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Action Research for Improving At-Risk Students' Literacy Skills: The professional development of three Florida teachers through their journeys integrating technology, poetry and multiculturalism for literacy intervention

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Action Research for Improving At-Risk Students' Literacy Skills:

The professional development of three Florida teachers through their journeys integrating technology, poetry and multiculturalism for literacy intervention

The Interdisciplinary Studies in Curriculum and Instruction (IDS) Master's program at National Louis University has focused on an equity and social-justice-based philosophical framework, where one of our main goals is the direct positive impact our teachers have with their own students. Through action research projects, the IDS program guides the professional development of our teachers in this process. Conducting research on best practice, gathering and interpreting data based on students' performance and modifying instruction based on findings is one of the professional competencies expected of highly qualified teachers in the 21st Century (e.g. Crawford & Cornett, 2000; Florida Department of Education, 2010; Giles, Wilson & Elias, 2010).

In this paper, I have compiled three significant case studies focusing on the action research journeys of three Florida teachers with whom I worked as their core instructor, mentor and research advisor: A white teacher, an African American teacher and a Latina teacher. Through their action research projects, these teachers used different venues to improve at-risk students' literacy skills by engaging them in multicultural responsive learning as they were immersed in a literacy-rich curriculum with their own students.

Significance of the Content

These teachers, as action researchers, are also social change agents in their own classrooms, working to decrease the high dropout rates within the Tampa Bay area in the state of Florida. In the Pinellas County School District, for example, only 60.5 percent of the students who were enrolled in four years of high school, made it to graduation in 2007 (Pinellas Education Foundation, 2008).

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In the Tampa area public schools, at-risk student population is comprised mostly of African-American, Hispanic and English Language Learners (ELL) of various ethnicities and cultural backgrounds.

According to the Florida Department of Education (FLDOE) (2010), the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) student performance results for reading at 10th grade reveal alarming overall low levels of achievement. Literacy skills in the state of Florida are defined by the reading scores in the state's standardized test, (FCAT). This is critically important because students must pass this test as a high school graduation requirement. The data of reading scores at the 10th grade level over the period between 2006 and 2010 is fairly consistent. Therefore, for the purpose of this analysis, I focused on the data from 2010.

The mean of the percentages of students in 10th grade passing the Reading FCAT scores in the districts of Hillsborough, Pasco and Pinellas¹ is only 57.6 percent. Demographic comparative means of students passing the test in these three school districts are summarized as follows: 66.3 percent White; 34.66 percent Black; 45 percent Hispanic; and 11 percent ELL². These data indicate a significant achievement gap between White students and African American, Hispanic and ELL students in their literacy skills. More alarming, though, is that the statistics indicate that about 42 percent of the high school student population is at-risk of not graduating.

Furthermore, according to Weber (2010), Florida high schools are boosting their graduation rates by removing struggling students from school rolls and thousands of students are being transferred to adult education programs. Weber's report claims that students who have fallen behind and are unlikely to earn diplomas are no longer included in the equation when school districts compute their overall graduation rates, so the percentage of graduates looks much better than it really is. In a study conducted by Johns Hopkins University, Center for Social Organization of Schools, 62 percent of Pinellas County high schools were identified as dropout factories³ (Pinellas Education Foundation, 2008).

All this information points to the key problem being addressed point in this discussion, which is that Florida students, in particular the minority groups, are not meeting the state levels nor the national levels for high school literacy achievement. This calls for urgent and intensive intervention and this is what three IDS graduates did in their action research projects.

Purpose

¹ The teachers involved in this study work in these school districts.

² Raw data from the FLDOE were used to make these comparative data analyses.

³ Schools labeled as dropout factories are schools in which the majority of students who enter ninth grade do not earn a diploma from the school (Pinellas Education Foundation, 2008).

The purpose of this study focuses on the findings for three main research questions: 1) What were the purposes and outcomes of the teachers' action research projects on their own students? 2) How did these projects address the real problem of low literacy skills and low graduation rates in Florida? and 3) How did the action research projects contribute to changes in the participating teachers?

This paper will feature how IDS 2010 Master's graduate teachers responded to improve the literacy skills of some of Florida's most vulnerable students. Three of these teachers, Pam, Anita and Magda volunteered to share their journeys through their action research projects, describing their research, the literacy teaching strategies they used to impact student learning, and their projects' outcomes. The teaching strategies used to improve at-risk students' literacy skills included integration of innovative instructional technology, culturally-relevant poetry and bilingual teaching.

The Action Research Projects

Participants

Pam is a White veteran teacher of Spanish in Pinellas County. She has worked as a school teacher for over seventeen years in one of the most vulnerable areas in the district. There is a high percentage of African American, Hispanic and economically impoverished students in her school. She used podcasts to support her students' development of literacy skills.

Anita is an African-American teacher, who has been in the profession working with culturally diverse at-risk and dropout students at a charter school for 5 years. She engages her students with the poetry of Maya Angelou and Nikki Giovanni, offering the literacy-rich experience of Black women's literature and inspirational discourse through role-playing and interview delivery formats.

Magda is a native Nicaraguan teacher working with a large population of ELL and Hispanic students, who are below grade-level in English reading and writing. Magda has been teaching elementary school children of diverse ethnic, racial and linguistic backgrounds, as well as children from immigrant and/or low-income families for fifteen years. She has taught in public schools in California and Florida in districts with a high level of immigrant population, particularly from Mexico and other Central American countries. She uses a variety of constructivist methods to support students' native Spanish language development utilizing bilingual strategies to improve English vocabulary and comprehension, as she fosters her students' pride and continuous cultivation of their cultural heritage.

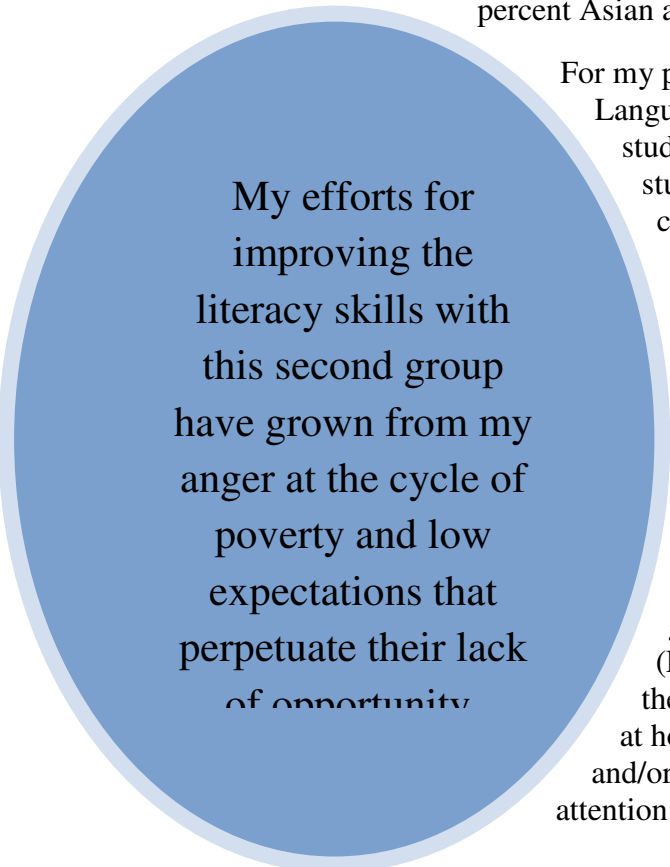
Developing the action research summaries

Throughout the two years in which these teachers were immersed in their action research development, they were also fully immersed in a self-reflective process, which was recorded

in their personal journals. These journals served as a formative assessment tool for the teachers' insights, personal and professional development and transformative actions. Finalizing the action research project, the participating teachers were prompted to reflect on and summarize their individual journeys. An organizational framework was provided to support the teachers in identifying the key ideas and synthesizing the content of each section of their projects. The framework included the following components: Project's description, personal or professional reasons for developing the focus of their research, project's purpose, participants' descriptions, description of data collection and analysis, and personal reflection of their findings. Finalizing their summaries, I offered some revisions and supported the editing process for the purposes of this article.

Pam's summary of her journey:

The problem I was seeking to answer in my action research project was how to engage students in improving their motivation to read. I teach foreign languages at an inner-city Title 1 high school in an economically disadvantaged area in Pinellas County, Florida. That means that 70 percent or more of our students are on free or reduced lunch programs. Our school's student population is about 60 percent African American, 10 percent Hispanic, 10 percent Asian and 20 percent White.



My efforts for improving the literacy skills with this second group have grown from my anger at the cycle of poverty and low expectations that perpetuate their lack of opportunity

For my project, I chose my Advance Placement (AP) Spanish Language class in which there is a mix of black and white students who are, generally speaking, high achieving honor students and Hispanic students who fall in to two categories: 1) They come from well-educated families which have legally immigrated to the United States. Many of these students attended school until middle school in their countries of origin. They are high-functioning native speakers of Spanish who can read and write well and who have taken challenging classes since they arrived in the United States. 2) The second and largest group is made up of students who were born either in a Spanish-speaking country or in the U.S. but who didn't attend school in a Spanish-speaking country and have never had any formal instruction in Spanish. In general, these students began to learn English in an ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) program when they began school in the U.S. They don't have an advocate at home as many of their parents can't speak any English and/or are illegal immigrants who are afraid of drawing attention to themselves.

My efforts for improving the literacy skills with this second group have grown from my anger at the cycle of poverty and low expectations that perpetuate their lack of opportunity. I noticed that my students seem to be fascinated by technology of all sorts. Because of the poverty among our students, many of them only get to experience technology at school. I decided to find out if the use of technology to meet the goal of getting the students to read would be a hook that would motivate and engage my students in their literacy development (Lacina, 2008). I had the students do their outside reading, a book of their choice from my classroom library, and then create a book chat podcast that we could upload to iTunes. Podcasting is a fairly new way to share information and I had become very interested in using podcasts to get students to extend their learning outside my classroom (Rossell-Aguilar, 2007).

A podcast is different from a simple audio recording in that it is part of a series of related recordings and it's syndicated on the internet and is available for listening there or downloading to a portable device like an mp3 player or a cellphone. Podcasts are audio only, enhanced podcasts are podcasts that have still photographs or PowerPoint slides in them and vidcasts are video (Villano, 2008).

Students were excited to learn to use new technology. They saw the connections to other areas of their studies and lives in general. They recognized that they now understand what podcasts are, how they work, how to find, use and create them. They see these as valuable skills as they continue in high school and go off to college or to the workplace.

The podcasts didn't motivate all of my students to read more outside of class, which was the main goal of my project. However, the students found unanticipated literacy value in different ways. Isabella, for example, realized the impact the podcast project had in her development of literacy skills. She stated: "I enjoyed the book chat project because it allowed me to work on my Spanish reading and speaking skills". Isabella is now in college majoring in Nursing at the University of Central Florida. Barry, now a Pre-Vet/ Spanish major at the University of Florida, gained personal confidence as he developed media literacy skills: "I learned to be confident in myself when speaking to others through the media". The development of media literacy skills was also important for Min, who is now a Chemistry major at the University of Los Angeles. He says: "I would definitely do the book report podcast again. It's awesome to know that an audio recording of my voice is available in iTunes!"

Jennifer found value in discovering that media literacy would open doors for her in developing a career. She reports: "...these processes with a podcast make me ready to use this with a corporate company, businesses, school presentations or for other reasons". Jennifer is now caring for her daughter and taking online classes at St. Petersburg College. A.J., Jennifer's husband, who was also a participant in the project, found out that "Spanish is not as easy as everyone thinks it is for a native speaker." However, his ability to succeed in the

project was a motivator for taking online classes at St. Petersburg College, which wasn't in his plans at the beginning of his senior year. A.J. is also supporting his family by working in construction.

Anthony, now majoring in Pharmacy at a technical college in Florida, gained literacy skills in developing research strategies and organizational skills. Anthony shares: "I learned how to gather information and present it in an orderly fashion. [These skills...] could help me in the future to gather information and stayed organized."

Another unintended positive outcome from this action research project is that the Advanced Placement Spanish Language course this year is using the podcasts we created as a way to choose the books they will read. Students are enthusiastic about using the new technology and they are interested in doing a similar project so that they can tell future students about the books they have read. This project seems to be developing into a podcast catalogue of book talks given by students who have read the books.

Anita's summary of her journey

My study for improving at-risk students' literacy skills centered on a charter school, Life Skills Center, with a diverse population of over 300 students. Our mission is to help students ages 16-21, who have dropped out of traditional high school or are at risk of dropping out. The students have had a negative experience in traditional schools and most have an average fifth grade reading level. They are in need of individual assistance with day-to-day life challenges as well as their academics.

My action research project was entitled, *Dispel Myths, Excel Dreams*. It focused on how motivation, engagement and interpersonal relationships can support literacy development for culturally diverse students. One of the strategies I used to motivate and engage students was learning with, through and about culturally relevant literature (e.g. Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Specifically for the action research, I chose to develop a literacy unit based on the poetry of Maya Angelou and Nikki Giovanni. They are two great voices of African American literature. For the purpose of this paper, I will focus my discussion on the learning experience the students had with Maya Angelou; she is with whom the students connected the most because of her cultural life experiences.

My initial reason for selecting Maya Angelou was I saw her as a world-renowned African-American poet. However, after my experiences of studying her with the students, my understanding of the importance of choosing this author expanded. I learned she is someone with whom I, and the students, can identify using our own knowledge, experiences and cultural identity. The second reason is I got students engaged in a literacy experience that introduced quality literature, powerful language and content that elicited significant students' personal responses.

One of my teaching strategies involved impersonating Maya Angelou, modeling her speech, language and intonation. This sparked the students' attention (Lumsden, 1994); it was the engagement "hook". One student volunteered to be the "TV Host" for the mock interview with Maya Angelou. This strategy deepened the culturally relevant experience, especially with my African American students. A script with the interview questions and answers was written with the purpose of modeling the use of language in interview format and asking questions that prompted higher order critical skills. During the interview, I shared significant biographical information about the poet using her own words. The following are examples of questions and answers from the interview:

Peggy: Where you always aware of your own talents? As a girl, you were silent for so many years.

MA: I was a mute from the time I was seven and a half until I was almost 13. I didn't speak. I had voice, but I refused to use it. My grandmother, who was raising me in a little village in Arkansas, she used to tell me, "sister, mamma don't care about what these people say: You must be an idiot, you must be a moron. Mamma don't care, sister. Mamma know when you and the Good Lord get ready, you're gonna be a preacher. Well, I used to sit and think to myself, "poor, ignorant Mamma." She doesn't know. I will never speak, let alone preach. It has devolved upon me to---not preach, as it were---but to write about moral, about hope, about desolation, about pain and ecstasy and joy and triumph in the human spirit. So it seems to me, that is my calling. And I write about it for all of us, because I know that human beings are more alike than we are unlike (Academy of Achievement, 1997).

Peggy: Is there any one poem or verse that you have used to sustain you through challenges or adversities or difficulties?

MA: Well, yes. Some of them are mine, or course. "And Still I Rise," which is a poem of mine that is very popular in the country. And a number of people use it. A lot of black of people and a lot of white people use it. It begins like this:

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies:
You may trod me in the very dirt;
But still, like dust. I'll rise (Angelou, 1994).

This other poem says:

May people wonder
Where my secret lies.
I'm not cute, or built to suit
A fashion model's size.
When I try to show them,
They think I'm telling lies.
I say: It's in the reach of my arms
The span of my hips,
The stride of my step,
The curl of my lips.
I'm a woman, Phenomenally! (Angelou, 1994).

Peggy: From your own experience in life, can you tell us any valuable lesson that you have learned?

MA: I think that one of the things I have learned is that as human beings we may encounter many defeats but we must not be defeated. In fact it may even be imperative that we encounter the defeats so that we can see who we are. Each time you overcome a burden or barrier, you feel better about yourself. You become stronger. It is like being at school. Once you pass, you feel okay. You may not attain the level you wanted but you passed. The next time you encounter a test you feel a little stronger. You keep overcoming. Then finally you walk with more assertiveness, more pride and more confidence (Academy of Achievement, 1997).

Finalizing the interview, students were prompted to write and ask questions they wanted to know about Maya Angelou and her poetry. This got students excited about thinking what questions to ask. They were given written copies of the two poems I had introduced during the interview, so they were also prompted to ask questions about these poems.

The results of this specific strategy elicited not only application of literacy skills but deep critical thinking as students analyzed the meaning of the poems and made connections with their own personal experience. For example Tamara wrote: "I personally think that Maya Angelou did a very wonderful job interpreting the confidence of a woman. Its [sic] describing how she is very exceptional for many reasons. It could help the reader find the confidence to get over her insecurities. The phenomenal woman is me, you and all the women in the world. They have to find it inside them."

Kiara wrote: "I feel like I can relate to this poem. My friends and guys always say that there is some sort of a mystery about me. Though, I do try and reveal the true me to them; they just still don't see. I think the poem talks about a person who is very proud to be a woman. She has put herself on a very high pedestal. I really do relate to this in that way".

Overall, the literacy development of the young ladies in the class through this project was a very positive one: They felt empowered, confident, beautiful and validated. These at-risk students engaged in poetry analysis, synthesizing the ideas of the poems and connecting them with their personal experiences. These are high level literacy skills.

The young men in my group were less engaged in this project. For example, Javon responded: “It [the poem] remind [sic.] me of a strong woman like a strong mother image. I guess I would like to hear what black men have to say. Most of us [men in the classroom] have never met our fathers or they are not part of my life. Its [sic.] not easy to write about something that you don’t live”. Javon’s response doesn’t surprise me. I think my African American male students lack a strong male role model who they can look up to. For the most part they didn’t connect with the poetry unit of African American women poets.

As I gradually built a relationship with the young men and they began trusting me (Savigtz-Romer, Jager-Hyman & Cole, 2009), I got them to journal every day about their own experiences, their needs, fears, dreams and aspirations. I believe that the lack of a paternal figure or male mentor in their lives is the main reason why their dreams and aspirations were so basic: Travis wrote: “I want to graduate so I can get a job”; Mr. T wrote: “I want to live to see 40”; Cornelius wrote about his dream to be able to attend college and T.J. wrote: “I hope to stay out of trouble and not end up in jail like many of my friends.” These quotes speak for the need of a positive relationship with a strong male figure who can inspire them to see possibilities beyond just getting by through life barely surviving.

In conclusion, I would like to share that all the students made some important literacy gains through the action research project. All but one of the participants passed the FCAT Reading test and were able to graduate. Up to date, I only know that Tamara and Cornelius got enrolled in college.

Magda’s summary of her journey

My action research project centered in increasing students’ intrinsic motivation through explicit instruction of goal setting and monitoring students’ progress of goal achievement. I focused my research on eight of my own students, all fourth and fifth grade students. All but one, are immigrant students or first generation children of immigrant parents. All of the students are of Latino origin, and five students are still considered English Language Learners (ELLs). In addition, all students qualify for free or reduced lunch, and their families have limited educational levels, with most parents having completed elementary school on up to eighth grade. I conducted surveys and interviews of both students and their parents to track the level of discussion in their home around goal setting, future goals, and overall involvement in their schooling.

As a former bilingual teacher, I am especially interested in how valuing students' primary language and culture can increase their development of their second language (Krashen, 1982). I immigrated to the United States from Nicaragua when I was 11 years old, so I know first-hand the importance that literacy in the first language plays in developing literacy in the second language (Cummins, 2000). I struggled my whole life to develop my own literacy in both languages, especially because I did not have the benefit of attending bilingual classes. I used a process of comparing and contrasting grammar and vocabulary between Spanish and English in the process of Second Language Acquisition. I used my prior knowledge and cognates to develop fluency in English. Many academic words, especially in subject areas such as Math and Science, where terms derived from Latin and Greek, were direct cognates of each other, and allowed me to comprehend. For example, numerator = numerador, denominator = denominador, fraction = fracción, dividend = dividendo, biology = biología, etc. I used this meta-cognitive knowledge of my own process of second language acquisition to assist me with teaching ELLs.

...valuing students' primary language and culture can increase their development of their second language...

One strategy I have used in teaching English to ELLs, is the FLASH program. Through this , families learning English as a second language at school and home increase their own literacy in the second language and can help their children be successful in school. The program uses graphic organizers to preview a content-rich text such as "Transportation," "Inside Your Body," and "About Trees". The graphic organizer and highlighters (green and red), allow the students to identify words that they are familiar with because of their first language, and words that they have no idea about because of their unfamiliarity with the language. Invariably, students will find that there are a lot more words that they are familiar with. This encourages them to have greater confidence in attempting to read the text. After identifying these words and writing them in the graphic organizer, the teacher provides the meanings to the words and the students create a graphic representing the word.

Selecting to present material thematically with language skills, patterns, and functions taught in context, not only increases retention of grammatical patterns (Weaver, 1996) but also follows the natural approach of language acquisition in addition to building retention of English vocabulary because it builds on the students' schema for the topic (Krashen, 1982). For example, students, especially older and adult students, already have built in schema for the topic "human body," thus, learning the English language becomes a process of overlaying the English vocabulary on top of their primary language vocabulary for this topic.

Another of my favorite strategies for English Language Acquisition is the use of Reader's Theater (McCauley & McCauley, 1992) and plays in the classroom. Each year, I try to put together at least one play for students to present. These plays are usually based on literature that is universally recognized, fairy tales, folk tales or fables. The repetitive text assists ELLs

with learning their parts, especially if there is a choral part because they have the support of more fluent students. The use of costumes, props, and acting engages all learners. For example, we presented *Ranita*. This is the classic fairy tale of Frog Prince retold with a Latino perspective where a Mayan princess is enchanted and the kiss of a prince changes her back. We coupled this with a dance performance of the song *Ranita*. Students were intrinsically motivated to participate in the play and dance because they loved imparting what they learned with the younger students and they enjoyed the cultural connection to the curriculum. This creates an atmosphere where all students, native English speakers, as well as ELLs enjoy learning.

Some of the concrete results I got from my action research intervention included students reaching their Accelerated Reading goals, which were part of my action research project. Through a girls' book club, these students chose to read *Confetti Girl* by Diana Lopez, a book whose main character is a Mexican-American girl, like themselves. The girls not only read the book, but also connected with it deeply. Their book club created *cascarones* or confetti-filled eggshells, as described in the book, and took them to school to crack with their classmates. They took pictures of themselves in the process and emailed their pictures to the author, who was delighted to post them in her website. This is an amazing example of how students' intrinsic motivation to participate in literacy activities can be increased by valuing and honoring their home cultures and languages.

Another concrete result out of this project was the dramatic improvement in the literacy skills of my at-risk students by the end of the school year. FCAT results showed an increase in reading comprehension, vocabulary and grammar application. Carlos and Francisco, for example, also made important strides in developing a stronger sense of self-efficacy, more independence in their process of second language acquisition, while also furthering their pride and connections with their own cultures.

What were the Effects the Action Research Projects had in the Three Participating Teachers? Reflections from the core instructor, facilitator, mentor and primary advisor in the action research process.

Pam's, Anita's and Magda's action research journeys were powerful experiences through which these teachers had a direct effect in improving the literacy skills of at-risk students in Florida. Beyond the gains of their students' literacy skills, their projects also provide evidence of important professional and personal shifts in these teachers. They expanded their knowledge, skills and humanistic dispositions, which have served them well in their professional development and have empowered them with a stronger sense of self-efficacy (Goodnough, 2010; Suksunai, Wiratchai, & Khemmani, 2011) and their ability to create emancipatory action in their own classrooms.

Finalizing their action research projects and summaries of their journeys, the teachers completed a questionnaire that prompted their self-reflection and assessment of the effects the action research process had in their own development of knowledge, skills, attitudes, personal and professional dispositions and transformative action. The responses were then coded for emergent categories and analyzed in the following discussion:

Regarding the association of action research with an effective form of professional development for teachers (e.g. Sales, Traver & Garcia, 2011; Shabani, Khatib & Ebadi, 2010; West, 2011), clearly, all three teachers' reflections concur with the literature review as they all found the action research process a valuable professional development experience with tools they take to their own students and classrooms.

For example, Magda states:

Because I understand the process of Action Research, I want to do other minor studies. Last year I focused in improving my math teaching skills with some success with my students. This upcoming school year I want to refocus on the teaching of reading and how to move students to higher levels of comprehension and critical thinking.

And Pam reflects:

Action research is a great way to explore opportunities for growth in my teaching and increases in student learning [...] I now have a professional way to explore my own practice and continuously improve and grow. I have also learned how to seek out appropriate research that others have done and to optimize their findings in bettering my practice.

These teachers' level of engagement in their projects was a process that elicited critical reflection and provided them with a sense of empowerment as school leaders (Sales, Traver, & Garcia, 2011), as was the case with Magda, who was elected *Teacher of the Year* in her school and applied for the position of ESOL Coordinator in her school district. Pam's outstanding technology skills led her to be transferred to teach mostly online. She has become mentor for other teachers providing research and technology workshops in other school districts. Both Magda and Pam joined an Ed. S. Leadership program with National Louis University and are together in the same cohort.

Shabani, Khatib and Ebadi (2010) use Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development and socio-cultural theory of mind to analyze the action research's instructional implications in teachers' professional development. Their findings suggest that scaffolding the knowledge gains with support of the instructor and other peers in the cohort, lead teachers not only in making gradual epistemological shifts in understanding the action research process, but also in developing and applying new skills.

This is evident in these three teachers' transformative processes in knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions. Based on Turner's (2010) five-stage model of epistemological shifts through action research, which include: 1) research immersion; 2) research literacy; 3) authentic research design; 4) incremental process; 5) teacher and student reflection, clearly Pam, Anita and Magda provided evidence of this transition. However, the participants' processes involved a more sophisticated scaffolding in epistemological shifts that include the following transformational stages: 1) little to no knowledge about the action research process; 2) research immersion; 3) personal struggle with the research process and inquiry about ways of knowing; 4) first trials venturing into the research process; 5) refinement of research skills leading to research literacy; 6) authentic research design; 7) incremental process and acknowledgment of limitations of research project; 8) further refinement and narrowing down the content; 9) struggling with determining "when is the project done?"; 10) final teacher reflection; 11) further motivation to expand and share their projects⁴; 12) leadership in motivating other teachers to engage in action research.

Pam reflects on her epistemological shifts and development of new skills, from understanding her ways of conceptualizing a project, making the interpersonal connections with her students a primary goal to improvement of technology skills:

I learned that I'm a big picture person who needs to have a vision for the future and clear goals. [I also learned that] the personal connection with the students is the key to helping them achieve. Individual conferences with the students lead to personal interactions that help me to better guide my students. [I also learned] how to maximize the use of technology to assist me in completing tasks and how to structure an action research project.

Anita reflects on the skills she gained:

I learned (1) how to enhance critical skills in analyzing, synthesizing and organizing information (2) a clear understanding of research with data collection, collaboration and willingness to learn and (3) [action research] is a problem-solving tool for educators. Skills I learned were instructional strategies, improved communication and qualitative analysis.

Magda shares her insights:

Success breeds success; when students experience success with a small goal, they develop the confidence to attempt a larger challenge. [Skills I learned included] time management, literature review and response, data gathering techniques (journaling, dialectic notes, surveys, interviews, etc.).

⁴ We co-presented a symposium at the National Conference of Equity and Social Justice in Pomona, NJ, 2010.

I would recommend action research to other teachers because the process can be used to meet your professional development needs where you're at, with the students you have, and the tools at your hand. It doesn't require anything more than a clear understanding of the process of honing on to a question, selecting the data gathering techniques and analyzing the results. It's part of a natural learning process and data analysis that we engage naturally as educators.

Beyond epistemological shifts, there were attitudinal and dispositional shifts that reflect a deeper transformative process in teacher identity and reconstruction of the teacher persona. In line with Goodnough's (2009) correlation of the role of action research with identity transformative processes for teachers, Anita clearly identifies with her students as she reflects upon why she chose her action research topic:

"Literacy skills of at-risk students" is a dear topic of mine. I have seen many students under-represented [...] due to their socio-economic status and cultural background. They are labeled when they, themselves do not know it. [...] One attitude I developed was that human behavior effects one's changes, mood and motivation about a given issue. In this case action research was that trigger for transformation.

Magda reflects on the same transformative issue:

I learned that I can serve as a key role model to my students. I learned that as educators we can never take the short cut of blaming parents or a student's socio-economic status, prior history, etc. for lack of success, even the most struggling families want their children to succeed [...] I have a clearer understanding of what motivates students, how to build intrinsic motivation, and how to set high expectations with the appropriate scaffolding and support for my students.

Conclusion

Anita's charter school closed due to lack of funding. Anita has kept working with at-risk youth in temporary jobs, while a teaching position opens. In the meantime, she is getting certified to teach high school English and is looking forward to getting a position in an underprivileged school, where she can serve as a positive role model for African American students. These are her recent insights:

I feel that the project was eye-opening for me. It focused on an interest that I had as a child and to evaluate it as an adult and educator was quite an experience. I learned a lot about myself, my influences, drive and my desires. It made me want to strive toward a functional environment.

Pam feels:

Relieved to have successfully completed it [action research] and proud to have followed through in such a way that others deem acceptable. I also feel good that I now have a valid way to organize any further projects in which I might engage.

Magda's closing thoughts:

I would like to extend it [action research] and continue understanding the psychology of motivation. I am proud of having achieved [this project], as I felt daunted when first presented with the expectations of this endeavor.

In summary, a major significance of this study's findings is that beyond epistemological shifts and development of complex skills, positive changes in dispositions, self-perception and self-efficacy impacted these teachers' motivation. This motivation translated into improved classroom practice, leadership agency and a desire to further improve professionally and inspire other educators to do action research. Action research is an empowering tool for teachers at all levels. It moves us toward purposeful leadership in classroom practice with a stronger sense of commitment toward emancipatory educational action.

...beyond epistemological shifts and development of complex skills, positive changes in dispositions, self-perception and self-efficacy impacted these teachers' motivation.

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