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The Transformative Power of the Action Research Process: Effects of an Inquiry Approach to Preservice Teacher Education

by *Clare Kosnik*

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What you see is not always what you get! Having been involved in action research in preservice teacher education for the last four years I continue to be startled by the impact of the process on students and faculty. It is not simply an assignment to be completed; rather, it is a process that leads student teachers to the core of what it means to be a teacher. This experience and the knowledge gained in turn change them as individuals. The action research process requires students to ponder and struggle with many difficult questions: what is the role of the teacher; what does it mean to have a student-centred class; how much can and should I deviate from the formal curriculum; how can I authentically assess student learning; what should be the goals of schooling; and what kind of teacher do I want to be? These deep issues require a lifetime of reflection, analysis and research. Certainly student teachers do not "solve and answer" these questions; however, action research draws them into the intricate process of teaching/learning and helps them realize that teaching is a highly personal process.

Background

In the past decade, teacher education programs have gone through radical reforms in an attempt to make them more relevant and effective. (Fullan, Galluzzo, Morris and Watson, 1998) Having been involved in teacher education for the last ten years I am well aware of the challenges of preparing teachers (Knowles and Cole, 1994; Katz and Raths, 1992). In response to the research on teacher development, in 1994 I began to restructure the teacher education program I coordinate. (The program had followed the typical university format of disconnected courses and three separate field placements.) At the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto (OISE/UT) the 450 students enrolled in the elementary teacher education B. Ed. program are divided into cohorts or "Options". Each Option has approximately 65 students with a small team of faculty who design the program and organize the field placements. Given the latitude and flexibility of the Option structure I had the opportunity to work with my faculty team to redesign the program. I decided to use action research as the conceptual framework for the entire program because I wanted to promote the model of teachers as thoughtful practitioners (Atwell, 1991). Some of my initial goals for the restructuring around the philosophy and practice of action research were to link the academic program and the field placements and to help students think deeply about the teaching/learning process. It took a year of intense work to

redesign the program, and the class of 1995-1996 was the first group to be involved in action research.

Once action research became the framework for the program I began my own action research exploring the link between ownership and action research (Kosnik, 1998a); examining how action research helps student teachers understand the complex role of the teacher (Kosnik and Beck, 1997); and analyzing the demands placed on faculty working in an innovative program (Kosnik, 1998b). In addition I followed some of the graduates as they began their teaching careers (Kosnik, 1999a). I wanted to determine the effectiveness of the action research process in providing them with the skills to meet the challenges of teaching and to ascertain the ways the action research experience shaped their practice. Another aspect of my work, of equal importance, was to find ways to continue our collaboration. From a very personal perspective, I did not want to lose these colleagues. Since we had worked well together in the preservice year, I treasured their friendship, insight and knowledge. I believed we could each benefit from continuing our work together. This paper is a report of some of the studies conducted with graduates of the program and a description of our continued collaboration. As will be shown action research had a profound effect on the six teachers, yet the effects were quite varied and led to some interesting career choices. It also transformed the relationship between the teachers and myself. We started out as professor-student; however, through the action research process we became colleagues. As we continue our work together as co-researchers, we look at their practice, my practice and search out ways to work together. Working with graduates from the program seemed a natural extension of my work and in keeping with the intent of teacher-research.

Teachers throughout the world are developing professionally by becoming teacher-researchers, a wonderful new breed of artists-in-residence. Using our own classrooms as laboratories and our students as collaborators. We are changing the way we work with students as we look at our classrooms systematically through research (Hubbard and Power, 1993, p. xiii)

Methodology

This qualitative study involved a variety of research techniques. Some of the teachers had been members of my research group during their B. Ed. program; they had been interviewed five times over the course of their certification year, others completed questionnaires and all gave me copies of their reflection papers/journals. Having data from the initial B. Ed. year provided a baseline and helped me determine the changes in thinking and practice. I have worked with two graduates for the last three years; I visited their classrooms, observed them teach and examined their lesson plans and assessment/evaluation records. I interviewed them extensively. Others have been interviewed regularly since graduation. The panel presentation discussed below provided another source of data. I also drew on my journals which helped me understand the changes that occurred to me and the transformation of my relationship with my former students. In writing this paper, I was able to draw on all these sets of data and thus had a rich fund of information.

From my work in preservice teacher education I know that student teachers initially find the action research process highly confusing and are skeptical about whether it will provide them

with the skills required to be effective teachers (Kosnik, 1999b). Since many initially have limited research skills, have a negative attitude towards research and are keen to be given "recipes and strategies" for lesson planning they do not see the value of being a teacher-researcher. At the beginning of the process they have many queries and some are often hostile to action research. To alleviate some of this initial fear and confusion I have tried numerous strategies: discussing readings by teacher-researchers (Bissex and Bullock, 1987; Hubbard and Power, 1993; Patterson, Santa, Short and Smith 1993), sharing the final reflection papers written by students from the previous year and talking about my own action research. Unfortunately, none of these strategies had been particularly effective in alleviating their fears about action research. Once they get into the process the action research makes sense to them and they become highly enthusiastic about it, recognizing they have learned a tremendous amount about teaching methods, assessment strategies, evaluation techniques and program modification; and realizing it gave them ownership of one aspect of their field work.

Being frustrated at the futility of my efforts to introduce action research in an effective user-friendly way, I turned to some of the graduates of the program for advice. I asked them how I could help the student teachers grasp the concept of action research and lessen their fear. In discussions, they told me that as students they simply had not believed that action research was manageable; therefore, I needed to "show" that it was not just feasible but worthwhile. They gave me numerous suggestions, most of which I followed. One suggestion was to draw on the expertise of the graduates. In January 1999 I invited six graduates from the program to participate in a panel presentation about their views on action research to our current students. By including graduates from the three previous years I was able to provide a longitudinal perspective and draw on a variety of experiences.

The six teachers gladly accepted my invitation. My request was simple: talk about action research. The question I posed was: How did involvement in action research in preservice teacher education influence you? The speakers had total freedom, they could include criticisms of the program, offer suggestions for modifications to the action research process, focus on their current work or address personal and professional development. Some of the panellists knew each other very well while others had only met briefly. The format for the presentation was fairly informal: each teacher spoke for approximately fifteen minutes, there was a short discussion among the panellists and finally student teachers were invited to ask questions. The session scheduled for two hours extended for two hours beyond the allotted time. As the session unfolded I experienced a sea of emotions; I was proud of these new teachers, I was stunned by their insights, I laughed with them, I was nostalgic for the time we spent together (especially the two who had been part of the first year when we struggled to make sense of action research) and I was affirmed. Action research had been a powerful, effective process. In the sections below I show how action research had a profound effect on each teacher and on our relationship. There are some common themes which are discussed at the end of the paper yet the uniqueness of each presentation showed the personal impact of the action research process. As will be shown, the influence of action research spread far beyond "teaching" students the skills to be a teacher; it affected the personal and professional development of each individual. Some of the graduates have not followed a traditional teaching path yet all felt that having been involved in action research enriched their lives. Action research became a vehicle for us to continue our work

together, it seemed to help us form a bond that allowed for collaboration long after the program officially ended.

Danila's Story

When Danila graduated from the program in 1996 prospects for a teaching position were limited. She chose to work full-time in a tutoring agency. Within a short time she was promoted to a managerial position, writing handbooks on language arts, conducting achievement tests on students, planning individual education programs for children and providing in-service training for teachers. The knowledge gained from the action research process provided her with the skills and attitudes needed to complete these tasks. Although the work was very interesting and challenging, after a year she decided to try to gain employment as a regular classroom teacher. She began supply teaching (working as a substitute teacher), working frequently in the same school with the same children.

During this period I was senior author of the innovative spelling series, *Nelson Spelling*. My students' action research projects in the area of spelling helped me understand the challenges of implementing a cross-curricular spelling program. I often brought in sample lay-outs and unit designs for their critique. At first they were hesitant to voice their concerns but soon entered into the discussion enthusiastically. The author for the grade two book struggled with the writing; it became apparent he did not have the knowledge to write a highly integrated spelling text. Knowing that Danila had recently done an action research project in the area of spelling in a primary class, I talked to her about the problems with the grade two book. She helped me understand that the template for the book needed to be modified given the reading ability of the children. Eventually I asked her if she was interested in writing the grade two book. She said she would be delighted. I suggested to the publisher she be considered as a potential author for the grade two book. Not surprisingly, he was skeptical about the ability of a newly minted teacher to write an entire book. However, I knew she had read widely and had conducted a very successful project. She was given a trial period as author and within a few short weeks was hired to write the book. Drawing on her action research work, she was able to write a book that has become extremely successful. She noted, "I guess the culmination of the action research was writing the spelling textbook. It was a real testament to the project itself. I don't think if I had just attended lectures or read I would have been able to do that."

Wanting to upgrade her skills to make herself more marketable Danila had taken an Additional Qualifications course on special education. However, she found the tone and style of the course unsatisfactory. She described this course as "babyish," complaining they had not done any research and were treated like "passive children." After the demanding B. Ed. program her expectations for professional development courses were very high. Rather than persist with Additional Qualifications courses she switched to the more rigorous Master's program. While doing the Master's program, she was part of a small research project I was doing which examined the stages of development of student teachers in their understanding of action research. I needed her expertise in developing the research project. We worked on the interview questions together, she often took the lead because she had firsthand experience of doing action research as a student teacher. She conducted some of the interviews and her insight into the data analysis was invaluable. She thoroughly enjoyed the research experience which led to her applying to be a

research assistant on a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) project. Although very junior, she secured the position, mainly due to the research skills acquired through the action research and her recently published book. The job market in teaching has changed dramatically in Ontario; Danila could have secured a full-time teaching position but she chose to have a child and work on her graduate studies. Her plan is to complete her Master's degree, return to teaching and enroll in the doctoral program at OISE/UT. In personal conversations she has said that she truly loves research and writing. Although she still wants to be a classroom teacher she now knows that she wants a career that includes research and writing. The action research experience in the B. Ed. has led Danila down a non-traditional path.

Danila began her panel presentation with a general comment about her year in the preservice program. "It's a lot easier in retrospect to look back and see what you learned. While you're doing it you tend to lose sight of the forest for the trees but something that was critical was the way action research created an atmosphere of a team in the class." Throughout my work with Danila she has continued to remark that the action research process had a unifying effect on the students in our Option.

After her opening comments Danila focused on two specific aspects of the action research process: collaboration and the role of the teacher. She noted that during her many years of schooling she had been required to be part of many group projects. But her involvement in action research was different.

the three of us really worked incredibly well together. And even though you have a lot of projects where you work with other group members, you kind of get through them and go on to the next group project; but we truly became collaborators and partners. Our questions were different but our goal was the same. We weren't just friends or chums, we actually had mutual respect for each other and it also broadened our topics of conversation when we talked.

Danila and her fellow researchers talked about educational issues which helped them develop as thoughtful practitioners. Danila noted this was the first time she felt she had professional colleagues. The benefits from the collaboration helped her identify this as her preferred style of working. In her subsequent work situations she has sought to be collaborative. In the tutoring agency, Danila helped foster a network among the teachers by organizing in-service sessions, socials and meetings where the teachers could share strategies, exchange names of relevant texts which led to them working collaboratively. On the SSHRC project she has worked well with other graduate students. One of the lead researchers of the project remarked that Danila has helped the researchers become a team. She strives to have the same level of collaboration in her current work as she experienced in the action research project.

The second major impact of the action research was on Danila's understanding of the role of the teacher.

It really shaped the way I perceived the role of the teacher. In any other program you'd probably hear the phrase reflective practitioner but I think until you live it you can't really understand it. And with the action research we really learned that we had to read. We had to read, we had to

reflect, we had to consult, we had to talk, we had to observe our kids, we had to implement changes. You can't understand it unless you're really immersed in it.

Since the students had to conduct a long-term action research project they were fully immersed in the world of reflective practice. The theory and the practice gave her an approach to teaching/working/mothering. "You have to pick a small area and really work on that area over the years if you are to continue to engage in reflective practice that would sort of build your knowledge in many areas." Danila has followed this cycle in her work, picking a small area to improve. This has become a way of life for her.

Danila had five points of advice for our students.

First of all, work as a team, and I don't mean just give lip service to that but every person on your team has a strength even if you don't realize it at first. Second, don't discard the project during the practicum. It's really easy to let it fall to the side as you get caught up in everything Try making it more of a focus of your practicum because it is going to teach you what it means to be a teacher. Third, read, read and read more. I can't tell you how important it is to read the literature. It really is a source of knowledge. And it's inspiring, it can give you ideas, and I think the better you understand your area from a theoretical perspective the easier it is for you to defend what you're doing in the classroom or for you to have a better understanding of what you're trying to do with your students. Fourth, consult the experts. They have the knowledge and the understanding and the experience to give you a hand in this project. And last of all, have fun. You'll never get this year back so make the most of it. Squeeze as much learning as possible.

Having worked with Danila as a co-researcher and fellow author I know that the advice she gave the students is essentially her philosophy of education. These principles guide her work as a researcher, student and teacher. When Danila begins her doctoral program we are planning to work together on a joint research project related to action research.

Cathy's Story

Like Danila, Cathy graduated from the program in 1996. She immediately secured a teaching position in a small private school in Toronto. The school specialized in working with children who struggled in the regular public system, either because of learning or behaviour difficulties. Cathy felt that part of the reason she was hired for the job in a very tight job market was her ability to modify programs, something she had learned through the action research process. Given the needs of the students and the high cost of private education, the parents tended to be very attentive. Although she was a first year teacher she did not experience significant problems with the parents. She attributed this to the communication skills she acquired through the action research, especially having to present at the Action Research Conference . Cathy then moved to the public school system where she held numerous long-term occasional positions and now works as a full-time kindergarten teacher.

Like Danila, Cathy enrolled in Additional Qualification courses after graduation; she too found them to be unsatisfactory. She wants to continue her studies through a Master of Education

program. She feels she cannot develop as a teacher without doing research on her practice. She hopes to begin a Master's program soon.

Cathy feels action research has a place in preservice teacher education. "I really loved the action research project because it brought a lot more reality to teaching for me." She called her presentation "a recipe for success" and used the word "recipe" as an acrostic. She wove stories from her past experiences into her presentation showing how the action research experience has informed her practice. Having followed Cathy for the last three years, I believe her "recipe" for action research is her philosophy of education. A philosophy she lives and practices on a daily basis.

- R record all of your observations diligently. Look for any patterns, trends, exceptions or effects of changing any variable. It really is like an experiment. The more you write down the more you'll be able to piece things together later on especially when you start to read all of the research that's out there.
- E in the recipe is to remind you that every child is different. And every child has different needs. Take the same child and observe that child a number of times.
- C in the recipe is something that is really important for those of you who are working in groups with other people. C is for collaborative research which calls for cooperation and for commitment. And Danila and I were a living example of this because we really, really talked all the time about our research.
- I is for invaluable tools. There are two tools that I think are really invaluable in action research: one is samples of written work. Keep as many samples of written work as you can. A lot of kids may not express to you verbally what they're thinking but if you give them a sheet of paper they'll be able to write it down or draw it for you. The second tool relates to the voice of experience. Listen to what other teachers have to say. There's no point in reinventing the wheel in a number of instances. There's always a teacher out there who's willing to talk to you about what they've done and what they think.
- P is for positive. See action research as a learning opportunity for yourself. What you put into it will determine what you get out of it. And at the very, very minimum you're going to learn assessment strategies.
- E just remember that this is an experiment and it may not work out according to your original predications. Flexibility and an open-mind are the keys to survival. Allow your question to evolve. [My question] changed and it evolved and that's what teaching is all about. So try to keep in mind that you can't change everything at once or try to observe everything at once. And the last thing is read research results from other experiments. Read what other people have done and then you'll have some kind of grounding and a framework from which to go. That's my recipe and just make it your own because it will help you and later on you'll look back and say it really did make sense, and it will show you how to accept kids.

Cathy included in her presentation a long story about one of her junior kindergarten students. This story she felt represented her approach to teaching. One day this youngster could count to ten but on the day she tested him he could only count to three. She said, "It is not enough for a teacher just to have one set of observations, there must be multiple notes." She linked this current example to the skills she had acquired from the action research experience. She learned early on "to record each child a number of times. Do things over. It doesn't hurt to repeat things. In fact, it's much better, you'll get a much better idea about the child. He/she could just be having an off

day that day." Without the action research experience she feels she would not have been so acutely aware of the need to observe nor would she have had the assessment skills. Cathy continues to use an action research approach in her teaching; she observes, reads, discusses and responds.

Alan's Story

Before beginning the B. Ed. Alan had worked as an educational assistant in a high school for two years. When he graduated from our program in 1997 he was immediately hired by a school board. He was offered a position as an educational assistant but declined the offer choosing to pursue work in teaching. Initially he did supply teaching but was quickly given a long-term occasional placement in a special education class. This led to his current position as a remedial/special education teacher (in the same school). His work as an educational assistant and his skills at program modification gained through action research helped him secure the position. His current job is very challenging; he works with a large number of children who are experiencing problems in their regular classes. He provides individual teaching and assists the classroom teachers with program modification strategies. Eventually he would like to have his own class but feels his school principal will not enthusiastically support him leaving his current position because he is so able. The staff and students find him extremely capable in handling the demands of the job, a difficult position for a new teacher.

During his year in preservice teacher education Alan expressed an interest in pursuing further education. He has his sights set on completing a Ph.D. and is going to enroll in the Master of Education program shortly (once his financial situation improves) and then do a doctorate specializing in teacher development. Given his background, skills and interest, Alan and I have looked for ways to continue working together. When *Orbit* journal was doing a theme issue on action research, Alan and I decided to submit companion articles on the our differing perspectives on the action research process in preservice teacher education. In his article "A Preparation for Teaching" Alan said, "nothing could have prepared me more for the world of teaching than action research" (Grozelle, 1998, p. 36). He concludes:

action research gives credence to teachers' observations and reflections. Where the thoughtful practitioner's final analysis may have been based upon intuition, experience, and hearsay, action research empowers the teacher by answering why the implementation worked or did not work and why he/she observed what he/she did. Action research simply allows for more focus and empowers teachers to empower their students to learn (Grozelle, 1998, p. 37)

Alan felt that the action research experience shaped his view of teaching in two ways. First, he realized the importance of observing children. For his action research project he videotaped his classroom regularly; and from analyzing the video he learned "how kids work, how they react, what makes them click" which then helped him to "interact with the kids." This process of observation/analysis/response is fundamental to Alan's work as a resource teacher. Rather than develop a one size fits all curriculum plan, he responds to student need. And often his responses are quite clever. Alan felt that although he had done action research in language arts it had taught him skills that could be applied to any subject because he always begins with the individual child.

Secondly, the action research experience influenced Alan's view of professional development. He does not believe that top-down, district mandated "reform" initiatives are useful. They deprofessionalize teachers because the frontline educators are not part of the development process; in the long-term they will be ineffective because teachers do not fully understand them. He spoke at length about the futility of an initiative in his particular school board.

In [my school board] they have what's called balanced literacy in the primary division and it's a wonderful program but it's not action research. You can see the merits of action research. It becomes your own, it's your own project, and you take a lot of pride and respect in it by developing your own work. You're not being forced into a program, being told to use this because it works. Instead you're saying, well what I do does work. [Action research] is a way of developing your own teaching philosophy and how to deliver a program. And I guess that's for me the most important thing. It's a way of teaching. It's not just a project or program.

For Alan ownership and understanding are fundamental to professional development. These elements will be the threads he develops in his graduate studies on teacher development. We continue to look for ways to continue our work together. Our next project is a "dialogue" about action research transforming our relationship from professor-student to collaborator. We will draw on our journal entries to explore the topic.

John's Story

When John graduated in 1998 he immediately found employment as a grade six-seven teacher in the greater Toronto area. He is finding the demands of his job enormous; his school, a brand new building, was not fully constructed by September. Labour disruption in his board resulted in teacher walk-outs thus causing a tumultuous start to the school year. He finds the workload exhausting and at times overwhelming. He said that he has on occasion thought about leaving teaching because of the punishing and grueling pace. Nevertheless he enjoys working with the students, his principal has praised his work and he has had a very positive response from parents.

John entered the teacher education program with some experience working in the business sector. Initially, he was extremely negative towards the action research work but as the year progressed his attitude changed completely. Part of the reason for his changed attitude was the shift in our relationship. He noted that my respect for him allowed him to take risks, especially with his reflection papers. Through conversation he began to understand my perspective. In turn, his friendship helped me handle some extremely difficult incidents in the Option. When one student teacher was being highly disruptive and confrontational, John was extremely helpful. Numerous times I turned to him and asked for his advice. Our relationship transformed into two professionals working together.

Since John was part of my research study I saw how he began to see action research as a process and tool to help him understand the role of the teacher.

Action research has opened my mind. When I started the program I thought I am going to teach this and this is what the children have to do. I think that's the wrong approach. There is so much

more to it. I think action research has helped me help the students, especially those who are not at the top.

The impact of the action research experience on John was quite profound. When he first began the teacher education program he was highly focused on "teaching the curriculum." In one interview he told me that he firmly believed in the initiatives of our current government: use a standard curriculum for all students in the province, have regular standardized tests and fail those who do not meet the standards. By the end of the program John was describing the role of the teacher as "a friendly uncle, or favourite aunt. Someone who can give guidance, be firm and fair. A teacher is someone who has the answer to every child's question on the tip of their tongue. An answer, not the right answer but an answer that will make the child walk away happy and feel better about himself." He believes that by responding to students in a supportive, affirming way, he can keep the channels of communication open.

Through action research John became more focused on the students and less concerned about delivering the Ministry of Education curriculum. His current approach to teaching is flexible and responsive to the students: "The best thing I got from action research is learning to actually sit down and speak to the students. They do honestly have something to say. I ask them, How can I get you to improve on something? And that guides me." He sees action research and teaching as an experiment. It is a continual observing, shifting, responding, trying, reflecting. "I mean I'm doing it now. I go back and I try something new in my classroom. Many days I'll have lessons where half way through it I say, 'Okay kids, pull out your novels and start reading.' I realize it's not working." When recounting a poignant story about a student in his class John showed how deeply the action research experience had influenced his philosophy of education. This youngster, a very bright young girl, is inordinately shy. The intermediate students in his school are required to write and present a speech. He knows she will write a strong speech but will be unable to deliver it. He has read some of the research on shy children, spoken to other teachers in his school and plans to videotape her in the security of her own class giving her speech. This story illustrates how far John has deviated from his initial goals to teach, test and fail if necessary.

The action research experience led to John gaining a respect for educational theory. He learned to go to the research rather than rely on the methods from his childhood schooling which emphasized rote memory tasks. For example, in his action research project he was dismayed at the number of spelling and grammar errors in the students' work. Initially, he wanted to teach a series of lessons on spelling and grammar; however, through his reading of the literature he learned that the peer editing process is more effective than formal instruction. He then implemented a peer editing process in his class which worked remarkably well and he continues to use the same system in his current class. In an interview during his B. Ed. program John openly admitted he was not an avid reader, yet he continues to rely on professional texts to guide his decisions. In his current class, he has numerous books (not typical teacher resource guides) that he refers to regularly. "As much as I did enjoy the research, actually sitting down and reading was really important. As a teacher I do that a lot. I'll get a little book from one of the other teachers and just read for maybe 10 or 15 minutes. It's a lot of work if you're going to read and become an expert. It's going to take 10 to 15 years to become really good." His approach to teaching could be summarized as, "taking little things that you notice in the classroom. Look for

some research, go back and speak to your students and let it snowball from there. One little step at a time."

John believes that grounding your work in educational theory is vitally important if teachers are to be considered professionals. Research theory helps him with his curriculum decisions and he has found it useful when talking about his program with his principal. "I would say if you have done your research and it's grounded go to her or him and say I want to do this. I found out this works. I read this. Most [principals] would be open."

The student teachers were spellbound by John's presentation. His honesty about his negative attitude (initially) towards action research shocked them. He said this in front of me. The professor! Yet I introduced him as a friend and colleague! His talk encouraged the students to be open and frank with me regarding their concerns about action research. I feel my relationship with these current students transforming and John's presentation may have been the catalyst to hasten the change.

Margaret's Story

Margaret completed the B. Ed. program in 1998 and quickly found work as a teacher. Although certified to teach in the primary/junior division (Kindergarten to grade 6) she is currently teaching a grade seven-eight class. She described her year in the preservice program as the best year of university. She found the culture of our Option very professional and supportive. Part of Margaret's positive attitude towards the B. Ed. is directly related to her involvement in the action research. She quickly understood the goals and processes of action research, found her question and began data gathering. Margaret felt that involvement in the action research gave her some ownership in her practice teaching class. The project was hers, she understood every step of the process, did not feel the need to conform to her associate teacher's methods and believed it gave her insight into the children. She really enjoyed having one aspect of her practice teaching work that was completely her own. Although she had a strong relationship with her associate teacher, a critical piece of her development was feeling that she had taught her associate teacher "something" about a part of curriculum.

For Margaret the action research experience influenced her work in two ways. First, it provided her with the knowledge of a wide range of curriculum resources. She enjoyed the groupwork aspect of the project because she worked well with other student teachers. It was through collaboration she learned many approaches and strategies. Being placed in a grade seven/eight class after having been trained in primary/junior is a challenge; however, she is able to use many of the methods she learned from the junior/intermediate students in our Option. For example, she is using John's peer editing process with her students because she had heard him talk about the success of it last year. She continues to collaborate in her current school. For example, she treasures her personal and professional relationship with Nelia, a colleague in her school.

Like Alan, Margaret felt the action research process influenced her view of professional development and provided her with an approach to teaching. She noted that action research is:

a new buzz word that's going around right now but action research is what good teachers have been doing all along. What you do is you walk into your classroom, you observe your students, you see what's wrong, ask yourself how can I improve this and you just change a little thing. That's all there is to it.

This has become her approach to teaching in her seven/eight classroom. Similarly, she feels that top-down, imposed methods of reform are ineffective. She saw this firsthand in her practice teaching placement. The school was designated as a "balanced literacy school" which meant the teachers had to follow a highly prescriptive, regimented language arts program. This approach did not allow for spelling instruction which Margaret found a bit strange. She observed, read and interviewed students which led her to the conclusion that the students did not have any strategies to use when they could not spell a word. She circumvented the balanced literacy method by including spelling instruction under the guise of "word wall activities." This experience helped Margaret realize:

you can't just teach the lesson. The majority get it and then there are five or six who don't. And you can't just stand there and say deal with it. You have to figure they need extra special help. And you have to be on the lookout for all students whether they are gifted or learning disabled.

Rob's Story

During his year in preservice teacher education, 1997-1998, Rob emerged as one of the class leaders. He was an extremely able student, personable and thoughtful. Since his academic grades were high and his practice teaching evaluations were exceptionally strong, he was hired by a school board mid-way through his B. Ed. program for the following September. The school district had received 2,000 applications and Rob was one of the 40 hired. He had numerous offers for teaching positions and chose a grade four class in suburban Toronto. During the summer he took two courses to upgrade his qualifications while spending time preparing for his fourth grade class. Once he started teaching his world crashed down. A number of personal problems arose and he suddenly questioned his desire to be a teacher. My relationship with Rob had not ended at graduation; rather, we continued to talk and meet. We were friends. The bonds we formed during the preservice year could not easily be severed. We valued our work together and looked forward to continued collaboration.

During September Rob and I had many long conversations and he admitted that he wanted to resign. We were not in the professor-student relationship; since we were friends and professional colleagues we could have these intense, highly personal conversations. He was not experiencing significant difficulties with his class, his principal was very pleased with his work, yet he knew he did not want to continue teaching. Mid-way through October Rob resigned. I understood and supported his decision. The reflective thread of action research helped him think about himself as a teacher which led to a great deal of soul searching. Through reflection and discussions he was able to articulate that he always wanted to be a lawyer; however, family pressure swayed him towards pursuing a teaching degree. Although he liked teaching and was highly successful, the action research process led him to think about goals, not just goals for schooling but goals for himself. He began to examine his own life which led to a deeper understanding of himself.

One thing I want to say when you're doing action research is never forget who's doing the action research. I mean never forget about yourself. The main reason behind doing something like this is to empower yourself to build confidence and to go out there and make a change. And that's what I found very rewarding about [action research] . Something that the action research project taught me was to take ownership and to start doing and showing what it is that you have that's unique and special.

Rob took ownership in a way that surprised me and many others. Rather than stay in teaching, he took control of his life, left teaching and began the long process of becoming a lawyer. It may seem unusual to see this as a "successful" action research experience yet from my perspective it was valuable learning. The observations, group work and reflection led to Rob closely examining his goals for his students which in turn led to him considering his personal goals.

Discussion

As the six stories above clearly illustrate, action research significantly affected the beliefs and practices of the teachers. It was not "just an assignment"; rather, it was an all encompassing experience that resulted in the acquisition of skills, insights into goals and a deeper understanding of self. In many ways it seemed to embody Dewey's belief that the goal of education should be growth (Dewey, 1916). These teachers grew tremendously during their B. Ed. year and each continues to learn and have a desire to learn. Action research helped these teachers realize the potential within themselves and within each child. Each story is unique and compelling, yet through the analysis of the data some common themes were revealed. Although difficult to quantify, the action research experience has shaped the practices of these six teachers. Some of the tangible ways are described below, but the less concrete manifestations are more difficult to determine. Through class visits, interviews, our work on collaborative projects and the insight these teachers have into the teaching/learning process it is clear that action research had given them an approach to teaching.

On a purely technical level these teachers acquired the skills for assessment and evaluation. As Alan noted, "if you don't learn anything else from action research you will learn how to assess and evaluate." Given the testing frenzy and focus on accountability within our current educational system teachers need these skills. However, as my research has shown and the panel discussion clearly displayed these teachers use multiple methods to evaluate children. Repeatedly, the teachers emphasized the need to observe and gather samples of student work. This approach reveals an understanding that "measuring learning" cannot be adequately done by a test. These teachers all use authentic methods of evaluation; interviews, self-assessment and portfolios. Their goals are to determine what the child knows and plan accordingly. A corollary of this point is the teachers' focus is on the child. Before we redesigned our program we would give multiple lectures on the importance of being student-centred and extol the virtues of beginning with the child. For the last three years we have greatly reduced these formal talks and placed the emphasis on letting the students experience firsthand education as a focus on the child. These teachers have maintained this approach. Certainly, they are open to curriculum ideas and are always on the lookout for an interesting curriculum tip or suggestion but they know that effective teachers are attentive to children and understand their development.

Although action research does not follow the traditional scientific paradigm these teachers all see it as a type of experiment. Not an experiment in the traditional sense of outside scientists using control groups and manipulating variables; rather they see teaching as a continual experiment. Try something new, observe the changes, keep or discard them and change in light of your findings. The original intention of action research was to be an alternative to the traditional scientific method yet these teachers in some ways have brought it full circle. It is action in a specific context, yet the aim is to continually try something new. They see teaching as an on-going experiment, not necessarily to "prove a point"; rather, the goals are to gain knowledge about the teaching/learning process and to improve student learning.

Although student teachers do not expect to be conducting research in their certification year, and at times are resistant to the process, it becomes a standard for professional development. All six of these teachers want to continue their education; countless conversations with graduates from the program have shown a realization that on-going professional education is a necessity. However, the type of program they want is quite different from the standard Additional Qualifications course offered for teachers. Having done research on their practice once, they are skeptical of the "spoon feeding" approach often used in teacher education courses or inservices. These teachers have learned that it is vital to be involved in decision-making about programs and that teachers must own their knowledge and work. The negative comments about the futility of the balanced literacy initiative reveal a highly sophisticated level of thinking about professional development. These teachers see themselves as professionals and want to be treated as such. They may have walked into our program as students but they walked out as professionals. As John said, "It was the first time I felt like a teacher."

The action research experience has led some of the panellists to opt for a career other than classroom teacher. My goal for the B. Ed. year is that it should be personally and professionally rewarding for each student. If the insights and knowledge gained lead to another career, one which is fulfilling, then I will feel the program has been a success. Just as I do not want elementary education to produce "cookie cutter students" who have lost their initiative I do not want the B. Ed. to limit the students. If they can look back on the year as one that was joyful, enlightening, empowering, rewarding and fulfilling then it was a success. The action research process challenges students to think deeply and if this reflection leads them away from the work of a classroom teacher I cannot deem that a failure; rather, I see it as a success. The culture of the community established in the Option, the process of action research and the relationships established helped them ease the constraints which allowed deep reflection. My collegial relationship with the students allowed us to have many important discussions, conversations and explorations that would not have happened if I had maintained a hierarchical position of professor-student.

Earlier in this paper, I noted that I felt a "sea of emotion" listening to the panellists. It was not just their poise and assurance that was striking but the thoughtfulness of their comments. Each teacher has a philosophy of education to guide his/her practices and work. Their work is rooted in a philosophy that sees teachers as thoughtful practitioners, teachers who question, observe, reflect and make sense of their classrooms; they change in light of their discoveries; and they act as scholars (Atwell, 1991, p. 3). Would this have happened without the action research

experience? No. The completely integrated program, with its emphasis on inquiry, community and collegiality shaped their work and provided them with a model for teaching/learning.

Working with these teachers has had a profound effect on me. I began to understand some of the dynamics in a preservice program, such as student teacher's expectations for a B. Ed. program. I became aware that students are used to the traditional relationships between professor and student, one that is very distant. Initially this preconception limits their willingness to collaborate with me. I learned that it takes time for students to trust me and I had to be aware of the ways that I subtly reinforced a professor-student relationship. I also learned that I had to share my successes and challenges with my students/teachers. I needed to meet them as people, be honest with them and let them into my life. When I let down some of my reserve and guard, our relationship could move into new and more productive territory.

Looking through my journal entries I realize that Danila and Cathy helped me understand that the professor-student relationship can be reinterpreted. Technically, we may have been student-teacher, but we became friends and colleagues. This substantial change did not damage the program or diminish their respect for me. Through my work with them I realized that it is safe and acceptable to let the relationship transform into a collaborative partnership. I continue to recast my role, I do not need to be the expert on every topic, the students are very knowledgeable. By sharing the "podium" with them I can learn from them which allows the class to become a community of experts.

Through my work with Margaret I began to understand more fully the dynamics between the student teacher and the associate teacher. From her thoughtful analysis of the challenges of doing action research in someone else's classroom, I gained a deeper understanding of the very subtle pressures on a student teacher to conform to the associate teacher's style. Her insight had such an impact on me that I have taken a very different stance with our associate teachers. For example, at our Liaison Committee meetings (associate teachers representing each practice teaching school, student teachers and faculty) I have devoted time to helping the associate teacher "see" the student's perspective; one strategy I used was to have the students help us revise the Formative Evaluation form to make it more beneficial for them. This gave them voice yet it was done in a very safe environment. I have also started a small collaborative research project to find ways that the practice teaching supervisor (a faculty member) can support the students more fully. I have also been more proactive with our associate teachers regarding action research.

Action research was a vehicle for student teachers to learn many skills and it had a personal impact on the way we worked together. It allowed us to change our relationship which in turn changed the program to be a community of learners. I was a learner alongside these students. And I continue to learn from them as we work on our joint projects. Initially, I saw myself as a teacher and as a researcher. But my collaboration with these graduates, first as student teachers and now as teachers has helped me transform into being a teacher-researcher. The action research experience is intense; it personally and professionally impacted on each of us. Through on-going collaboration, each of us has benefited. I look forward to continued work with my colleagues.

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