Guest Editors' Introduction:
Action Research
for Teacher Empowerment
and Transformation

By Barbara B. Levin & Sherri P. Merritt

The articles in this issue of *Teacher Education Quarterly* are all focused on the theme of *action research for empowerment and transformation*. In most cases the authors have engaged in collaborations with preservice teacher candidates, novice teachers, or experienced teachers to carry out action research projects in classrooms and schools in various regions of the US. While the processes and procedures used to carry out these inquiries are described in each paper, what we have learned from the collection of papers are five important features that seem to be needed to insure the transformation and empowerment of the stakeholders involved in these action research projects:

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Choice seems to be a key for empowerment. That is, those engaged in action research must be able to determine the focus of their research, and such choice appears to motivate and empower those carrying out action research projects. In all these papers, the ability to determine and find ways to solve one's own problems was empowering even when action research was a requirement for a course.

Systematic data collection and reflection can lead

to transformation of knowledge and perspective. In each of these papers, the value of systematically collecting, analyzing, and reflecting on multiple sources of data was acknowledged by the participants as a key in leading them to new insights and confidence in their actions to change something in their practice.

Support is another key to the potential for action research to lead to empowerment and transformation for the stakeholders. Without support from peers, from a collaborator, or from a facilitator it is unlikely that the action research projects described in these papers would have been started or completed. Support from facilitators like university-based or school-based professionals included providing knowledge about ways to carry out action research, potential methods for data collection and analysis, suggestions of resources to consult, examples and models of other action research projects, and feedback. Support from peers engaged in action research was also crucial for problem finding, problem solving, and debriefing.

Discomfort during the process is cited by several authors as a key feature of their experience with action research. Because the intention of action research is to not only understand but also to cause change, often at a deep level within an organization or classroom, it tends to shake up the status quo and raise as many questions as it answers.

Successful inquiry leads to empowerment and transformation, an idea which is clearly evident in all the papers in this issue. "Successful inquiry," in this case, refers to inquiry which leads to deepened understanding and leads to improved practice, even if the research questions the notion of what counts as "improved practice." All the action research projects described in these papers yielded successful solutions to educational problems, even in the midst of frustrations with process. Unfortunately, given that usually only successful action research projects are shared publicly in writing, we don't know if empowerment or transformation occurs for stakeholders when an action research project flounders or is deemed to be unsuccessful by the stakeholders. Nevertheless, freedom of choice, reflection on data collected, and support were all aspects of successful action research that led to empowerment and transformation for the people engaged in these inquiry projects.

We begin our focus on *action research for teacher empowerment and transformation* with a paper by Colleen M. Fairbanks and Diane LaGrone who describe the process of constructing knowledge in a teacher research group. Through their analysis of the discourse of this group, they were able to deepen our understanding of how the members of this community of practice shared ideas, examined practical and theoretical issues of action research, and learned from their experiences. Their research illustrates two distinct forms of collaborative knowledge building and illustrates the transformative nature of this kind of talk. Furthermore, it casts light on the kinds of complex knowing that exemplify reflective practice in a way that can guide us as we seek to integrate opportunities for transformative discourse in our own teacher research networks.

Action research for teacher empowerment and transformation is also evident in Patricia J. Bonner's paper, which describes a year-long action research study she

facilitated with two 5th grade teachers. These teachers' efforts to help their students get better at solving math word problems led to improvement in their knowledge of mathematics pedagogy, their attitudes towards teaching mathematics, and their views of their students' abilities as math learners. In addition, their students apparently transformed their attitudes about learning mathematics as a result of their teachers' efforts throughout the action research process. Bonner's findings ascribe these changes to several conditions that are important in the action research process including autonomy regarding choice of research focus, sufficient and sustained time, cultivating a culture of inquiry, opportunities for collaboration, objectivity achieved through systematic data collection, and ongoing reflection.

Jennifer Esposito and Shayla Smith describe the empowerment of one second-year teacher researcher and her students as a result of an action research project conducted about ways to transform 3rd grade children with little motivation to read by providing various incentives, choice of books, and time to read. Using the Accelerated Reader program mandated in her school, Smith challenged her students to read and take tests on books to earn points toward various kinds of rewards that she learned matched her individual student's motivational goals. This novice teacher researcher's efforts not only increased her students' attitudes and motivation to read but also led to 95% of her students meeting or exceeding standards on an and-of-year criterion-referenced competency test in her state and promotion to 4th grade.

Brenda M. Capobianco, Susan Lincoln, Donna Canuel-Browne, and Ruth Trimarchi deepen our understanding of different "generations" of teacher research-ers (teacher researchers at different stages of development and with different levels of experience in conducting teacher research). As a university researcher who has had multiple experiences conducting and leading others in action research, Capobianco represents a first-generation teacher researcher. Three science teachers who had previously taken a graduate course in action research form the second generation, and eight science teachers who were new to action research form the third generation. By giving voice to members from each generation, the authors are able to describe the complexity of action research and show how each generation of researchers experienced empowerment.

Barbara J. Merino and Pauline Holmes focus on how their efforts at promoting teacher inquiry as a part of their courses for preservice teachers evolved over time to yield increasingly successful inquiry projects focused on improving instruc-tion and the learning of culturally and linguistically diverse children in their students' classrooms. In this paper two different models of teacher research, one for elementary preservice teachers and one for secondary preservice teachers, are presented. Details of how these models were carried out and revised to be more rigorous and better scaffolded by the teacher educators are shared. Several examples are also provided of successful action research and the authors' own reflections on the process of empowering their student through transforming their own practices are included.

The article by Linda Valli, Emily H. van Zee, Peter Rennert-Ariev, Jamie Mikeska, Stacy Catlett-Muhammad, and Patricia Roy represents a self-study of their teacher education program, which includes a focus on building the capacity of teachers to inquire into their teaching practices and student learning through conducting action research. In the process of inquiring about their efforts over five years, these authors asked: How can teacher educators initiate and sustain a culture of inquiry among participants in a graduate program? In the tradition of conducting collaborative action research, several faculty members, graduate students, and program graduates collected a wide variety of data to answer this question and bring a variety of perspectives to bear on the outcomes of their program courses. Clearly, their graduates were satisfied as well as empowered by their experiences in this program, and this paper provides a good model of how action research can be used to engage in program evaluation.

Even in higher education, action research holds the potential for transformation, as Camille Wilson Cooper evidences in her study of an effort to refine social justice commitments through collaborative inquiry. She illustrates the difficult, messy nature of collaborative action research yet shows how the inquiry served as a tool for both professional and personal transformation for participants. Her research provides valuable findings for university faculty planning to undertake such research and offers specific suggestions for how to make that process productive for participants.

We close with an article by Tracy L. Smiles and Kathy G. Short that describes an effort to increase publication of teacher research manuscripts written by practitioners. Recognizing that the publication process can be daunting for classroom practitioners who may not have ready mentors in their buildings, they argue that journal editors can find ways to support and mentor novice authors by identifying resources and people and linking them with teacher researchers. Our hope is that their discussion of the challenges facing all novice authors can engage us in a productive discussion about how we make open the process and hear a variety of voices from the field in our journals.

Increasingly, action research is being seen as a vehicle for professional growth, personal transformation, and improved student learning. This collection of articles gives us a starting point for continuing the conversation about the transformative potential of this very personal, authentic form of research. By deepening our understanding of how and why the process of action research can be empowering and transformative, we can continue to find ways to improve our own practice as action researchers and facilitators of action research groups. In short, we can use these stories of transformation to inspire our own continued learning as we continue to grapple with the complexities of action research.