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Action research in a graduate reading program

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Abstract

The Master's Degree in Reading Education (M.Ed.) in the College of Education (COE) at Florida Atlantic University (FAU) would like to improve performance among its graduate candidates in accomplishing the school's mission of creating informed, ethical, capable, and reflective decision-makers. Our aim is to create professional-efficacy amongst our graduate students who are currently in the classroom or plan to teach in the near future. Keeping in mind that to be a professional educator, teachers must be intimately involved in the research process, which when used, becomes educational (Stenhouse as cited by Holly, Arhar, & Kasten, 2005) the reading faculty decided to investigate Action Research (AR) as a component of the master's degree curriculum. Reconnaissance by professors prior to refocusing the graduate curriculum revealed that very few instructors were teaching about action research (AR) across the seven campuses. Therefore, a targeted course engaged in AR as a pilot class. Journal entries at the end of each class documented both graduate student and professor reflections. Following the implementation of AR, a graduate student and the class professor wrote this self-critical account of their experiences, observations, findings, and plans for future research.

Action Research in a Graduate Reading Program

The main goal of the graduate reading program in the College of Education (COE) at Florida Atlantic University (FAU) in Boca Raton, Florida is to create professional educators. The students who graduate from FAU need to be informed, ethical, capable, and reflective decision-makers. The reading department dialogued concerning ways to facilitate the realization of the college mission statement. They decide that by refocusing class objectives in the master's degree curriculum to include elements of action research (AR) would attend to all the qualities that we expected of an FAU graduate. To be a professional educator, teachers must be intimately involved in the research process, which when used, becomes educational (Stenhouse as cited by Holly, Arhar, & Kasten, 2005). The four characteristics of AR, ethical commitment, cycle of reflective practice, public character, and collaboration, were used to scaffold this new pedagogical focus (Holly, Azhar, & Kasten, 2005, p. 43). This article presents examples of observations and experiences of this AR focus on the graduate students as well as the university professor who piloted this curriculum change.

The core belief of AR is that all students can learn. Resolution for ethical commitment by providing literacy instruction based on professional practice and democratic principles are especially relevant ideals for the demographics of Florida Atlantic University's student population. The student population at FAU reflects the diversity of the communities served by its seven campuses. Therefore, it is important for FAU professors and their graduate students to provide curriculum and instruction that includes everyone in a community of learning and doesn't benefit a few at the expense of others.

This cycle of action research was carried out in the K-12 and university classrooms to enhance practice. The next step for the university reading faculty is to revisit this curriculum revision after reflecting on findings from the pilot study. The agenda for the next reading retreat is to discuss what improvements can be made from critical self-inquiry. Portfolios evince that the graduate students will also follow the cyclical nature of AR throughout their program. These portfolios will include their AR journals as well several revisions of their AR proposal that will eventually culminate in an option to complete an AR Thesis for partial fulfillment of the FAU Master's Degree in Reading. Changes in the K-12 classroom practices of the graduate students will also substantiate reflective practice.

The third component of AR, that increases the professionalism of graduate students, is to share their research findings with peers and the public. By opening their findings to the constructive criticism of others they increase their learning. The graduate students shared their findings with classmates and a special guest, COE department chair, Dr. Gail Burnaford, as the culminating, critical assignment for the first course in their Master's programs. The faculty member who piloted this AR focus joined others members of the reading faculty to present the department's new AR focus at the American Reading Forum conference in Marco Island, Florida in December 2004. In addition she is writing this article for publication in a peer reviewed Florida journal with one of the graduate students in her class. However, the initial learning came from critical self-reflection and sharing observations and experiences with colleagues.

Finally, the collaborative learning enabled professors and students to construct their own views and meanings through discussion. Collaborative learning occurred when

researchers on both levels cooperated to achieve the common goal of becoming professional and reflective educators.

Literature Review

Action Research (AR) is defined as a procedure analysis which has the dual purpose of action and research. Action brings about change and research increases understanding. By integrating action (intervention) and research AR has been found to be an effective procedure analysis (Dick, 1993). Others have defined AR as the attempt of teachers to study and improve their teaching techniques (Connelly & Clandinin as cited by Chant, Heafner, & Bennett, 2004). Numerous studies (Burnaford & Hobson, 1995; Johnson & Button, 2000; Sax & Fisher, as cited by Chant, et al., 2004) evince that there is improvement in teaching skills of graduate students who participate in action research. In addition, these graduate students also enhance their students' learning. This literature review will highlight themes noted throughout the research as they related to the graduate student involvement in AR: the benefits to the graduate program and to the K-12 curricula.

There is a connection between AR and a functional and successful teacher education model. Empowering teachers to create their own learning and teaching communities is a mark of truly effective teacher education models (Benton & Schillo, 2004). Dick comments that AR may be more relevant to research-practitioners than mainstream research (1993). Traditional research methods do not include the classroom teacher as a knowledgeable participant. Often university professors stand outside the classroom and collect data to prove theories that are then forced upon teachers as a higher truth. Action research provides the framework necessary to better understand how student learning can

improve. Miller states that action research is a natural part of teaching (2005). Teachers constantly observe students, collect student data, and analyze the data. Perhaps most beneficial to the university students is that professional-efficacy is enhanced through AR. It is both a reactive and proactive teaching tool that needs to be introduced to graduate teacher education programs.

This AR goes one step beyond improvement of the researcher and the practitioner to the children who benefit from that practice now. Action research is essential to the learning process for K-12 students. Positive environments are created by action research and this may lead to school reform (Lambert, 2002). The goal of all curricula should be the desire to create an atmosphere conducive to learning and to constantly search and research for ways to improve the quality of education for students.

Procedure

Students enrolled in the first graduate reading class, RED 6351 Developmental Reading, were chosen to be part of this AR focus in their graduate work. Action Research is defined as any systematic inquiry conducted by teacher researchers in the teaching/learning environment to gather information about the ways that their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how well their students learn (Mills, 2003, p.2). Initially, it was not difficult for the students, many of whom were practicing teachers, to choose a focus area related to improving student learning. Students were advised to begin their action research portfolio and to write journal entries concerning questions, opinions, suggestions, or reflections they had after each class session.

After an introduction to AR students were assigned to conduct preliminary reconnaissance, begin readings, and to determine a question or problem to investigate. In

a subsequent class meeting Dr. Gail Burnaford, COE department chair and an expert in the area of AR, scaffolded a collaborative dialogue with students to narrow their AR questions. Students worked in cooperative groups to brainstorm questions, determine whether questions would be clustered, and to make sure that questions were researchable. Following this initial phase of the AR process students made use of the FAU library's online databases to begin their reviews of literature. This initial examination of professional sources helped students to identify and understand the literature directly relevant to their research question. Later literature searches included more specialized readings that helped students to further refine their areas of focus, define their variables, and develop their interventions. The class professor was also a participant in the AR process, reflected on questions she had about how to improve teaching in the university classroom and considered the possibility of AR being the most effective approach. Her AR question was "How is action research used in a graduate reading program to affect teacher practice?" During this AR pilot class the professor did not collect data. However, graduate students were taught important guidelines for gathering data that included a statement of the kinds of data to be collected with a suggestion for including two or more data analysis tools. Required parental and student permission for AR participants was modeled by the professor when she asked students to give signed permission slips to use their journal reflections and artifacts to include in articles and conference presentations.

The critical assignment for this graduate class was to write and present a very basic AR proposal. The professor believed that after class discussions and readings on AR a preliminary attempt at writing an AR proposal would allow students a holistic glimpse or general idea of what an AR Thesis would involve. Students were provided

with an outline to follow, a rubric for grading, and a choice of how they would share their proposal. This culminating activity allowed students to analyze and synthesize knowledge gained from class readings, discussions, guest speakers, and literature reviews into an AR proposal that could be revisited, revised, and elaborated upon in future classes. Note that the class activities, course sequence, and other reflections will be critically discussed by the FAU reading faculty before the actual adoption of these practices in the master's program.

Graduate Student Journal Reflections

This pilot study of the effects of action research on the university professor and graduate students in a master's class in reading resulted in a preliminary collection of data to delineate important themes. Students wrote journal entries consisting of comments, questions, and/or suggestions about AR at the end of each class session. Several distinct themes and particularly noteworthy issues emerged from analyzing students' reflective journal entries. These themes fell into two broad areas of the merits and struggles of action research.

The following journal entry evinces the struggles with AR that began on the first night of class. "Course syllabus, overview, assignments, action research, yikes!! Everyone seemed so excited about starting school. The action research though, I don't know!! Help us, please!!!!!" Overwhelmed, confused, and unfamiliar were some of the adjectives used to describe students' opinions of AR upon their initial introduction to the topics. Much of this resulted from how foreign this area of study was to the students. Many of the students had never heard of the term before and benefited from Dr. Burnaford's presentation on the second night of class. Her introduction to AR consisted

of building on the explanations, examples, and student's prior knowledge of teaching, research, and inquiry learning. She orchestrated a dialogue that sparked great interest in this scary new terrain and created a collaborative atmosphere between class members. Halfway through the class sessions comments changed to "difficult", "a lot of work", "even more confused", and "I thought I understood it, but I don't". Students began to feel more comfortable about tackling action research as well as tackling problems with problem formulation, writing a literature review, and problems in their own classrooms.

The AR continuum outlined in Holy, Arhar, and Kasten (2005) correlated with the learning process that took place in this graduate class. What began as a problem aroused curiosity and turned into inquiry leaning and a plan for action research. Also evident was a change from students' feelings of inadequacy and the obvious absence of self-efficacy to a perspective of authority and professionalism.

The second theme that ran throughout the student journal entries had to do with the importance of AR for any profession, especially teaching. Student reflections on the benefits of AR included topics of inquiry learning, collaboration, and sharing. Students also wrote about how they appreciated being able to focus on a problem specific to their classrooms. The inquiry approach to AR inspired reflections such as "because I was able to choose a question to research I found it very interesting to read about my topic", "I thought it was great that everyone had a different question and a wide variety of research. There were many great ideas presented that I hope to use in my own classroom", and "I understand theories and class content because I can apply this information to my AR project". The following journal entry exemplified how students' introduction to AR and inquiry learning will not end with this class. For example, "My area of interest has

completely changed to fluency. Each day when I work with my below average, I see how they labor over basic words. I have to admit, it can be quite frustrating when I just modeled a sentence and they still cannot read it back to me. Those are the days when I definitely have to take deep breaths. I feel that after having completed this AR proposal I would like to learn a lot more about fluency and make it a more important part of my daily reading program.” This also shows how important this teaching tool is to teaching ownership of problems in the classroom.

Discussion by Graduate Student

As a graduate student enrolling in a graduate developmental reading class I had no idea that I was about to enter the world of “Action Research” (AR). Sitting in class and listening to the instructor talk about AR I realized that I was going to have to actually do one of these proposals! So, as usual, I buckled down and went to work.

The most meaningful part of AR was selecting a question that was pertinent to me and my teaching. The instructor listened to each AR question proposal and then helped rephrase it or even refocus the purpose of the question. For example, one student asked if improving student vocabulary would be a good question. The professor helped the student to narrow her questions to how a specific vocabulary strategy recently introduced in class would effect student vocabulary achievement. The instructor focused on the specific problem that this student was experiencing in her elementary classroom. Benton and Schillo (2004) emphasizes the value of practitioner-based knowledge in this approach.

The class discussions benefited the group. Allington (2002) points out that effective programs emphasize conversational rather than confrontational interactions.

By listening and discussing ways to improve others' AR questions we all began to see how we could improve our own AR questions. In addition, the instructor encouraged all students to e-mail questions and discussions. Occasionally she would share the e-mails with the group so we could continue the "conversation" during the hours that we weren't in class, especially during the three hurricanes South Florida experienced during this semester.

The final culmination of the project was an oral presentation of our written report. Some of the students constructed detailed and intricate PowerPoint presentations while others spoke in front of the class with a chart or prop. It was interesting to note the diversity of the subjects and the personal enthusiasm each student displayed for her topic. I look forward to completing the IRB forms so that I may implement my AR question during practicum. Hopefully I will have the opportunity to present my AR question and findings at a professional reading conference.

One student summarized the importance of AR best in the following quote "AR is very essential to the learning process both for students and teachers. It is ongoing and valuable because there is constant reflection on what works and doesn't. Also, the idea of educators sharing their findings to improve the quality of educating is elementary. It is both reactive and proactive and a great tool."

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