

Action Research in a Professional Development School Setting to Support Teacher Candidate Self-Efficacy

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This paper discusses preservice teachers' use of action research in a Professional Development School setting. Preservice teachers were placed in a PDS site that focuses on internationalizing education and on teaching languages. The teacher candidates were in charge of planning, teaching, and assessing language instruction in their classrooms. The preservice teachers implemented action research. The process helped them adjust to their teaching responsibility. They collected and reflected on their action research data, used it to understand their practice, and then made plans accordingly to improve their practice. This process was empowering and helped preservice teachers grow in their confidence and competence.

Introduction

Action research is a form of research where teachers learn to improve their practice while improving the understanding of their practice. It is not just thinking about teaching but is a more systematic and collaborative process. It is not just working to solve a problem but to pose issues and questions about teaching as well (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). Action research is a systematized process for data collection in a school setting (Arhar, Holly, & Kasten, 2001; McNiff, 1995; Mills, 2003).

Action research has become common as a form of inservice training in some school districts. Teachers are empowered to examine their own teaching practices rather than receiving outside inservice training that may or may not be of value to the teachers. As Mills discusses, "action research is an invitation to learn, a means to tackle tough questions that face us individually

and collectively as teachers." (Mills, 2003, p. v) Action research teams support teachers in studying their teaching practice and to actually take action to improve what they are doing in their classrooms. Teachers should certainly use theoretical research to help in their understanding of what occurs in their classrooms. In addition to this knowledge, however, action research allows teachers to collect data that more specifically relates to the current issues relevant in their own classrooms.

The action research cycle relies on teachers developing a focus for study in their classrooms or their schools. Teachers must plan out an area of interest or concern in their practice. The focus may be difficult to narrow down in that teachers must consider what kind of data will be realistic for them to collect while still busy working in their classrooms. Once a focus is decided, the teachers must collect data. The data is analyzed and interpreted to look for particular patterns that

exist. The final reflection stage is to develop an action plan for what to implement to improve the classroom/school practice. This cycle of plan, act, observe, and reflect (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988) can then be repeated and research continually developed based on a particular research topic.

Another possible step for action research's use is to consider it as a possibility for preservice teachers who are in their field experience classes and student teaching. Preservice or novice teachers also need to consider their practice. They certainly should receive feedback and advice from their mentors/supervisors, but they need to learn and embrace the concept that they must assume personal responsibility for improving their own practice. When combined with the process of clinical supervision, a university supervisor or mentor can be a data collector to support preservice teachers' action research data collection. The long-term goal of such a process is to not only improve teachers' practices and their understanding of their practices but to also build self-efficacy in preservice candidates' teaching.

Methodology

Participants and Context

Preservice teachers from a Midwestern university in the United States were placed together in a Professional Development School setting at a local international elementary school. These teacher candidates were all in their final semester before student teaching. The candidates were in charge of planning, teaching, and assessing all Spanish and German instruction in their assigned classrooms. Since these candidates were all novice teachers, this degree of responsibility before student teaching was enormous for them to assume.

Procedures

The candidates all taught foreign language at the international school two times a week. The candidates also had a weekly seminar where they would meet together to discuss their teaching and reflect on their practice. One of the seminar's focuses was action research. The candidates learned about the action research steps. They considered what aspect of their teaching they needed to address early on in the semester. Once the candidates decided on a focus, they learned some data collection techniques so that they could start to collect data on their teaching. The candidates met in teams and in the class to share and reflect on their action research data. Action research became an important step in helping the candidates to understand and improve their teaching.

Background

School-university partnership opportunities are well respected in teacher education as positive steps in teacher preparation. The Holmes Group recommended that research and demonstration of quality learning be a primary mission of education schools. They recommended close connections between schools of education and educators in K-12 students. (Holmes Group, 1995) The Association of Teacher Educators document the need for Professional Development School (PDS) sites that can support a healthy learning community and foster continuous learning by all educators so important in supporting the learning of all students. They document the PDS process as a positive learning experience for teacher development. (Byrd & McIntyre, 1999)

PDS sites provide a unique opportunity for preservice teachers to develop as teachers. They also provide a unique opportunity for inservice and preservice teachers to work together to collaborate in their teaching. The goals of PDS include: "preparing future educators, providing current educators with ongoing professional

development, encouraging joint school–university faculty investigation of education-related issues, and promoting the learning of P–12 students.” (NAPDS, 2008, p. 1) A PDS can be any form of a partnership between PK-12 schools and universities’ educators who work together to improve teaching and student learning.

This particular PDS site started up in the fall of 2005. In the spring of 2005, local educators approached one of the authors about the district’s new international elementary school. Goals for the school include internationalizing the curriculum and teaching Spanish in grades PK-5. The school district did not have enough educators certified to teach both Spanish and elementary education to be able to teach Spanish to all grade levels. An important goal of the PDS grew to have preservice teachers come to the school to teach Spanish two times a week throughout the semester of their placement at the international school.

This opportunity became an important part of the modern language majors’ preservice education. To meet the qualifications of state certification, modern language majors/minors have two opportunities. The first is for preservice teachers to be certified to teach a modern language from birth to age twenty-one. Most of these preservice teachers are particularly interested in teaching middle school and/or high school. Since they are to be certified in the early years also, the preservice teachers need opportunities to teach at the elementary level. This PDS site gives these candidates the opportunity to teach in the younger grades before their student teaching.

The second group is those future teachers who are to be certified from age six through thirteen. These candidates are all elementary/middle level majors who must also have a content minor. The candidates who attend this PDS are modern language minors or double majors. These candidates teach a modern language twice

a week but also teach other content areas, since they are certified in those areas, and work to internationalize the content as much as possible.

The focus of the instruction is Spanish. The university also prepares students for certification in French and German. Students with these majors have the opportunity to teach in these settings also at the international school. The school honors the local community’s sister city relationships. These sister city relationships lead to partnerships of kindergarten with China, first grade with Norway, second grade with Ireland, third grade with Germany, fourth grade with Russia, and fifth grade with France. As a result, candidates working toward certification in German or French are assigned to work in third grade or fifth grade classrooms respectively so that they can teach culture lessons and some language lessons.

The preservice teachers start the semester of their involvement at the PDS site by watching the teachers who are certified to teach both a modern language and elementary students. They observed their Spanish lessons. The candidates also receive the school’s foreign language curriculum. They slowly start to plan their own lessons then start to teach their lessons. By week four in the semester, all teacher candidates are teaching foreign language in their assigned classrooms twice weekly. They are to teach both language and culture lessons.

Of the nine essentials listed by the National Association of Professional Development Schools, this PDS site works to broaden its outreach and scope more than what either institution can do alone (essential #1), value its commitment to prepare future educators (essential #2), engage in ongoing professional development for all participants (essential #3), share a commitment to innovative and reflective practice (essential #4), engage in public sharing of educational practices (essential #5), articulate agreements (essential #6), maintain a structure for

ongoing governance (essential #7), work across boundaries of the individual institutional settings (essential #8), and share resources and recognition (essential #9). (NAPDS, 2008)

Discussion

Teacher education candidates assigned to the international school assume a great deal of responsibility for planning and implementing all foreign language lessons during the semester. These candidates typically have had one field experience before this semester's placement in which they have been expected to teach two or three lessons on their own throughout the semester. The lessons are usually single lessons, not two or three consecutive lessons. Therefore, the candidates usually find the assignment of teaching all language lessons to be a lot of responsibility and work. To support teacher candidates' work, one of the authors added action research to the university class expectations. Action research, though a new concept that seems overwhelming to many candidates at first, ends up providing a structure for teacher candidates to study and examine their teaching.

In the university class, the teacher candidates first learn the purpose and structure of action research. They also learn a few data collection techniques that are fairly commonly used in the elementary school setting. Next they are asked to start to consider possible applications for action research in their teaching. As part of the PDS commitment, the course instructor, one of the authors, is at the school three or four days a week. As part of supervisory responsibility, the instructor supervises the candidates and includes possible action research focuses in the postobservation conference. Slowly candidates start to implement action research cycles. If possible, based on their schedule of teaching, the candidates observe one another teach and collect action research data as part of their observation responsibilities. Their university instructor

and cooperating teachers provide the other data sources.

Teacher candidates conduct a variety of action research projects based on their interests, perceived weak areas, cooperating teacher interests, and their curriculum. Many teacher candidates think first about how to implement the curriculum in unique ways that incorporate all students' interests. This concern often leads to a focus on how to differentiate instruction during their lessons. Other candidates think a lot about general student involvement in classrooms. They take data on which students are involved or not involved in their lessons. This data collection device, though demanding another person as a data collector, provides valuable general information that many teacher candidates are not yet able to perceive without such quantitative data. Other candidates want to look at classroom management issues. This topic and the corresponding data are particularly helpful to examine with peers. The data facilitates in-depth discussions on what classroom management strategies to implement in the classroom and the effects of these strategies.

Action research data provides very helpful material on which to base postobservation conferences. Since all preservice teachers are going to have a limited knowledge and experiential base in teaching, factual data provides a source of evidence that supports reflection. Rather than giving general reactions to what is happening in the classroom, candidates can use real data on which to base discussions and reflections on teaching.

Action Research Examples

Lauren:

My action research in a third grade German classroom focused on the on-or-off task analysis of two students. I compared one student with both Autism and Emotional Behavioral Disorder with

another student who was usually very focused and a willing participant, in order to make sure I was reaching her and to see how my lessons could be adapted. I chose to center in on this topic because I was also enrolled in an Introduction to Special Education course and because in my first field experience I did not deal with any apparent disabilities or exceptionalities.

The notes I received from my supervisor, one of the authors, and additionally from a fellow teacher candidate were very helpful. I learned that passing out items to hold on to and to see visually during a lesson on recycling helped the student with Autism grasp the content. During the times when she was holding an object like an empty bottle from Germany, she was very curious and on-task. It was a struggle for her to raise her hand, and she seemed to not to be engaged during most class discussions. As a result of these action research cycles, I spent the last few weeks making sure to include a variety of activities and tangible items within my lessons. Another thing I learned was to take suggestions that she offered. One example was where to put a visual of a spoon on the ice cream representation. Taking her suggestion, when appropriate, kept her involved in the lesson. It was also something she remembered—at the end of the year she gave me a drawing of this lesson!

Another important aspect of the action research cycles conducted at the PDS site was for me to observe my fellow teacher candidates. From taking research data for them, I was able to gain an idea of what goes on in a kindergarten or first grade classroom during a foreign language lesson. I also gained ideas for lesson plans to use in my own classroom. One example was how my colleague placed photos of vegetables on a board with numbers written next to them. She had two students race at the board to find the picture of the vocabulary word they heard while the other students raised the appropriate number of fingers in the audience. This kept everyone on task. I adapted this activity to use on a color unit

in my classes. Her research focused on classroom management, but rather than just seeing her management style, I gained a new method for reviewing vocabulary with students. This was significant because I had evidence that it worked in her class and a better idea of how to implement it than if I had just heard about it from a coworker or read a book of lesson plans.

Overall, my action research gave me a new way to learn about my teaching. It made me more comfortable being observed and gave me a higher level of confidence that I could change my lessons to get my students to stay focused on the lesson and to benefit their learning.

Susannah:

In order to assess my classroom management techniques, I focused my action research on the students in my kindergarten and first grade Spanish classrooms and their time on task. I hoped to gain an understanding of the effect of my actions on my students' participation and attention in class. To gather information, I had both my supervising teacher and a fellow teaching candidate observe several of my classes with a focus on classroom management, my actions as the teacher, and the students' reactions. In the first and third of these observations, my supervising teacher simply took notes regarding my actions in regard to classroom management. The next time she observed me, she recorded each student's time on task by using an on/off task sweep analysis. I also had a peer teaching candidate observe two of my classrooms. She used an on/off task analysis but focused on three specific children who on occasion had behavior issues. The object of this observation was to find out how my actions and the activities facilitated in class corresponded to students' attention and participation.

After the first of these observations by my supervisor, I was able to gain perspective on my actions as a teacher and focus on ways to make my intentions clearer. After my supervisor's

second observation, in which she performed the on/off task analysis, I noted that some students whom I assumed to be non-disruptive and generally on task were off more often than I thought, and some students who I had deemed disruptive were focused on the lesson nearly 100% of the time. In my supervisor's third observation, we focused more on my own actions as a teacher than on the students' behavior. I was able to critically look at my actions and my students' reactions.

When my peer observed me, I gained good information. However, in my opinion, one lesson was not enough data to begin making hypotheses and changing my teaching styles to attempt to better serve my students. Had I had time for another data cycle, I would have collated the data to determine during which activities my students responded the best, and I would have begun altering my practices to see if behaviors improved. Through my action research, I also learned that one observation cannot be used as definitive evidence of student personalities. Many factors affect student learning and behavior, and when a student is off task or on task during one observation, it does not imply that the student will have the same issues on other days. However, the research was still helpful in guiding my teaching practice and making me more aware of my own actions as a teacher.

Results

Seeing examples of teacher candidates' action research reflection is evidence of the success of action research as a tool for helping candidates understand issues occurring in their teaching and how to improve their practice. Lauren used action research to understand how to meet the needs of students with varying learning or behavioral disabilities. She learned techniques to help students stay on focus better during a lesson. Lauren also used the opportunity to observe other teacher candidates to learn ideas that she could take into her own classroom. As she stated, "I

had evidence that it (her lesson plan) worked in her class and a better idea of how to implement it than if I had just heard about it from a coworker or read a book of lesson plans."

Susannah was able to use action research to understand how what she did as a teacher influenced students. She could see examples of how what she did helped students to stay on task or why they might become off task. She was able to see examples of how her actions influenced students' attention and their participation. She also recognized how important having multiple data sources is before making decisions about what is happening in a classroom. As she stated, "the research was still helpful in guiding my teaching practice and making me more aware of my own actions as a teacher."

Lauren and Susannah, and the other teacher candidates at this international school, learned the power of their role as teachers and their influence over students. This issue is important for teachers to learn to understand their efficacy and to continue reflecting on how to improve their practice. They did this based on data, not assumptions as to what happens in their classrooms.

The power of using action research to observe and learn from other teacher candidates as well as experienced teachers should not be underestimated. A PDS setting offers great opportunities for teach candidates and experienced teachers to observe one another and to learn from these observations. The data collection process fosters gathering concrete data, possibilities in analyzing data, and reflecting on how to improve teaching practices by implementing changes based on the data. The action research process can empower and help all teachers to reflect on and improve their practice. PDS educators can easily adjust and implement action research to accommodate the unique PDS goals at their particular sites. The action research process can be a important opportunity to help

the educators accomplish their goals and improve all educators' practice and understanding of their practice.

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