addressing their topics were significant first steps in transitioning from viewing education through the lens of the classroom teacher to the broader lens of a potential principal. A primary objective in this introductory class then, was to guide students away from defining leadership as management and toward leadership of teaching and learning as transformational leadership (Burns, 1978; Giroux, 1988; Sergiovanni, 1996, 2005).

As part of my own commitment to this form of growing inquiry, I now wanted to study its effectiveness as a pedagogy for aspiring educational leaders. It became pedagogically imperative to complete a case study, a qualitative analysis of one introductory leadership class, and to delve more deeply into the pedagogy of both developing action research and the functioning of teams and social learning. I wished to gain a deeper insight into the effectiveness of my current teaching of leadership and action research as it transpired into the students' knowledge base. And so, I decided to examine my own practice as one tier of action research in this study, seeking more definitive confirmation, modification, or even, perhaps, negation of my belief that action research is indeed transformative for aspiring principals, for schools, and for academics.

With the above in mind, the study consisted of three distinct tiers with one graduate class: tier one: a reflective self-study evaluating the pedagogy of developing action research student team projects, which was my own personal action research; tier two: an analysis of aspiring principals' self evaluation of the pedagogy of developing action research team projects and its effect on their learning; and tier three: the transformational learning resulting from the aspiring principals' action research topics.

In this manuscript, I will begin with the literature review on action research. I will then describe the methodology of the study. The data sources, emerging themes and

reflections will follow. My conclusions will allow for deep reflection and dialogue on the positive outcomes of action research.

Literature Review

Action Research: Dialectic of Theory and Practice

Although on one level it seems logical, mere common sense, to blend theory and practice in teaching educational leadership, on another level, there has been significant debate about the appropriateness of action research as a research methodology. Historically, there has been the persistent attempt to separate theory from practice, as I have noted in the introduction and in my past work (Batagiannis, 2008). Additionally, Anderson and Herr (1999) agreed and concluded, "We are poised on the threshold of an outpouring of practitioner inquiry that will force important redefinitions of what 'counts' as research" (p. 14). Carrying the argument of action research further, Schon (1995) discussed action research as "new scholarship," pointing out that this form of inquiry conflicts quite naturally with the "norms of technical rationality–the prevailing epistemology built into the research universities" (Introduction, last para.). And, in fact, action research, the subject of this study, is a response to this theory-practice battle.

The development of the action research project was designed to teach aspiring principals that, ". . . action researchers differ from traditional researchers because they are committed to *taking action* and *effecting positive educational change* based on their findings, rather than being satisfied with reporting their conclusions to others" (Mills, 2003, p. 3). Levin and Martin (2007), too, identified the expectation of action research, which is focused on practice, but with a solid theoretical foundation; they spoke of, "together [shaping] a person who is both scientist and practitioner" (p. 226). Freire (1970) emphasized that theory and practice are both meaningless without the other, "When a word [dialogue] is deprived of its dimension of action, reflection automatically suffers as well; and the word is changed into idle chatter. . . . On the other hand . . . [the] latter – action for action's sake – negates the true praxis and makes dialogue impossible" (p. 88).

The application of action research by academics to their own work, interestingly, has been inconsistent. Greenwood (2007) defined action research in higher education as "promoting successful, sustainable, and liberating change" (p. 250). He saw it as the antithesis of what he viewed as typical "teaching" in higher education, and referred to Freire's (1970) "banking model" of education, "The authoritarian 'banking model' of education through lectures and regurgitation dominates, the asymmetrical relationship between all-knowing professor and the ignorant student is taken for granted, the radical separation of the faculty and students . . . ." (p. 257). Kitchen and Stevens (2008) linked action research and the merits of their own reflective self analysis, viewing the two as naturally intertwined. And Anderson and Herr (1999) pointed a somewhat accusatory finger at academics when it came to action research, stressing that action research should result in the reflective analysis of both the practitioner's practice and that of the academic: "Academics who form alliances with practitioners or who send practitioners out into their school to generate knowledge about practice should be equally willing to submit their own institutions and practices to the same level of investigative scrutiny" (p.

17). This expected reflexivity for academics is in sync with my own commitment to action research and to the constructivist frame.

The commitment to transformational, constructivist action research inquiry in educational leadership guided my investigation, in large part because of the lack of research in this area. Clearly, constructivists are committed to practice-based rather than lecture-based pedagogy; to students as active, not passive learners; and to learning as a social process in which knowledge is socially constructed and serves as the foundation for further learning (Dewey,1916; Freire, 1970; Kemmis, 2009; Schweitzer & Stephenson, 2008; Vygotsky, 1978).

Constructivism[3] and action research include strands of reflection, active learning, critical inquiry, mutual learning, collaboration, and the rejection of formal roles. The instructor's commitment to students and learning is primary and paramount. And both constructivism and action research value voice, including that of teachers and students. Esposito and Evans-Winters (2007) stressed the importance in action research of including student voice, as well as teacher voice, and opposed the converse: "Action research that ignores systems of power relationships and student voice sustains the teacher as knower and the student as receiver of knowledge" (p. 235).

Implications of Action Research for Transformational Leadership Identity

Thus, action research provides an opportunity to develop and deepen one's leadership identity by exploring the role of the principal and defining it as primarily that of a leader, not a technical manager (Heifetz, 2002; Fullan, 2005; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Jenlink, 2006). In other words, the principal is defined as a leader who cares, listens to, and reflects multiple voices. This type of reflective activity is also a powerful vehicle for learning and, specifically, for creating one's own learning in that it translates experience into learning (Freire, 1970; Lee, 2003; Sagor, 2005; Carr, 2007). Freire simply and powerfully stated, "Reflection – true reflection – leads to action" (p. 66). Criticos (as cited in Lee 2003) agreed, "Unless an experience is examined and reflected on it has no educative value . . . experience needs to be arrested, examined, analyzed, considered and negated to shift it to knowledge" (p. 84)

Action research also introduced aspiring principals to transformational school reform (Burns, 1978; Fullan, 2005; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Action research focuses on deep, contextual reform, rather than on a quest for superficial quick fixes. It results in substantive and continuous school reform and avoids the cyclical adoption and discarding of programs in an effort to find the one magic bullet I have discussed in previous work (Batagiannis, 2007) or the "syndrome of revolving-door programs that can breed cynicism and defeatism" (Sagor, 2005, p. 65). The objective of encouraging aspiring principals to develop a leadership identity included this focus on true reform and the refusal to be lulled into acceptance of the technical status quo. Schoen (2007) stressed that action research nurtures a belief and hope that change is possible. And Freire (1970) focused on both education and humanity in discussing this focus on improvement and

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[3] *Constructivism* is a theory of learning in which the learner is involved in creating his/her learning, with the teacher as the facilitator. This theory promotes active learning; collaboration; respecting social learning as an important component of learning; and reflection, recognizing its inextricable role in the learning process. (Piaget, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978; Greene, 1996).

change: "Problem-posing education affirms men and women as beings in the process of becoming – as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality" (p. 84). Freire (1970) then moved the conversation of change to the deeper level of the potential for transformation, addressing both pedagogical transformation demonstrated in his "banking model" and cultural transformation that reflected critical theory tenets. Although this paper does not focus specifically on the latter, his words in the following reflected, perhaps, both forms of transformation: "In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality; but as a reality in process, in transformation"[4] (Freire, p. 83).

Action research also has the potential to be transformative in schools by promoting collegiality and discouraging the historical isolation of educators working under the traditional model of education. It seeks to unearth substantive examples of leadership. And it taps the power of mutual learning as it focuses on consistent and continuous learning both for students and teachers. Put differently, while action research supports the goals of educational leaders, who today are expected to focus on improving instruction in the classroom, it holds the promise and possibility to move the aspiring principal from the technical to the constructivist leader, from the trivial technician to the deep thinker and doer. In other words, it focuses on systemic reform in schools – transformational school improvement, not superficial programs aimed at addressing deficiencies on a surface level and limited by policymakers' current demands defined by narrow, high stakes testing. To accomplish this transformation, theory and practice must be integrated. Action research does precisely that; it seamlessly blends the two. While theory often doesn't sit well with aspiring principals, one of the goals is to move them to more thoughtful, reflective, sophisticated practice that can only be built on a strong theoretical foundation, as opposed to personal opinion and experience alone, i.e., a reliance simply on "what seems to work" in practice on "Monday morning."

Pedagogy of Team Projects

In teaching aspiring principals, professors often debate whether to use individual projects or team projects. In this study I elected team projects as part of the course pedagogy to simulate the "administrative team" and other collegial groups with which aspiring principals will work in the future. Social learning plays a vital role in education (Dewey, 1916; Piaget, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978). Li (2008), too, supports the concept of mutual learning: "Cognitively, information becomes knowledge through people working together in solving problems and achieving goals, and knowledge becomes shared wisdom through sustained interaction" (p. 251). Scott-Ladd and Chen (2008) are also proponents of the use of team projects for effective learning and for career preparation.

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[4] This is to acknowledge that Freire uses the critical theory lens in addressing transformation, and this paper is not written with a critical theory framework although there are some threads of critical theory that will be acknowledged later in the paper. However, Freire's discussion of the "banking model" clearly is pertinent to the pedagogy of transformational leadership. While it is recognized that Freire's discussion of cultural studies and transformation is on a deeper level, reflective of the inequities challenged by critical theory, it is extended here to transformation in educational leadership.

In summary, the literature review addresses the power and the transformative potential of action research for both practitioners and academics in studying their practice and then envisioning and implementing educational improvement. I next turn to the methodology of this research study.

Methodology

Setting

The study was a qualitative case study. It was conducted at a university in the Midwest region of the United States with a total enrollment of 13,500 graduate and undergraduate students.

Study Participants

The participants in the study were graduate students pursuing a Master's degree in Educational Leadership and were enrolled in the spring semester of 2009. The data were collected as part of the course pedagogy and instruction; therefore, IRB approval, *Exemption Granted,* was requested and obtained. The participants were enrolled in *Introduction to Educational Leadership*, the first course of the Educational Leadership Program. The class included both cohort students, who would complete the program together in seventeen months, and traditional students, who would enroll in courses at their own pace, as well as three students enrolled in other programs, but who needed the leadership course. Upon completion of the program, in order to be licensed as principals in their state, students also would have to have completed two years of teaching. Regardless of the individual student's immediate career aspirations, all were treated as aspiring principals for purposes of this study.

As qualitative research embraces the identification of personal values; the present study, too, integrated values in: identifying students' personal values; developing their leadership identity founded on their values; selecting their action research topics; and, then, evaluating this pedagogy.

Theoretical Frame

The study had a constructivist theoretical framework. The action research project engaged aspiring principals from the beginning in constructing their own learning, e.g., in selecting the leadership subject of their research and reflecting a topic about which they were passionate; in researching and developing the project in a collegial process of mutual learning; and at the conclusion, in self evaluating their learning from developing this action research team project, and assessing the structure and pedagogy of the course. Through the action research project, aspiring principals first created their own learning and then analyzed it, synthesizing it with their past experience and their reflective readings and discussions on leadership in the course. Thus, this study reflected, "The epistemological assumption of the qualitative paradigm . . . based on minimizing the distance between the researcher and the informant (Guba & Lincoln, 1988) cited in (Creswell, 1994, p. 158). The purpose of the study was to evaluate the pedagogy of

developing the action research project and to determine if the learning objectives which were reflective of higher-order thinking skills, were accomplished (see Appendix A).

Tiers of Action Research Analyzed

As mentioned in the introduction, the study consisted of three tiers of action research: tier one: a reflective self-study by the instructor of the efficacy of the course pedagogy of teaching students how to develop action research projects developed by teams of aspiring principals. tier two: a study of the aspiring principals' reflections, their self-evaluation of their learning through developing action research team projects, and their evaluation of the course pedagogy. And tier three: a study of the aspiring principals' own action research team project plans and the process through which they progressed and evolved. The 23 aspiring principals worked in teams of three, with the exception of one team of two. Having previously worked with larger teams of four and five with other graduate classes, I had found the larger teams were more likely to permit team members to shirk their responsibility to contribute to the project, thus resulting in more problems with the team process.

Aspiring principals were asked to identify a topic about which they were passionate. For this project, the topic could not be a management topic; a deep leadership topic was required. They were asked to envision themselves as principals and to identify the one topic that they believed would achieve the greatest transformation in their schools. The teams were then required to communicate with the professor to discuss their selected topics. They then completed: the literature review of their selected action research topic; individual and mutual reflection; identification of sources of their data; and the evaluation plan they intended to follow. We discussed implementation extensively, and I encouraged students to explore with their principals the possibility of implementation at some point.

Data Collection

As a take-home component of the end-of-semester, course evaluation process, the twenty-three aspiring principals were asked to individually and anonymously complete open-ended narrative questions related to the three tiers of the study and their learning through the action research project (see Appendix B). The students were given two weeks to complete their responses, which they returned during the last class with the formal, in-class evaluations. Because the evaluations were anonymous and collected by a student, rather than by the professor, the students could have elected not to complete or submit responses. The narrative responses were typed by the department secretary. They were then coded and analyzed for emerging themes by the instructor.

Trustworthiness and triangulation. To support the trustworthiness of the data (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993), several methods of triangulation were used to "find convergence among sources of information" (Creswell, 1994, p. 158). These methods supported the extensive and anonymous self analyses completed by the aspiring principals. Although the study was a qualitative study, aspiring principals were also asked to evaluate their transitioning toward a leadership identity and their learning about deeper

issues using a quantitative method, a five-point Likert scale, with five being the highest score and one the lowest. Using the same Likert scale, the aspiring principals also were asked to assess their learning from the team process, which was designed to simulate an "administrative team." In addition to the anonymous evaluations of action research, which comprised the primary data source of this study, aspiring principals also were asked to complete an evaluation of each member of the team and of the team project design. This second evaluation was not anonymous. In this evaluation, aspiring principals were asked if they would have elected to complete a team project if they had had a choice. In addition, they were asked if they would elect a team project in the future after their experience with this team project. And finally, the instructor's observations, conversations, and e-mail communications with the aspiring principals about the project served as yet another method of triangulation. The instructor met with each team at least once outside of class to discuss the team's topic. This permitted both informal observation of each team member and discussion with the team members concerning their understanding of action research.

Data and Reflections: Emerging Themes

The majority of the teams began the process of topic selection with a surface, technical, management topic. The dialogue that ensued focused on the posing of questions by the instructor to help the teams reflect on their action research topics; to explain their passion about the topics; to delve into the deeper issues; and, through this reflective dialogue, to further define themselves as leaders. Eventually, the teams identified leadership topics about which they were excited and convinced would result in positive change in their schools.

As explained under methodology, the primary data used in this study consisted of the coding and analysis of aspiring principals' responses to reflective questions. Because aspiring principals responded anonymously, they had nothing to gain from claiming to have espoused the leadership concepts reflective of our classroom dialogue. In fact, they did not have to submit evaluative comments at all. Yet twenty of the twenty-three submitted responses, and they wrote extensive, deep analyses.

Aspiring principals were also asked to evaluate their learning using a five-point Likert scale with five being the highest. Nineteen of the twenty-three responded. The mean score for Question One: The effects of action research on the transitioning to the lens of a principal and to learning about deeper issues was 4.13. The mean score for Question Two: The learning resulting from serving on a simulated "administrative team" was 4.28. The strength of both scores further supported the narrative response data analyses.

One of the emerging themes identified in the project was that of constructing a leadership identity. This included the challenge of being active in one's learning, which for one aspiring principal, who is cited in the introduction, differed from her original definition of and expectations for her learning as a neophyte graduate student. As she, her team, and I met for our second meeting, she expressed frustration as she continued to struggle with the action research project. Later, she commented:

> Action research, in particular, was a strange concept for me. . . .Action research, as I soon discovered, was much different from traditional research,

and touched on the heart of action research and of constructivism, at that,

> . . . . the topic of the paper was supposed to be something that was relevant to our collective schools and [could be implemented]. That was the first major difference I noticed about action research—it was not supposed to be just a requirement for a class. I was actually supposed to use what I learned, to apply my knowledge.

Although foreign to her in those early days, that same student recently—and several semesters after completing her action research project—contacted me to let me know how invaluable action research is to her now and how she is applying all that she learned in her new position–much to her "surprise." That kind of deep, transformational learning for future leaders was the foundation of the action research project and my transcendent hope as the professor. Easy? No! But significant? Absolutely. Another aspiring principal also similarly expressed that the students had felt challenged by this, their first action research project:

> The action research project was actually very hard to get started on for neither I (nor anyone else on the team) had ever done an action research project before.

In responding to the question of "Who am I as a leader?" aspiring principals generally progressed through several stages. First, they reflected; next, they analyzed the principal's role; and finally, they tried on the principal's role through their projects. The transition I envisioned for the aspiring principals was that of reflecting and analyzing leadership issues through the lens of a future principal. This transition also entailed analyzing the responsibilities of the principalship and concomitantly, the very definition of leadership.

Aspiring principals learned to define their leadership identity as entailing being ethical advocates for all students, providing transformational growth for teachers, and supporting authentic learning for every child. Reflecting the collaborative learning of the constructivist frame, aspiring principals were immersed in the experience of leadership through the simulated "administrative team." As the instructor, I used the Socratic method of questioning, particularly during the early stages of the students' work on the action research project to facilitate, rather than direct learning. One aspiring principal summarized the learning that resulted from the constructivist frame used in selecting the action research topic for her/him:

> Dr. Batagiannis did not come out and tell us what we were doing wrong; however, she used such probing questions that she forced us into the right frame of thinking to complete the project. In doing so I think that I

learned so much more than I would have if she would have just told us, "do it this way."

A second emerging theme was the effect of the action research project on analyzing deep issues of leadership beyond the technical. Authentic leadership topics encouraged aspiring principals to delve into the deeper underpinnings of school issues in order to develop action research projects reflective of transformational and sustainable leadership.

A third emerging theme was that of the commitment to implementation of the action research projects. This reflected the level of engagement of the students with the action research pedagogy. The more authentic the learning from action research, the more likely they were to be interested in implementation.

Learning from and satisfaction with the team project was a fourth emerging theme. Although the aspiring principals expressed initial feelings of trepidation with the team project assignment and acknowledged some of the problems that could arise from team projects, they concluded that the project had been a successful learning experience. Aspiring principals made the connection from this simulated and small team process was made by the aspiring principals to the broader concept of school professional learning communities.

Effect of Action Research on Constructing a Leadership Identity

This action research project and the self-analysis were intended to encourage aspiring principals to experience the reflective process as they began their leadership journey. In the study, aspiring principals, in fact, acknowledged their growing reflective habit, as they began to analyze themselves as future leaders and to reflect upon the needs of the schools they might serve. Symbolic of these changes, three students commented:

> The action research project, I believe, did help me transition from a teacher to an educational leader because I had the opportunity to think how to lead a school not just a classroom. It allowed me to think about the bigger picture . . . . that will change the entire school for the best.

> The transition from the perspective of a teacher to an administrator is still a work in progress . . . . I just feel the focusing of that lens will continue to sharpen the more knowledge I gain.

> Since having worked on this action research project, I find myself thinking more about what kind of leader I want to be and what kind of leader my school would need.

With the transitioning of aspiring principals and the resultant reflection, came a growing understanding about responsibility as a component of leadership. Commented another student:

> I think the most interesting issue I encountered through this project is just how difficult it will be to be an effective educational leader.

And yet another student echoed similar thoughts:

> This project helped me see the complexity of the decision-making process and better understand the pressure that is placed on administrators.

Thus, the action research project also helped several aspiring principals to understand the complexities of leadership and of the principalship and what they still needed to learn.

The aspiring principals generally indicated that developing the action research project contributed to their transitioning from perceiving leadership and education as teachers to doing so through the lens of the principal. It speaks to the strength of action research as pedagogy that most of the aspiring principals concluded that it helped them to transition—without qualification, in the opinion of most, or partially, for those few who identified their transition as more of an on-going process. The latter decided that the action research project had only resulted in a partial transition or metamorphosis for them. One aspiring principal commented that:

> I believe the project has helped transform my thinking to that of an educational leader. I am quite certain that transformation is not complete, but the action research project got the ball rolling.

While they did not yet feel confident in fully defining their leadership lens, all expected the transition to progress as they learned more about leadership.

Since the aspiring principals were completing only their first semester of the program, their astute conclusion was that the transition from teacher to educational leader was difficult. I was reminded once again in informal conversations and class discussion of how daunting a task this transitioning is for teachers. Some commented about their sense of inadequacy to discuss leadership because of their limited professional experience. And others, early in the semester, expressed their perception of the principalship in narrow management terms, which indicated that much remained to be learned. For instance, one student reflected on the transition from the early narrow management perception to that of leadership, commenting that:

> During the process of our action research, I began to see that there are more issues at stake than just scheduling classes, & hiring staff, etc.

Another initial block that existed for teachers moving into leadership was not having fully valued leadership itself. Commented one student:

> I think the issue I learned about the most throughout this project is the impact of leadership. . . . I have underestimated the importance of strong leadership.

Critically, the self-analyses of the aspiring principals confirmed that leadership is a complex journey, and the action research project was at least the beginning of their journey.

Another aspiring principal discussed his/her own transformative journey and, in so doing, captured the essence of action research as effective pedagogy, better defining the instructional promise and possibility of action research for aspiring leaders:

> The most difficult part of the action research project was shifting into the leadership role – my tendency was to keep saying or feeling "as a teacher." I really believe the difference came for me when we had to rework our project – I felt as though we had to stand back and look at it to fix it – Isn't that what the action research is all about? . . . . [We came] full circle – I felt we really worked as an administrative team to determine how to "fix" it.

And as the aspiring principals wrestled with their emerging identity, through developing their action research projects they began to understand that in order to lead and support teachers to be transformational learners themselves and to inspire authentic learning in their students, the principal, too, must model being a transformative learner and leader.

Embracing Deep Issues of Leadership, Not the Superficial and Technical

As a result of developing the action research project, deeper learning was consistently identified by the aspiring principals. Such depth was reflected when students identified potentially transformational action research topics, rather than management topics, e.g., professional learning communities for improving teaching and student learning; improving student engagement; engaging disengaged, high-risk students; and developing an interdisciplinary curriculum. A number of tenets of the constructivist theoretical frame surfaced in the aspiring principals' comments. One of their comments focused on student-centered learning:

> I learned more and thought more about having students perform more of the research on themselves . . . students actively participating is dynamic. Students will learn [throughout] their whole lives. Therefore, they need to be aware of their own learning.

Another tenet, that of valuing active learning, is discussed later in this section. In addition, critical theoretical elements also surfaced in the analyses of some of the aspiring principals, as they began to refine their personal leadership lens to focus on inequities and some of the injustices that arise from social class and gender bias, reflected in the words of several aspiring principals:

> I had not thought much about the issue of gender differences at the outset of this project. Understanding that girls at the secondary level could be affected by taking a more regular approach to improving positive teacher-student relationships remains quite intriguing. While it makes perfect

sense now, I had not considered the importance of implementing such teaching practices at the earliest possible educational levels.

Things like economic social issues played a huge role in the academic success within the public school system.

Numbers and quantitative assessment, the foci of today's narrow political demands on education, were insightfully perceived as not always the appropriate methods and, certainly, falling short of the magic bullets of *instantaneous perfection* sought by many today. *Instantaneous perfection*, a term the author has ignited in education, demands perfect solutions immediately and without consideration of the effects of those decisions. It reflects our society's underlying philosophy, as well as the demands of policy makers, and results in significant challenges to education and educational leaders (Batagiannis, 2007). The aspiring principals began to understand that there is value in both qualitative and quantitative data determined by the particular context, as exemplified by this student's comment that:

> The ARP [Action Research Project] also helped me to see qualitative research is just as important as quantitative research. In other words, breadth is important, but so is depth.

Thus, the aspiring principals' lens included qualitative assessment, as well, even given today's obsession with and insistence upon numbers alone.

Another deep issue of leadership which they began to see was the role of the principal leading teachers as not about control and power, but about creating a collaborative professional learning community, as discussed further under the subsequent emerging theme of the team process. And they extended their understanding of the importance of principals' relationships with teachers to the value of relationships between teachers and students, emphasizing that:

> [Students] desperately need to establish relationship with teachers at their school,

and,

> These relationships will assist students to better engage in the educational environment.

A number of the aspiring principals made the connection to the critical role of the inclusivity of all voices. For example, one commented about teacher voice:

> I have benefited greatly through this process. I have realized that while working in a group we need to be flexible . . . . We also need to be open to perspectives from other people's point of view . . . . As a future leader I will keep in mind what I have learned through the Action Research Project about a voice for all staff in the building.

And another commented about inclusivity, generally, that:

> The team work concept is designed to and should lead to better, more creative solutions. . . . This project served as a reminder to me to . . . always look for ways to be inclusive in my decision making.

Related to power and control issues, a few of the aspiring principals in their comments even made the insightful connection to student voice and how to encourage it, thus, further constructing a vision of themselves as future, effective instructional leaders:

> Group work can offer students a chance to share their ideas in a less threatening environment than teacher-student instruction alone.

And another student even identified student peer review as a:

> . . . valuable classroom activity in building social bonds and student self-efficacy.

Several aspiring principals focused on deeper student learning; this is critical given today's misguided focus on scripted teaching and narrow, test-determined learning. One commented that:

> As far as a deeper understanding of education and the impact of solid leadership on our plan, I now have a greater understanding of how teachers and administrators can influence deeper learning on the part of students.

Aspiring principals understood, too, that leadership is about planning *learning*, not about adopting canned programs. The depth of being a leader was being negotiated seriously by my students as the semester progressed. As such, one aspiring principal concluded he/she had not made the connection to the deeper issues, indicating that only actual implementation of the action research project would have led to that understanding for him/her. Yet he/she acknowledged that would have been impossible to do within the purview of this course. Anticipating greater learning would have occurred with implementation was not a problematic or surprising conclusion for purposes of this study. In fact, that conclusion reflected the constructivist commitment to active learning. Ideally, immediate implementation would have deepened the action research experience of all the aspiring principals. In fact, that the majority found the experience with action research as powerful as they did—even without implementation—further confirms the potential power embedded in action research for use in leading schools and improving student learning.

Another deep issue in the aspiring principals' comments, which also was discussed earlier under the theme of developing leadership identity, was that of the complexity of authentic leadership and the rejection of the superficial. Commented one aspiring principal:

> Today's environment of NCLB and AYP serves to force the hand of many administrators to make snap decisions about how to improve the educational environment and achievement of students . . . educational leaders need to begin to work against the tide of instant results. Real change, positive change, sustainable change takes time.

Another significant deep issue in the data, which also played a role in the transitioning of teacher to aspiring principal, was that of the discernment of authentic leadership, (i.e. the difference between deeper learning and leading, as opposed to test scores and technical management). Commented two of the aspiring principals:

> I am still learning to delve deeper into issues rather than just looking at management issues. Perhaps I need to grow more in this area because my educational background is in management.

> Administrators, teachers, politicians, parents and students have become enamored with test scores. The amount of paper pushing and the loss of deeper learning in an effort to cover the appropriate dogma as handed down by the state is [sic] maddening.

And, finally, the words of an aspiring principal wisely captured the "Aha!"—the insight—reflecting the dialectic between deeper issues and technical, management issues in their learning, in their transitioning to a vision of what leadership could be:

> This [project] led to a greater understanding of some of the deeper issues of education and leadership. Today's educational environment is very challenging. The pressure to perform and improve is intense. It is easy to see why many administrators look for a magic solution to cure their woes. For effective leaders, however, there is no magic solution, no quick and easy fix.

The breadth of the deep leadership topics identified by the aspiring principals, as well as the depth of the reflective comments, was an additional confirmation of the learning of the aspiring principals through the development of the action research project. As discussed earlier, they began the semester and the program with the teacher's lens and perceiving technical, management topics as the landscape of the principalship. Yet, in completing their action research project in the span of one brief semester, that landscape was transformed. Now, they analyzed deep learning, student voice, teacher voice, the importance of teacher-student relationships, the complexities of leadership, collegiality, and some even began to reflect upon socio-economic and gender inequities.

Plans for Action Research Implementation

In the self-analyses of these aspiring principals, there was universal interest in implementing the action research projects—now or once they are in the position of principal. Most of the aspiring principals indicated that they would implement the action

research project in its entirety; a few planned to make some changes. One aspiring principal commented on having implemented the project during the same semester:

> I have always looked for ways to improve upon our learning culture. The project helped me to discover a very practical approach that I have started to implement in my school.

Another considered doing so the following year:

> I am seriously considering implementing the ARP [Action Research Project] at my school next year. I have an advisory committee, and there are students who also serve on the committee.

A couple of other aspiring principals articulated that they wished they could have actually implemented their project, as they would have learned even more; this was discussed earlier in the paper. No aspiring principal responded that he/she would not wish to implement the action research plan developed.

However, several aspiring principals further demonstrated their learning about action research by acknowledging the importance of context in action research. Since the team members represented different schools, often with entirely diverse demographics and student needs, they thoughtfully weighed the feasibility of implementing their teams' particular projects in their own schools. One aspiring principal indicated that, while he/she was interested in implementing the plan, it might not be feasible in his/her current rural district. Another aspiring principal discussed the size of his/her current district as a possible impediment for parts of the plan:

> Ideally, I would implement this plan; however, my school is very small. It seems that small schools will be a bigger challenge for implementation of some projects.

In addition to the above, the subject of collegiality was evident in the students' thinking that the plan would have to be developed with the specific team of the future school involved in the planning prior to implementation. One commented that:

> I look forward to revising this plan with a new team of leaders.

Another aspiring principal discussed the need to involve the staff of his/her school, indicated the importance of *planting the seed* of collegiality prior to beginning the action research process. The intent to modify the plan was indicative, too, of having learned this integral step of the action research process, which consistently reflects, implements, and refines—and uses collegiality as an underlying norm.

However challenging developing their first action research project was, the aspiring principals unanimously expressed an interest in implementing part or all of their projects in their particular contexts. As mentioned earlier, a recent e-mail from one of the students in this very case study, but a few semesters after the course was completed,

elaborated on how much was learned through action research and how invaluable this implementation of action research would be in framing leadership in her new position.

Team Project

Action research is undergirded by collegiality and mutual learning, with the potential for schools that embrace it on a large scale to evolve into professional learning communities. One objective of the study was to determine if aspiring principals perceived action research developed by teams as having value in learning about leadership. As the aspiring principals completed their team projects in their very own small "administrative teams" or "professional learning communities," they commented positively on their learning from this process. For example, the aspiring principals concluded that they had learned about the functioning and benefits of an administrative team and the acceptance of the ideas of others. Commented one aspiring principal:

> I think the benefit of working as an administrative team was the ability to share all our points of view and then to meld those into one plan to address an issue. That process forces an individual to look at all points of view, value all points of view, and then work to create a solution . . . .

Another aspiring principal remarked similarly:

> I learned and benefited from working as a member of an administrative team . . . . I think we also had our thinking stimulated through synergy . . . . We have so much to learn about cooperating with others . . . . I learned from the group by sharing ideas, expanding my knowledge, plus being exposed to cooperating with others.

In evaluating professional learning communities, which they viewed as invaluable, some also identified the importance of the voice of teachers, also discussed earlier, and what Kanpol (1992) termed the deskilling of teachers—when that voice is silenced. Reflecting the constructivist frame, aspiring principals were able to synthesize their own experiences with deskilling as teachers and to, then, translate those experiences into their anticipated personal leadership, absent such deskilling. Several aptly summarized this learning. One aspiring principal emphatically commented:

> Presently as a teacher, I feel my voice is not being heard . . . . This type of leadership has taken away the ownership for the teachers. As a future leader I will keep in mind what I have learned through the Action Research Project about a voice for all staff in the building.

Another supported the above contentions:

> I think probably the most significant point that I am taking away from this project is that as an administrator one must consider the teachers that often

are made to feel like they are being taken along for the ride when it comes to the implementation of new school programs.

The aspiring principals were candid about the challenges of working in teams and their individual style preferences—individualist or collectivist (Scott-Ladd, 2008). As reflected in a second evaluation completed by the aspiring principals that was not anonymous, a number of students indicated that they would not have elected the team project originally if they had had a choice. One reason for their early reluctance was concern with logistics, both finding time to meet and the likelihood of finding a topic of significance to all of their schools. The most common reason, however, was their past negative experience with team projects.

Ultimately, all the data indicated that the aspiring principals deemed the team process as valuable. In fact, no aspiring principal in this class indicated not learning from working on the project in a team format. For instance, one aspiring principal expressed the individualist perspective of preferring to work on projects alone, but he/she acknowledged the value of the collectivist stance of sharing ideas with others as a form of collegiality—a predominant view, as summarized by one student:

> I generally prefer not to work in groups but I see the importance – especially since I will be part of an administrative team. I really can't see a negative.

Another reflected similar thoughts about the benefits and his/her personal preferences in stating that:

> In general, I don't like group projects. . . .On the other hand, you do get better ideas with more people. It is something that has good and bad things about it. I just like to be responsible for my school work and not someone else's.

And still others acknowledged learning from the team process, while still communicating their initial reluctance or some of the challenges of the team process. Comments, such as:

> I originally thought that working in a group would be difficult, unnecessary, and annoying. However, while it was difficult it taught me a valuable lesson . . . . As educators we need to collaborate together.

> Although the process was tedious and at times disagreeable, the team approach helped us to develop a well-rounded . . . action plan for our problem.

> I have never enjoyed working in a group, but this experience has really helped me feel more comfortable,

The comments above dominated the transformation from an individualist leader to a collectivist with action research as a framework.

In addition, the issue of logistical problems was raised, and the importance of face-to-face meetings to discuss their team project, rather than e-mail and telephone communications, was identified. Some also considered more serious problems that potentially could occur in team projects (e.g., team members failing to contribute), but quickly pointed out that such problems did not surface in their team. Of the 23 aspiring principals, 22 indicated that having completed this team project, they *would* now select a team project in the future if given the choice. Only one indicated continued reluctance. While acknowledging that this had been a positive experience, her past negative ones caused her to perceive her positive experience in this case study as being an anomaly.

Additionally, aspiring principals concluded the team project served as an ultimate source of professional growth. Comments such as:

> I learned that I am more comfortable than I thought I would be disagreeing with my colleagues.

> Another way I benefited from working in an administrative team was going outside my comfort zone.

became the norm for the transformed aspiring principals.

In conclusion, although the team process was challenging and, not surprisingly, uncomfortable at times, ultimately, the students all felt it was beneficial, with leadership beliefs serving as a unifying factor. For instance, one aspiring principal commented that,

> After some discussions, we concluded that while we had our differences, we also share a number of basic tenets about education and the role of the administrator.

Another aspiring principal commented,

> We really became a team while working on this project. Not only did I feel that we worked well together on the project; we were forcing each other to start thinking about what kind of leaders we want to be in the future.

And two specifically compared learning from the team process, as opposed to independent learning:

> I am not sure that I would have gotten as much out of the action research project if I had done the project on my own. I think that a leader is only as good as the people they [sic] have around them.

> . . . I learned more about myself as a leader having to work with a team (especially my team) than I would have if we had to work alone.

On a more collegial level, an additional benefit not originally identified in the objectives of the course was the development of strong networking, friendships, and the building of a mutual support system outside the classroom among the students. One aspiring principal summarized it well:

> I truly feel that I have made connections that I will keep with me long after we have completed the cohort.

In the conclusion I will summarize both what the students learned based on their assessments and what I learned about their learning and my own teaching.

Limitation of the Study

The action research project plan was developed in this course, but not implemented for several reasons—time and feasibility. The project was only one component of the introductory leadership course, and the course was only one semester in length. This limited time did not permit completion of both the study and implementation of the project. In addition, and, most importantly, schools are unable to accommodate the immediate implementation of multiple projects. However, given these limitations, aspiring principals were encouraged to include in their planning the selection of topics of import to their schools, to discuss the topics with their principals, and to explore the possibility of current or future implementation.

Conclusion

Educational leaders face many challenges in serving children in today's troubled times. If aspiring principals are to lead schools effectively in the future, they must first establish their leadership identity, which will include analyzing the deep, transformative issues of learning and leading. This research study focused on the metamorphosis of graduate students, helping to transform their very identity from that of teachers to that of aspiring principals using the pedagogy of developing action research projects in simulated administrative teams/professional learning communities.

The constructivist frame of the study paralleled the tenets of action research, sharing such strands as active learning, collaboration, participation in one's own learning, and reflection. Being an active learner is integral to developing a leader identity and to action research. One cannot, after all, lead without first taking initiative and responsibility, being creative, developing effective instructional strategies, and being a transformative visionary. This study supported the use of action research to prepare aspiring principals to don the mantle of leadership and to be transformed from mere managers to true, transformational, instructional leaders.

The study melded theory and practice in each of the three tiers of action research it addressed. It confirmed, strengthened, and deepened my commitment as a professor to action research as a powerful pedagogy for educational leadership identity transformation; my earlier informal assessments of action research were now supported by more formal and intentional analysis and evaluation. The study confirmed the positive

effects of action research even though it included only the development of action research projects. The fact that even without implementation, action research was successful at the multiple levels confirms the power of action research.

For academics, action research is an opportunity to analyze, reflect upon, and strengthen our pedagogy by having an unwavering belief in the *possibility* embedded in our teaching. It is that hope, that vision, which defines authentic teaching–open to transforming and creating meaning based on our students' learning and needs– irrespective of the level, P-12 or higher education. This is in direct opposition to the narrow, technical, even scripted substitutions for teaching that are being demanded by the proponents of narrow standards and high stakes testing of our day.

This study should be paradigmatic of what we expect of practitioners in the field. For future aspiring principals, my hope is that they will acquire the courage to complete more sophisticated action research projects—in subsequent courses and in their eventual leadership practice—even, perhaps, integrating social issues and cultural transformation and a sense of "otherness" reflective of critical theory, as well, which surfaced in a few of the aspiring principals' comments. While this is my hope for future leaders and what I teach in the classroom, I also acknowledge that today's narrowly defined accountability, exemplified by *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), and now *Race to the Top*, is in contrast to and working against the philosophical underpinnings of this action research project, specifically, as well as the philosophy of action research, generally. This short-sighted movement focuses on the quick fix without concern about research, authentic learning, or the educational development of children. It also neglects the voice of many—educators, students, and parents. NCLB was written, originally, with the intentional exclusion of educators' voice.

Given this climate, future studies on action research and leadership will necessarily be affected by the politics that have infused education and will need to examine the effects of the latter on action research, pedagogy, and learning itself. Yet, even still, the overarching emphasis in teaching aspiring principals should be on deep transformational leadership that rejects the unexamined status quo; challenges the silencing of voice of educators at all times by promoting reskilling; and recognizes and embraces the promise and possibility embedded in action research to transform our leaders, teachers, and schools toward new realities.

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Acknowledgement

Appendix A

Course Learning Objectives

a). To begin to reflect upon and develop their identity as educational leaders and to begin the transition of exploring education from the lens of a principal, rather than of a teacher/graduate student.

b). To analyze and differentiate between surface, technical, management issues and the deeper issues of leadership reflected in leadership praxis.

c). To participate in and create their own learning—beginning with the selection of their leadership topic, participating in an "administrative team," and concluding with the self-evaluation of their learning and of the contribution of the pedagogy of action research to that learning.

d). To synthesize their learning about action research with the functioning of an administrative team, including divergent visions, priorities, and conflicts.

e). To envision action research as a model of professional development and school improvement and, potentially, of a professional learning community.

Appendix B

Aspiring Principals' Self-Analyses and Course Analyses (Anonymously Completed):

1.) Assess if and how developing your action research project helped you:
    a). to transition from the perspective of a teacher to that of an educational leader
      and . . . .
    b). to understand the deeper issues in education and leadership, as opposed to
     surface, management issues alone.
    c). Explain if you plan to implement the project you designed in your present
     school or as a future principal?
2.) Analyze from the perspective of an educational leader:
    a). what you learned and/or benefited from in working as a member of an
    "administrative team" or . . . .
    b). why you did not learn and/or benefit from working as a member of an
     "administrative team."
3.) Analyze a deeper issue(s) about which you learned through this project.

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