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Editorial

Action Research as Formalized Reflection

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Action research as a paradigm, or model of practice, provides a framework for the ongoing improvement of practice (Pine, 2009). Within that framework of practice, many formal reports of action research have emphasized the improvement in student learning, or the changes needed in the curriculum, or the pedagogy. Less frequently, formal reports emphasized the changes that take place in the practitioner.

Reflecting on changes in self is a significant part of action research because the practitioner is the person who identifies the problem, the intervention, the analysis, and whether or not to make changes in the future (Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Sometimes the changes that are needed are a new perspective by the practitioner on that practice. As one of our authors in this issue, Dresser recognized, “One of the most important findings in this study was that teacher candidates became cognizant of the impact of negative experiences on student academic achievement.” It’s not that the teachers needed a new curriculum, or needed to focus on a different part of practice, but rather, the teachers focused on their own perspective, adding to that focus an emphasis on the students’ social-emotional learning needs as essential to improved academic learning.

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Indeed, I believe that reflecting on changes in self is at the heart of action research, as we seek to formalize what Schön (1983) referred to as “reflection-in-action.” Many authors have written of the need for reflective practice in the training of new teachers. And, many action research authors have written of the connection between reflective practice and action research, some equating the two. Yet, how often do we as action researchers take the time to reflect formally on the changes in us—how the very practice of action research, with a contextually defined problem, has inevitably changed us as practitioners by expanding our perspective, or completely reversing our thinking about ourselves as practitioners?

Recently, I presented a workshop on reflection in action research at the inaugural conference of the Action Research Network of the Americas (ARNA,

<https://sites.google.com/site/arnaconnect/>). In that workshop, participants had the opportunity to reflect on changes they experienced in five areas of practice: (a) *the problem in context*, (b) *the context/culture*, (c) *the improvement of practice*, (d) *the self*, and (e) *for future directions*. I asked participants to choose an area within which they had not spent much time reflecting in the past, and to think about that area now and why that might be. Significantly, many participants discussed the difficulties with reflecting on “self,” using words such as “selfish” and “high risk,” and that the idea of self is a “dense” concept to unpack. And yet, this is the “crucial dialogue” that Pine asserted was at the very nature of action research—a dialogue with ourselves that is critical and open to change (2009, p. 86). Whitehead (2008) asserted that focus on how “I can improve what I am doing” is an emphasis on the “uniqueness of each individual’s living educational theory” (p. 103).

In this issue, we highlight the work of five authors, each of whom exemplifies the power of action research to change the practitioner’s knowledge about themselves and their practice, and to offer knowledge generation through systematic inquiry for the greater community. We also include a position paper from Ravid and Efron. We hope that you find this issue stimulating and thought-provoking, and welcome your feedback.

Dresser tells us that a “common element among schools reporting academic success is that they all have a systematic process for promoting students’ social-emotional skills.” The caring and empathy exuded by students in these schools permeates the school culture and climate. Dresser demonstrates the effect of embedding social-emotional standards within the language arts classroom. Dresser has found that most of her preservice teacher candidates did not have understanding of the importance of emotions in student learning and achievement. Through reflection, the teacher candidates became more aware of their students’ feelings. Through her analysis of the action research project with the teacher candidates, Dresser highlights the necessity of relational empathy between teacher and student in order for academic achievement to flourish.

Palak, a novice at teaching action research to new teachers, writes of finding value in action research as a rigorous form of research for teachers by conducting her own action research while teaching the course. She also writes of the teachers’ reflections on changes in self as becoming better practitioners. Palak concludes that “the process of conducting their self-inquires gave teachers the means to systematically evaluate the complexities of their profession,” and that “most teachers. . . used the phrase ‘becoming better teachers’ in their own self-reflections.”

Bates and Bryant describe their experience of using portfolios in teaching teacher research courses. Using data from four years of teaching 300 students, the authors’ goal was “to study the design and implementation of this newly developed assignment, the research portfolio.” The research portfolio consisted of four elements: Focus, Data, Format, and Analysis. Multiple sources of data were collected and analyzed in this study. Bates and Bryant identified three categories of learners: (a) willing learners, (b) committed strugglers, and (c) dissatisfied learners. The authors concluded that “ultimately, the research portfolio assignment has achieved one of our major goals of giving all candidates first-hand experience in data collection and analysis as teacher research during the early stages of the teacher preparation experience.”

Harkins examines the question: How does a student with severe and multiple disabilities, his parents, and educators experience full integration in general education from first grade through high school and beyond? This study examines the role of advocacy, leadership, transition, and politics of full inclusion and inclusive practices through the lived experiences of the participants.

Ravid and Efron present a position paper in which they argue for the use of a “balanced approach” in action research, using qualitative and quantitative research designs. The authors also advocate for the inclusion of assessment in action research courses and textbooks as a way to incorporate “teacher renewal” from within, at a grassroots level, versus “educational reform” from a ‘top-down’ perspective. The authors assert, “Conducting action research becomes ‘a reaction against a view of practitioners as technicians who merely carry out what others, outside of the sphere of practice, want them to do’ . . . and thus provides educators with a powerful strategy for being active partners in leading school improvement. . .”

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