

An Action Research Project's Impact On Teachers' Leadership Attitudes And Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

California Lutheran University is a regional site for the California Reading and Literature Project (CRLP). In 2010, CRLP began a two-year longitudinal study to examine the effects of participating in an institute called Reframing Teacher Leadership: Action Research Study Group had on PreK-12 teachers' attitudes and perceptions. The foundation underpinning this study is the New Framework for Teacher Leadership. This study examines the impact that participating in the Action Research Group had on teachers' attitudes and perceptions. Mixed-methods were used to analyze participants' feedback through surveys and fieldnotes. Results confirmed the claim made by educational researchers that action research empowered teachers to have a greater stake in curriculum and instructional decisions and provided them with a framework to improve their pedagogical practices.

Keywords: Action Research; California Reading and Literature Project; Teachers' Leadership; Teachers' Attitudes

INTRODUCTION

Since 2000, the Graduate School of Education at California Lutheran University has been a regional site for the California Reading and Literature Project (CRLP). CRLP exists to provide quality, standards-based professional development for PreK-12 teachers in language and literacy instruction to ensure that every student achieves the highest standards of academic performance. CRLP works toward this end by empowering, educating, and supporting educators as they grow into teacher leaders through dynamic experiences of professional development.

Toward the end of fostering individual teacher leadership, CRLP began offering an institute entitled "Reframing Teacher Leadership: Action Research Study Group" (hereafter referred to as Action Research Group). The purpose of this group was to build a community of inquiry within the local teaching community. In 2010-2011, CRLP developed a pilot study recruiting 30 teachers interested in conducting supervised action research on promising reading instruction practices. Participants worked in collaborative groups for accountability and designed and executed their own action research within their classroom. Preliminary post survey findings highlighted teachers feeling "better prepared to become a better teacher." In 2011-2012, half of the educators from the pilot study returned to participate in the second year study, totaling 24 participants. In 2012, the Action Research Group culminated in late spring to present their research findings at CRLP's Action Research Symposium. Preliminary post survey data from the culmination of first two years, 2010-2012, of this program suggested a positive impact on teacher leadership. This study will continue longitudinally until May 2014. Nonetheless, this study examines the impact that participation in CRLP's Action Research Group in 2011-2012 had on 24 teachers' leadership attitudes and perceptions about incorporating a research project on literacy strategies and assessing its effectiveness in a collaborative environment.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Much has been written about the value of action research and how it changes teachers' attitudes toward research and change in classroom practices (Gilles, Wilson, & Elias, 2010; Megowan-Romanowicz, 2010; Warren, Doorn, & Green, 2008). Reeves (2008) argued that "Teachers and leaders are influenced by their own colleagues, their own experiences, their own students, and their familial associations" (p. 4). By reflecting on, and sharing data of what worked in the classroom, Reeves believed it enabled teachers to become leaders in their learning communities. In the first year study, participants indicated that the CRLP Action Research Group helped them "to identify and apply classroom practices and changes in student learning" and "skills to use when working with teachers". Of the 10 participants who provided responses to the 2010-2011 Reframing Teacher Leadership Response Summary, all expressed an interest in participating in the second year study.

Megowan-Romanowicz (2010) reported action research has gained in popularity in recent years. Yet, responses to the 2011-2012 Reframing Teacher Leadership pre-survey indicated most of the participants had not conducted action research in their classrooms. Of the 24 participants in the 2011-2012 Action Research Group, the responses to the pre-survey indicated that 54% had never collaborated with other educators to develop and implement action research in their classroom or school while 45% worked with others on action research projects. Responses to the pre-survey also indicated that 57% never developed or implemented action research in their classroom or school independently while 42% had implemented action research alone. As such, this study adds to the body of research highlighting the ways that action research reengages teachers by enabling them "to take on the role of the professional so that they gain the wisdom that informs their practice as opposed to relying solely on advice from supervisors and outsiders" (Warren, Doorn, & Green, 2008, p.261).

QUESTIONS OF THE STUDY

This study aims to determine the following: What is the impact of participation in the Action Research Group on teacher growth?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reeves (2008) argued that educators are more likely to be influenced by the professional practices and action research of their peers than they are by reading journal articles or enrolling in undergraduate or graduate courses. In most cases, traditional professional development seminars rely heavily on consulting outside experts' "inspirational speeches and administrators' stern follow-up memos" (Reeves, 2008, p.4). For this reason, Reeves developed a new foundation for professional development, naming it the New Framework for Teacher Leadership. According to Reeves, this framework made action research conducted by teachers and school administrators "the heart of professional learning" (p.4). He found when teachers are afforded opportunities to conduct action research on a continuous basis and discuss it in a collaborative setting, three things happened: teachers had a direct and measurable impact on student achievement; they affected the professional pedagogical practices of their colleagues; and when effective pedagogical practices are reinforced and repeated by the teacher conducting the action research, other educators who observed the practices replicated them.

Gilles, Wilson, and Elias (2010) maintained action research empowered teachers "to examine their own beliefs, explore their own understandings of practice, foster critical reflection, and develop decision making capabilities" that enhanced their teaching and enabled them to assume control over their respective situation in the classroom (p. 93). Gilles et al. claimed one important benefit from action research was that it created and strengthened a professional learning community. According to Gilles et al., action research strengthened a professional learning community because it placed emphasis on student learning and collaboration and reflection on pedagogical practices among teachers. In support of this, Warren, Doorn, and Green (2008) found teachers who engaged in action research had "a higher sense of efficacy" that led to a "greater willingness to seek solutions to the dynamic and ever-changing classroom issues" (p.261). As such, this study examines how participating in CRLP's Action Research Group reframed 24 teachers' leadership attitudes and perceptions about incorporating an action research project on literacy strategies and assessing its effectiveness in a collaborative environment.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Creswell (2005) identified the exploratory design as an appropriate approach to mixing methods when a researcher wanted “to explore a phenomenon in depth and then measure its prevalence” (p.75). According to Creswell, this design requires the researcher to explore the research topic from a qualitative stance first and then the qualitative findings guide “the development of items and scales for a quantitative survey instrument” (p.77). This study utilized mixed methods combining qualitative analysis to highlight teachers’ perceptions of their experiences in the Action Research Group with quantitative methods to analyze their attitudes toward action research and its role in their classroom.

Data Collection

In 2011-2012, 24 teachers participated in a year-long CRLP Action Research Group. Once participants returned their informed consent, they received a link via e-mail to access Survey Monkey’s Website to complete an online pre-survey. The online Reframing Teacher Leadership pre-survey collected demographic information as well as data on teacher knowledge, lesson planning, confidence, and leadership skills. It consisted of 9 questions, 4 open-ended to elicit teachers’ perceptions of their experiences with action research and experiences with examining behaviors/actions/practices in their classrooms or on their school’s campus. Survey Monkey automatically assigned a code of random numbers to each participant to ensure confidentiality.

Of the 24 participants, 22 completed the Reframing Teacher Leadership mid-survey. Each participant received a link via e-mail to access Survey Monkey’s Website to complete the online mid-survey. It consisted of 5 questions, 2 open-ended to extract the knowledge that the participants developed over two-months from participating in the study. In addition, participants attended 4 CRLP Action Research seminars. The mid-survey asked participants an open-ended question about the knowledge they gained from participating in the seminars.

Participants also attended a culminating CRLP Action Research Group Symposium that required them to showcase the results of the action research they conducted. A link to Reframing Teacher Leadership post-survey hosted on Survey Monkey was distributed via e-mail to participants one week after the completion of the Symposium. The post-survey contained the same general content as the Reframing Teacher Leadership pre-survey to track changes in attitude and impact on teaching. Of the 24, 10 participants completed the post survey.

Data Analysis

Content analysis, as described by Elo and Kyngas (2008) was used to analyze teacher responses to the knowledge they gained from participating in CRLP’s Action Research Group. According to Elo and Kyngas, content analysis is a method that can be used with either qualitative or quantitative data. They described it as a method that enabled researchers to analyze documents. In this case, content analysis allowed “the researcher to test theoretical issues to enhance understanding of the data” (Elo & Kyngas, 2008, p. 108). For this research study, inductive content analysis was used to open code participants’ written responses. The written material was read repeatedly to identify categories. Once categories emerged, a means to describe the phenomenon increased (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). Table 1 highlights the categories that emerged.

FINDINGS

The pre-, mid-, and post-surveys were used to assess 24 teachers’ growth as they participated in CRLP’s Action Research Group. Figure 1 captures the participants’ responses to the Reframing Teacher Leadership pre-survey question about prior experiences with action research. Figure 2 highlights the participants’ responses to the Reframing Teacher Leadership mid-survey question about understanding action research. Of the 24 participants, 22 responded to the Reframing Teacher Leadership mid-survey. Figure 2 highlights majority of the participants, 54%, developed a different perspective on action research. Table 1 reveals the impact that the CRLP Action Research Group had on 10 of the 24 participants.

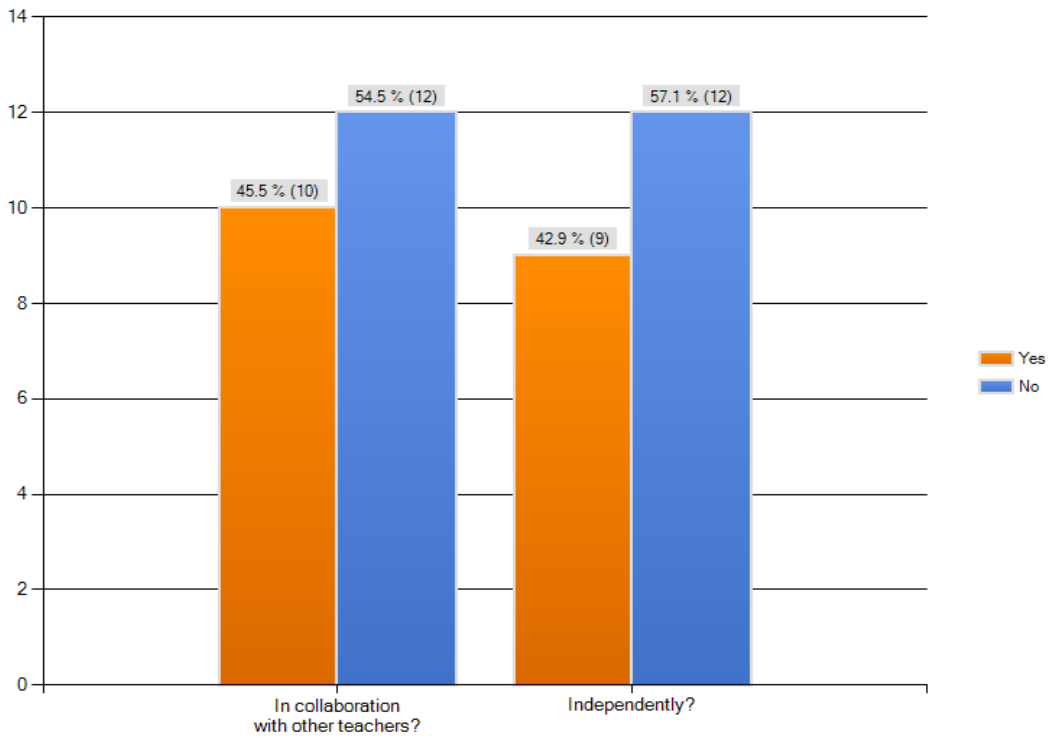


Figure 1: Responses to Reframing Teacher Leadership pre-survey question: Have you ever designed/implemented action research in your classroom or school?

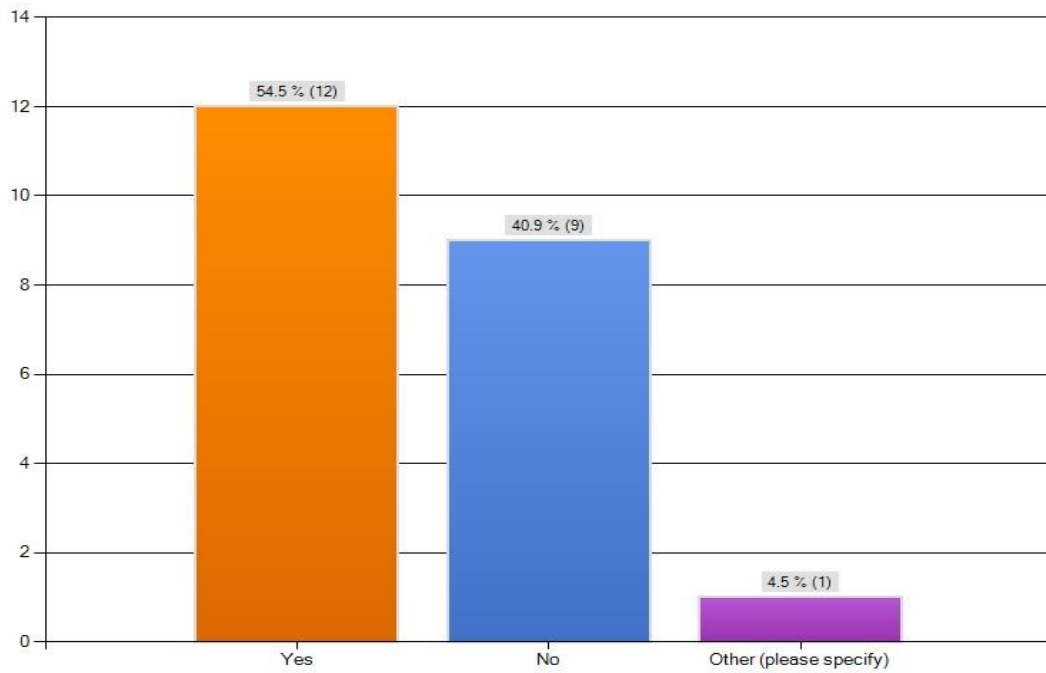


Figure 2. Reframing Teacher Leadership mid-survey: Has your understanding of what action research is changed since our last meeting?

Table 1
Responses to Reframing Teacher Leadership Post-Survey Question:
What Have You Gained from Participating in CRLP's Action Research Seminars?

Categories	Responses
Collaboration	<p>Response 1 My practice as a teacher has improved as well as my ability to share and collaborate with colleagues at my school and district. It has informed my instruction and provided a tool to continue to improve my teaching practice.</p> <p>Response 2 I thoroughly enjoyed working collaboratively with other teachers across grade levels and from other schools as we implemented similar instructional strategies. Hearing the success stories from the other action research groups encouraged me to consider pursuing a similar process with colleagues on my own campus next year.</p> <p>Response 3 I have gained so much. First, learning about the Common Core Standards has helped me gear up for huge shift coming our way. Next, I have learned how to apply Action Research into my reading and writing program. Finally, by incorporating the phonics routines into my class I have been able to reach even the most reluctant readers and writers. I have truly enjoyed collaborating with knowledgeable teachers. Thank you for this opportunity.</p> <p>Response 4 The courage to try something new and better, to discover new strategies and to increase my friendships across the district.</p>
Action Research	<p>Response 3 I have gained so much. First, learning about the Common Core Standards has helped me gear up for huge shift coming our way. Next, I have learned how to apply Action Research into my reading and writing program. Finally, by incorporating the phonics routines into my class I have been able to reach even the most reluctant readers and writers. I have truly enjoyed collaborating with knowledgeable teachers. Thank you for this opportunity.</p> <p>Response 5 Many exciting ideas.</p> <p>Response 6 When I face a challenge in the classroom, I now will constantly be thinking in terms of how action research can help improve the situation. I know that the action research process has helped me become a better teacher and, in turn, benefitted my students. I have gained great insight and encouragement from the other educators involved in CRLP's Action Research Seminars.</p> <p>Response 7 I have gained knowledge of action research, technology and the common core. The seminars always left me with great ideas and motivation.</p>
Leadership/ Empowerment	<p>Response 8 What I have gained is that explicit teaching of reading strategies do make a difference with the students.</p> <p>Response 9 I feel empowered to use Action Research as way to improve my practice and student outcomes.</p> <p>Response 10 Confidence, leadership, knowledge, connections.</p>

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to explore the impact that the CRLP Action Research Project had on teachers' leadership attitudes and perceptions about incorporating literacy strategies and assessing the effectiveness of the strategies in a collaborative environment. The CRLP Action Research Project used Reeves' (2008) New Framework for Teacher Leadership as the framework for the study.

What is the impact of participation in the Action Research Group on teacher growth?

Fifty-four percent of the participants developed a different perspective on action research. Of the 24, 4 participants described the impact that working with others collaboratively had on their pedagogy. One participant mentioned the link that was made between action research and the Common Core Standards. Overall, 3 participants highlighted the impact that action research had on their pedagogical practices. Finally, 3 participants connected the framework underpinning the study with their own practices. After participating in the study, they found themselves feeling empowered to improve their pedagogy and student achievement.

CONCLUSION

While much has been written about action research and its impact on teachers' perspectives, more research is necessary to determine what effect action research has on student achievement. We know from teachers that action research has impacted their attitudes and perceptions. We also know from teachers that action research has improved their pedagogy, and as a result, they have seen improvement in student achievement. However, we need to hear more from the students, so that we can learn how action research affects student achievement.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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