

COLLABORATIVE ACTION RESEARCH: A CRITICAL COMPONENT

IN THE

PREPARATION OF EFFECTIVE LEADERS AND LEARNERS

by

Beverley B. Geltner, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Department of Leadership and Counseling
Eastern Michigan University

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Recent research in related fields is leading to new hope for the creation of effective schools. The writings of individual reformers (Bridges, 1993; Murphy and Hallinger, 1987) and of national bodies (National Policy Board, 19; Education Commission of the States, 1991) have served as catalysts for the reconsideration and redesign of administrator preparation programs. The enhancement of professional development through collaborative action research has been documented by numerous action researchers (Nodie Oja and Smulyan, 1989; Miller and Pine, 1990; Elliot, 1991; McKay, 1992; and Sagor, 1992). Louis and Miles (1990) and Fullan (1991) have deepened understanding of the meaning of educational change and the complexities involved in introducing change into individual schools and entire systems.

These contributions served as the basis for the development of a graduate administrator preparation program at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan. Working together over a two-year period, cohort teams of 15 Education Specialist students engaged in learning experiences designed to prepare them for effective school leadership. Through their participation in the process of collaborative action research, they transformed themselves into pro-active, emboldened change agents. Along with various partners--their program colleagues and their associates in their schools--they set out to find new ways to improve teaching, learning and leading in schools.

Collaborative action research

Over 40 years ago, Lewin (1948) described action research as research which united the experimental approach of social science with programs of social action to address major social issues. He believed that social problems should serve as the impulse for social inquiry, and would lead to necessary social change.

The action researcher studied problems which grew out of the community rather than his or her own knowledge. and worked to make discoveries which could be applied in the community setting. It was believed that participation made the practitioners more aware of the need for the action program chosen, and more personally invested in the process of change. The power of group interaction helped produce commitment and change in attitude and behavior. There was the belief that the studying of the consequences of one's own teaching or actions was more likely to change and improve practices than reading about what someone else had discovered.

(Nodie Oja and Smulyan, 1989)

Traditionally, researchers assumed as their responsibilities the investigation of an educational issue or problem and the expansion or creation of theory. The implementation of the findings was left to actual practitioners in schools. In contrast, educators involved in action research design and initiate their research in conjunction with their work in the school or classroom, with the primary goal of putting their findings into practice.

The investigative orientation of educator-as-action-researcher is very much bound up with a growing belief in teacher professionalism, in-service education, professional self-evaluation and the focus in school-based curriculum development. Thus, this process can serve as the basis of continuing educational research, change and improvement efforts.

Miller and Pine (1990) stressed that when practitioners engage in their own site-based inquiry, they use their own expertise, experience, initiative and leadership. Other recent literature stresses collaborative action research that is developmental, that focuses in the "practitioners' rights and skills as professionals and encourages their involvement in the examination of practice and the clarification of theory" (Nodie Oja and Smulyan, 1989). Goswami and Stillman (1987) highlighted the value of action research as a process that develops a "community of thinkers", impacting all of education by transforming schools into institutions of ongoing learning and thinking. Kyle and Hovda (1987) examined the impact of school-based action research on teachers and identified several major transformations that occurred:

- Their teaching is transformed in important ways. Teachers become theorists, articulating their intentions, testing their assumptions, and finding connections with practice.
- Their perceptions of themselves as writers and teachers are transformed. Teachers step up their use of resources, form networks and become more active professionally.
- Teachers become rich resources who can provide the profession with information it simply does not have.
- Teachers become critical, responsive readers and users of current research. They are less apt to accept uncritically others' theories and are less vulnerable to fads.

To be most beneficial, action research is conducted as a collaborative activity that can involve teachers, students, parents or administrators in shared school-based research activities. By this approach, individuals join with others in applying their skills and engaging in reflection in pursuit of three critical goals: improved school practice, greater theoretical understanding of teaching and learning, and professional development.

Collaborative action research is emerging as a particularly fitting approach in schools that are seeking to restructure. Traditional models of governance characterized by bureaucratic, systemwide, hierarchical control are being replaced by new norms that feature site-based problem solving and program development, (Glickman, 1992), workplace collaboration, (Little, 1982), shared leadership and the

shaping of a school learning community culture (Barth, 1991). In such settings, collaborative action research can serve as a highly effective collegial venture, simultaneously contributing to knowledge in the field and improving practice.

Further, collaborative action research lends itself to current models of ongoing school improvement, since it operates as a continuous process rather than as a means to specific ends. It provides an opportunity for lived commitment and engagement in the change process, not only in intent but in behavior. For Fullan, this attention to the lived reality of change--both the objective and subjective experience of change--is a requirement for authentic school reform (1991).

Thus, by integrating site-based inquiry and action, the operation of group process, the centrality of adult development theory, and the inclusion of diverse participants with varied expertise and perspectives, collaborative action research can serve not only the needs of schools undergoing restructuring, but also of administrator preparation programs seeking to implement new designs which link theory and practice more effectively, and which can prepare future administrators to confront the complex issues involved in authentic school change. In brief, collaborative action research can serve as an instrument of collegial engagement, empowerment and changemaking. When integrated into a professional preparation program, it can provide opportunities for future school administrators to experience the complexities of the change process in real school settings, and to acquire an orientation for pro-active, reflective leadership behavior.

Integration of Collaborative Action Research into the Program

Collaborative action research was integrated into the administrative preparation program described in this study in several steps, in an effort to achieve the program's mission--the preparation of pro-active school leaders who possess the knowledge and skills required to facilitate authentic educational reform.

a. Program description and admission process

In the information materials presented to program applicants and in the subsequent pre-admission personal interview, collaborative action research was described as one of the core dimensions of the program. Students seeking admission were informed that one of the requirements of the program was participation in a whole-cohort action research effort, involving both individual and group effort. Specifically, students were expected to collaborate with their cohort colleagues in identifying a major area of concern which was important to all of them; with their worksite colleagues in defining their own specific action research topic; and with their program colleagues once again in sharing research problems, struggles and successes and in writing the final collaborative action research report.

b. Introduction to action research

Starting in the first semester, students were introduced to the core dimensions of action research--the engagement of the researcher in collaboration with colleagues in a systematic effort to address identified problems in the workplace. Formal coursework in action research methodology was presented, along with instruction in qualitative and quantitative research methods, both of which were encouraged as

methods of data gathering and analysis. Students began the long process of clarifying their interest and focus, both as a group and individually, conducting literature searches and planning their research projects.

c. Completing the collaborative action research projects

The intensity and pace of classroom interactions accelerated as students entered the lived experience of identifying real problems and preparing for action. Rhetoric about collegiality and communality were transformed into reality as students moved through the various stages of group formation and goal clarification. Throughout the remainder of the program, while students proceeded through their other coursework, acquiring new knowledge and skills related to the technical core of administration, they also met in regularly scheduled action research seminars to discuss their research projects, describing problems and seeking feedback, guidance and support from their colleagues. This process continued to the end of the program, when both the individual site-based action research projects and the entire group report were completed.

Description of Research Methods

This research was conducted employing qualitative ethnographic research methods. The purpose of this project was to access the experiences of graduate students enrolled in a cohort school leadership preparation program as they clarified their vision, articulated their commitment and strengthened their courage to engage in school reform efforts through collaborative action research. Fifteen individual graduates from four cohort groups of students enrolled in a graduate administrator preparation program were involved in the study. Multiple data gathering methods were used including:

- a. the writing of reflective papers in which students described the experience of participating in collaborative action research and the impact on their personal and professional development over time;
- b. individual structured interviews
- c. the writing of critical incident reports which captured significant events relating to the impact of collaborative action research on their growth
- d. the audio recording of action research seminars throughout the program which documented the natural flow of discussion and the development of students as reflective collaborative action researchers

All data were analyzed in accordance with ethnographic research standards (Bogdan and Biklin, 1982; Glesne and Peshkin, 1992) to identify recurrent themes and patterns and to interpret the multiple dimensions of the lived experience of collaborative action research.

Findings

Through analysis of the data, seven major themes were revealed, relating to how students came to view themselves, their colleagues, and their emerging new professional identity. They were:

- a. Transformation of selves from receivers of research to creators of new knowledge, action and change.
- b. Enhancement of commitment to act as change agents in schools.
- c. Deepening commitment to the positive value of collaboration.
- d. Deepened understanding through authentic engagement of the complexities of the change process or individuals and organizations.
- e. Enhancement of confidence, emboldening of spirit and reinforcement of growth.
- f. Increased awareness of the power of reflection.
- g. Creation of an environment which permitted expression of passion.

a. Transformation of selves from receivers of research to creators of new knowledge, action and change

By participating in an extended process of collaborative action research, students came to experience a transformation of self, moving from being receivers of the research, writing and actions of others, to the new role of generators and creators of knowledge, action and change. Through the process of engaging in a lived research effort and describing their experiences to cohorts in class, their own potential as researchers was confirmed. The excitement of asking questions, planning and implementing action and seeking answers gave new meaning to their work and to their perceptions of self. They came to know first-hand the exhilaration and the challenges of setting out on their own paths of discovery.

After verbalizing my project for the first time, I feel validated, on target, knowledgeable, current. However. . . I'm also scared; there's not enough time. When will I read all there is to read? I calm myself by realizing that I can limit this document. I really ought to limit my presentation of this new knowledge for it to be readable and to have a shot at publishing.

The results are far beyond what I ever imagined. To hear each of us talk about our goals and our results has been truly inspirational. Everyone seems to want more now that we've had a taste of our research topics. We have more questions which have developed from our findings.

They also validated the research efforts of their colleagues, critiquing the importance of the work, and linking its significance to practice.

As I listened to Alice and Ellen report, I realized that they targeted the significance and value of being able to synthesize and design from familiar components a new way of thinking. This synthesis will become their new knowledge base. They will know which skills will be necessary to make the curriculum work and they have experienced the delight of assessment.

While at first most students were hesitant to imagine themselves as published researchers, as the weeks and months passed, and as they shared the fruits of their investigations and their writings, slowly they came to believe that their work was worthy of sharing with others, and the conversation turned to plans for publication.

I think we have the skills to pull it off (the whole document); we have to keep up the motivation; I always have trouble with that. Actually, I'm PROUD of our topic. This is really important, isn't it! Who would have thought two years ago that we would be so brave to try so many new things!

This was fun. We will research conflict resolution and report out our findings. Knowledge is power, and our findings are research-based. This is another case of a learning experience which will continue like the ripples in a pond. This process should be published and teachers trained in its incorporation into their own classes.

Students shared some of the difficulties and frustrations of their research efforts, and learned that this was part of the process. Not everything went as planned; nor were developments or results as one would have wished or even anticipated. Negative findings did not necessarily mean one had been unsuccessful. Rather. . .

The value of negative results is that they generate new questions. I feel positive about the resistance to change, even the hostility to change--it defined a need for training. As I look back on it, I see that in facilitating this program, a lot of things occurred that I didn't even plan for. Change is possible. Action research can change individuals, colleagues, schools professions, students.

The process of action research unfolds itself as one progresses. What unfolds cannot be planned for and sometimes isn't expected. The unexpected offers the greatest learning experience.

Action research can be a powerful force in bringing about change in school--small changes, big changes. The passion and interest of the researcher are vital. Action research does not necessarily provide answers, but may instead open up a whole new world of questions. Sometimes things may be learned that go far beyond the scope of the original project.

Finally, the process of sharing research findings motivated students to inquire further into the new knowledge created by their colleagues, and to consider how they might apply the findings to their own settings. One student was a participant in her district's efforts to identify a set of core values to serve as the basis for a system-wide emphasis on character education.

I need to know about Sherry's findings. They truly are significant for all of us . . . we need to learn more about what she has uncovered. How can we introduce a set of values, a certain character, into schools? Is it a process? Is it a philosophy? How does one come to know about it? I was intrigued and encouraged by Ellen's point that this information validates what she is attempting to do in her school.

changes?" You became proactive. . . a beginning. . .creating an awareness and opening doors, sharing information with others.

This feedback permitted the student to reevaluate her actions and their possible impact on her own work environment. She became more aware of the significance and value of her work, strengthened in her commitment to address a critical issue.

I feel now that my action research project has been very rewarding. It is providing a method and a rationale for change that I didn't have before. Discussing the project helps create meaning for me and clarifies the connectedness of what I was trying to do to our overall purpose. I can make connections that I didn't even think about before, and I am determined that things are going to be different. Even though this started out as a simple idea, talking about it leads me to make many connections, and stirs up an abundance of other issues. I can see the importance of what I'm doing in a way that's larger than myself.

The research project conducted by two students into conflict resolution at the high-school level resonated for another seeking to help young children handle aggression in the classroom.

Their topic is similar to a part of the action research problem in which I'm involved, that is, helping children learn to solve problems with others, at the preschool level. I feel even more strongly, after listening to them, that conflict resolution skills must be part of the culture of the classroom throughout a child's education. They are finding out that many people agree about the importance of this topic which helps us all believe in the entire focus of our project.

I could see/feel the ownership and caring that each felt for what they were doing. Each of them felt they have something valuable to give on the subject and lots more to learn. Their thirst for more information about the subject was expressed. Both want to perfect what they are doing by taking information and building on it. Afterwards, they want to share it with others. They are beginning to take charge.

This discussion led to an extended consideration of how they might serve as change agents in their schools. They explored various resources that were available to them, including how they might reach out beyond the schools, how they might explore external funding for staff development efforts, and how they might create a county-wide information network.

One student's research on the mainstreaming of an autistic child led colleagues to reevaluate their own past beliefs and experiences, and to reflect on the impact that action research could have as a driving force for educational reform.

Pat made integrating the autistic student less of a threat for me. As she spoke, I began visualizing how this would work in my classroom. She encouraged me to rethink my past behavior, and to join her in the struggle. I don't believe I would have been open to

this if I had not been witness to her struggle and to her success. She started out with just an idea, a hypothesis, and she is already making a change in her district. It causes me to rethink my whole position, and to share these findings with the people in my district.

Finally, one student, a junior high assistant principal in a financially poor suburban district described how he was able to create an exciting school-business partnership project in his school. Paul knew starting out that there were no financial resources available, but he saw other possibilities. His research described how he carefully involved other members of the school in a partnership with a local commercial bank. There was no precedent for this kind of shared program development, and no clear outline of what the project should look like at the end. What there was, and what the student seized and used as the foundation for his project, was an openness and a need to new ways of preparing students for the transition to the world of work. Step by step, he described how he engaged others in his project and how his own commitment carried him along when he was not sure of how to proceed.

I refused to accept "No"! I just believed that what I was trying to do was important, and tried to get others to join me. I knew it had to be our project, not mine. As time passed, I saw that we were moving, and that the teachers along with the bank were buying in. Believe me, before I did this, I would never have imagined we could really pull it off. . . We hear so much about how hard it is to get anything to change. . . But this proves to me--without extra money, without any fancy equipment of anything, we could bring people together to create something better for our kids. I know now that this can be done, that we can make a difference!

For a number of his colleagues, this student's impact was critical. They saw in his engagement in action research a coming-to-life, a higher level of leadership and a new depth of commitment.

Paul's point was critical: resources need not be barriers. He has shown us what one person can do, if he really thinks and plans and carefully makes his moves. Paul demonstrated that leadership can make the difference, along with a commitment to a goal.

Paul's new identity in the group remained forever changed. He had formerly been viewed as a more casual, easy participant, living out his role as assistant principal--second in charge, but not really "in command". Now, his colleagues knew him in a new way, as one who had direct experience of the process of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, and who had, in his efforts to change the lives of his students, been himself changed.

c. Deepening commitment to the positive value of collaboration

Students experienced the positive impact of collaboration, learning how diverse perspectives and backgrounds could expand understanding and enhance development. They saw themselves and their struggles reflected in the efforts of their colleagues, and gained new respect for the integrity of their work.

One student had particular difficulty getting started. He selected a research topic, but after living with it for a period, questioned its worth. Starting out on a second path, he questioned whether he should indeed drop the first idea, struggled to gain clarity of focus with the second, and began to despair of being able to move ahead at all. Colleague students joined in his struggle, entering into a shared process of reflection and clarification, and helping him proceed. One student documented this experience in her reflective writing:

I came to see that action research can be developmental. We saw this in Thurmon's willingness to take charge and change from topic #1 to topic #2. He seemed to start out unsure, asking us for approval and validation. After he had explained his project, I was still somewhat unclear as to his focus. When others asked questions and Thurmon responded, it became more clear. When we actually

outlined the process on the board, the focus of his project became very clear to me and I think became clearer to Thurmon, also. . .

This is an important issue. Feedback from others in the class gave Thurmon more confidence to continue in his project and perhaps will give back some of the passion for it which he felt was lost. . . He was not clear about the significance of his project, he undervalued it; our group helped his confidence. He also failed to trust his ability to connect his thoughts and project together; for example, he knew empowerment was at the core of the project but could not articulate it.

Thurmon has ways of knowing he often cannot articulate. He feels a lack of competence and fails to trust himself. My reaction is that our ways of knowing are different from one another. The power of our cohort group is to respect that and support and learn from one another.

For some, the honest narration of the struggles encountered by colleagues in their own research became the catalyst needed to move them ahead. The sharing of problems gave permission to be frustrated, even to be "stuck", while the telling of successes gave hope that they too could move on and find their way.

Listening to Alice and Ellen explain their research reawakened me. I've labored over this project for almost a year. You can lose your zest when you are with something--writing, writing, writing for too long of a period. They have helped me get "unstuck" and move forward.

Though Paul came to be an inspiration for his colleagues, as was described above, it was in fact their feedback given in the early stages of his project that helped him revise his planning and implementation.

They (*his student colleagues*) confirmed that my efforts to help develop staff ownership were on the right track. Based on their feedback, I now believe that the program will continue whether I am there or not. I KNOW I have made a difference. I believed the role of assistant principal could be and should be way beyond that

of building disciplinarian, and the support the team has given me with my research strengthens that belief.

Others recognized the impact of their collaboration with Paul, and testified to its value for Paul and for their new understanding.

Action research enabled Paul to see how to build ownership in a program. We know what he went through, and how we helped him. He showed us that the change process takes time, and trust is a key to change. Paul's view of education has changed. Action research is a way to apply the skills and see what happens, and learn from that, and grow as a leader. Working together, we were able to help him and apply it to our own growth. . . Action research, particularly collaborative research, can be a very powerful force to bring educators together, respecting each other, helping each other, learning from each other. It has done this for our group and with leadership it could happen in other groups too.

The power of collaborative action research was demonstrated by two students from neighboring districts--Judy and Susan--who designed and implemented a joint project.

We really enjoyed each other. I couldn't have done it without her. We had discussions about many aspects of our work, including the loneliness of the teacher leader. We provided sensitivity for each other, great support--you don't have to be a leader in isolation.

As they reported on their progress, others commented on their partnership, identifying the positive value of their collaboration, the complexities of working with another person, and the strength the two members gave each to other.

The bridging of the two members' relationship--I think that was more important than the project itself. Part of the joy of this project was the collegial relationship of Susan and Judy that was developed during the course of this project. Two diverse people with different ethnic backgrounds, being able to come together and make a positive impact on seniors, students and their parents. . . it was remarkable!

Judy and Susan seemed to find out about teamwork. They broke down the isolation which so many people in education feel. They were able to recognize each other's strengths and capitalize on them, which made them both feel valued and further committed to the project.

Working together is initially more difficult than working alone because brain pictures, goals and expectations must mesh. The prior relationship made the startup easier, but I was struck by their beginning semi-apology regarding how they had changed and moved away from an early plan. One of the important things about collegial work is to evolve, to develop, to grow. Not only was this a growth experience for children and seniors, but for Judy and Susan

also. The synergy of their combined project shows. They both seem so enthusiastic about their project and the results.

This was a terrific example of teamwork--matching strengths. They have obviously grown as a result of this experience. They seemed immersed in their project--amazing surprises develop when this happens. This shows the power of action research as staff development in the broad sense of human growth--cognitive and affective.

As each cohort team moved toward completion of the action research projects, members reflected on the experience, and on the impact of their collaboration in a challenging endeavor. Comments reflected their shared pride and satisfaction in their work, their colleagues and themselves, and their awareness that they had been participants in an experience which need not end with them, but could serve as a model of how they could interact with new colleagues in future leadership roles.

The first word that comes to my mind reflecting on the research projects of our colleagues is respect. I watched Jerry explain his work and I tried to visualize what his working day must be like. His world is so different from mine, but I tried to understand, to enter with him. I think our team is tremendously supportive and analytical.

The enthusiasm comes as we watch people change and from our own research. We are developing and reinforcing our own skills as we evolve. Our projects are a strong demonstration of our beliefs in action.

And finally, in an open statement of admiration and affection, one student shared with her colleagues the following:

I realize how much I have come to love and admire my fellow cohort members. I share in the joys each one has experienced and feel great pride in them. We're all trying so hard; it makes the imminent parting in June so much more wistful and bittersweet.

d. Deepened understanding through authentic engagement of the complexities of the change process for individuals and organizations.

Students experienced the multi-dimensional dynamic complexities of the change process, learning from their own action research projects and hearing the narratives of their student colleagues. They developed a broadened understanding of critical issues including context, political forces, resistance, resource allocation and long-term commitment. Many of their lived experiences helped them create powerful new linkages to their earlier studies. Frequent references were made to Barth's discussion of the challenges of improving schools from within, with teachers and administration sharing responsibility and leadership.

The most important aspect to me is the finding that a meaningful relationship was valuable to both students and mentors. As Barth says, the relationships between people in the school are the best indicator of whether or not the school is a learning community. I do not believe we can separate caring and educating, as some "back-to-basics" folks would like to do.

Administrative support seems to be a key issue for the success of this endeavor. This is exciting because while the teachers learned, Shirley also learned . . . she learned a lot about staff development, about the fact that fear of change was part of the culture of the school. In her administrative capacity, she modeled that she was in fact the "head learner".

The change process is dependent upon the changemakers. Their commitment and integrity in creating meaningful change are essential. Without someone who analyzes the impact of change and questions decisions, the process becomes simply a formality.

I. the challenges they faced seeking to introduce new resources, new strategies and new beliefs into their educational settings, students corroborated Fullan's analysis of the complexities of school change and discussed this.

This project verifies what we have been reading about--the complexity of the change process itself. Clarifying "what is really going on here" is a major issue in the readiness part of the change cycle. Commitment to the "program" can be immense but without support, communication and political allies (to name a few) change can be the slowest process of all. Change takes enormous time. Hostility from colleagues is to be expected because change is painful. I'm more conscious of what I'm doing in my classroom, of the deep difficulty in making change.

Starting with a small number of staff members, Shirley was developing a readiness for change by having teachers and herself share valuable information about control theory. She is now affecting the goals of the entire school improvement process and culture of the school.

It's interesting to note that much of what can be learned from this project was not necessarily what the project intended to focus on, but instead was a reminder of how very difficult the change process is. Jerry and Sherry learned there are many obstacles to overcome and just the first step of getting people ready for the change can be very lengthy and time-consuming. It is important to keep people interested in the process since enthusiasm may be high in the beginning but then may start to fade. By continually seeking input and communicating effectively, that enthusiasm may be sustained.

Sharon is confronting some major cultural issues. She not only is dealing with familiar and societal issues, but also with the organizational structure at large. Changing attitudes is difficult as she discovered.

Applying this understanding, students were able to recognize when fellow students were effective in linking theory to practice. They critiqued the progress of their colleagues and commended them when their actions aligned with what they had examined in their readings.

She was skillful in figuring out how her project could connect to her school, and to some major goals of the district as a whole. We saw the importance of the district context for her project. Her district supported her. They supported the need for staff development, and worked the project in tandem with school improvement and whole culture change. They were true to Glasser; it was the opposite of coercion and involved a true change in attitudes and beliefs. Students learned, staff learned, parents learned, and the facilitator learned many things. It's likely that her project will, in fact, make some real, lasting impact. She moved it beyond her initiation to a likelihood of future institutionalization.

This is a perfect example of how to make significant change without creating animosity. The learnings that come out of this are significant: ownership, pilot process, trust building. This is inspirational to another practicing administrator.

There is so much here--process and product, problem solving, community building, social responsibility. . . The key I think is that they dove into problem solving and become totally immersed--no boundaries or barriers.

Thus, the experience of engaging in research projects in which they were actively involved, with others, provided opportunities for students to confront the difficulties of introducing change into organizations. Theory and practice were linked as students confronted real problems and sought ways to transform their ideas into new ways of teaching, leading and learning.

e. Enhancement of confidence, emboldening of spirit and reinforcement of growth.

Students recognized that both they and their colleagues were affected by their engagement in their research. Whereas they had initially doubted their capacity to formulate a research project--merely to conceptualize it, let alone truly serving as change agents--they gradually assumed new roles as assertive designers and implementers of action, and challengers of the status quo. Students believed that it was their acting in concert with others, with both their cohort students and their collaborators in their school sites, that gave them spirit and strength.

Ron was encouraged to take risks based on the confidence that came from the group. The modeling of our colleagues, their recounting stories of risk taking created a common culture, and nudged the more hesitant of us to act.

Paul used terms that showed us the real connections he's making, like "bridging theory, involving and empowering people, developing trust, ownership . . ." It was authentic and exciting. It showed us what was possible.

One student echoed the very language a colleague had used in her report: "Concentrate on the finish line," she had said, " and not on each individual hurdle." This would sustain him as he struggled with the challenge of road blocks and the necessity to keep a clear focus and an "intact vision". He continued,

I learned that we can make a difference. Cultural change and connectedness are possible. I won't be afraid to try to make change because even though it is scary, it is powerful.

In the success of a colleague, one student saw the worth of her own efforts, and was reaffirmed and encouraged.

Sandy's project highlighted the reasons why I feel my project was a success--emotional, affective goals are needed to make our students successful. Her partnership program established a social culture that made it a trusting experience. Through these social experiences she was able to confront academics on a personal level, connecting social needs to school curriculum goals. I feel wonderful about my own children's affective development. It has changed my way of thinking, and through seeing her results, I know I'm on the right track. I am more committed to what I'm trying to do.

One student's initial doubts were swept away as he listened to the variety of approaches and topics followed by his colleagues.

I am now experiencing probably the greatest sigh of relief of my life. I have till now felt a bit like a second class citizen, because Sherry and I are doing an action research project not based upon the intervention, assessment, intervention, evaluation model. Ours involves research/ facilitation as a preparation for action. Hearing Alice and Ellen reassured me of the importance of this kind of research.

Classmates encouraged each other, validating the worth of their efforts and highlighting the significance of their work. One student, Monica, had designed a classroom problem-solving process for use at the second grade. She had initially hesitated, given the young age of her students, but had proceeded in spite of her doubts. The result in terms of changed student behavior and capacity for self-management was so significant, that by the end of the year, the program was sought out by other teachers at the second grade, and then by teachers throughout the school. Monica described the impact of her classmates' encouragement:

Your reactions gave me strength. You confirmed that second grade was not too early to seek to make an impact. What a powerful

support you have been for me. The initial period was so critical. . . I wasn't sure I should even try this. I was encouraged to try, and now I see that young children can learn these skills, and can reflect on their own feelings, their own behavior, and their interactions with others. You helped me believe this was a very valuable process and you confirmed the growth I was seeing in my students. They did gain knowledge, they did develop skills and change attitudes.

Of another colleague who dared to enter the "risky waters" of an unfriendly working environment through a boldly designed action research project, one student stated,

Our group's applause was a sign of our respect and appreciation for a man who took a risk! We felt that there was some comfort in knowing that we were all risk takers, and we were in this with him.

Students affirmed the growth of one of their colleagues, and celebrated their own new confidence and understanding.

Your determination and commitment to your project inspire us. The sociological implications of your findings are very important. Your work will perhaps impact future generations of adults and their beliefs about learning. Seeing what you are doing, and hearing of your success at your school gives me hope for myself, my school, and the children we teach. I have a different understanding of the potential of my role, and I'm determined to use my influence on behalf of what I believe. I know I can make a difference.

f. Increased awareness of the power of reflection.

In the process of describing their research projects and hearing of the work of their classmates, students reflected on the actions that had been taken--on their meaning, significance and impact. Adopting a "reflective practitioner" stance (Schon, 1987), they thought critically about what they had done, trying to make sense of what was going on and to critically view their research in the total context of school improvement, rather than as a particular, singular intervention. They made connections between singular victories or setbacks, the overall purpose of their collaborative research project and their shared commitment to act as agents of school improvement. Through a process of metacognitive analysis, they analyzed their actions and acquired new awareness of the significance of their behavior.

I'm more conscious of what I'm doing in my classroom, more aware of the difficulty of making change. The classroom became a microcosm of the larger community. I realized that social change takes enormous effort, and that hostility from colleagues is to be expected because change is painful. . .

Jerry and I learned about how people say one thing and mean another. We gained a real appreciation for the amount of work it will take. Sherry was impressed with the level of distrust in schools that affects their progress. I learned that we are not alone in playing politics; it is everywhere and plays a major role in what

happens in schools. One of the learnings, quite simply, is that politics is here, and here to stay.

Reflection permitted students to construct new understandings of the workings of schools, and of the challenges presented to innovators. They looked back on actions they had dared to initiate, pondering their impact, and relishing that they had in fact survived. Often, colleagues were able to identify more clearly the significance of various actions than the actual participants, and it was their reflections and commentary that illuminated the hidden meanings of events.

One student considered an action research project which brought community employers into the school as mentors to students. For the employers, their initial conception of their role was that they would give some concrete job information to their young charges. As a result of their participation in the project, in which emphasis was placed on creating personal relationships between employer and student beyond mere information, other developments ensued.

Sandy personally took risks and made new connections into new territory. Many times those who were helping others (the mentors) were also helping themselves. Many of the mentors found a deeper purpose in their jobs as a result of their mentor relationships with students. Sandy also raised the consciousness of employers that employees are people. They came to see they were not just business managers, but rather are business/people managers. Meaning is critical to students and adults and her work with them confirmed this. That was the true significance of what she did!

Reflection also clarified that change is a continuous process, with a dynamic ebb and flow, and an ongoing need to redefine and recommit.

Enthusiasm was high at the outset, but low as the project proceeded. How will there be continuing buy-in for implementation? Readiness is such a critical piece, but will the district be able to move (motivate) the teachers/staff to action? ..

I gained appreciation for the work it will take to actively implement character education in schools. It is easy to talk the talk but not as easy to walk the talk. We as educators must be better role models. When I think about it, everything that Sherry and Gerry experienced reconfirmed, strengthened and reaffirmed what I know about making change--there must be focus, consistency, and a real willingness to invest the time that's needed to have real impact.

This has been exciting. I've learned a lot and I think I have helped some teachers grow. My feelings consist of some encouragement and some disappointment. I knew I was getting involved in risk-taking, and I didn't know all I needed to know beforehand, . . . but I had to act. My goal was to apply the theory. As I think back on it, I realize the change process is scary. . . there was resistance, others got empowered. . . I have learned a lot about staff development and how we must not make too many assumptions about change lasting. I was supported by teachers in the project, and learned that

coercion is not the way to go. The issue of support from others was critical, and I got support from three other people.

The experience of assisting one student was understood, on reflection, to be a kind of model of how individuals could work together in a real school setting.

Our discussion of Thurman's project moves me to see how collaboration among colleagues could work within a school staff. I see that, with people who have training in working in teams, we can work together to help each other clarify ideas, extend thinking, validate thinking, generalize to other situations. It's great to see this because I think in most school situations people feel threatened by collaboration. Without the factor of "intimidation" or "coercion", people in our group are feeling very comfortable and value each others' ideas.

One student summarized the power of reflection by writing, "For me, reflection is a major source of knowing (recognizing) just what it is that has been accomplished." Often, when things didn't go "exactly as planned", he would get discouraged, but reflecting on what he had done and what the impact of his actions had been, he concluded that "his efforts truly did have some impact on learning". Reflecting on his actions, and on the thinking, decisions and actions of his colleagues as they engaged in similar endeavors, helped him focus on his work in a thoughtful, deliberate and purposeful manner.

Reflection also permitted students to reconsider the commitment they made to each other at the beginning of the program to work as a "community of learners". For one student, a colleague's description of her struggle to know, to figure out, was a living example of what Barth had urged--"to value and honor learning, participation, and cooperation--above prescription, production and competition. . . to be in a place where fellow students discover, and adults rediscover, the joys, the difficulties and the satisfactions of learning." It is evident from our discussions," she wrote, "that learning is the predominant feature of our group. . . and we are working to create a supportive environment for the discussion of problems, sharing of process, reporting of results, and affirmation of our goals." "I believe," she continued, "that we are all engaged in defining a moral purpose for our working together."

g. Creation of an environment which permitted expression of passion.

Finally, students revealed that the opportunity to collaborate with others in action research projects had enlivened their learning and awakened a new sense of passion and excitement. They freely shared this excitement with each other, relishing that they were able to "lose themselves" in discovering the "power of their actions".

The excitement in the learning process for Ellen and Alice was evident. Their learning will continue long after the action research project because they have a passion for their topic. . .

Monica is truly passionate about what she has done, and she has been changed. She is a very good teacher, and her work is important. What an important issue for elementary students to feel that needed sense of belonging. The class meeting sounds like a

model that can impact societal values for children and adults. Talk about an empassioned educator!

By shifting gears to a new action research project, Pat is following her bliss. She lights up as she talks about the children with autism. Her beliefs are inner core. She has a mission to share with us. When she talks of unlocking the Plexiglas box, one can feel how she has decided that in order to "do no wrong" she must risk and take bold steps to convince others of her belief. This project is really forging new territory. Pat really did take our project's goals to heart and act on them. Each new question she asked impassioned her to do further research. I believe the far-reaching effects of this project will be impressive, as they always are when the impact on human relationships is considered.

Sandy was passionately committed to her project. She was totally involved with the students and mentors. Her project will likely have a long-term effect on her own life; it is something that she will not easily be able to let go. But to dream and to have your dream realized is a-once-in-a-lifetime. . .She feels good about making the connections. Her project will grow as others become involved. She made a dream come true.

Concluding his remarks, one student stated,

If the document that our team creates from all of these projects reflects even a little bit of the passion that we've all experienced as we listen to teach other, it will certainly be worthy of praise and reward.

His colleagues paused as they reflected on his words, and considered how they themselves had grown in this process of transformation. If only they could find ways to create an environment where others could share their excitement . . . their sense of rebirth. . .their passion!

Summary:

This research documented the growth experienced by graduate students in an administrator preparation program that featured collaborative action research as a core component of the program. Moving far beyond traditional program designs, this approach holds promise for the development of new kinds of educational leaders. Collaboration, risk-taking, knowledge and understanding were linked; theory guided practice; and action served as a basis for reflection and deepened awareness. The findings suggest that collaborative action research can transform the graduate preparation experience, and can help prepare educational administrators who will draw on their own lived experience to create dynamic, vibrant future school learning communities.

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