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# Empowering Teachers Through A Professional Development School and Classroom Action Research

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Recent presidential and public attention to the importance of students attaining literacy by the end of third grade has validated teacher educators' passion to empower teachers to be instructional leaders in reading. Seeking ways to motivate teachers, our university faculty established a professional development school (PDS) following a philosophy of constructivism and critical theory. Our site-based delivery of master's programs was designed to focus on the empowerment of teachers as change agents. One of the most effective learning experiences that promotes such professional development is classroom action research. Teachers were guided as they took informed action to construct and apply their knowledge experientially with their own students. In this article, I (a) describe a practical model for a beginning graduate reading course in which teachers research strategies to improve their students' reading achievement, (b) share highlights from our experiences, (c) examine problems and challenges, and (d) make suggestions for conducting classroom action research in the future.

This model was developed with more than forty graduate teachers who were beginning master's degrees in elementary education or reading education. Despite the large number of teachers involved, I took this approach because it allowed teachers to construct their own first-hand, concrete, procedural knowledge instead of hoping for them to accept abstract, declarative knowledge from lectures. According to Corey(1953) classroom action research is "research undertaken by the

people who actually teach the children, supervise teachers and administer school systems in an attempt to solve their practical problems by using the methods of science . . . in order that they may know that they are accomplishing the things they hope to accomplish" (p. 141). Corey explained that teachers with the disposition to study and learn from their own teaching are more likely to change and improve their teaching from such experience than from reading about what someone else has discovered.

When teachers were first introduced to the concept of classroom action research so early in their graduate studies, their anxiety levels were high. They needed to learn the difference between empirical research and classroom action research. I explained that the emphasis would be on developing their professional expertise and judgment (Hopkins, 1993) as they explored a published, proven strategy with their students. Classroom action research was a way for teachers to search for ways to improve their effectiveness as teachers. To do this, they first reflected on their beliefs about reading instruction using DeFord's (1985) theoretical Orientation to Reading Profile (TORP) to gain an appreciation of where they currently were on the continuum from a traditional to a whole language teacher. They needed to become conscious of the relationship between their beliefs and their teaching practices, a crucial link to becoming empowered literacy professionals.

Through class discussion, I estimated where each teacher was on a scale that estimates their use of reading strategies, Levels of Use of An Innovation Model (LOU). The levels range from 0 to 6, with 0 being the least aware and 6 the most. The purpose was for them to advance on the following LOU scale:

- Level 0 Non-use: Teachers have little or no knowledge of reading/writing strategies and do not care to learn about them
- Level 1 Orientation: Teachers have acquired information about reading/writing strategies and are evaluating their value and usefulness
- Level 2 Preparation: Teachers gather information in anticipation of beginning to use reading/writing strategies
- Level 3 Mechanical Use: Teachers use the strategies in a mechanical way and are interested more in user needs than the students' needs

- Level 4A Routine: Teachers make few changes, use reading/writing strategies to further improve student learning
- Level 4B Refinement: Teachers vary the use of the strategies to increase impact on students based on knowledge of both short and long-term consequences of strategy
- Level 5 Integration: Teachers have extensive understanding and are willing to help other colleagues learn reading/writing strategies (They look to further improve student learning in a great sphere of influence.)
- Level 6 Renewal: Teachers re-evaluate the quality of use of the reading/writing strategies and alters the strategies to achieve greater impact (Look to explore new strategies and set new goals.) (modified from Hall, Loucks, Rutherford, & Newlove, 1975)

All the teachers were approximately at Levels 0, 1 or 2.

Several models of classroom action research have developed from Kurt Lewin's original description (described in Hopkins, 1993) that included analysis, fact-finding, conceptualization, planning execution, more fact-finding or evaluation, and a repetition of this cycle. To tailor this design for a literacy focus, I developed an elaborated model for a one-term class delivery. The students realized that they needed to become a community of teacher researchers who would discuss what they were doing to support each other along the way. We progressed through the steps as follows:

1. Analysis – Defined problems or ways in which they wanted to improve the reading instruction in their classrooms based on a needs assessment of their students and the social context for learning.
2. Fact-finding – Identified and chose strategies that had been documented as beneficial to students.
3. Conceptualization – Reflected in writing on the match between their individual classroom settings and the original researcher's classroom setting.
4. Planning execution – Planned the strategy considering ethics for classroom action research; planned a wish-list budget, if funding were available, from such sources as state

reading associations; planned the assessment making sure that it matched the reasons for selecting the strategy and found three sources to access the data (triangulation of assessment); planned ways to document the process by making a video, including the introduction, each step of the strategy development, and interviews with the students aimed at capturing their response to or evaluation of the strategy; planned ways to disseminate what was learned; wrote a proposal for potential funding, but planned to start without any additional funds.

5. Fact-finding – Sought suggestions and support from the principal, colleagues, and classmates.
6. Revision/Conceptualization – Revised the plan, if needed. This allowed teachers to redirect their work as their thinking evolved.
7. Implementation – Informed students and parents with letters describing what they would be learning and seeking consent for video taping before beginning implementation.
8. Documentation – Kept a professional journal classifying their notes describing participants and events along with interpretations.
9. Dissemination – Shared the experience with fellow teacher researchers, exchanging feedback and giving ongoing formative evaluation; disseminated what was learned in various ways; set new goals.

There were many highlights from this classroom action research project designed as a course for graduate students. One was that the teachers searched and shared excellent resources such as *Reading Strategies and Practices: A compendium* (Tierney, Readence, & Dishner, 1995) and journals from which they chose documented strategies for implementation. The teachers also became a community of collaborators and supporters rather than competitors within the graduate class as they problem-solved and shared suggestions and materials.

In evaluating the problems identified by the teachers, certain patterns emerged. Most often, the teachers wanted to motivate students. They felt they were unable to get and keep students engaged in work. Several were concerned with ways of creating a positive classroom climate by improving classroom management during reading

and writing or improving students attitudes toward reading and writing. Others spoke of students' lack of experience with literacy due to limited English or due to parents' lack of time or involvement in their children's literacy development. These problems, we believed, were similar to those faced by many educators across the country.

Another point of interest was that the teacher-selected strategies were going to be used for solving a broad spectrum of problems. For instance, Sketch to Skretch (Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988, in Tierney, et al., 1995), a strategy in which students transform events they understood from text into sketches, was used to not only improve comprehension, but to improve students' oral expression, and to instill a love of reading. This helped us appreciate the multitude of benefits of teaching reading strategies for improving student achievement.

Even when teachers had been vague about what needed to be improved, their careful reflection with professional coaching helped them to refine their observations, identify and describe their students' needs, and match them with appropriate instructional strategies. One teacher, for example, said she could not get three students "to make a single written response to a story." After she had reflected on why she had chosen the particular strategy, she explained that she had not been looking just for a response to stories, but a means of getting students to focus on instruction. Once she was able to better observe behaviors and infer the students' cognitive and developmental levels, she was able to deliver more appropriate instruction resulting in the students focusing on and engaging with text and learning to read. Teachers constructed their professional knowledge and applied what they had learned in the classroom. Under a constructivist's framework, their self-constructed knowledge, created while working through the systematic implementation of a strategy, played a key role in improving student learning.

The benefits became apparent. Teachers reported improvement in students' reading behavior as observed through the various selected assessment methods. With the Sketch to Stretch strategy, for instance, student comprehension, oral expression, and attitudes toward reading improved. All reflected on their teaching and were able to motivate students through their systematic approach to teaching using strategies. With classroom success, teacher empowerment was obvious and became a source of motivation in the graduate class as well. Because their students responded very enthusiastically, teachers were encouraged to continue using the strategies. The teachers took ownership of the strategies and were determined to convince other teachers to use them, rising to higher and higher levels on the LOU scale. Some teachers enthusiastically tried other teachers' strategies in their class-

room; some applied strategies in innovative ways, and several planned to continue researching with them.

These benefits were not without cost. The teachers went through emotional ebbs and flows at different points of the process. Elliott (1976) who had directed classroom action researchers with the Ford Teaching Project identified stages and similar situations: (a) analysis, the problem-solving stage; (b) reflection, the stage in which the teacher researcher thinks about what to do to "solve" the problem; (c) the self-evaluation stage, the stage in which most teachers feel the most tension or dissatisfaction; (d) insight, the stage in which they see the progress of their work, working through the conflicts from the self-evaluation; and (e) change, the stage in which the teachers incorporate what they have learned. Several of the teachers in the graduate classes found the difficult stage of self-evaluation extremely stressful. In this stage, the teachers began to question the quality of their teaching. This challenged their professional identity. They wondered, "Have I not been a very good teacher?" At this stage, the teachers began to blame other factors for problems or obstacles. This was a critical time when teachers needed to have open discussion. The teachers had to process their feelings and see that teaching improves with such critical reflection.

As a means of performance evaluation, I had asked the teachers to document the implementation of the strategy. The teachers had either videotaped themselves or asked a colleague to videotape them. On the self-evaluations, teachers revealed that some of them were uncomfortable with seeing themselves on tape or were technophobic, afraid to use the video camera. This was a greater concern than I had anticipated and was probably related to their anxiety over university grades as well. All of the teachers overcame their fear and produced a video, although many tapes were full of blips, blank spaces, and noise interference.

Everyone gained insight from engaging in classroom action research. One suggestion that could improve the experience is to limit the number of teachers involved at one time. A ratio of more than 40 teachers to one university supervisor took a great deal of physical time and effort. Consider fully the feasibility of classroom visits. Another suggestion is to be prepared to deal with high levels of stress during the self-evaluation stage. Students sometimes rebel during the self-reflection stage from their personal discomfort. Teaching is a nurturing profession and teachers, generally, want to believe they have done all they could have for their students. When one threatens professional identity, one has to help teachers verbalize their thoughts and to rationally examine what they are thinking. It is important to explain beforehand that they may likely feel uneasy self-evaluating. Creating

the expectation of stress at a point is better than simply letting it erupt. Teachers are reassured knowing others are feeling the same self-doubts they are. Some individual conferences may be necessary to ease the situation.

To use the video to its greatest benefit, as a visual enhancement for the presentation of the teacher's work, the teachers should develop a list of what they want included in it and a rubric to evaluate it prior to beginning the classroom action research. Allow the teachers to peer evaluate the tapes using the teacher-created rubric. This eliminates much of the anxiety that they will be evaluated on their technical prowess. After they have made the video, ask teachers to sign a release, if they wish, for their tape to be used for teacher training. This empowers teachers to know they have produced a demonstration worth sharing.

In conducting classroom action research as a learning experience at the beginning of a master's degree program, students, teachers, and the university collaborator learned valuable lessons. Students learned many new strategies. Teachers progressed to higher levels on the Levels of Use of an Innovation Model. Teachers eagerly disseminated what they learned from their experience at their schools, some at county-wide coalition meetings and some in their districts. Others presented their strategies at professional conferences on the state and national levels. Some teachers have gained positions in the county as instructional supervisors, some are teaching at research and development schools on the strength of their new level of professional competence, two have won state grants, two were awarded scholarships from the American Reading Forum, and some set the new goal of going on in their career for doctoral study. As the professor, I learned that conducting classroom action research with its positives and its challenges resulted in the empowerment of a new generation of change agents who will surely make an impact on the literacy achievement of students.

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