

## **From Reluctant Teacher to Empowered Teacher-Researcher One Educator's Journey toward Action Research**

**By Jennifer Esposito & Shayla Smith**

Yet another role, another hat to wear on a daily basis. I am now to wear the hat of a researcher. Nurse, educator, parent, comforter, encourager, etc. My hat pile is getting high. First as a mother and wife, next as an elementary public school teacher to 23 third graders, and now as a researcher. Action researcher to be exact. The reason for the new hat you may ask? No, I am not an avid collector. I am, however, a student at a state university in the Southeast working towards a Master's degree in educational research who is about to embark on a semester long course on action research.

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The above words were the initial thoughts of one of the authors, Shayla, a graduate student less than thrilled, and perhaps, a little overwhelmed by the thought of taking a required Action Research course. Once again, another aspect of her personal and professional repertoire was added without her consent or approval. The other author, Jennifer, was Shayla's professor for the course who, as a former teacher, has a firm belief that action research is the best way to empower teachers in urban schools. The two embarked on an action research journey together and

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both became empowered by the process. The focus of this paper will be Shayla's transformation from reluctant teacher-researcher to empowered teacher-researcher.

We will describe Shayla's journey through action research because it was this journey from circumspection to empowerment that strengthened her in ways that she had not foreseen or anticipated. It allowed her to see her classroom in fresh ways, focus in on a problem and systematically attempt to not only change and better it but also to understand it. This, of course, led to another funhouse of doors to explore and research. Through the interaction of her new-found desire for knowledge and the intricacies of action research, Shayla became a better, more effective and empowered educator. Her students also became empowered because they became more aware as self-starters and thinkers. Noticing a positive change in their children, the parents also became more involved in a responsive manner. Although the focus of this article is Shayla's empowerment, her peers in the action research course as well as her professor, Jennifer, all became empowered as well. Shayla's peers were informed of her findings and were able to utilize aspects of her research to address their students' needs. Jennifer witnessed Shayla's growth as an action researcher first hand and was able to use this growth along with Shayla's struggles to tailor her instruction so that her students in the future could have a similar worthwhile and empowering experience.

In this paper, we explain the Action Research course and include excerpts from Shayla's and Jennifer's reflective journals. We describe Shayla's action research project, and discuss what new questions have been raised for Shayla. Finally, we make the argument that Shayla's journey from reluctant teacher-researcher to empowered teacher-researcher has lessons other novice teacher-researchers and their instructors can learn from.

### **The Action Research Course Description**

Action research is being embraced by many graduate and undergraduate programs as a route to teacher development. There exists much literature on how action research can be utilized by novice teacher-researchers to enhance their pedagogical choices and, ultimately, improve student performance (Burnaford & Hobson, 1995; Sax & Fischer, 2001). There are also many examinations of how partnerships between universities and K-12 educators can enhance the action research process (Burnaford, 2001; Coulter, 1999; Noffke, Clark, Palmeri-Santiago, Sadler, & Shujau, 1996). Although we believe that our partnership enhanced the action research process, we intend to focus on what Shayla learned through her first experience as a teacher-researcher and how she became empowered.

Shayla enrolled in the course in Spring, 2005. It was Jennifer's hope that Shayla, along with the other teachers, would feel empowered by the process of systematically effecting change in their classrooms through action research. The course objectives were as follows:

1. Choose an appropriate research question to explore.
2. Select and/or design data collection procedures.
3. Review and critique relevant professional literature.
4. Conduct an action research study.
5. Make changes to teaching practice through systematic reflection and experience.

Having taught Action Research before, Jennifer knew teachers were often hesitant about buying into any kind of research especially since policy is often developed from research conducted on teachers but not by teachers (Fruchter & Price, 1993). During the first meeting of the course, Jennifer asked the teachers to create conceptual maps of what they thought action research was. Words like “statistics,” “libraries,” and “variables” appeared. It was clear the teachers conceptualized action research as traditional quantitative research. Jennifer knew that part of her role as facilitator of learning was to debunk some of these preconceptions:

It is always disheartening to find out how widespread students’ understandings of the positivistic paradigm are even when they feel this paradigm has no relevance to them or their teaching. I was not surprised by the conceptual maps but I did realize I would have to do more teaching about how action research differs from more traditional, quantitative research.

As a graduate student well schooled in quantitative research, Shayla had completed the majority of her coursework. This was her first experience in an action research class that by definition is a qualitative method of research. Shayla’s thinking and intuition were brought to light as she jotted in her journal. She expressed feelings of nervousness with the course requirements, doubtfulness of the effectiveness of the research but also excitement with the possibilities of the outcomes:

From the beginning I knew that this class would be different. After our initial meeting the professor changed our location to a meeting room in which all eleven of us sat at a conference table. We all looked puzzled as to what exactly action research was. Nonetheless we were told that we would, by the end of the course, conduct an action research project in our classrooms and by doing so it would enable us to solve an educational problem.

Jennifer structured the course with “research groups” of students who functioned for each other both as emotional support and general assistance. The research groups met weekly, usually after a specific component of action research had been introduced. Shayla remembers the group as:

When we were divided into groups of five, I’m sure we all felt the same initial horror: *not another group project*. Actually, the research group was designed to be that of a support group. There was a block of time every class meeting for us to meet and discuss any relevant details that pertained to the class or our research project. Generally we discussed educational issues as they related to our research. The research groups were one of the best components of the class because it allowed us to feed off one another for creative ideas. We also got to ask/answer one another’s questions. This

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provided a more in-depth understanding of the action research process because we verbalized what we knew as well as what we were struggling with.

The research group in this course was similar to a group of Albuquerque teachers in Raisch's (2005) study. Both groups engaged in professional conversation and used one another as an outlet or as a resource. The research groups found it easy to discuss problems but more difficult to generate solutions. McCarthy and Riner (1996) also found this to be prevalent in their study with teachers in Accelerated Schools. A teacher wondered why they could not just focus on the solutions instead of trying to determine problems. Shayla concurred. This is the attitude she had at first as well. She knew the multitude of problems that existed in her classroom. At first, when she met with her research group to discuss her project, they could not discuss *the project*. Instead, they discussed their days. Similarly, a teacher from the Raisch (2005) study explained that "the groups were a safe haven to discuss questions about the effectiveness of (our) teaching."

Jennifer required students to keep a reflective journal. They were instructed to record three entries per week. Generally, two of the entries focused on their concerns regarding their research projects while one entry focused on the process of learning action research. More specifically, at the beginning of the course, journals focused on observations and experiences from the school day that stood out. The intent of these entries was to enable the teacher-researchers to key in on possible research questions. Once they chose an educational problem to research, their entries focused on observations, questions, and reflections on the problem. Once data collection began, journals focused on struggles teacher-researchers encountered. Data analysis was ongoing and was included in journal entries alongside ruminations about data collection.

Though there were a variety of course requirements, the main one was the completion of an action research project. The project necessitated that teachers choose a problem or concern in their classrooms they wanted to change. During the second night of class, Jennifer asked the teachers to compile a list of problems they faced in their classrooms. Shayla immediately thought:

This shouldn't be too difficult. As a beginning teacher in an inner-city school where parental involvement is scarce due to a myriad of factors, let me digress by saying that brainstorming a list of topics would not rank high on my list of difficult assignments.

Jennifer guided the teacher-researchers through a traditional "Look-Think-Act" action research cycle. The action research project was to be focused on a self-selected topic. The culmination of the project was a written research report as well as a poster presentation.

An excerpt from Shayla's final journal entry stated:

To my surprise, this was not your average research or even like any other research that I have ever completed at all. And as I learned, this research would never really be *complete*. In fact this particular research did not just lead to me earning an extra

three credit hours and being one step closer to graduation. It also did something far greater and out of the ordinary. It empowered me.

We believe that empowerment through action research is a process of gaining insight and knowledge that would allow one to effect change. Once we began collaborating on writing this article, we realized that all stakeholders involved with Shayla's research had been empowered.

## **Shayla's Research Project**

### ***Introduction***

Shayla adapted the process of "taking stock" as described by McCarthy and Riner (1996). During the "taking-stock" process teachers avoid "jumping to solutions" but instead decide what kind of information they need to have about the entire school community and its operation before they make decisions about what needs to be changed. Shayla had to decide what information she needed about her classroom before she could decide what needed to be changed. So, she started with very broad questions: "What do my students struggle with? What aspect of school do my students have a genuine dislike for?" These two questions led her to narrow her topic further: "Which subjects are students failing? Which subject affects grades in other subjects?" The answer to her question was reading. Shayla knew from the beginning that she wanted to focus on literacy. She just didn't know how.

She wondered how her students' reading levels would impact them. The state she teaches in utilizes the Criterion Referenced Competency Test as a requirement for promotion to fourth and sixth grades. Shayla's third grade students had to pass the test in order to be promoted to the fourth grade. The problem was that 15 out of her 23 students were already below grade level by at least three months. And, some were below grade level as much as three years. This was clearly a valid educational problem to investigate.

Ina S. Harrison (1994) found that third grade students seldom read for pleasure, were not motivated to read, and, therefore, read poorly. Harrison noted that this lack of motivation is directly related to overall poor self concept. Thus, students with low self-esteem often perceive themselves as poor readers and therefore may not choose to read. Shayla questioned if the implications of the Harrison study could be meaningful or even generalizable to her own study. Were Shayla's students not reading because they had knowledge of their poor reading skills and deficits in their reading levels? Did this lead to a poor self concept of themselves as readers? Shayla witnessed on a daily basis what Harrison found: her students hated reading. They knew that they were not good at it. They rushed through reading assignments. They did not read independently. It became clear to Shayla that she had to improve the students' self concepts of their reading skills. She thought she might do this by requiring them to read more (practice makes perfect) and helping them reach realizable reading goals. Consequently, Shayla felt that as students saw their

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improvements, they may be more likely to enjoy reading and furthermore adopt a more positive self esteem toward their reading abilities.

Shayla wondered what classroom interventions could be put in place that could help students on a day-to-day basis in a measurable, systematic way. Given a variety of constraints and a limited curriculum base from which to choose, she selected Accelerated Reader (AR). AR is a program by Renaissance Learning Company in which students select pre-identified books. After selecting the pre-identified books, the students then read the books and take a computerized test on the book. There are 5-10 questions depending on book length. The AR program's website states that students who use the program outperform students who do not use the program on standardized tests and that gains are especially pronounced among students with low reading ability (<http://www.renlearn.com>). A study by Holmes and Brown (2003) indicates that students taking part in the Renaissance Programs outperformed the control schools on the Georgia Criterion-Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) in reading and math. These gains increased during the second year.

Comparably, Ross, Nunnery, & Goldfeder (2004) conducted a randomized control trial of the effects of a first-year implementation of Accelerated Reader and Reading Renaissance Programs in an inner-city school. Their results showed that students who use Accelerated Reader achieve greater reading gains than students not using Accelerated Reader. A survey of participating teachers revealed strong positive attitudes about Accelerated Reader and Reading Renaissance Programs. In fact, 90% agreed that student achievement has been positively impacted by their implementation of Accelerated Reader. Ninety-five percent were highly supportive of the program. Ninety percent responded that they wanted to continue using the program.

Likewise, Anderson (2001) implemented Accelerated Reader in conjunction with a district-wide grant in 1998. Educators at the school were initially hesitant and skeptical about the program, specifically questioning its adaptability in a high school setting. The author felt that, while Accelerated Reader had been helpful in regular classes, it had been most effective for struggling readers, citing that the students appreciate being able to read books at their levels, are motivated by the quizzes, and are successful because the program provides students with structured and supported reading. The author also notes that, in the district where the study was conducted, library circulation more than doubled and students read for pleasure and recommended books to one another.

Similarly, Lawson (2000) reported that in less than a year after first implementing Accelerated Reader and Reading Renaissance techniques, numerous students' reading grade levels increased two to three years, while the majority experienced more than a year's growth. The author also notes that reading motivation also increased significantly. In addition, library circulation increased from 600-700 books a month to around 4,000.

Within the AR program, passing a test requires a score of 60% or above. Shayla required her students to score 80% or above in order to pass a test. Her research

question had finally developed: How can a district-mandated AR program be used to effectively motivate students' reading, improve their reading interests, and boost their self concepts of their reading abilities?

### **Context**

The students involved in this project were in Shayla's third-grade classroom at a Title I public school in a southeastern city. There were 11 males and 11 females, ages 8 to 9. The students were predominately African American with one Hispanic, one Asian, and one Indian student. The students possessed a variety of strengths and various learning styles. At the time of this research, the average reading level equivalency was 3.5 (third grader, fifth month) For Shayla's class, the students' reading levels spanned from 0.2 (kindergarten, second month) to 6.3 (sixth grader, third month). Shayla was a second-year teacher at the time of her study.

Shayla had first implemented the AR program in her class the previous year. The students became more motivated to read after the promise of a pizza party or the competition of being the first person to reach a 25-book goal. The students' motivation to read increased positively. This was made evident in a myriad of ways. First, the students were checking out more books during the first month and the class library circulation record indicated that Shayla's class had checked out 264 books compared to the 38 books her class had checked out previously. Next, the students were the top performers in the school-wide AR challenge for her grade level. Lastly, Shayla's students encouraged their peers who hadn't reached their goals. They reminded their peers in ways such as "You're almost there," or stayed on task by inviting others to go to the library and check out books or go to the reading corner and read together. Based on her students' experiences from the previous year, Shayla's intuition told her that AR might be a promising program to continue. She wanted, however, to determine this in a systematic way with results that could be shared with others.

Shayla's initial experience utilizing the AR program illustrated that her students seemed motivated by extrinsic rewards. This situation was comparable to a study completed by Ted Rejholec (2002). He found extrinsic rewards increased student performance. There has been much debated about extrinsic rewards. Some feel that it is wrong to bribe students (Chromey, 2002; DeLisle & Hargis, 2005). Shayla, however, believed that she could encourage extrinsic motivation first and, later, encourage intrinsic motivation. Thus, she reasoned that if she could get her students to first feel good about reading and find success while reading, then they would later do the opposite of what Harrison (1994) found: they would begin reading for pleasure, they would be motivated to read, and, therefore, read better.

### **Data Collection**

Shayla embarked on the data collection process. Shayla presumed, from the students' low grades they hated reading as a requirement, but wondered whether or

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not they were reading at home. Shayla reasoned that even if they were reading the comics inside the Sunday paper, they were showing an interest in literacy. She wanted to determine their interest in order to capitalize on it. Shayla conducted informal interviews with her students. The following is an excerpt from one of the interviews:

*Shayla:* When do you read at home?

*Student:* When we do our reading homework.

*Shayla:* When else do you read?

*Student:* When my momma makes me.

*Shayla:* How often is that?

*Student:* When we get in trouble.

*Shayla:* What is the reason you don't read without someone telling you?

*Student:* I don't know.

*Shayla:* Who picks the books that you have to read when you're in trouble?

*Student:* We do.

*Shayla:* What kind of books are they?

*Student:* Not true stories like fairy tales or cartoons.

*Shayla:* Do you have many books like those?

*Student:* Yes.

*Shayla:* How often do you go to the public library?

*Student:* Once my aunt took [my cousins and me].

Next, Shayla devised a survey. Many of Shayla's students had poor grades in reading and many were not reading on grade level. Both characteristics could have impacted their overall desire about reading and participating in the Accelerated Reader Program. All of the students, however, did not exhibit these characteristics. The purpose of the survey was to collect data about the students' attitudes about the Accelerated Reader Program in the most time efficient way. The survey included questions like:

1. *Do you like taking AR tests?*
2. *Have you passed at least 15 AR tests this year?*
3. *Do you believe that you can pass 15 AR tests in 4 weeks?*
4. *Would you take an AR test if no one knew that you passed or failed?*
5. *Would you take an AR test for fun?*
6. *Would you take more tests if there were prizes for passing?*



Since this was Shayla's first attempt at constructing and administering a survey, she quickly saw that her results from the survey were rather narrow because students were not able to provide details about their choices and attitudes. Because of this, Shayla used the data from the survey to form focus group questions to further explore students' attitudes about reading as well as their feelings about the Accelerated Reader Program. Shayla held focus groups three times during the investigation. The first focus group was for all students to discuss items mentioned in the survey, which she did by dividing her class into smaller groups. The next focus group was for students who met their goals early. The last focus group was with the entire class to discuss the outcomes of the project. The following excerpt is from the first focus group:

*Shayla:* First, please tell me how you feel about reading.

*Student 1:* I hate reading. I get tired of reading.

*Shayla:* Why?

*Student 1:* It takes too much time, [you're] always trying to make us read.

*Shayla:* Do you believe I do this to make you a better reader?

*Student 1:* It probably is but I just hate doing it. I can't stand reading.

*Shayla:* Is this why you don't like taking AR tests or reading AR books?

*Student 2:* Exactly.

*Shayla:* When you read how do you feel?

*Student 3:* [Angry]. It takes so long to read. We have to read so much.

*Student 2:* If I could read [quickly] like people do in the grocery aisle, then it may be fun. It takes me so long to read.

*Shayla:* Is there any time reading may be fun to you? Just think of ANY time you read and laughed.

*Student 4:* Sometimes when we learn about fun stuff. Like, The Lost and Found. That story was funny.

*Shayla:* How do you feel about taking AR tests?

*Student 2:* Frustrated, it takes too long to read those books. We have to think fast and remember what we read.

*Shayla:* What could make AR more fun?

*Student 4:* First, if we could check out our own books. Not saying we don't want you to check out some books for the class because it takes too much time for us to go [to the library] every time. But can we go to the library more? Like once a week.

*Student 5:* No twice a week.

*Student 1:* And quit forcing us read.

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*Shayla:* What do you mean?

*Student 3:* Don't tell us you're going tell our moms if we don't read.

*Student 4:* And another way [to make AR more fun] is that sometimes we don't want to read in the morning when I first get here. I just woke up and my eyes are tired. We should be able to have a choice of when to read like maybe after lunch or after we pack up our bags.

*Shayla:* Do you mean as long as you get the 15 minutes in per day?

*Student 4:* Yes

*Shayla:* What about the prizes? Tell me how you feel about those.

*Student 4:* I don't think its fair that only 3 students get to have pizza when more than that may have met their goal. That's why I don't try because I know somebody's going to meet their goal before me because they may read faster or their mom may take them to the library more.

*Shayla:* What if there were no prize?

*Student 3:* We probably wouldn't read as much. I'd probably take some tests but not as many.

*Student 6:* We're not doing this for nothing.

*Shayla:* Would you read if no one knew you did?

*Student 6:* No. Even though we don't like to read, its still fun that if you do read you get to put a sticker by your name.

Shayla also used was what she called the AR Challenge Chart to track students' progress. Each time a student passed a test on an AR book, Shayla placed a sticker by his/her name. The students were able to see their progress as they strived to reach their goals. The students loved to see their progress (and even more, the progress of others). The AR Challenge Chart was important for two reasons. First, it served as a way to track Shayla's students. But, the chart also served to motivate students. The students started to view the AR Challenge as an extra-curricular activity. They began reading at lunch, after school, and during their free time at school. After the survey and first focus group, Shayla knew she had to investigate how to motivate her students to read. She utilized the Forced Item Reinforcement Menu developed by Cartwright (1970). This menu is used to determine the motivational systems of individual children. Each student reads the two items and checks the item that he or she would rather receive as a reward. The rewards fall into particular categories: adult approval (ex. teacher writing excellent on your paper), competitive approval (ex. having your work displayed on the bulletin board), peer approval (ex. classmates asking you to be the leader), independent rewards (ex. having free time), or consumable rewards (ex. receiving a candy bar).

**Findings**

Based on Shayla's collection of data, she determined several components that must be in place in order for Accelerated Reader to be successful in her classroom. According to the survey results, students reported they could be successful with the AR program. They also revealed they did not think AR was fun and were unmotivated to participate prior to Shayla's research. The results from the forced choice menu illustrated the majority of Shayla's students preferred either independent rewards or consumable rewards, though she had a few students in all of the reinforcement categories. It was clear from the menu, that there are varieties of ways to motivate students to read but it is up to the teacher to find and initiate these reinforcements. Shayla placed these motivators in her class. For those needing adult approval, Shayla sent notes home or gave stickers that said "I have read 4 books this week" and certificates that said "I have reached my goal." She also made contact with certain parents to let them know that their child had positive gains in reading. The AR chart, where students would place stickers by their name to track their results, was utilized as a competitive reward. Peer approval naturally seemed to fall into place. The students bragged on one another saying "I can't believe you read that whole book already!" or invited one another to the reading corner to read together. As components of independent rewards, the students were given time to go to the library independently as well as choices of activities to do once they had met their weekly goals. Consumable rewards such as candy and pizza parties were also promised and were utilized as a motivating factor. Because most students were able to meet their twenty five-book goal over the course of the research, it was apparent that if the correct motivators were in place then the students could and would read.

The focus group dialogues clarified for Shayla what the students felt was and was not working in helping them to reach their reading goals. Shayla found during the last focus group that the students stated that they felt listened to during the focus groups. They believed she was really interested in their perspectives on why they did not read as much as she would have liked them to. This is an excerpt from the last focus group:

*Shayla:* In looking at the chart, I see that you all met your goals. Why do you think this is so?

*Student 12:* Because you listened to us. Some of the things we told you like reading in the morning and going to the library more, we got to do more.

*Shayla:* How did this make you feel?

*Student 7:* Like I wanted to read more. I thought since you listened then I might as well show I appreciated it.

*Student 14:* It made me feel like what we thought was important too.

*Shayla:* Do you think your suggestions played a part in the outcome of everyone meeting their goal?

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*Student 11:* They made a big difference.

*Shayla:* Next time something is going on in school that you have suggestions on how to make it better, do you feel like you would feel comfortable telling your teacher how you felt?

*Student 2:* Yes. Maybe she would listen to us too.

*Shayla:* What do you think was the best outcome of reading all those books?

*Student 7:* Well I feel like I read better. Especially when I got to pick my own books. Now I can I read better and I take more tests and pass them.

We determined from the data collected that Shayla's students needed choice, opportunity, and extrinsic motivation in order to complete the AR challenge. The students felt they should be given the choice of when to read or what time to read. For example, AR reading time was set for 7:20 in the morning when the students first arrived but Shayla found that several students would not read during this time. Some students said in the focus groups that it was too early to read and that they would rather read during lunch or in the afternoon, prior to dismissal. So, Shayla began offering students the choice of when they wanted to read. We discovered her students must also be given the opportunity to check out books, time to read, and take tests.

Many of the students reported that they read but just did not get a chance to take tests. Some reported that they wanted to read but did not get a chance to check out books. Some even stated that they would read at home but they have too much homework. So, one night a week Shayla assigned an AR book to read as homework. Shayla also had to motivate her students to read in a variety of ways. Her students responded to different kinds of motivators (candy, free time, ice cream, etc.). So, she found what motivates each student and put those motivators into place. After all, one student did state that "we're not doing this for nothing." Based on the data Shayla collected, it is clear this project helped to empower the students and make them active agents in their education.

### ***New Questions***

Following the action research process, Shayla found new questions to investigate. For example, after reading her students' CRCT results at the end of the year, it was clear that something we did was right since 95% of her students met or exceeded standards on the CRCT. It is possible that the AR program had a substantial impact on their CRCT reading scores. This year, Shayla will determine what types of questions in the AR program were similar to those found on the CRCT so she can integrate them into her daily reading instruction. However, there was one student that did not pass the CRCT. She did, however, have AR success. Shayla is interested in investigating this. What was the missing link? Was it attendance, lack of parental involvement, just a bad day for a major test? These are all new questions that have arisen in her journey through the process of action research.

### **Teacher Empowerment**

Shayla felt that without conducting this action research project she would not have identified factors that made her students more positive about their reading capabilities, and allowed them to find enjoyment in literacy. We believe that this action research has empowered her students but has also empowered Shayla in the following ways:

*Empowerment to choose:* Shayla felt that she had a problem in her class. She chose a study that enabled her to effect change. Shayla felt that this topic was “research-worthy” because the findings would benefit her classroom, students, and ways of teaching. Shayla felt that this was empowering because she, as the teacher-researcher, took on the responsibilities for using systematic research to solve her particular educational problem.

*Empowerment in design:* Action research can be designed so that data collection occurs as part of a teacher’s daily routines. Shayla felt that this was empowering because it does not add to a teacher-researcher’s already full plate. She did, however, have to modify her ways of collecting information that normally would have been based on valuable teacher intuition and observation to a more organized and effective mode of recording data through journaling and field notes. This, in turn, aided her in becoming a more reflective practitioner.

*Empowerment in sharing:* Shayla felt that there was no right or wrong way to share her results. Shayla believed in her results and thought if other educators heard about them they would be willing to use them to change a similar educational problem. Shayla shared her results in informal settings such as grade level meetings. She also shared her results with administrators and encouraged them to conduct professional development classes around the issue of how useful teacher research really is.

*Empowerment in results:* Shayla felt the research itself was the most empowering experience. Shayla chose a topic that was important to her classroom. She, along with her students, found ways to solve problems they were facing. Shayla felt the results were the ultimate gain. When one particular student stated that he no longer hates reading and felt that he was a better reader now, it became clear that a teacher-researcher’s hard work does, in fact, effect change.

Numerous studies have indicated that practicing teachers conducting action research as part of their graduate education programs can improve teaching and enhance student learning (Burnaford & Hobson, 1995; Johnson & Button, 2000; Sax & Fisher, 2001). We feel action research empowers the teacher because it allows the teacher to investigate his/her own pedagogical choices within his/her classroom and specifically work to meet the needs of all those involved.

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It is not only the teacher, however, who may be empowered by action research. Shayla's students have been empowered as well. They have learned that they can actually impact their own education. Through the focus groups, surveys, and informal interviews, they saw that they were the most important factor in the educational process and that everything Shayla did in the classroom was put into place to ensure their success. They felt listened to. They felt involved and knew that their opinions mattered. The students' parents and surrounding community have been empowered as well due to the fact that they are major stakeholders in student achievement. Through Shayla's sharing her findings with parents individually as well as at parent conferences, parents stated that they, too, saw changes in their child's attitude about reading. Shayla shared with the parents the changes that she made in her classroom as well as suggested these changes could be made at home. After this communication with parents, they have a better understanding of the fact that reading does matter.

When Shayla first set out to complete her study, she anticipated fulfilling another degree requirement. She never thought that understanding this type of inquiry would so positively affect her as an educator. To her surprise, action research was actually beneficial to her students and herself. As the instructor of an action research course, Jennifer knew that her ultimate goal was to illustrate how action research could be an empowering experience for the teacher-researchers in her course. Although she did not reach all of her students, the majority left the course firmly stating that they would continue to complete action research, even after their course grades had been turned in!

### **Lessons Learned by an Empowered Teacher-Researcher**

The lessons learned are many but we will focus on two: persistence and flexibility. Shayla came to the course with an appreciation for positivist research and was worried that her action research project would not be "real" research. She was told by Jennifer that she needed to think from within a different research paradigm in order to complete a successful action research project. Such a change required persistence by both Shayla and Jennifer. For, although she was unsure about this type of research, Shayla needed to tenaciously go through the process, learning as she went along. Shayla also was required to be flexible since Jennifer warned that initial research questions may change or shift once data collection began.

For Jennifer's part, she was required to be persistent with students. Mentoring students through the action research process is sometimes difficult and time consuming. Jennifer had to keep her focus on the fact that many students, although struggling during the semester with mistakes and unanticipated problems, would have very fruitful outcomes by the end of the semester. She also had to become more flexible as an instructor. She had to genuinely listen to her teacher-researcher's concerns and be prepared to adapt the course at any moment to address those concerns.

Both authors have been empowered in ways they did not foresee and share their story with the intent of helping novice teacher-researchers realize the multiple benefits of action research. Shayla's students and their parents were positively affected by her investigation of how to raise student-reading scores. Shayla became a more reflective practitioner in just her second year of teaching. She was able to share her results both with her colleagues in the action research course but also with her school community. We believe that the empowerment of all stakeholders involved in the process of action research can only improve our schools and the communities of which they are a part.

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