Using Qualitative Action Research To Effect Change:
Implications for Professional Education

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Active learning communities consider and use action research as an organizational model and a methodological strategy to conceptualize, imple- ment, and evaluate promising practices (Bartunek, 1993; Calhoun, 1993, 1994; Greenwood, Whyte, & Garkavy, 1993; Glickman, 1992). Action research has been described as a "tradition that links processes of inquiry to the lives of people as they come to grips with the problems and stresses that beset them in their day-to-day lives" (Stringer, 1996, p. xv). One of the most important features of this approach lies in the relationship between those conducting the research and those "being researched." That is, the "subjects" become partners in the research process, and share responsibility for identifying specific problems and applying local, action-oriented strategies (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Further, this form of research is part of a worldview that "sees human beings as co-

creating their reality through participation, experience, and action" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 206). In addition, action research is performed through a set of social values (Stringer, 1996) and may be described as the "pursuit of democratic forms of communication that, in their turn, prefigure planned social change" (Hamilton, 1994, p. 67).

Action research typically cycles through the following phases: targeting an area of collective interest; collecting, organizing, analyzing, and interpreting data; and taking action based on this information (Calhoun, 1994). Many researchers have abbreviated and/or expanded the descriptions of these phases (e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Salisbury et al., 1997; Stringer, 1996), but essentially, the process remains the same. Most importantly, the process is continuous, evolving, and complex. As each set of activities is completed, the participants "will find themselves working backward through the routines, repeating processes, revising procedures, rethinking interpretations, leapfrogging steps or stages, and sometimes making radical changes in direction" (Stringer, 1996, p. 17). In essence, action research addresses relationships, communication, participation, and inclusion, and potentially leads to benefits for all stakeholders involved in the process (Stringer, 1996).

What then is the utility of action research to a group that has yet to establish or identify themselves as a learning community? How are the tenets of action research introduced under such circumstances? Does the action research process, in and of itself, become a catalyst for developing a new community of learners? Does action research result in teachers becoming more reflective of their practices in the classroom? In this article, we addressed these questions from the vantage point of 21 teachers in a school district who partnered with us in a two-year graduate program that focused on Rethinking Schools for the 21st Century.

Context

Setting

The district, located in southeast California, just north of the Mexican border, and about 50 miles west of Arizona, had a population of approximately 6,600 students in grades kindergarten through eighth. The district operated a total of eight elementary schools and two middle schools. The ethnic representation of the district was 77 percent Latino, 17 percent White, 5 percent African-American, and 1 percent others including students identified as Asian-American (.5 percent), Native American (.16 percent), Pacific Islander (.16 percent), and Filipino (.16 percent). Of the 6,600 students, 3186 (48 percent) were bilingual and 4,554 (69 percent) qualified for free or reduced lunch. Six hundred twenty-two students, or 9.4 percent of the student population were identified as receiving special education services. San Diego State University (SDSU) operates a small campus in the area to provide more access to undergraduate and teacher education without the inconvenience of a two-hour drive to San Diego. However, graduate programs were limited in

number and scope. Teachers in this district interested in graduate studies were often required to commute to San Diego.

The authors of this paper were approached by the district administration to provide staff development opportunities for the teachers, given the limited availability of continuing professional education in the area. We agreed to design a new university graduate degree program as an alternative to traditional inservice workshops. Specifically, an interdisciplinary master's degree was developed and advertised throughout the district. The program was offered on-site (i.e., in-district) rather than on the SDSU campus. Announcements were sent to all teachers in their back-to-school packets, and an informational meeting was arranged to describe the entire program with its scope, sequence and timeline. Undoubtedly, the opportunity for obtaining a master's degree without the logistical and transportation arrangements that teachers would otherwise have to endure for graduate coursework was the reason that many teachers enthusiastically enrolled. The classes ran on a flexible, alternative schedule format, enabling teachers the opportunity to finish the program within 20 months. For example, two of the classes were held on a weekly basis (consecutively), and two courses were held monthly on Saturdays. The final course was held in San Diego in the summer, followed by the comprehensive exam. Masters projects began in the fall and were completed within two semesters. The key selling point was that all but one of the classes would be offered locally, with the instructors commuting.

This study is based on the information and activities from three of the courses we taught, "Action Research," "Principles of Investigation and Reporting," and "Seminar and Master's Project." These courses were held sequentially. We met the students once or twice a month over the 20 months. In addition, students met weekly with other course instructors in their graduate program. No other instructor taught more than one semester.

Players

Twenty-one teachers from eight schools, seven of which were elementary, enrolled in the sequence of classes. Among this group, every grade level from kindergarten to eighth grade was represented, including multi-age, bilingual, English transition, music, drama, and history. Teaching experience ranged from two years to 29 years, with an average of 8.8 years. The group had 186 years accumulated teaching experience. Ten teachers (48 percent) were Latina, 10 (48 percent) were Anglo females, and one student was Latino. Eighteen of these teachers (86 percent) had grown up in this rural desert community and had raised or planned to raise their families in the area. While this was a small community, only five of the 21 teachers knew each other prior to the beginning of the graduate program.

How We Measure What We Measure

A number of measures were used to collect data as part of this study; first by

the teachers who were students in the graduate program (referred to as teachers) and, second, by the university professors (referred to as instructors) of the designated courses. The activities for the three-course sequence that we taught were designed around "Essential Questions" (Sizer, 1992), beginning with the first assignment of "What is a good student?" The use of Essential Questions encouraged teachers to think creatively about the assignments, as the characteristics of such questions include the idea that no one answer is correct and that the questions involve thinking and exploring, not just answering. Teachers had the option of selecting either quantitative and qualitative methods or both and were encouraged to identify the stakeholders of their choice, such as peer teachers, clerical staff, administrators, parents, students, and others. For example, one teacher created a survey to use with her students while another developed interview questions for front office staff.

During one class session, the teachers reported the data they collected from students, peers, family members, administrators, other school staff (e.g., secretaries, nurses, custodians, etc.) through the use of surveys, interviews, self-reflections, journal entries, and focus groups. The instructors videotaped this class session during which themes were identified from the data that the teachers had collected. In addition to data triangulation, the instructors used investigator triangulation (Janesick, 1994) by inviting other instructor colleagues to examine the written data and the videotape. An activity and discussion during a subsequent class session on the use of critical incidents in qualitative research (Fivar, 1980) provided additional evidence regarding the development of the teachers' ability to act as reflective practitioners. Once again, themes were identified from information gathered in dyad interviews, small group discussions, and the class analysis of the data. The teachers also submitted their notes from this process that identified critical incidents and were indicators of implementing reflective practices. Finally, the teachers were provided with a draft of the findings from this study and participated in a member check of the findings. The group agreed that this document was an accurate description of their development as reflective practitioners.

Discoveries

Look, Think, Act

One representation of the action research process is abbreviated to "look, think, act" and is represented graphically by a continuous spiral (Stringer, 1996). For their first essential question, "What is a good student?," teachers determined how to "look" for this information. They identified a variety of stakeholders who could provide answers to this question, and after making predictions on possible responses, the teachers proceeded with their selected methods and stakeholders. They held discussions, designed close-ended and open-ended surveys, incorporated the question into other lessons, and asked their students to record responses in journals.

Findings were then reviewed during a class session, with each teacher reporting results. The teachers described stakeholders, instruments, answers, and their own reactions to the results. This "think" stage enabled them to explore and analyze what had occurred and led them naturally to the next stage of "act." The teachers created more questions based on shared data and then designed proposals to implement specific actions. Several months later each teacher reported on subsequent results of these actions, which sparked another cycle of "thinking." The subject was revisited in May and June, with the final discussion focused on the teachers' progress as reflective practitioners.

Thinking About Students

What appeared on the surface to be a very simple question, "What is a good student?," evolved into reflections on many difficult and complex issues. The difference in responses from the range of stakeholders generated a great deal of thoughtful discussions and reflections. Overall, children tended to answer the question by listing specific behaviors, while adults tended to describe personality characteristics. Table 1 lists responses from children and adults. Adults tended to respond with qualities that they believed should be emphasized in classrooms. As one teacher said,

> The 'Good Student' assignment really got me thinking about qualities I emphasize in my classes and what I reward through attention, verbal recognition, or grades. In the subject that I teach, music, I have always put a large value on individual effort and participation even if some of the theoretical material is not mastered. However, I'm not sure that the students always understand what I am looking for in their performance and why it is important. I now try to make that more clear, both by word and by action. (Middle school teacher)

On the other hand, children focused on compliance issues in their responses to what is a good student. For example, children believed that good students paid attention, got good grades on tests, did their homework, didn't talk or fight, and followed directions. Because the characteristics of good students according to children included so many compliance issues (see Table 1), teachers began to raise questions about the influence they had on children's beliefs.

> I got a sense that the students were merely repeating something that their teacher had told them when they did not turn in their homework or when they were goofing off in class. I have to be very careful what I say in front of the kids and make sure they know I value kindness and cooperation. (Kindergarten teacher)

The number of negative examples was also noticeable, particularly from the younger children.

> I was struck by the overwhelming negative tone of the characteristics they identified (e.g., don't run, never fight, don't talk back). I hope I give my students expectations of what to do instead of what not to do. (Second grade teacher)

Given the discrepancy between the children and adult responses, many teachers began to question their own actions versus their intentions.

> The question of a good student is more than academics. I know from my kids' responses that they hear 'reading, math, spelling' from me. Now I talk about other ways kids can be good students like when they work together, play together, help each other, and do their best. (First grade teacher)

Starting the Action

Given the responses to "What is a good student?" and the ensuing discussion, every teacher saw potential for immediate action. As a part of their proposed masters' projects, each teacher conducted a review of literature relevant to the actions that he or she planned to implement. In addition, each teacher developed a data collection system, conducted further action research, and analyzed the results. The instructors visited the teachers' classrooms during the final semester of the graduate program, and saw evidence of the teachers' interventions, adding data from these observations to the analyses and discussions held in the graduate course. The teachers' actions were then categorized by the instructors into the following four non-mutually exclusive topic areas: classroom management, instruction, student placement, and curriculum.

All 21 of the teachers examined their classroom management strategies, e.g., giving students more active involvement in establishing behavioral expectations

Table 1
Perspectives on "a good student"

From Children	From Adults
Does their homework	Cooperative
Pays attention	Creative
Follows directions	Involved
Courteous	Unique
Works hard	Attentive
Does what the teacher asks	Citizenship
Doesn't talk	Supported by parents
Gets in line quietly	All students are good students
Sets a good example for others	Does his/her best
Tries	Willing to learn
Comes to school everyday	Enthusiastic
Good grades on test	
Polite	
No fighting	
Not hurting others	
Follows the class rules	

and contingencies (Kohn, 1993). Thirteen teachers designed interventions to change how they provided rewards and consequences to students. These interventions included writing individual contracts with students regarding their behavior and removing contingencies for rewards. Six focused on the use self-monitoring techniques and intrinsic motivation. Another teacher, as her intervention, "stopped blaming children for their behavior and tried rearranging the environment instead." Yet another teacher, having examined her use of negative directions (e.g., *don't* run vs. *please* walk) initiated a plan to more clearly communicate her expectations to her students in positive terms.

The next most common action (13 teachers) focused on changes in instructional delivery, primarily through the increased use of cooperative learning activities. Teachers from kindergarten through eighth grade reported these efforts, and each described positive outcomes such as reductions in discipline referrals, increased time on task, and active participation in group discussions. The third most common action identified (nine teachers) was reconceptualizing assumptions and decisions about placement for students with disabilities or those who were low achieving. Six of these teachers reversed their decisions to remove specific students with disabilities from their classes. Instead, they organized interventions to focus on alternative classroom management and instructional approaches. The other three teachers examined and implemented new ways to support students with disabilities by modifying the curriculum, thus maintaining full-time placement in general education versus "pull-out" special education services. The final category included interventions centered on the curriculum (seven teachers), many involving the writing process. Activities introduced and studied included the use of student journals, websites and technology, peer critiques, and essential questions.

Looking and Thinking Again

Several questions were posed as a result of the initial cycle of research. First, teachers re-examined their use of data collection measures. For example, some questionnaires were open-ended, while others provided structured choices. On the second round of inquiry, several teachers modified their approaches to gain a deeper understanding or more diverse perspective on the issue of good students. When sharing the information across schools and grade levels, the teachers were eager to find commonalities that they could analyze together. Six teachers commented that the focus on "a good student" was too narrow. One teacher realized that not all students necessarily want to become good students or at least their perception of what a good student might be. Four teachers were asked "what is a good teacher?" by their students. This started a new round of surveys, interviews, and discussions, comparing the answers about good students and good teachers.

> While walking around the classroom after they first started [writing about what makes a good teacher], it became evident that some of them thought I wanted them to tell me that I was a good teacher. I told them that wasn't what I was looking for,

but that I wanted to know what characteristics any good teacher should have. This is one of my favorites from a first grade boy [taken verbatim from his text]: "Spend time with your students. Tel them rite from rong. Tech them how to read and tech them how to write or draw. Let them have fun if they have ben working alot and if they have ben good too. Help them with very big words." (First-second multi-age classroom teacher)

Teachers took to heart what their students wrote as their expectations of a good teacher. A fourth grade teacher created charts with her students that listed responses that they, their parents, and their teachers had provided to "What is a good student?" and "What is a good teacher?" After a class meeting during which the most common responses were identified, the students and their teacher came to "an agreement as to who would try to do what."

I have tried to do more cooperative, hands-on learning activities to engage more students. My group has been difficult to manage - they get off task as an entire group at the least excuse. With activities that can be done with group support, they began to stay more on task. I strive more now to find positive methods or ways to have the class help each other. I have tried to live up to what my students want from a teacher. (Fourth grade teacher)

Concluding Thoughts

The action research and the subsequent changes addressed in this article may be viewed on several levels—personal, professional, and political (Noffke, 1997). First, on the personal level, the sense of community and belonging created within the graduate program contributed to the teachers' confidence about their teaching. In addition, new peer relationships developed as the teachers engaged in action research. From the evaluations of the entire graduate program, and consistent with Noffke (1997), it was clear that the participants experienced a deeper understanding of their own practices.

Second, these 21 teachers were challenged to step outside their "normal" professional routines to become reflective practitioners. Through qualitative research activities designed in a graduate program, these teachers learned to seek out and listen to more voices (i.e., more stakeholders) when implementing assignments, based on essential questions such as "What is a good student?" and "What is a good teacher?" As a result of their data collection and analyses, teachers made changes in their classrooms and in their professional practices that benefited all students. Consistent with Sagor (1992) and Llorens (1994), the teachers in this study acquired new professional knowledge that resulted in important new roles as mentors to their colleagues.

At the political level, teachers examined a range of issues involved in school improvement and recognized roles that they as reflective practitioners might play in that process. They were no longer willing to be passive members during staff meetings, but rather began articulating the insights discovered during their re-

search. Moreover, the elementary and middle school students in these teachers' classes were challenged to think more critically as they were introduced to new perspectives and as they saw their teachers model active listening and problem-solving strategies.

A number of implications for professional education programs emerged. The action research process made research methods more accessible for teachers. This cohort of 21 teachers started with a simple yet complex question "what is a good student." As they collected information about this question, they learned research and data analysis methods. This reduced the "fear of research" that many of them expressed during the first class meeting and facilitated the eventual completion of their graduate studies.

The cohort status reduced the "fear of looking foolish" that many expressed. Because of the time that they spent together, they had the opportunity to build trust, ask lots of questions, share with one another, and become a learning community. In addition, having the same instructors for more than one course contributed to the consistency and continuity of the instruction. Thus, the instructors became part of the learning community. This allowed us to ask more rigorous questions and ensure better understanding of research, as well as the opportunities and challenges of translating research into practice. We believe, as Patton (1997) does, that "one doesn't learn from experience; one learns from *reflection* on experience" (p. 95). The translation of theory into practice was encouraged in this cohort of teachers due to their sustained study. Through action research, each teacher was enabled to identify changes he or she needed to make. These changes were based on the perspectives of students and were perceived by the teachers as "more real." The action research cycle enabled teachers to attempt their implementation gradually, study that implementation, and observe the changes. Because the process was dynamic and cyclical, reflection became an essential component for moving from one cycle to the next.

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