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Action Research as First-Year Faculty: Exploring the Path Less Taken

Emily A. Daniels & Maureen Squires

The integration of educational research and practice is essential if any genuine progress is to be achieved in addressing compelling, complex and significant issues in education.
(Pine, 2009, p. 3)

As new faculty members, both authors came to the process of action research through collaboration. The path was a new one that we had previously not explored, one that emerged as we moved forward together. We started down this woody lane with ideas, hopes and flashlights to begin to clarify our work, our ideas, and the needs of our students. We also hoped to illuminate the way for other junior faculty members attempting to integrate action research into their praxis.

Both of us were trained at research-intensive universities, where research is often not as intertwined with classroom practices as it could be. I (Emily) did not have previous experience with action research, but I had taught for 15 years, and engaged in research through my doctoral program over the course of several years. Like Emily, I (Maureen) did not have extensive training in action research. Yet my experiences as an 11-year educator and student in a doctoral program and an educational leadership program provided me opportunities to engage in research and become a critical practitioner.

After arriving at the college, talking together, and considering options, we began to develop promising ideas that could support us as junior faculty and action researchers. Action research has a distinctive democratic appeal and our conversations highlighted the importance of both

modeling the research process and actively reflecting on our practices.

Students enter into our combined Bachelor of Arts/Master's in the Science of Teaching Program as undergraduates or move into our MST Program as Master's candidates matriculating after they have earned Bachelor's degree elsewhere. Both groups of students take the research class during their first semester of graduate work. The students are seeking certification in childhood or adolescent education in the content areas including math, science (e.g., biology, geology, chemistry, physics), English, social studies, and foreign languages (e.g., Spanish, French). The yearlong research course opens with a focus on general information and the exploration of educational research, which leads to the development of a collaborative research proposal during their first semester. Their second semester is dedicated to implementing the research project through the collection and analysis of data, the writing-up of their project and a poster session presentation.

Beginning the process of research as first-year faculty members, we confronted multiple levels of complexity. We worked to balance various nuances of learning systems, instructional skills and practices, and the organization of instructional environments while addressing students' needs, alongside our academic and campus-wide responsibilities. The juggling of these responsibilities and identities contributed to our desire to understand how our development as scholars was parallel to the development of our students as teachers. We began to consider

research to be a topic, an experience, and an identity. Across these many levels, we found ourselves struggling to portray the topic of research to our pre-service teachers as something intriguing, informative, necessary and perhaps potentially empowering. We opened a discussion based on these questions: What does it mean to be a teacher as well as a researcher? How do we combine these identities and practices?

Questioning

The focus of our work involved bringing together the practices related to teaching with research possibilities through the introductory research course. We noticed that the narrow definitions of research brought by our students seemed irrelevant to them as pre-service teachers. Some students understood research as searching the Internet for information related to pre-assigned topics; other students with math and science backgrounds viewed research as strictly quantitative. Due to this disconnect, many of our students questioned why they were required to take a research course. One student laughingly admitted that she had postponed the research course as long as possible thinking that it would be dreadfully boring and irrelevant. These admissions emerged late in the second semester pointing to the necessity of delving more deeply into the purpose and role of classroom research.

Our questions were as follows:

- 1) What does it mean to become a pre-service teacher-researcher? How do pre-service teachers conceive of educational research? How do their identities shift and grow as they become pre-service teacher-researchers?
- 2) How might a two-semester research course be designed to introduce research to pre-service teachers while providing an initial research experience?
- 3) What content might be emphasized in a 2-credit research course for pre-service teachers?
- 4) How might students be invited to engage in the research process before implementing their own study?
- 5) How do instructors scaffold learning and create cultures that support the professional

and intellectual growth of pre-service teacher-researchers?

We hope to encourage growth as well as exploration, as we collectively learn about the research and teaching spectrum, and explore our potential roles within the teacher-research community. In addition, we hope that our discussion of possibilities and challenges supports other junior faculty members who wish to embark on the same journey.

Tensions

An important tension involves our roles at a teaching-intensive college, with 3-4 classes of 50-100 students each semester. This was particularly intense during our first year. The tensions revolved around creating spaces for meaningful research, meeting the requirements of the program, and finding time to think deeply, examine data, and conduct research. Perhaps all faculty face these struggles, but as first year professors, we encountered a steep learning curve. We encountered dual, and perhaps conflicting, messages about the importance of our research. At times we were strongly encouraged to conduct research; other times we were told to “create boundaries” between the time devoted to research and teaching. While our colleagues, department chairs, and our Dean were supportive of our research initiatives, we struggled to maintain a balance between actively engaging in research and meeting our teaching responsibilities - balancing the life of the mind with the life of the classroom.

Three additional difficulties and tensions surfaced as we continued with our work. The first dilemma involved the distinct possibility that action research did not fit with the requirements and limitations inherent in our program. In other words, while we fully intended to focus our class on action research, timeframes were not sufficient to allow students to conduct research in their classroom placements. The lack of a fieldwork component within the research courses made it difficult for students to conduct action research projects. This was true despite our differentiation of the course requirements to allow students to pursue individualized projects based on their interests, curiosities, and passions. Students

designed and implemented research projects on various topics and with diverse participants. Some students identified gaps in the existing knowledge base or practices that felt should or could be changed to enhance the educational experience of their students. However, due to time constraints, we struggled with creating a course grounded in action research practices. We wondered whether simply adding on a fieldwork component to a research course would help.

A related second dilemma involved our role as faculty members engaging in action research. It seemed disingenuous to applaud the value of action research while not engaging our students with high quality teacher research experiences. In addition to reflecting on the research courses, we initiated conversations with colleagues across our department. We sought to connect our research courses with the required course on curriculum which included a fieldwork component. This required field placement could provide students with opportunities to engage in instructional planning and implementation as well as research design and practice. In this way, field experiences of the teacher candidates would mirror their future classrooms where they will be expected to facilitate, evaluate, and institute changes to enhance student learning. Using field placements in this manner would provide students with opportunities to participate in action research rather than learn about it and then use that information at a later date.

Another challenge involved the necessity of providing rich, meaningful feedback in a timely fashion to our students. This was complicated by the many content area certifications that we offer as well as the vast differences in experience and understanding that students bring to their courses. This was particularly evident with the research course that was required of all students regardless of content area. We each acted as principal investigators on 15-20 research projects per semester involving in-depth mentoring through the research process.

Finally, issues related to empowerment and social justice are crucial to our work as scholars. However, through action research and reflections on our own practices, we worried that we did not fully attend to these issues during our initial academic year.

Acting on Action Research

While our dilemmas have not been resolved, we continue to grow as educators and as researchers. We expect the fluidity of qualitative action research to present challenges and unanticipated directions. Moving forward, we return to the opening quote about the necessity of combining research with practice. We may not discover what we had intended to find as we begin to act on and with our research, but we hope that the powerful dilemmas above will push us to learn, grow, and act in ways that support and nurture our students and our professional development. Since we began questioning, we have encountered a new year's worth of students, and have begun to analyze our data and encountered strikingly similar themes, including a dawning awareness among our students of the importance of research as well as a deepening appreciation of the process of research and their potential as researchers. In addition, we have worked to integrate the ideas, voices and feedback from our research into our current teaching practices. It is a winding path, with stops and starts along the way. Perhaps our paths will lead us in unanticipated directions - this seems to be the case as we continue to work through the ideas and input that our research has inspired. Sometimes we meander from the path, wander through the data, and engage in conversations about various dilemmas. Regardless, we revel in the possibilities of the path less taken.

Reference

Pine, G. J. (2009). *Teacher action research: Building knowledge democracies*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.