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The Impacts of Preservice Action Research in a Rural Teaching Residency

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Preliminary data was collected as part of the program assessment of a yearlong teaching residency program in rural California where preservice teachers conducted action research as the culminating activity for a Masters degree. Focus groups and survey data from program graduates were analyzed and compared to findings from the research literature. Themes from the data indicate that the residency program prepared graduates to feel confident about their ability to reflect on their teaching and to collaborate with other professionals. Graduates report that having conducted action research in their preservice program had many benefits to their experiences as a teacher of record, including analyzing data, sharing their knowledge with others, and to ask for assistance when needed. Challenges of conducting action research during a preservice program were also cited by a few participants.

Introduction

Action research has been used in a number of teacher preparation programs as a way of introducing a culture of inquiry for people learning to teach (e.g. Kitchen & Stevens, 2008; Levin & Rock, 2003; Kosnik & Beck, 2000). Action research “is especially important for the success of beginning teachers. Early in their careers, teachers need to learn how to conduct their own inquiry project and delve into the research on their problem” (Diana, 2011, p. 173). One program in Chico, California, integrated the process of action research in a one-year teaching residency designed to prepare teachers for high need rural schools.

The Rural Teacher Residency (RTR) program at California State University, Chico was a federally funded grant program that combined the Master’s in Education with a multiple subject or special education preliminary credential. The candidates participated in a one-year residency where they co-taught with a mentor teacher in a high need rural school. The culminating activity for their MA in Education was an action research study in which the preservice teachers rigorously and systematically studied their own practice. At completion of the program, these teacher researchers presented their findings in a formal poster session attended by faculty, mentor teachers, and future program participants.

The RTR program at CSU, Chico was funded by a United States Department of

Education Teacher Quality Partnership (TQP) grant for five years and had a total of 87 graduates. Two years after the program ended, program directors completed both quantitative and qualitative data collection on the impacts of the RTR program on graduates. This article will outline some preliminary findings of two focus groups (26 participants), the data from which was used to create a survey that was sent to all graduates. Seventy of the 87 graduates responded to the survey. Program assessment data points to a few critical aspects of a teacher preparation program that impacted the graduates’ sense of preparation, one of which was the inclusion of classroom based research which will be the focus of this article.

Reflection, Collaboration, and Confidence

All of the survey respondents were aligned on one question; they all agreed that the RTR program prepared them to be reflective about their teaching. Reflection was built in to all aspects of the program: through classroom observations, university coursework, and the process of action research. This focus on reflection during action research was illustrated by this focus group participant: “I think the whole part of action research that was the most important was really solidifying that reflection piece, and really just getting yourself into the habit of every day, everything you do, really thinking about what was the purpose of that” (focus group 2) and this survey response: “Having to do an action research project made me a really reflective teacher in all aspects.”

Table 1. Survey responses by RTR graduates related to reflection and collaboration

Survey Question	Strongly Agree/ Agree	Strongly Disagree/ Disagree	Unsure
I feel prepared to work collaboratively with other teachers at my school	97%	3%	
I feel prepared to reflect on my teaching practice	100%	0%	
I feel prepared to ask for assistance that leads to professional growth	99%		1%
My experience co-teaching/planning improved my ability to collaborate	91%	6%	3%
My experience with PLCs influenced me to engage in collaboration with other colleagues about student data	86%	10%	4%
My colleagues have sought me out for my perspectives on teaching	97%	3%	
I share my knowledge of action research with other educators	76%	20%	4%
I continue to reflect on the topic I chose for my action research study	86%	14%	
Conducting action research in RTR influenced me to analyze classroom data for the purpose of improving my teaching practice	90%	7%	3%

Collaboration opportunities were built into the RTR program through co-planning with the mentors, in designated Professional Learning Communities (PLC), and among the cohort. These integrated opportunities were intended to prepare candidates to be able to, in part, learn from reflection on their own practice and talk about teaching with other teachers. Seventy-six percent of the survey participants responded that they shared their knowledge of action research with other educators. All but one person in the survey felt prepared to ask for assistance that leads to professional growth, and all but two reported that they had been sought out by their colleagues for their perspectives on teaching. Some focus group participants also commented on how they were seen as having more expertise at their school site; one person commented, “My current school asked me to be on a pilot committee for doing action research on the impact on our students of doing no homework” (focus group 1). Another person shared the confidence they felt about their skills: “All my teachers at my site, they’re all afraid of it [data analysis] and they don’t know where to start and I’m like, okay, let’s get to work” (focus group 2).

A major theme from both the focus group data and the survey was the level of confidence the graduates felt. Many commented on their depth of experience and higher skill levels than many of the beginning teachers with whom they worked. “One of the main advantages that made RTR in my opinion so much better than a traditional credential program was it was a significantly higher level of academic rigor” (focus group 2). Many aspects of the program appeared to have contributed to the success of the candidates. It was clear from all of the data that co-teaching with a mentor for a full year in the same classroom were all critical components of the program that contributed to their high sense of preparation. Having a cohort of classmates was also cited as an important factor. All but two (97%) of the graduates surveyed reported feeling prepared to collaborate with other professionals. Increased confidence and collaboration are themes found in other research about the impact of action research (e.g. Caro-Bruce & Zeichner, 1998; Kosnik & Beck, 2000, Levin & Rock, 2003; Mills Teacher Scholars, 2017).

Forty-three respondents (61%) in the survey answered that action research was among the top five aspects of the program that contributed to their sense of preparation. Diana (2011) suggests that “action research represents one mechanism that may help the beginning teacher succeed in making the transition from being a student teacher to managing his or her own successful classroom” (p. 170). This is the rationale behind many of the California state mandated induction programs, such as the Beginning Teacher Support & Assessment (BTSA),

that made action research a central aspect of their training. Eighty-percent of the RTR survey respondents confirmed that they had done action research as part of their induction program during their first two years of teaching. The consensus of the members of both focus groups was that they were far more prepared than their peers for the induction program. One participant stated “I just feel like RTR gave us such a more in depth understanding of what action research should be, that when induction asks you to do it, it’s like well this isn’t really truly the way it should be the right way” (focus group 2). One survey respondent noted in the final comments of their survey: “I felt more prepared from RTR than I ever did with BTSA. To me my BTSA program was a joke and it made me thankful that I did have such a great start into my career with RTR.”

Not only did graduates feel more prepared, but their administrators noticed. From focus group 1, a participant commented “For our administrators, also, knowing the program that we came out of, two of us did BTSA in a year, so they signed off and fast-tracked our program – you’re done.” One of the RTR graduates had become an administrator and he said this in a focus group: “With staff, I do heavily support action research and encourage it. It’s something I’m still very passionate about and try to get staff members to integrate that into their own practices” (focus group 1).

Impact on Preparation for Teaching

Throughout the process of data collection for this program assessment, program directors were seeking to understand to what extent participating in action research might have impacted the graduates’ ability to reflect on and improve their teaching. One focus group participant noted, “Research and doing my Master’s in the same program has made me a better teacher in that I know how to do research in my classroom” (focus group 1). Eighty-six percent noted in the survey, and focus group participants echoed this, that they continue to reflect on their action research topic from the RTR program. Ninety percent reported that conducting action research during the program influenced them to analyze classroom data for the purpose of improving their teaching practice. This finding is illustrated in this comment from a focus group: “I feel like I’m using the skills maybe not as much as we did with the action research, but I’m using the skills, and anything that we’re doing, any new adoption that we make, or whatever it is, we’re trying things out, we’re testing things, we’re looking at the data...so I feel like I’m using skills that I

learned through the RTR program” (focus group 2). These findings resonate with a study done by Mills Teacher Scholars program (2017) where 83% of 270 teacher researchers responded that their inquiry project, they felt more confident using student-level data to make instructional decisions.

When asked whether or not they felt prepared to be an effective teacher, all but two respondents agreed, with 64% choosing “strongly agreed.” In the final section of the survey, respondents were asked to add any additional comments. More information about why these two may have felt unprepared was found there. One person wrote that her RTR mentor was a poor model and that having one experience in an upper elementary grade did not prepare her for primary grade teaching. The other indicated that university coursework did not prepare her in classroom management or teaching math. Even these two respondents, who reported not feeling overall prepared by RTR to be effective, credit the program as having contributed to their skills in being a reflective practitioner. This finding is supported by the fact that both reported that they continued to reflect on their action research study after the program. The survey data also suggests that these two respondents felt prepared to ask for assistance in their teaching as well as offer their perspective to colleagues, important qualities in their ability to collaborate. Both responded that conducting action research during the program influenced them to analyze classroom data for the purpose of improving their teaching practice.

Some Mixed Results on the Impact of Action Research

Six respondents who reported that they disagreed (4) or were unsure (2) if action research influenced them to analyze classroom data for the purpose of improving their teaching practice were further analyzed. Two of the six indicated that they did share their knowledge of action research with other teachers; two different respondents said they still reflect on their topic of action research. Three of the six report having done action research as part of a state-mandated induction program in their first years of teaching. There did not seem to be any consistent pattern across all six respondents. One set of responses seemed inconsistent: one respondent did not believe the process influenced them to analyze data to improve their practice, though they did share their knowledge of action research and did credit action research as being the third most important component in their feeling of preparedness and the thesis advisor as number three in sources of support.

The restrained support of action research by these six survey respondents was voiced by at least one person in the focus groups when they said “When you’re in the program, it was a requirement, it wasn’t anything more than something that I had to do to complete the program even though I appreciated the process, but at the time, in the moment, it was more really a requirement than anything else” (focus group 1). Some challenges to conducting action research that were mentioned in the focus groups were “head strong teachers” who were not interested in changing their teaching and the time needed to focus on the research process (focus group 1). Two other comments addressed the challenge of conducting their action research at the school site. “It was two of us who were stuck with one mentor teacher who was not flexible nor supporting of our research based project. If it was not for the support from our supervisor and the faculty in this program it would have not been possible” (survey response, 22). “I felt like my support at Chico State was awesome, but no one at my school site wanted me to do it [action research]” (focus group 1). Although generally RTR mentor teachers have been supportive of action research, the hesitancy of some mentors is documented in earlier research on the RTR program (Schulte, 2014). Lyndsay Halpin Klipfel, a graduate of RTR, speaks to the importance of a good mentor when she writes:

I was fortunate to be paired with a mentor teacher who was part of a dedicated community of teachers who consistently implemented action research, visited one another’s classrooms to help with data collection, and were continuously asking questions about their practice. Their good example helped me cultivate my own expectations for collaboration with colleagues and modeled how action research is still vital in an experienced teacher’s classroom. (Schulte & Halpin Klipfel, 2016, p. 463)

Conclusion

Although the experience of conducting action research was not in the top three aspects of the program that contributed to graduates’ sense of preparation, the data suggests that it was still a very meaningful experience for many of the program completers. One focus group participant said, “But it was a valuable learning experience that brought my own academic knowledge up to the next level. I hadn’t been challenged that much in a long time and it was a really good experience for me” (focus group 2). Another spoke to the long-term value of action research: “I think that having to do the action research in the RTR and then again in this setting keeps you

fresh. ... It prevents staleness and [you're] always re-inventing yourself because even if it did work, you want to work on things and improve on things that will work long-term" (focus group 1). Lyndsay Halpin Klipfel (Schulte & Halpin Klipfel, 2016) summed up her RTR experience when she wrote:

I feel fortunate that I received a strong introduction to action research in my preservice context... I am able to indulge in the questioning and realize that, even if the clock is still ticking down on the end of the year, the questions live on, and it is the process of asking and answering those questions that has the real value. (p. 464)

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