

Teacher Tales of Action Research: Trials and Triumphs

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ABSTRACT: In this paper we tell two different kinds of tales of teachers doing action research. First are five case studies of teachers in an action research course that we (a professor and six doctoral students) collaboratively taught and a longitudinal follow up looking at whether they put their research proposals into practice. Some of our case study teachers did their proposed action research; for others it took time and particular circumstances before they were willing to do research. We wanted to document the barriers and experiences that students from our class had once they stepped outside of our college classroom and into their teaching classrooms and tried to implement their action research projects. Were they supported in their research goals? Under what circumstances were they committed to the project and to follow it through to completion?

The second tale is our own, as teachers and researchers in this course we learned a great deal. We report on the self-study aspect of this project related to our own learning. After co-teaching this course and then collecting and analyzing data for four subsequent years, our co-teaching team concluded this project with mixed feelings about the viability of teacher research. Our self-study analyzes these differences in perspectives.

Literature Review

Two areas of literature informed this study--action research and self-studies. While there are overlaps between these two research methodologies, their focus and orientation reflect distinctions that were important to different aspects of this study.

Action Research

The focus of action research is the action that teachers take in their classrooms to create change. The research process is a study of this change through systematic data collection and analysis. Within this broad definition, there are various foci and variations. Reflecting this diversity, researchers advocate for varied benefits of teacher research including heightened professionalism (Hubbard & Power, 1993), empowerment (Burnaford, Fischer, & Hobson, 2001; McLean, 1997), teacher collaboration and support (Miller & Pine, 1990; Miller, 1990), teacher initiated reform and school change (Wells, 1993), teaching as a form of inquiry (Elliott, 1985), critical reflection and social change (Gore, 1991; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988), democratic processes and social change (Noffke, 1995), teachers learning from each others' research (Stenhouse, 1975), and developing a teacher researcher knowledge base (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993).

A large and diverse literature has accumulated to guide teachers in doing action research in their classrooms and schools (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 1994; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Elliott, 1991; Goswami & Stillman, 1987; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Mills, 2000). In reports from teachers conducting action research in their classroom, a majority of the reports focus on the value of doing research for teachers (Cirincione & Michael, 1994; Hampton, 1993; Keith, 2001; Nath & Tellez, 1995; Strickland, Dillon, Funkhouser, Glick, & Rogers, 1989). For example, in a study of 21 teachers from a California school district who were conducting action research as part of a graduate program, Sax and Fisher (2001) found an increased sense of belonging and community was created which in turn contributed to participants' confidence regarding their teaching. New peer relationships among participants were also established.

Against these positive outcomes, equally important, yet far less often discussed, are the obstacles, hardships, and political constraints that make action research difficult, even impossible (Allen & Shockley-Bisplinghoff, 1998; Cliff, Veal, Holland, Johnson, & McCarthy, 1995; Dana, 1995; Johnston & PDS colleagues, 1997).

Numerous academics (Adler, 2003; Noffke, 1995; Winer, 1989; K. M. Zeichner & Gore, 1995) and reports from some large scale projects (Bisplinghoff, Allen, & Shockley-Bisplinghoff, 1998; Webb, 1990) point to constraints and challenges, although there are fewer studies in this area. A study by Gilbert & Smith (2003) is typical. The participants in this study included nine mentor teachers, two administrators, and fifteen former teaching fellows in a graduate program that were followed for three years. Gilbert found these participants lacked knowledge of the processes involved in action research and also lacked skills in using data collection tools. They were also challenged by the lack of time for data analysis and preparation of a report or write-up, the recursive nature of classroom research, and unplanned critical events. Maintaining systematicity and rigor in their research was also problematic for some teachers. The research presented here adds to this literature by presenting cases of teachers and the challenges they faced in conducting action research in their various educational contexts.

Self Studies

The focus of self studies is the self. Self studies defines the locus of the research (i.e., content and nature of a person's activity), not the methods (Loughran & Northfield, 1998, p. 11). Cole and Knowles (1998) identify two main purposes: "Self-study for self-understanding and professional development is essentially being thoughtful (in a Deweyan sense) about one's work. It is reflective inquiry. . . ." (p. 225).

Zeichner (1999) claims that "The birth of the self-study in teacher education movement around 1990 has been probably the single most significant development ever in the field of teacher education research" (p. 8). The Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices Special Interest Group (S-STEP SIG), initiated in the early 1990s, has become one of the largest SIGs in AERA. A two-volume handbook of self-studies published by Kluwer has just been released (Loughran, Hamilton, LaBoskey, & Russell, 2004). This two-volume handbook demonstrates the growing interest in this research methodology. A sampling of books and articles in teacher education demonstrates the variety of ways in which self-studies are being used (Griffiths, Bass, Johnston, & Perselli, 2004; Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2000; Hamilton, 1998; Johnston & PDS colleagues, 1997; Loughran & Northfield, 1998; Zeichner, 1995).

While narrative and other autobiographical research approaches also reveal the self, self study inquiry in teacher education has been less defined by a particular methodological rationale than on a systematic inquiry into the self in its many manifestations within teacher education. Self-studies in teacher education are eclectic in the methods used including traditional and innovative methods including autobiography, narrative, performance, creative writing, dialogic inquiry, and so forth. Like action research, self studies are cyclical and lead to more questions and problems to be addressed — a continuous cycle characteristic of an educative experience described by John Dewey (1938). The expectation is that the self-study research will lead to changes in the self and in the profession (Cole & Knowles, 1998). Our self-study is situated in this eclectic methodological and theoretical context as we puzzled over what we learned from our teaching and our case studies, and the differences in our evolving understandings of the usefulness of action research in teaching.

Background

We co-taught this core course, Classroom Based Inquiry, the first time it was offered in a newly developed graduate program. There were 40 students registered, six of whom were doctoral students. Marilyn invited the doctoral students to be co-instructors. As a group, we did action research on the class as we taught about classroom based inquiry.

The focus of the action research course was the development of a research proposal by the teachers for a research project to be conducted in their classrooms beginning the following school year. The course was held in the summer. We shared our action research proposal and methods of doing our research related to teaching the course with our

students. Our action research proposal and teaching of the course was meant to demonstrate action research as we taught about it. Using the Hubbard and Powers (1999) book, *Living the Questions: A Guide for Teacher Researchers*, we discussed typical topics such as posing questions, writing literature reviews, data collection, data analysis, ethical issues in doing research, publishing, and teacher empowerment. We also had book club groups where teachers were reading various accounts of teacher research. In these book club groups, teachers worked collaboratively together to support each other's development of their research proposals. This collaboration modeled the kinds of critical friendly relationships we advocated for teachers who are doing research.

Research Methods

Our research methods were typical of action research studies (Burnaford, et al., 2001; McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead, 1996; Stringer, 1999). We began by posing questions about our practice--the teaching of a course on action research. We examined our teaching practice and student learning through the lens of our questions and our situated perspectives. Both the questions and what we were learning during the research process influenced our teaching as well as the emergent character of the research. The results of our inquiry provided the basis for making adjustments in the course and for further self-reflection on our teaching.

Conducting action research during this course provided a model for what we were teaching in the class. The teachers could see how we were doing research and collecting data and how the data were used to make decisions on our teaching of the course. We passed out our research proposal, shared our data and interpretations, and modeled collaboration in the organization of the course and the research project (Christenson et al., 2002).

As part of our collaborative research, each of us selected a different class member for a case study. We looked for teachers who seemed particularly interested in the course and in action research.¹ We invited them to participate by explaining that our goal was to trace what they were learning in the course and how they were changing their minds about research and their research projects (Christenson et al., 2002). For these case studies, we did three semi-structured interviews during the 5-week intensive summer course. Upon completion of the course, we decided to follow up with the teachers to see if they were actually doing their research and asked their permission to extend the research study. We conducted four to ten telephone conversations between October 1998 and April 2002. These were informal conversations about what they were doing and how they felt about their research.

The data included semi-structured interviews with the teachers during the course, as well as their assigned course reflective journals, field notes from class sessions including small group discussions, and notes from follow-up telephone conversations. Of the original case studies, two of the teachers moved away and/or did not respond to follow-up calls. This resulted in five completed case studies.²

The self-study portion of the research is represented in a dialogue that follows the case studies. This dialogue demonstrates the contrasting attitudes and perspectives we had as a group related to the value of action research for us and for teachers in general. The analysis for this aspect of our research depended on extended dialogue over a 4-year period as we first taught the course and then worked on data analysis, writing articles, and conference presentations. The collaborative writing this part of the paper required an in-depth reflective analysis of our shared and differing attitudes about what we learned from this process.

A dialogic process to conduct research (Dewey, 1925/1981; Florio-Ruane, 1986) depends on the reflective ability of the participants and their willingness to participate in a self-study of their own thinking and learning. This inquiry process is evaluated using concepts of "validation" (Louie, Drevdahl, & Purdy, 2003) or "catalytic validity" (Lather, 1986) as criteria where issues of traditional tests of "validity" have less salience.

Five Case Studies

Our case studies provide five examples of teachers' successes and struggles with implementing teacher research in their classrooms. Because of length, we only summarize the most salient points in order to give readers the flavor of these cases. Following the case descriptions, a cross-case analysis provides a description of the barriers and support mechanisms that helped or hindered these teachers as action researchers.

Kathy: Ready, Committed, and Able

Kathy was a unique member of our class because she came with a focused goal in mind, to learn about action research. In her first journal she wrote, "My goal is to gain a clearer understanding of action research so I can use this as a guide." She said that she considered herself a researcher of children after visiting Italy to study the Reggio Emilia approach. Clearly she came to the class with a positive attitude and an interest in learning how to do action research:

Inquiry research is like this extraordinary thirst. After the cup is empty and your thirst isn't satisfied, you look for more water sources to help satisfy that thirst. I guess you need to enjoy each sip instead of gulping it all at once. It's what I call the tea party scenario. You sip. You socialize. You sip. You socialize. You question. You research. You question. You research. (class journal entry)

She wrote and talked a lot about the course as a part of her professional journey:

My professional life has been a journey of seeking deeper knowledge and increasing my skills as a professional. I compare my personal evolution as a professional to the image of an oak tree: growing, changing in small ways over the course of years. Change has been steady and I know I am a better professional because of it. (class journal entry)

Kathy works in a special education setting teaching both hearing and hearing-impaired preschoolers. She received support from supervisors and colleagues who encouraged her to continue her work the following year. Also her ongoing communication with Mary (doctoral student/case study researcher) and her masters project advisor stand in contrast to some of the teachers in the class who subsequently got no support from either school or university colleagues.

Even though she had support, doing her research was not always easy. When she returned to school in the fall, she had many set backs including typical time-consuming school responsibilities and a serious car accident that kept her out of school for many weeks. Nevertheless she persisted and successfully defended her Masters project in May of 1999. She felt that her study created some useful "commotion" and "lots of discussion" with her colleagues. All in all this led to positive changes in her school setting.

Two years later, however, Kathy was not doing the same kind of systematic documentation that she did while she was conducting her research for her masters degree, yet she felt that the experience of doing her research had made her a better observer and more reflective teacher. She continues to collect documentation in her classroom. In addition, she is enthusiastic about the benefits that resulted of her action research.

Unlike Kathy, the teacher in the next case study received little support at her school and only eventually does her research by relying instead on her university advisor for support.

Eileen: Conflicted & Tentative

At the time Eileen took the Classroom Based Inquiry course, she had taught a total of 6 years as a first grade teacher and 4 years as a part-time Chapter One teacher. She was working on her Masters degree and had completed 10 quarters in the program.

Time was of utmost concern to Eileen throughout the course. She knew that she would be involved in extensive workshops for literacy training for a program that her school had adopted for the next school year. She also worried about the demands for other job-related tasks would still need to be done. She worried about how she would fit it all in? How would she find time to talk to colleagues? How would she even find a colleague willing to talk and read her research? She confessed: "Discussion is a forum that does not go on much in my school. . . . Most staff members don't stay around after school or come in early."

She also had questions about justification and accountability:

Will the information I discover be valued by my administration? How do I justify observing? If my principal walked in my room, he might think I should be doing more than looking at kids. What if my research doesn't answer the question? How do I justify putting so much time into it and then not come up with the answer? (class journal entry)

In addition, she wondered whether the general public and parents would value what she was doing in her classroom. She did not think either would understand it enough to value it.

Her final concern was peer pressure. If she attempted to do this research, would it isolate her from her peers? She believed that the culture in her school did not encourage professionalism. Her experience was that if a teacher talked about his/her teaching success, it was perceived as bragging. Eileen's initial concerns about time constraints, administrative and parental support, and faculty pressures continued to overwhelm her and she did not undertake her research.

Two year later, Eileen reported that she had completed her proposed research for her Masters capstone project

where she had the support of her university adviser. "If not for her [her advisor], I would never have had the confidence to do the action research." She also had support from a gifted education teacher in the district that helped her with the writing in the final stages of her project. She reported: "I rarely hear the term "action research" in my district, but I use the real work done by my children to inform my decisions on a daily basis."

She now feels that action research is only the beginning of a "life long project." Eileen plans on doing "another action research project" as part of her professional development plan required by her school district.

Lois: Success & Support

Lois, like Kathy (first case study teacher), came to the course with an agenda--to gain the skills and knowledge to be able to complete her final capstone project for her Master's degree. She came with an eagerness to learn and a positive attitude. She wrote a proposal for her study and found the process useful. "The course helped me define and clarify what I was planning to do [for my masters project]." For her study, she wanted to interview Jewish university students who were currently teaching at Jewish Hebrew and religious schools. She hoped that her study would improve recruitment, training, and retention of these teachers.

Lois had only positive things to say about the Classroom Based Inquiry course. She found that the readings and writing in a journal aided her in forming ideas about her study. The readings and issues discussed in the class were particularly helpful.

Time was a big issue in doing her research. The project was time consuming. She began meeting with principals in December and told them about her proposal. They were encouraging and supportive. She was also given a grant from the local Commission on Jewish Education. In January she began the student interviews. It was hard managing time and coordinating interviews between the participants and her schedules, but the university students, the Rabbi at the University Jewish Center, and her adviser were helpful in her endeavors.

After completing the project, Lois felt like her study made a contribution to Jewish education. She would like to see her study replicated in other areas and a follow up study with the participants conducted in order to see if they were still as committed in years to come as they were now.

Two years later, Lois is a teacher in a Jewish educational program and is helping to prepare 12 and 13 year olds for their bar and bat mitzvahs. She feels that her action research helped her to become a more flexible teacher. She learned how to develop new teaching strategies that focus on the individual student and family needs. She feels that the core of action research can be applied to any situation, not just education. Her experience with research helped her to support what she calls "self-career development." She described her approach as using the "tools" of action research to become a better educator. What Lois learned from doing this research continued to influence her subsequent teaching.

Like Eileen, Michelle finds the support of her university advisor to be important in completing her action research, but she lacked the institutional support that Lois had.

Michelle: Motivated but Lonely

I knew general sorts of patterns [about children's learning], and I could tell where a child was at all times, but I never delved into the workings of a child like I have in this [research] project. That's opened my eyes a lot. (conversation after completing action research project)

Michelle took the summer course, wrote her action research proposal, and then promptly began her study in her classroom in the fall. She decided during the course to use the action research option to complete the final project for her master's degree program. Marilyn was her advisor so they began meeting weekly during autumn quarter to discuss her project as it evolved.

The fact that her research was to be her culminating project for her Masters degree both motivated and worried her. It motivated her to actually do the project and provided a structure for it, that is, weekly meetings with Marilyn and 3 hours of university credit. As she reported in a conversation with Marilyn at the end of the quarter:

Michelle: The fact that I'm reporting to you each week really helps me stay on track.

Marilyn: If we weren't talking and you didn't have the credit, would you have done this?

Michelle: No, because it takes a lot of time, a lot of effort. My driving force is that this is going to get me to my masters. (conversation with advisor)

After a quarter of collecting data, Michelle realized that she was doing things differently in her teaching and that she was learning new things about her four case study children as a result. She said:

I can say honestly, that over the last four years of teaching, I never was aware of some of the things I'm finding out about how kids learn. As teachers we tend to generalize about children from impressions we get throughout the year. You know, you have to in order to move kids along; you have to be able to group them by abilities when you need to . . . but when you really start looking at a specific child . . . you begin to understand that there are important things that you would have easily overlooked. For me, it's sitting down at the end of the day and really thinking about what I did as a teacher, and then what those children produced for me, and the interactions that they had, and the narratives in their journals. It really puts things in a different light; it really muddies the waters because you don't have those general distinctions any more. You start to look at kids differently; you start to teach differently, because you start to ask questions that are different. I ask questions because I want to get it down in my data, questions I would never have thought of asking as a teacher. (researcher journal)

Michelle was observing more closely. She saw her case study children in different and more complex ways and asked different kinds of questions.

A major theme for Michelle was the lack of support or collaboration in her school. Her principal was new and uninterested in her project. He didn't mind if she did her research, but he wasn't particularly supportive either. Her colleagues were "all going in different directions." She couldn't find anyone in her school who was either interested in doing action research or willing to talk about hers.

After she completed her masters project, she was not sure that she would be willing to continue her action research, even though it had been "incredibly valuable," unless she had other people to talk to. Collaboration seemed particularly important to her because it took conversations about her reflections to make sense of them.

When I sit at home in front of the computer, I can't make sense of all my notes and reflections. When we talk about them, it helps me to create some interpretations of what I am finding. I need other people to make sense of what I am seeing and recording. (phone conversation)

Two year later, Michelle had finished her masters, but she was not planning to do action research again. Nevertheless, she continued to collect documentation on her students' learning and this data has had an on-going influence on her teaching. She is convinced that she needs this kind of close observation to help her reflect on her teaching even though she is not calling it "action research."

The next case differs from the others in that Belle never completes her proposed action research project.

Belle: An Isolated Advocate

Belle was a preschool teacher in a university setting. She began our Classroom Based Inquiry course having had prior experience with action research within a funded project looking at written language development in 3, 4, and 5 year old children.

Belle believed that she learned a great deal about her teaching practice as a result of her previous involvement with action research. "It made me look much closer at my own teaching practice. It helped me see more clearly how it really did work and how the teaching that I do supports that."

Belle was comfortable with the flexible nature of action research. "I came upon a stumble, I got over it, I went in a slightly different path. That was not a problem." She also saw action research as providing her with a more immediate and rewarding way of approaching data collection and analysis. "I [previously] felt like all of my data collection had to wait until the end to be evaluated. That's not necessarily true."

Like many of the teachers taking the course, Belle was reconstructing her understanding of the process of doing action research and its connections to how teachers informally study their teaching.

I didn't realize that the process I went through was a natural process. I perceived this as, "I can't do this right. I'm doing this all wrong!" That's how I perceived it but that isn't really how it was. (class journal entry)

After the class, said she had wanted support from her workplace director, but she lamented, "That didn't really happen. We met a total of three times during the year . . . I needed more guidance and support." In addition, Belle

and her director differed in their beliefs regarding child development, making the implementation of her action research project difficult.

I'd take a [child's] written project, including a drawing, to be part of literacy development. She [the director] was looking at only letters, shapes, and words. I had to struggle through her beliefs and my beliefs and [her] lack of knowledge on how to do research. (phone conversation)

When asked how her supervisors felt about her doing research (she taught in a university-based preschool), she responded:

My director is pleased. We're trying to establish some credibility within the university. [Historically] we've been looked upon as non-professionals and babysitters. The education department at the university called one day to ask if we all had college degrees! We're trying to establish some credibility and say we do research and are professionals. They [the university people] have no clue what we do If I publish what I've written last year or what I will do hopefully this year, that makes them look at us like, "They are doing something over there besides playing in the sandbox!" (phone conversation)

Within six months, however, Belle had stopped her project because the lack of support as well as time constraints imposed by the need to complete a Master's degree project.

When you're in a stimulating course that relates to your study and with peer interest, you're more prone to take risks. I'm not as interested in the project as last year . . . I'm looking now for a final Master's project.

It is interesting to note that although Belle came to us feeling more confident about doing classroom based inquiry research than many of the other teachers in the course, she, nevertheless, did not complete her proposed project. The lack of support from her director and university peers as well as time constraints imposed by her Master's program put an end to her research project in mid-stream.

Nevertheless, two years later, Belle reported: "The course definitely impacted what I do. As a teacher, how are you going to support what you do unless you have a research base to back it up?" Although Belle did not complete her research, she had learned to value documentation and reflection to a much greater degree. She continued to use her journal to document her teaching practice and curricular decisions as well as her decisions about whether to remain in her preschool setting. During a recent job interview, Belle mentioned that she would like to extend her action research by conducting and publishing studies about her classroom. She was disheartened when the interviewing principal responded: "Teachers in THIS building are not going to have any time for that." She felt the interview was over at that point. She continues to look for a setting where there will be support for action research.

Cross-Case Analysis

From a cross-case analysis of these studies of individual teachers, five themes emerged: 1) time challenges and mediating factors, 2) collaboration and support, 3) open-endedness of action research, 4) long-term implications, and 5) motivation and rewards of an external project or degree requirement. Of these themes, time and collaboration/support have been documented in other research; the challenges of the open-endedness of action research, the long-term implications of taking a course, and motivation and rewards of external projects/degrees are new findings.

Time challenges and mediating factors. Many of the teachers in our course discussed issues related to time in their class journals and in the follow-up phone conversations. It was a major factor that worried them as they thought about and implemented their research. The challenge of time is often mentioned in the literature on action research as well (Bolin & Falk, 1987; Clift, Veal, Johnson, & Holland, 1990). It is typical for teachers to feel overwhelmed by the pressures of teaching. Their responsibilities leave little time for doing action research in spite of the potential benefits to their professional growth.

For our five case study teachers, however, environmental and administrative support appeared to be more important than time constraints. For these teachers, time seemed to be more of a barrier in the absence of collaboration, support, or an external goal. If our case study teachers had others to talk with and/or to support them, then time was not a debilitating factor. Time was still a challenge for them and they struggled to do their studies on top of other responsibilities, but it was not a factor that kept them from engaging in research. Fuchs and Moore (1988) found this to be true in their collaborative project: "The benefit of collaborative planning, teaching, and reflecting outweigh the challenge presented and extra time involved" (p. 413).

Collaboration and support. For our teachers, collaboration and support were critical variables that influenced their success in doing action research. In the literature, collaboration and support are often presented as key elements to successful action research projects (Oja & Smulyan, 1989; Wells, 1993). Action research may require the eyes and ears of others to assist and critique one's procedures, reflections and analyses of data. In their popular book on action research, Burnaford, et al, (2001) argue "that teacher action research is enhanced in group settings through systematic dialogue and critique" (p. 21). This is a methodological argument that other people are needed in order to check the analyses and interpretations of a researcher doing research in his or her classroom. There may be things that the researcher cannot see that others can. Other critical eyes enhance the verity of the research. Some theorists argue further that collaboration and support are necessary to buffer the negative attitudes of administrators, peers and other institutional constraints. Hursh (1995) concludes from his work with teachers that: "Action research, when undertaken as an individual activity, is easily overwhelmed by the culture of the school" (p. 144).

Collaboration and support were critical variables in our cases. There were many different ways and places that teachers found support, but no one finished their research without finding it somewhere.

The open-endedness of action research. One of the themes that was apparent in our analyses of these teachers' work with action research that seems to relate to the need for collaboration and support was their apprehensions about the open-endedness of action research. All of them worried about whether the outcomes from their studies would have any value, and further, if there would even be any outcomes. Several of them seemed to assume a traditional sense of "outcomes," in the sense that they would have to prove something was effective or worthwhile. The fear was that they would not have anything to say from all their work. None of them had questions that would lend themselves to these kinds of "findings," and yet, they seemed to anticipate that they would need to have "something to show" from their research.

This expectation for "results" was further exacerbated for these teachers by the cyclical nature of action research. In the course we talked about questions leading to further questions, and the way in which teacher research is never completed. Teachers easily recognize this as paralleling the nature of teaching and learning, as Michelle said, "It's an on-going process." Yet, when they initially thought about themselves as researchers, their expectations made them nervous about producing "results." These expectations for results, however, seemed to be moderated later by what they learned in the process of actually doing the research.

Long term implication. All of our case study teachers asserted that they were better teachers as a result of doing their research, even if they didn't finish their project as in the case of Belle. Michelle reported: "Action research truly does make you, not a more efficient teacher, but it makes you a more aware teacher." The result of doing close observations of students and of their teaching, revealed things that they had not seen before. They described research procedures that they were continuing even in the absence of a systematic study. For example, Kathy was keeping a journal to document her observations, Belle reported that she was a better observer and more reflective teacher, Eileen described ways she used the "real work done by my children to inform my decisions on a daily basis."

These on-going practices of our case study teachers suggest the usefulness of action research methods beyond the parameters of an actual research project. They had all become better observers of children. From the course and their research, they were more oriented toward careful, systematic documentation, even in the absence of a formal research study.

Motivation and rewards. Completing their Masters Degree project provided significant motivation and reward for teachers to complete their research projects. Two of the three teachers who completed their Masters Degree, did action research to fulfill their final capstone requirements. While the motivation and rewards were there in the master degree requirement, these teachers reported that it was support and assistance from their advisers that was the critical variable in helping them to do their research. Incentives and rewards, in and of themselves, were seemingly not enough for these teachers. The promise of a reward at the end -- the completion of the degree -- kept them focused and engaged in research, but without support these teachers felt they would not have continued. The usefulness of rewards and incentives seems tied to the need for support and collaboration.

Overall, these case studies demonstrate a variety of important characteristics that may be necessary to facilitate and encourage teacher action research more generally. As other studies have found, time, while an important constraint, may not be the most important obstacle deterring teachers from becoming teacher researchers. Support and collaboration may mediate the time demands required to do action research, and further, while motivation and rewards may be helpful, they may not be sufficient to sustain completion of teacher research. Studies of the relation of time, collaboration, and incentives may be fruitful areas for further case study research.

Beyond what has been found in other studies, these teachers found the open-endedness of action research and the expectations for traditional research "results" worried them throughout their initial work with action research. However,

the lasting value that teachers found from close analysis of their students and teaching, moderated these worries as they found that the value of the research, not in the results, but in what they learned from the process.

Value of the Longitudinal Study

If we had concluded this study with the initial case studies and two-year follow-up conversations, we would simply have reported that three teachers completed their action research and two did not. However, follow-up conversations into the fourth year after the course ended indicated that the long-term impact of this course was greater over time than was apparent at the end of the two years. By the fourth year, four of the five teachers had completed their action research project and all five were regularly using documentation and journaling to examine their teaching and their students' learning. All of them currently see more formal action research as potentially part of their future professional lives.

Self-Study

The following dialogue reflects the self-study methodology of our project. Our analysis is presented in the form of a dialogue that took place between two of the doctoral students who helped to co-teach the course. Here we turn a critical eye inward to examine our attitudes about action research after teaching this class and then using self-study methods to analyze our own learning.

The actual dialogue was a rather heated debate during a meeting where we were analyzing our case study data. Later, when we were analyzing the data from our own research meetings, we realized that this conversation had articulated something we had not realized before within our group. It represented two very different perspectives on the viability of action research which paralleled whether we had actually conducted action research ourselves and whether we were currently teaching at the university or in the schools. Both experience and context were related to the two difference perspectives within our group. The following dialogue reflects our contrasting attitudes about the value and viability of action research for teachers.

The Dialogue Participants

Shirley Bendau has taught for 35 years, 25 years in an urban, multiage, open-space alternative school. Shirley was at this point a part-time doctoral student and has since completed her PhD degree. Mary Christenson had recently taken early retirement and was completing her PhD degree, and currently is an assistant professor at The Ohio State University, Lima campus. For her last public school teaching assignment, Mary taught for 11 years in an urban elementary school in the same neighborhood in which she lived as a child. As a classroom teacher, Mary conducted a collaborative research study and published it before she began the doctoral program (Christenson & Serrao, 1997).

The Setting

Friday, June 23, 2000, 3:00 pm, sitting around a large table outside Marilyn's university office with snacks, drinks, and various versions of our case study paper scattered all over the table. The conversation took place during a meeting related to writing this paper. We were having a hearty discussion about the implications of our case studies.

The Dialogue

Shirley: Because of co-teaching this class, I've thought a lot about myself, and action research. I've taught for a long time and I have a lot of questions. So why is it that I don't do action research when I have so many questions? Why didn't I do action research last year when I had a very challenging class, problems with crack babies, and issues in my students' homes and families? Maybe the other two teachers I team with would have collaborated with me. But, honestly, you know, action research was so far down on my list it never happened. There is so much going on, all the committees, workshops, staying late for all kinds of school activities. I feel guilty. I think reflective teaching, collaboration, school reform, these are all essentials, but I don't think action research is necessarily required.

Mary: Reflective teaching was not enough for me. Action research gave me a sense that I could go beyond my own classroom. I could do something that went beyond just the kids in my classroom. It was empowering to publish my action research project. I also learned that I could make a difference in teaching. I learned a lot about cooperative learning. I learned that I had the power to make changes based on what I observed. I could produce evidence that cooperative learning was working in contrast to the norms of the school where this type of learning was not thought to be possible or valuable. Many of my colleagues had an attitude about poor kids that they couldn't handle this kind of learning.

Shirley: I did a research project last year, but it was for a class and not something I chose to do. I don't think there are any real rewards for research or publishing. Who would care about what I'm doing? When I got my poem published about *The Courage to Teach* by Parker Palmer (Bendau, 1998-99), I was afraid to even mention it at school. I only showed it to a couple of people who I knew would be okay with it. It's not okay in schools for teachers to be different, and publishing is not something that's valued, or perhaps other teachers are just jealous. Either way, you put yourself up for criticism and scorn if you do things that make you stand out from other teachers. So why did you do action research Mary?

Mary: Well, one reason was because people said that cooperative learning couldn't be done with poor kids in that setting. You can't do it with these kids because they lose control. I wanted to make it work. I don't think I would have been willing to continue to do cooperative learning if I didn't have the research data to show that some of it was working. Others had tried it and it got noisy. They didn't look closely enough to also see the benefits. Because we were looking closely, we could see the positive outcomes.

Shirley: But you had someone to work with.

Mary: Yes, Sheila was a MEd student who graduated from our program. The next year she was in my classroom one day a week when I was released to be a clinical educator for our Professional Development School (PDS) project to supervise student teachers. She had done her internship in my school. My motivation for a project was to have something interesting for her to do when she was there one day a week. She had heard about cooperative learning in all her university courses and she also wanted to see if it worked. So we decided we were going to try and make it work in my classroom.

Shirley: Could you have done this research on your own?

Mary: Probably not. We did things separately, but also Sheila would come in on other days. One of us would teach and the other would do fieldnotes or walk around with a video camera. We began to see positive things that were happening from looking closely at our data.

Shirley: When my school decided to adopt multiple intelligences as a curriculum framework, I read everything I could find, and I tried things in my classroom. But I never did formal research or wrote it up, although I learned a lot from it.

Mary: That's reflective practice. That's important too, but it's not action research. It took data collection and systematic analysis and interpretation of the data. We collected fieldnotes; we did videotapes of the kids in their cooperative groups. We videotaped the groups and had the kids watch the tapes and evaluate whether they were doing a good job of learning cooperatively. It was great. I wrote up what we did during the summer. I used it as my paper for some PDS university credit and I handed it into Marilyn. Marilyn gave me the address of this teacher research journal and said I should send it in. The fact that someone outside of my school, both Marilyn and the journal editors, thought it was worthwhile, encouraged me to feel confident enough to pursue other things, like the PhD program I'm now doing.

Shirley: You had an unusual situation with your substitute, Sheila, and with the support of the PDS. As we have seen with our case study teachers, rarely do teachers have the support necessary to do action research. University professors have time during the day to do their research, but teachers can't do much, if anything, during the school hours, except teach.

Mary: I learned a lot from my research.

Shirley: I have this serious guilt about this whole issue. Much of what you are talking about is the same process that I went through for National Board Certification. We had to reflect, analyze, and document everything. I learned a lot about my teaching by going through that process.

Mary: The think the reflection and documentation of that process are like action research. Board certification is a lot of work and so is action research. We've talked a lot about the ethical issues involved in encouraging teachers to do action research. By encouraging them to do action research, like in our class, do we set up expectations that there's something wrong with teachers if they don't want to do this? Even though I've published an action research, I'm not sure I feel okay about encouraging people to go all the way through this process. The kids have to be first. I don't know about taking time to write and rewrite extensive papers. I went through all it takes to get my research published, and then I got negative responses from my colleagues because they resented what I said about them or about the kids. The fact that I had grown up in the neighborhood where I was teaching was why I felt so strongly about what I

was writing. The editors took out the autobiographical section in my paper and without situating me in that context it sounds like I'm putting the kids down. The autobiography identifies me with those very children, but they didn't like it and I didn't have the courage to argue to keep it. As a result of the criticism, I was just happy to go back into my classroom and not do that kind of research, not put it out there for people.

Shirley: What if the feedback about the article in your school had been positive, rather than negative?

Mary: That might have made a difference. Feedback about the article from people outside my school was very positive. They appreciated the fact that I approached it honestly and wrote about the real problems involved in cooperative learning. It didn't sound easy. Besides, publishing my research is probably the key to what I am doing now. If I hadn't gotten published, I wouldn't have had the confidence to begin this doctoral program. So it was very beneficial, it was empowering. But it also drove me out of the classroom because I didn't feel supported to continue there. I asked my principal if he wanted to read my article, his response was, "Put it in my box, and I'll get to it." That afternoon it was back in my box without comments. I felt I had no support in my school and I wanted to think more deeply about things, so here I am at the university.

Shirley: And here I am at the university doing a doctoral program and still teaching in my classroom. I guess there are lots of reasons why teachers decide to do, or not do, action research. I'm still not convinced that it's legitimate to ask teachers to do research in today's schools given the lack of support and appreciation for it.

Mary: While all of that is true, it's still a way to support making changes in our classrooms and for empowering us as teachers to take charge of our own learning and professional development.

Two Sides Revealed from our Self-Study

As a collaborative research group, we were situated at the university where the research reported here had support and we were successful in typically demonstrated university ways —national conference presentations and publications. From our self-study analysis, however, we found two contrasting points of view resulted from our work. On the one side, some of us agreed that action research was a useful methodology but not viable in our present teaching situations. Both of us (Shirley and Julia) holding this perspective are currently classroom teachers and we had not previously had experience in doing action research in our classrooms. Time, school politics, lack of collaborative support, and the strain of doing something different within school contexts made action research appear an unattractive choice. Doing action research in a university setting was not enough to convince us that research in our classroom was viable, although as Shirley expressed in the dialogue, we carry some guilt about not actually doing formal research.

For the other five participants in our group, the value of what we learned from doing research has sustained a positive perspective toward the viability of action research. All of us with this perspective had actually conducted research in our teaching prior to the teaching the university class. This experience seems to have supported our valuing of this kind of formal research. Those of us with this perspective continue to use this research methodology in our teaching although we have gained a new appreciation for the ethical issues and constraints of action research for all teachers. All of us currently are either full-time doctoral students or new assistant professors so we are situated in a university context.

Our two perspectives seemed to be associated with whether we had actually done research in our own teaching contexts and whether we are situated at the university or in the schools. Having had prior experience with action research and currently being situated at the university seems to have supported a positive perspective, while the lack of actual experience with action research in our teaching as well as being classroom teachers resulted in less optimistic views of the viability of action research. The division of school versus university contexts suggests again that the constraints within school context are powerful challenges, if not actual deterrents, to teachers doing research in their classrooms. This also reflects the support for research that is more readily available within university contexts and much harder to find in school settings.

Conclusion

Along with our case study teachers, as co-instructors and co-researchers, we leave this experience with more complex attitudes towards action research. All of our case study teachers, given four years out of the course and time to try various levels of research, had done some type of research in their classrooms. Our research team, by contrast, was not uniformly convinced that action research was a viable part of our future professional involvement.

For our case study teachers, having time, collaboration, support, and external incentives were factors that supported their action research. The case study teachers in this research were chosen because they were particularly

enthusiastic about action research in our course. Yet, they struggled and it took considerable time before they completed, or partially completed, their research plans. In order to help facilitate the action research process in classrooms, administrators must first and foremost support it. Teachers should be made to feel good about this process and that this is an appropriate process to becoming a better teacher educator. Perhaps one way to facilitate this in the schools is to break teachers into like groups (pair up 2 kindergarten teachers together) so that they can collaborate and support each other during this process. It's evident that isolating teachers during action research and not providing support is a sure way to stifle teachers' attempts at professional growth and project completion.

When those of us on the research team who were currently teaching went into our classrooms (Shirley and Julia), we felt all the tensions expressed by our case study teachers. Unlike our case study teachers, however, we did not do action research in our classrooms, although like our case study teachers, we found systematic documentation and reflection important to our professional development. The long-term influence of an action research course seems to have given us and our case study teachers the desire and tools to continue to collect data and analyze our teaching, informally and/or formally.

Our cases and our self-study as researchers suggest that schools, more than universities, continue to be contexts that limit the rich potential of action research to inform and improve teaching. While teacher research is frequently advocated in educational literature and policy statements, significant reform in school structures, norms and administrative support will be required if teachers are to be expected to become action researchers. Our hope is that those inside and outside schools will have the foresight necessary to support the long-term, open-ended, and cyclical process of teachers doing action research. Without support, as this research suggests, teachers doing action research will face challenges and barriers that are likely to result in uneven and limited implementation.

ENDNOTES

1 While distinctions can be made between "action research," "teacher research," and "classroom based inquiry," we use the terms interchangeably. Our vocabulary is inclusive because of the range of approaches we discussed in the course and because our case study teachers approached their research in varied ways.

2 The case study teachers include: Kathy Hoy, who teaches in Ohio; Eileen (pseudonym) teaches in a suburban classroom in Ohio; Lois teaches at a synagogue in Ohio; Michelle Puckett teaches in an Ohio School District; and Belle (pseudonym) teaches at a university preschool.

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