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Pre-Service Teachers and Participatory Action Research: Students, Community, and Action

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Abstract

Participatory Action Research (PAR) has a history of empowerment, transformation, and healing (McIntyre, 2008). Its limited use in teacher education must be addressed, and this study shows pre-service teachers' overwhelming enjoyment in completing a PAR project. An outline of classroom methods demonstrates how the project was implemented, and 41 student responses are analyzed from a secondary *Community and Cultural Context of Education* course. Findings indicate 73% concluded PAR was great or enjoyable, and included are reflections about transformational experiences, reasons for not enjoying PAR, and ideas to improve the project. Implications for continued study suggest a need for further inquiry through interviews, pre-service teachers' likelihood of using PAR in future classrooms, and PAR in method or content courses.

Introduction

The following study is a reflective explanation of a participatory action research (PAR) project implemented into the *Community and Cultural Context of Education* course in spring 2012. After a previous semester's successes and failures, as well as inspiring final PAR videos, I was eager to do this project again. The goal of the course was for students to embody activism and advocacy through PAR, connecting it to standards, and increasing student engagement through implementation in their future classrooms. The PAR model outlined in this study was inspired by Groves Price and Mencke's (2013) PAR with Indigenous Youth, Duncan-Andrade and Morrell's (2008) "Doc Yr Bloc Project," and Stovall, Calderon, Carrera, and King's (2009) "Doc Your Bloc Project."

I approach the classroom through critical pedagogy, which works with students to become change agents (Freire, 1970). This philosophy mandates praxis in the classroom, allowing students to move theory into action and reflect on their efforts. Reinforcing praxis is the research methodology of PAR, which follows a five step cyclic process: 1) Identify a problem, 2) Research the problem, 3) Develop a collective plan of action to address the problem, 4) Implement the collective plan of action, 5) Evaluate or re-examine the issue (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008).

Using critical pedagogy and PAR, positions students as the *present*, not the *future*. PAR uses teachers' creativity by connecting lived experiences with the standard curriculum, and students are contributors in the community. As Freire (1970) states:

> Students, as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obligated to respond to that challenge…Their response to the challenge evokes new challenges, followed by new understandings; and gradually the students come to regard themselves as committed (p. 81).

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PAR was an integral component to the *Community and Cultural Context of Education* course because its five step process brings community issues into the classroom, and action through research on community issues brings the classroom into the community. Furthermore, PAR is a practical example of the theory of critical pedagogy through informed action mandating students move beyond classroom walls to raise awareness.

Literature Review

This study is grounded in a critical framework, stemming from centuries of social thought, but coalescing around critical pedagogy, which gives form to various radical, emancipatory, and transformational pedagogies (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003). Specifically informing my classroom practice is Paulo Freire's (1970) transformational and empowering education, which humanizes both student and teacher. Freire's (1970) work with peasants in Brazil is the foundation for critical pedagogues' belief in the dialectical relation between domination and liberation in education. As a liberation methodology, critical pedagogy combines students' previous knowledge with course curriculum, then mandates praxis, which is essential to transformation. Freire (1970) states, "Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it" (p. 79).

Resisting memorization and regurgitation, or a banking method of education, critical pedagogy uses a problem-posing method where students' brainstorm ideas to find generative themes (Freire, 1970). Generative themes arise from problem-posing or asking students what are problems in their lives or community. Freire's work highlights the classroom as a political site where students act on their interests to learn through critical community engagement. Transformation occurs as students and teachers enact praxis leading to critical consciousness, which is the development of students' critical social consciousness ceasing to view their oppression as unchangeable; instead seeing themselves as change agents (Freire, 1970).

As a fourth generation of action research, Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) explain PAR's connection to critical emancipatory action research through activists such as Freire and critical consciousness. Moving from methodological theorizing of PAR, Groves Price and Mencke (2013), Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008), and Stovall and Morales-Doyle (2010) demonstrate increased engagement with high school students. Groves Price and Mencke (2013) report transformational experiences with Native American's analyzing the drop-out, or push-out rate from the rural northwest. Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) outline multiple successes in Oakland and Los Angeles with African-American and Latino students in programs ranging from an English class to Pan-Ethnic studies, and Stovall and Morales-Doyle's (2010) successfully apply PAR with Latino and African-American students in a Chicago urban sociology class.

Building from these successes, modeling PAR in teacher education is imperative. However, teacher education courses usually follow a traditional approach which includes classroom instruction on the theory of learning and development, content and methods courses, and field experiences (Boyer & Baptiste, 1996). Furthermore, using non-traditional methods most often results in "action research" projects, which differs from PAR. Action research uses teacher inquiry into a topic of their interest within their classroom; whereas, PAR inquiry uses students' interest regarding issues in their community.

McIntyre (2003) argues for PAR to be "integrated within the boundaries of the teacher preparation program [to provide] opportunities for the students to extend possibilities of learning...building a sense of community with a group of young people" (p. 37). PAR in teacher education courses usually focuses on students researching in their field placements or first years of teaching (Ginns, Heirdsfield, Atweh, & Watters, 2001;

McIntyre, 2003; McIntyre, Chatzopoulos, Politi, & Roz, 2007; Olafson, Schraw, Vander Veldt, & Ponder, 2011), but lacks modeling PAR for use in teachers' future classrooms. Most PAR examples aim is professional growth, whereas this study shows PAR methods to be used with future secondary students. Professional growth is essential, but the next step is integrating PAR with standards, linking students' interests with curriculum. Teacher education courses are optimal spaces for this experience (Ginns et al., 2001; McIntyre, 2003, McIntyre et al., 2007), but more research into PAR methods for classroom use must be pursued. To address this gap, the following project was implemented, and responses overwhelmingly support the use of PAR.

Although students responded positively to critical pedagogy and PAR, counter-arguments to these approaches must be addressed. Feminist scholars argue critical pedagogy remains patriarchal and continues the oppressive claim of universality, or one "right" way of teaching (Ellsworth, 1989; Lather, 1998). hooks (1994) correctly exposes the focus on the mind, which ignores the body, heart, or soul of teaching, and connects the mind and body through engaged pedagogy. Furthermore, PAR is critiqued for lack of generalizable data (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005), and its political agenda moving the researcher into a subjective position advocating for social change (McIntyre, 2008). Research *with* students raises validity questions for positivist researchers, but PAR views students as "the 'real knowers' of their lives" (McIntyre, 2008, p. 11); therefore, increasing validity.

Course Overview

The Community and Cultural Context of Education course's objectives are grounded in educational foundations and cultural studies, and include:

- Explain the impact of social and historical foundations of education, grounded in race, class, gender, sexuality

- Demonstrate knowledge of state standards

- Articulate strategies for collaboration between school and community.

The PAR project is substituted for a final exam, and other assignments include a mid-semester exam, discussion lead, and Teacher Performance Assessment (TPA) written commentary. The course enrolls pre-service secondary education students from multiple content areas including: History, Math, Agriculture, English, Foreign Language, Science, Family and Consumer Science, and Health/Fitness. Students are in their first semester of block education courses (three times a week for 16 weeks). There are two sections totaling 41 consenting student participants. Due to some anonymous responses, the demographics are not specifically known; however, the study takes place at a large land grant university in the Northwest, and total course enrollment is 46, of which 32 (70%) are female and 14 (30%) are male. Furthermore, there are eight (17%) students of color enrolled.

PAR Project Structure

The beginning of the semester involves deep exploration of theory related to community and cultural context of education. Starting with readings from McLaren (2003) on the major components of critical pedagogy, chapter two of Freire (1970) covering the banking versus problem-posing method of education, and Duncan-Andrade and Morrell's (2008) overview of the PAR cycle, students are exposed to power and privilege in education and why it is important to incorporate students' community and culture in the classroom. These readings expose curriculum as oppressive to marginalized populations based on race, class, gender, and sexuality. Furthermore, students understand traditional banking methods as detrimental and dis-engaging. During this time students and professor work together to ask critical questions about the structure of schools, leading to perceived "success" or "failure" among student demographics. This approach

posits issues of social justice, curriculum, pedagogy, and action at the forefront of the course, and is the foundation of many PAR topics.

Step 1) identify a problem.

After discussing a problem posing education, the class is introduced to their PAR project. *My Generation*, a hip hop song by Nas and Damien Marley was played; the chorus states, "My generation is gonna change…" (Jones & Marley, 2010), and I prefaced the song by asking what they want to change on campus, in the local region, and in education. Students then walked around and wrote their ideas on butcher paper hanging in the room. The questions on each paper were: "What needs to be changed [on campus]?," "What needs to be changed in [the local region]?," "What needs to be changed in education?"

This developed generative themes (Freire, 1970) meaningful to the students. They then individually selected their top three most intriguing issues, producing project groups. Groups consisted of these topics: Alcohol Abuse, Drug Abuse, Drop-outs, Engagement in School, Diversity in School, Budget Cuts to the Arts, Homosexual Discrimination, and Poverty. Groups were formed at the beginning of the course providing optimal time for completion.

Step 2) research the problem.

Students were given a research ethics tutorial and signed a departmental institutional review board (IRB) form confirming their understanding of ethics, including mandatory consent from participants. A rubric for the project was also given, which outlined the importance of connecting state and/or national standards to the project. It is essential for students to know PAR can, and is being done in the classroom (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Gustein, 2010; Schultz, 2008; Stovall, 2010). The class is then exposed to process versus content standards, and how to incorporate both; however, it is made explicit that PAR's focus

is the process of discovery (Kemmis & McTuggart, 2005).

Explaining the research process focused on the use of multiple sources, but most important is input from community members closest to the issue. Researching *with* the students mandates their lead in the inquiry process (McIntyre, 2008). The class had PAR days throughout the course to brainstorm and ask questions, and video examples from previous projects demonstrated high expectations.

Step 3) design plan of action.

Video examples from the previous semester outlined action taken to raise awareness about the problem. "Praxis" is constantly revisited to expose the idea of moving theory into practice, and reflecting on the action taken (Freire, 1970). Students brainstorm their action plan, and determine logistics needed to act. This step requires scaffolding to get students out of their comfort zones and into the community, as well as provide a critical lens to view the action. Reminding the class that PAR focuses on the process is imperative for understanding the end product is important, but navigating barriers to success is essential to the learning process.

At this point the professor's commitment to PAR allows students to embody the importance of the process. Students asked for advice when encountering barriers such as weather issues, difficulties reserving an awareness booth, or emails not being returned. By asking, "What do you think should be done?," the students' ideas led them to an answer. Then a debrief with students explains PAR's focus on student learning through *process* and content. Each situation was solved with little help from me; therefore, student confidence in producing change increases (Friere, 1970).

Step 4) implement action plan.

Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) describe this step as, "Once a plan has been developed, it needs to be implemented" (p. 13). Students are motivated to act because the

topic is relevant to their lives (they selected the topic during Step 1). Students' action steps involved presenting their video and leading a discussion with an introductory to education course, practicing teachers, fraternities, and sororities, as well as working on a campus awareness campaign, and many others.

Classmates were recruited to be volunteers and audience for action plans. Within the education department, professors used students' videos in class to promote better teaching practices for pre-service teachers. The action demonstrated the use of PAR process and content to meet state and national standards within multiple content areas. Students often commented on how easy it was to connect with standards because they are so broad; which is an objective of the PAR project.

Step 5) reflect on the process.

The last two weeks of class the students presented their PAR videos. They demonstrate each step of the process and how it relates to multiple content areas. During the presentation, reflection on the process and changes to be made are discussed. Oftentimes emotions are expressed through tears, and it is a bonding time for the class. Student groups are graded on their presentation, as well as individual grades for commitment to group work.

Methodology

PAR falls within a large scope of action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005), but shifts the power from research *on* students to research *with* students. As a political endeavor, PAR aims to transform participants (McIntyre, 2008). Study participants experienced PAR methods, which can transfer into their future classrooms. Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) outline three elements distinguishing PAR: "shared ownership of research projects, community-based analysis of social problems, and an orientation toward community action" (p. 560). This was done in the course through student generated topics, interviews with community members, and

action within the community. PAR is a cyclical research pattern, previously outlined, involving five re-occurring steps (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008).

Using a qualitative approach, 41 students were given a questionnaire during the final week of class containing the question: "How do you feel about the Participatory Action Research (PAR) project done this semester?" Their responses give insight into using PAR in pre-service teaching courses to engage students by linking course content with their interests. The research project, IRB certificate of exemption, consent form, and confidentiality was explained to students. Also outlined was the freedom to submit your answer anonymously. Forty-one students agreed to participate.

Employing grounded theory coding methods, initial coding moved the data from written responses to naming each segment of data, and focused coding used the most frequent initial codes to categorize into analytical themes (Charmaz, 2006). Initial coding was done by allowing codes to fit the data and not allowing preexisting categories to influence coding (Charmaz, 2006). Using line-by-line, then segment-by-segment methods (Charmaz, 2006) produced codes that deepened understanding of participants' experience. Moving initial coding into focused codes highlighted more conceptual and selective codes (Glaser, 1978).

Following this process, "major code clumps" (Glesne, 1999, p. 135) consisting of "Amazing," "Enjoy," "Not Enjoy," and "50/50" emerged. Statements reflecting each major code clump include: Amazing – "love," "awesome," "incredible," and "great;" Enjoy – "really liked," "valuable," "enjoyed," etc.; 50/50 – "mixed feelings," "like, but needs revamps," etc.; Not Enjoy – "did not enjoy," and "no purpose." From these code clumps, subcodes, which are discussed in the next paragraphs, emerged regarding deeper reasons for students' responses to the PAR project. A taxonomic chart was used to deepen analysis of the subcodes (Glesne, 1999), which were placed into a spreadsheet

to detect patterns. This analysis produced the following results.

Findings

Students overwhelmingly enjoyed the PAR project: out of 41 student participants, six participants thought it was great, 24 students enjoyed PAR, three did not like the project, and eight were ambivalent. When expressing the project was great, students focused on selecting a topic relevant to their lives, and having an assignment which was more than earning a grade and could be used in their future class. One male commented,

> I loved the PAR project because I was able to do something that really matters to me. Since I did mine on alcoholism I was able to really connect to it. It made me face my own demons and examine why it is an important topic to be considered...it made me more engaged and willing to learn about my topic because I was able to pick it.

This student brought his girlfriend to his presentation as he mentioned in his video the hurt he had caused her due to his alcoholism. The power of his story was compounded by his group member sharing her experiences as a child growing up with an alcoholic mother. She stated,

> My project specifically was about Alcohol Abuse...and this topic really hit home for me because of things from my past and this project allowed me to get my ideas, thoughts and feelings out to my peers...this topic has always been something that I have had a huge passion for and doing this project allowed me to get out and do something about it.

Both students beautifully expressed their emotions through tears, and PAR's impact was evident in the support given by their classmates.

This healing process was also exposed in the project about poverty when a tearful explanation of a friend's homelessness influenced the student's pursuit of this topic.

Furthermore, two students presented on school drop-outs, and explained their siblings' battle with this difficult issue. As one student stated, "[PAR] was an awesome experience. My topic was dropouts...This has personal importance to me because my sister dropped out of school early..." Another student researched cultural awareness, and after his presentation privately expressed his reason for selecting this topic was a need to find resources available to gay males like him. He never before talked about his homosexual identity in class (or to me personally), and PAR produced an avenue to look into a topic he was eager to explore without exposing himself. I find the power of PAR is not felt by all students, but this process gives agency to students struggling with difficult circumstances.

Students expressed an appreciation for a project to be used outside of class, and often the project became more than a grade. A female student explains,

> The PAR project was great. I had never done such a cumulative group project in my classes before that actually had a purpose besides having a final grade. I loved that we had to get out into the community...It benefited not only us...but hopefully those who will watch our videos in the future. It's nice to know that we may have just been able to make a difference, even if it be small.

Her explanation of less focus on a grade, community action, and making a difference correlate to the purpose of critical pedagogy and PAR; making learning relevant, and taking action to better students' community.

Another student commented, "This project was really a great one. I really enjoyed having the opportunity to choose something that I wanted to research on. It made the project more personal and fun." More student comments about the impact of PAR include, "PAR was a really beneficial project. It forced me to look into something that I had really only heard about – budget cuts – and really 'dig in'...Couldn't find a fact? Dig deeper...," as well as another student's comments, "...felt

[PAR] empowered us to really forge our own information and opinion about a given topic," and, "[PAR] is a great way for students to become engaged with both text and community." These statements epitomize PAR because the first quote exemplifies connecting curriculum to student interests, and the second and third quote highlight inquiry, which asks students to "dig deeper" into a topic and formulate an informed opinion. The fourth quote exemplifies Freire's (1970) idea of students' ability to read the word and the world.

Although 30 out of 41 students (73%) either thought the project was great or enjoyable, students also expressed concerns with the project. Three students expressed a dislike through comments such as, "I honestly did not like doing the PAR projects that much. To me it seemed more of a hassle then [sic] actually really learning from it," and another student commented, "I personally don't see too much purpose for the PAR project...I don't feel it's the place of teachers to grow political/social activists." I take these comments as a chance to adjust the project, but the final comment is testimony to critical pedagogy and PAR, which posit the teacher as a political agent (McIntyre, 2008). Without this comment, I would question the explicit political sentiment of the course, which is mandatory within PAR; this one comment confirms that a progressive politick has been pushed, but not to the extent of having multiple students reject an activist classroom.

Student Recommendations

Most of the 30 students whom enjoyed PAR also gave recommendations for making it better. Sub-codes indicated interest in selecting their group members then deciding on a topic, and providing video making tutorials. Five students said there was too much time for completion, while five students acknowledged an appreciation for the timeline. Student suggestions included periodic due dates or assigning the project towards the middle of the semester. Therefore, I am considering this input as I plan for next semester.

My reflections include taking more time to explain the research process; specifically the use of both academic journal reviews and community expertise. Most groups only included data from community members, and they need to juxtapose these interviews with other data sources. The action step must also be approached differently. Students' action was too "hands-off" and needs to be taken a step further by finding ways to directly impact the issue. An example is one group's development of a "Student Engagement Notebook," including great ideas for classroom use; however, they made the notebook, but did not distribute it to any teachers. In the future I want students to experience the uncomfortable feeling action produces, but how inspiring it is during and after as they embody fear as a catalyst to action (Shor & Freire, 2003).

Conclusions and Implications

The results show students' overwhelming enjoyment in PAR. Furthermore, PAR allows students to show emotions in the classroom, which facilitates a space for healing and transformation. As Shor (1996) explains, the main goal of critical pedagogy is transformation, and these findings reinforce Freire's (1970) statement, "The world—no longer something to be described with deceptive words—becomes the object of that transforming action by men and women which results in their humanization" (p. 86). Students were transformed and this is evidenced in their comments, final videos, in-class actions, and emotions. However, limitations of the study include selection of one written reflection, a sample size of 41 students, and data from one academic semester. Furthermore, five students did not consent and their responses could impact the data.

Students' suggestions for improvement yield ideas for support mechanisms to be added for further success. Future studies should interview students to gain deeper insight into reasons for their responses to PAR, analyze the likelihood of using PAR in the classroom after completing this type of project in pre-

service teacher education, and examine PAR in methods or content area courses. Further research must explore PAR projects in pre-service teaching courses, and this study highlights positive results from students' engagement with issues of social justice. Faculty of education must recognize the classroom as a resource and utilize PAR projects as a method of community engagement while learning course content. Successful results can begin to change pre-service teachers' view of their future classrooms; from a site of domination to a place of liberation.

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