

Action Research in Urban Schools: Empowerment, Transformation, and Challenges

By Aria Razfar

Introduction

For over ten years the teacher education program at a Hispanic-serving liberal arts college offered a traditional Masters program, with a traditional five-chapter thesis based on quantitative or qualitative designs. After much deliberation and feedback from graduating students, it was decided that a Masters program based on an *action research* model would be more engaging and appropriate for the population of educators served by the college. Given the nascent state of the program, the terms 'action research,' 'empowerment,' and 'transformation' were a quite nebulous and as expected contested terrain. Appropriately enough, they would be defined and shaped in the course of our collective actions over time. As a result of the shift, a distinguishing requirement for participating in the program was that students must be active in a K-12 educational setting whereby they would develop and implement an action plan appropriate for that context. Furthermore, this process would require the engagement of their colleagues as well as the community.

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This article examines the experiences of a cohort of seven urban educators who conducted action research over a two-year period. Of the seven participants, six were teacher-researchers (henceforth 'TRs') and one was a bilingual coordinator. I provide an analysis of

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focus group discussions conducted after the completion of the action research projects, in particular six sessions dedicated to the themes of *empowerment* and *transformation* framed by a special issue of *Teacher Education Quarterly* (Levin & Merrit, 2006), and vignettes from three illustrative projects. The three cases were selected to demonstrate the range of topics, issues, and populations embraced by the teachers. By synthesizing the narratives and reflections of multiple action research journeys into a single “meta-narrative,” this study aims to build upon the extant literature on action-research based approaches to in-service teacher training.

While carrying out action research can be considered a “messy” process for individual teachers (Wilson-Cooper, 2006), synthesizing multiple projects could be even messier. This was the challenge of this study; however, this type of meta-analysis is necessary toward broadening the dialogue about the dynamic potential of action-based approaches to teacher development. Through the voices of practitioners immersed in the lives of historically marginalized schools and communities, this article provides a framework for synthesizing and to some degree assessing teacher reflections about their action research journey, the meaning of the process to multiple stake-holders, the challenges they named, how they navigated the challenges, and ultimately some of the changes they named in themselves, their schools, and communities. Given the national trend toward “scientific” and essentialist approaches to student learning and teacher education (Erickson & Gutierrez, 2002) there are significant implications for teacher identity and epistemology(s). More specifically, the TRs in this study emphasized the importance of *problematizing* issues rather than ‘fixing’ them, appreciating *complexity* over simplicity, becoming comfortable with discomfort and *uncertainty*, and becoming a more complete member of their respective communities. In the remainder of this article, I discuss the context and methods for these emergent themes.

Defining Action Research

The action research projects conducted by the TR’s in this study show a wide range of issues such as literacy development for English Language Learners (ELLs), parent involvement, classroom management, and after-school programs geared towards increasing student academic performance and developing a positive sense of affiliation with the school community. Each of these projects illustrated how TRs can assume leadership roles in fostering pedagogical and policy changes in their respective sites. In order to contextualize these projects, it is important to note that prior to examining the basic principles of action research, the TRs engaged in readings and discussions about the fundamental assumptions of traditional quantitative/experimental and naturalistic/qualitative approaches to research and educational inquiry. This step was vital toward framing the multiple epistemologies, modes of inquiry, and data types that are available to TRs. Thus, they approached the action research paradigm with an understanding of how both quantitative and

qualitative research questions are asked and subsequently investigated. While there was a diversity of foci, each project was informed by the following principles and definitions of action research.

According to Mills (2003), “Action research is any systematic inquiry conducted by teachers to gather information about the ways that their particular school operates, how they teach, and how well their students learn.” (p. 4). Others have defined action research as the systematic process of studying real school or classroom situations for the purposes of improving the qualities of services and pedagogy (Dinkelman, 1997; McTaggart, 1997; Stringer, 1996). Historically, action research has been viewed as a ‘critical’ tool for empowering educators and underserved communities to define and analyze their social problems, develop new understandings, and action (Freire, 1970b). Action research assumes that change comes from the ground up rather than top-down (Ada, 1993; Freire, 1970a; Giroux, 2004). Another important component of action research that guided our work was the fact that the inquiry must be a collaborative partnership with other colleagues at the school (Foshy, 1998). When teachers build collaborative partnerships, they are empowered to foster more democratic ideals and embody transformative classroom practices such as inquiry, reflection and critique (Nagda, Gurin, & Lopez, 2003). Cooper and Gause (2007) argue that collaborative partnerships built through action research, what they term ‘collaborative activism,’ leads to larger social transformation through grass roots efforts,

Collaborative activism is a democratic education approach that unites educators and learners in raising consciousness and rupturing the status quo in order to socially deconstruct, politically transform, and share a sense of hope. Collaborative activism is the essence of transformative leadership. (Cooper & Gause, 2007, pp. 213-214)

Each project was guided by five basic steps: (1) *asking a question(s), identifying a problem or defining an area of exploration;* (2) *deciding what types of data to collect, how to collect the data, and how often;* (3) *collecting and analyzing data;* (4) *describing how the findings could be used and applied;* and (5) *reporting the findings with relevant participants and beyond* (Johnson, 2005). Participating TRs understood that the purposes of data collection was to gain insight, develop reflective practice, and affect positive change in their schools; more importantly, there was an expectation that they would have to systematically document, analyze, and publicly share the changes they observed both in themselves as well as other members of their school communities.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of preparing educators for action research was locating ‘change’ in the everyday practices of participants especially since these changes were often subtle and located in the texts of everyday life. Nevertheless, by drawing on sociocultural theory (Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985) and discourse analytic tools (Erickson, 1986; Gee & Green, 1998; Gumperz, 1982) the TRs developed analytic tools for understanding the everyday textual uses they

were gathering. All of the TRs located their unit of analysis within the discourse and interactions of students, teachers, principals, and parents. Furthermore, depending on the focus, they analyzed a range of texts spanning oral interactions to written artifacts produced by the students. They analyzed these discourse segments for shifts in participation, identities, vocabulary usage, and various aspects of writing. Each TR regularly analyzed transcripts of video-recorded observations, focus groups, interviews, and their own notes with their colleagues as well as teacher education faculty. This provided for systematic use of multiple modalities over the two year period in order to validate and scrutinize emerging analysis and interpretation of cultural practices. The action research orientation also compelled TRs to go beyond 'description' of a particular social or discourse phenomenon. In facing the challenge of relating the findings to the initial questions and problem area(s) that motivated the action research project, TRs would often realize the complexities of the questions posed thus creating a sense "that there were more problems."

The TRs were trained in the uses of NVivo qualitative software to assist them in organizing and coding their participatory observation field-notes, daily reflective journals, video tape-log summaries where applicable, recorded interviews, recorded focus group discussions, and material artifacts. Given the iterative nature of action research, TRs conducted exploratory data collection at the beginning of the academic year and developed their focused action plan by the third month of the fall semester whereby they had identified relevant research questions and a focal problem area. It is also important to note that during this initial stage of defining a focal problem area, TRs constantly defined and revised their questions and understandings of the problem by conducting a systematic search of the literature using ERIC, JSTOR, Psyc Info, and other appropriate social science and educational resources. TRs regularly engaged administrators, faculty, parents, and other students as they situated their readings in relation to their own communities. TRs then proceeded to develop an appropriate action plan to carry out for the remaining six months of the academic year.

Reflecting on Action Research:

Findings from Focus Groups

For the purpose of this article, data from the action research data portfolios, final reports, and 15 formal and informal focus group sessions with the TRs were used for analysis (see Table 1). In this section, findings from the focus groups are presented with emphasis on the later sessions on *empowerment* and *transformation*. Each of the focus group sessions were designed to be reflective sessions on different aspects of the action research process and were conducted after the teachers had "completed" their projects (i.e., submitted final reports). The sessions were devoted to *identifying a problem*, *literature review*, *methodology/documentation*, *findings/analysis*, and *empowerment and transformation*. At least six focus group

Table 1:
Focus Group Topics & Themes

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
Identifying the Problem	X														
Literature Review		X													
Methodology/ Documentation			X	X	X	X	X								
Findings/ Analysis								X	X						
Empowerment & Transformation										X	X				
Empowerment & Transformation												X	X	X	X
Unexpected Turns*											X	X	X		

*The theme of unexpected turns emerged during sessions dedicated to empowerment & transformation.

sessions directly focused on the themes of *empowerment* and *transformation*. These sessions were framed by readings from a special issue of *Teacher Education Quarterly* devoted to “Action Research for Teacher Empowerment and Transformation” (Levin & Merrit, 2006). The main questions posed by this issue were the questions we focused on during these focus group sessions:

- (1) In what ways has engagement with action research empowered you and/or your constituents?
- (2) In what ways has action research become a transformative undertaking for you and/or your constituents?
- (3) What issues have risen while engaging in your collaborative action research project and how have they been addressed and/or resolved?
- (4) How have you approached various methodological issues that arise when conducting action research?
- (5) In what ways has your action research informed or reformed educational practices in your school?

These questions were designed to understand the role of action research in the development of the participating TRs. During the actual focus group sessions

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dedicated to the themes of *empowerment* and *transformation*, the teachers were well aware that these terms came from the special issue readings and other related discussions on action research. They were asked to reflect on these questions and terms as they related to their own action research experience. Our discussions centered on the applicability of the terms, whether they agreed with them or not; but more importantly, it led to rich narratives about the nuances of their own experiences. The main goal of these sessions was not to make evaluative judgments on whether or not TRs were “empowered” or “transformed” but rather to elicit reflections *vis a vis* empowerment and transformation. Like all the articles in the special issue, the TRs emphasized teacher choice in selecting salient problems and issues, systematic data collection, and the need for persistence and flexibility in the face of uncertainty and discomfort. In addition to the sessions on *empowerment* and *transformation*, TRs discussed *unexpected turns*, especially as they moved from planning to implementation; the challenges of documenting and providing evidence for *change*. This theme generally emerged in the context of discussions about *empowerment* and *transformation*.

With respect to *empowerment* and *transformation*, TRs raised three major themes. First, action research provided a vehicle for TRs to go beyond “problematizing” to pro-actively and collaboratively develop solutions. A *problematizing* or ‘problem posing’ orientation emerged as opposed to a ‘problem-solving’ approach. In other words, TRs recognized the limitations of trying to ‘fix’ and ‘solve’ problems with myopic remedies and ‘one-size fits all solutions.’ For example, one teacher stated,

Our district has been trying to ‘fix’ the problem with our second language learners with one curriculum after another. It’s always some fad...this only leads to more hopelessness. The more I tried to fix the problems, the more frustrated I became...my students are so diverse, each one is different. We weren’t asking the right questions, didn’t have the right approach, and didn’t look at things from the learner’s point of view. My action research project helped me to think critically about how the students actually make sense of things rather than following the scripted curriculum. Before I would say, ‘why don’t they just translate, but it’s not that simple. I now appreciate the complexities of bilingualism better.

According to Freire (1970a), ‘problem-posing’ education fundamentally leads to a transformative consciousness whereby one sees themselves as a subject who can transform the world rather than be passive recipients of the actions of more dominant groups. In addition, this approach empowers teachers to become comfortable with questioning the assumed wisdom of mandated curricula and as a result assume greater responsibility in their own classrooms (Giroux, 2004).

Second, action research created opportunities to become more complete members of their communities of practice. This was particularly evident in the after-school basketball program because it was fundamentally organized to go beyond one classroom and extended into the community. By becoming a more active participant in their communities, especially those that have been historically

disadvantaged economically and linguistically, they acquired the means to validate the experiences of the parents and children they wished to uplift (Ada, 1997; Banks, 2001; Nieto, 2001).

Third, the TRs realized the complexities of problems they once felt had simplistic solutions, and also felt increased responsibility to address the problems. Several TRs regarded the ethnographic approach and methodology as fundamental tools toward mediating these realizations. One TR stated, “Action research has made me understand the importance of flexibility to modify strategies and goals throughout the project.” In all cases, TRs had to deal with the uncertainty of making shifts in their plans because of changes in participants or other unforeseeable circumstances. This necessitated a need for flexibility and a high tolerance for ambiguity; furthermore, most of the TRs initially considered these modifications in the midst of data collection as ‘unscientific’ or a deviation from their plan perhaps even thinking that their work was “not real” research (Esposito & Smith, 2006).

Several expressed concerns of “not being able” to document the dramatic change(s) that would be valid. Thus, many TRs changed their epistemic stances toward the role of theory, shifting from a positivistic perspective to a more grounded framework. One TR recognized the importance of viewing her work as building and often rebuilding theoretical explanations for observations and reflections. As full participant observers immersed in the context of study, many realized how difficult it was to document everything; and, they struggled with the notion that some data sources (i.e., detached and direct observation and interviews) were more valid than others (i.e., ex post facto reflections or delayed field-note writing).

For example, one TR expressed the importance of having access to “time-sensitive” video or audio recorded observations/interviews as opposed to field-notes that were written well after the fact. Finally, each TR struggled with documenting change for peripheral and distant participants. In reporting findings to other colleagues, one TR stated,

I knew what I had seen and experienced, I knew that my kids had improved their vocabulary uses...I had seen them use target words in naturalistic situations; but some teachers insisted on test scores and other quantifiable measures.

After engaging the literature and our numerous discussions about methodology and documenting evidence of change, all of the TRs adopted a more ethnographic approach that would focus on everyday language use. This appeared to be the most logical unit of analysis for documenting subtle yet profound cultural shifts over a six month period. The changes in how focal participants talked and the nature of their verbal and non-verbal participation provided a sound empirical tool for collecting evidence that could be publicly shared.

In one case, a TR was trying to change the overt negativity towards parents and parent involvement in her community of practice. In fact, in the beginning the principal, who was Spanish bilingual, never used Spanish in the context of parent

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meetings. The TR investigated this observation and found that the principal deliberately was trying to be distant and implicitly send a message to Latino parents, “to assimilate or else!” He was hostile to Spanish use by parents and claimed “it was the reason for their poverty”; so, he refused to use Spanish.

However, the action research project created numerous opportunities for the principal to directly engage parents. One of the most noticeable changes emerged when the principal shifted his language use. He began to regularly give public addresses to parents in Spanish which arguably indexed a radical shift in his stance toward Latino parents. A closer look at three of the action research projects shows how participating TRs: (1) experienced *empowerment & transformation*; (2) responded to *unexpected turns*; and (3) navigated methodological issues and the challenges of documenting *change*. Table 2 shows the type and range of methodologies used and data collected in the three focal case-studies.

In the following sections, I explore how action research was empowering, transformative, and often filled with methodological and conceptual challenges for three urban educators. More importantly, these cases highlight not only the changes carried out within the participants’ respective schools, but also raise questions about potential directions and changes for teacher education.

Table 2:
Focal Teachers’ Data Corpus

Teacher Researcher	Topic	Field Notes	Journals	Surveys	Focus Groups	Video-Logs	Discourse Transcripts	Final Reports
Erik	Changing Identities: After-school Basketball Program	X	X	X	X			X
Elena	Changing Pedagogical Practices through Changing Nutrition Habits	X	X		X	X	X	X
Patricia	Changing Writing Attitudes in ELL Contexts	X	X		X	X	X	X

Changing Identity(s):

The After School Basketball Program

Erick was a middle-school teacher who taught in a large middle-school consisting of 1,200 students in a predominant Spanish-speaking community where nearly 98% of the students came from a Spanish-speaking home. In addition, his school was identified as a Title I school where over 70% of the students were on free or reduced lunch. Like many of the other participating TRs, there was a heavy emphasis on “core curriculum” namely the language arts and mathematics. The prevailing administrative culture relegated co-curricular activities to the margins, and there was a general presumption that co-curricular activities such as art, drama, band, and sports did not provide valuable learning opportunities for students. Furthermore, Erick noted that many of the instructors and staff at the school thought that a certain segment of the school population were not disciplined and created problems for them. These students, who were regularly and pejoratively referred to as ‘homeboys’ and ‘cholos,’ always had disciplinary problems and were involved in other anti-social behaviors.

In attempting to develop a salient action research project, Erick collaborated with many of his colleagues in order to find a suitable problem to address. Erick quickly realized that there was a powerful deficit view *vis a vis* the students, their parents, the school, and the community at large. Many of the teachers stated that the students “lack discipline” and that their parents “simply don’t care”; others mentioned the need for more discipline policies and better teacher collaboration. After collaborating with other TRs, Erick decided that he needed a more systematic approach to measuring the needs of his school community. In order to probe the salient issues at his school site, he collaboratively developed a questionnaire for teachers designed to both identify the problems and the priority for addressing them.

What became evident to Erick from this process of inquiry was the disconnect that existed between the teachers and their students. Furthermore, many teachers cited the need for co-curricular activities, especially after-school sports. After-school sports and co-curricular activities were seen as tangible vehicles for improving school spirit, a sense of affiliation, academic performance, and discipline. However, after-school programs were non-existent for more than two decades; and, according to the principal, after-school sports had been the victim of the budget short falls when the middle school concept was implemented in 1983. As a result, Erick used the initial findings to launch an after-school basketball program that proved to be challenging, transformative, and empowering for the school community, especially the lives of the participating students and the teachers who worked with them.

Erick assumed the role of a full-participant by organizing a viable basketball team for the school. In addition, to his regular duties as a teacher he was now the full-time coach for the basketball team representing his school, but he also had to initiate basketball programs in the surrounding area in order to form a legitimate

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“league.” He quickly realized, “A school doesn’t operate in a vacuum but is connected to the surrounding communities.” Erick instituted an academic and citizenship requirement for students who were interested in joining the team that was to be completed by their teachers. Three students were below the standard set by Erick, but he gave them an opportunity to prove themselves over a one month period. After one month, they had grade checks again and this time they qualified. According to Erick, he had witnessed the “first measurable positive change” of the program. Erick speaks about one of the more dramatic and surprising behavioral shifts:

The biggest surprise in these behavioral shifts was that of Gerry. His original grade check displayed 5 ‘U’s’ (Unsatisfactory) and 1 ‘N’ (Needs Improvement). This type of report just showed that he was a constant behavior problem and disruptive in class. He had a history of being in trouble at school and if he continued on that path, he could easily have been expelled from school. He returned a month later with the grade check and showed no signs of disruption. Every teacher reported that he was behaving and had drastically improved. Just to be sure, I went around speaking with each teacher about his improvement, and they all verified the fact that he was doing exceptionally better.

Given the action research orientation, TRs were cognizant of making changes and focusing on methods that would effectively document those changes. Thus, Erick paid closer attention to these three students and conducted focus groups with them through out the project. After the season, Erick conducted a focus group discussion with the aforementioned students and asked them about how the after-school basketball program affected their lives. The following excerpt illustrates their thoughts about the transformative and empowering nature of the program:

Erick: Tell me how the basketball program has affected your lives?

Gerry: (Before I could even finish asking the question, Gerry blurted out), Hell yeah, without basketball I wouldn’t even be here, I wouldn’t be graduating.

Isaac: (laughs) I know, huh?

Erick: Do you feel you would have improved on your own?

Gerry: No way, without after school basketball I wouldn’t have cared, I didn’t want to do nothing before.

Eddie: I know, this fool always acted like an idiot, now he don’t even mess around or nothing.

Erick: (directed at Gerry) Do you want to play basketball in high school?

Gerald: Hell ya, cause if I don’t I probably will get in trouble and get kicked out.

At the end of the year, the school held a grade promotion ceremony where Gerry was given a citizenship award. Erick notes a conversation with Gerry’s step-father after the ceremony. He approached Erick and asked if he could take a picture with

him stating, “I need a picture of the man that made this all possible.” Erick records in his field-notes:

I was unsure of what he meant exactly and looked at him puzzled and he seemed to notice my confusion, so he responded by saying, if it weren't for what you done for Gerry, he wouldn't be here and I just wanted to say thank you because we tried, but he just wouldn't listen to us, but because of basketball and your rules, he all of sudden cared and is doing so much better.' After seeing how happy Gerry and his family were and hearing what they had to say, it only made what I had been through as a result of this program all the more satisfying.

Challenges

While the positive changes are intrinsically rewarding and motivating for TRs, the narrative of action research with this cohort would be incomplete without discussing some of the challenges TRs encountered. TRs were trained to expect and welcome challenges and seemingly unchangeable circumstances. Erick noted that he expected to see “more of an improvement in everyone's behavior, not just a select few.” Erick discusses in depth several of the more challenging students. One of the key players, Ray, was expelled for smoking marijuana. Erick was invited by the principal to sit on the hearing, but it was his third offense which made the case difficult to challenge. Another student, Marcos, gave Erick “a tough time” because he was always in detention. Erick eventually decided to intervene and speak with one of his teachers. As a result of the discussion, they mutually decided to shift the disciplining responsibilities for Marcos to Erick where Erick would make him do extra conditioning instead of detention. Toward the end of the year, this teacher began to describe Marcos as “rather enjoyable.” The positive effects on Marcos seemed to extend to other teachers as well. In an interview with Marcos' math teacher, he said that “Marcos has become much calmer and is friendly with all students. He is very respectful and continuously talks about basketball in class, he has also become more popular with everyone and his confidence appears to be higher.”

Working in collaboration with the teachers sent a new signal to the students because they had never seen their teachers communicating with each other about them. The after-school basketball program helped mediate and facilitate these new social relations and fostered a culture of collaboration that was unprecedented at this school. Erick conducted exit surveys at the end of the year to measure teacher perception regarding student performance and behavior. More than two-thirds of the teachers surveyed noted that the after-school basketball program had played a vital role in improving student behavior. Erick decided to follow up this survey with focus group discussions with the teachers who regularly worked with the participating students. One teacher noted that students had become “more responsible since participating in the after school program and have improved in the classroom.” One of the teachers who had both Isaac and Gerry thought that both had “become more concerned with school and their behavior improved.” A third teacher felt that

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the students were “taking school more seriously” and that they were “enjoying themselves more while at school.”

Clearly the biggest challenge for Erick was the degree to which his action research project consumed his life which was a point affirmed by the rest of the TRs. What began as a requirement for a Masters program quickly “snow-balled” into an all encompassing project grounded in the needs and experiences of the TRs’ community of practice. Erick speaks of his own transformation, “The first few weeks, I felt as if I was creating a program for the purposes of this project, but before I knew it, this program had taken a life of its own.” Erick realized a significant shift in his public profile as a result of implementing an after-school basketball program at his middle school. A program that began as a peripheral activity had become the subject of a district wide agenda item with him being the chief advocate and spokesperson thus taking “a life of its own.” While overwhelmed at times, Erick felt “empowered as a researcher because I was able to guide, initiate, and direct the methods necessary to implement the project.” More importantly, the action research orientation and methodology allowed him the flexibility to adjust the focus as changes and shifts were occurring. The results of the research were formally reported to colleagues, but because his colleagues were partners and stake-holders in the process, the “reporting sessions” were more like “conversations on how to improve and sustain the program.” Perhaps, one of the most important lessons from Erick’s case study for teacher education programs nationwide is the qualitative difference between a traditional, detached thesis and an action research project. Action research has the potential to engender authentic, situated learning opportunities for educators in ways that traditional thesis do not.

Changing Pedagogical Practices through Changing Nutrition Habits

In another Title I school with a predominant Latino, bilingual population, Elena implemented an action research project designed to address the health needs of her school. Elena worked in conjunction with two other TRs in the same community of practice and developed an action plan with the school principal. The discussion with the principal lead to three distinct areas of immediate need: (1) nutrition and health; (2) safety; and (3) classroom management. Elena decided that the nutritional and health component was the most relevant and intriguing one for her. Elena developed a plan to develop a student centered curriculum that would engage students in situated learning activities designed to improve nutritional knowledge. Elena began to design activities that were ‘hands-on’ in nature given the Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT)¹ orientation to learning that guided the teacher education program overall and was the subject of discussion in our classes. Initially, Elena found the assessment and documentation of learning to be the most challenging component. She regularly asked during the formative

stages of her action research plan, “How will I know they are learning and how can I show it?”

Drawing on Rogoff’s (2003) *apprenticeship* model and the concept of *participatory appropriation*, Elena focused on observing shifts in participation in socially organized activities. She would principally document these ‘shifts’ through the shifts in language use and discourse practices. Elena became attentive to observing her students as experts of knowledge and knowledge creation. While she formally espoused these theoretical frameworks, she only appropriated them after observing one of her students named David. This further confirmed that in action research change is multidirectional and that TRs themselves must be cognizant of the changes occurring in their own practices and thoughts as a result of participating in an action plan. Initially, Elena’s practical application of ‘hands-on’ activity was simply writing the recipe on the board and having students follow the recipe. Although the activity seems ‘hands-on’ and student centered, in reality, the lessons were scripted and formulaic. After observing David’s writing in his journal, Elena notes having a “valuable teaching moment.” She writes in one of her field notes:

I introduced a cooking activity entitled ‘Rice Cake Treats.’ The students had an opportunity to prepare a healthy snack... As I walked around helping students prepare their snack, I noticed that David was writing down something in his journal. I took a closer look and realized that he was writing down the recipe, but he was also writing about how much he enjoyed the snack he prepared and how he felt. I realized that this type of activity would be valuable in order to better understand how the students think about healthy eating. David’s work created a significant change in how I designed the lessons.

Interestingly, Elena describes this episode as a valuable teaching moment. As a teacher educator I saw this as a valuable “teaching/learning moment” as well. When asked to comment about why she considered this a ‘teaching’ moment, she responded, “I guess it was really a learning moment as well.” Many researchers in teacher education have argued the need to emphasize learning in teacher training (e.g., Little, 2002; Wilson & Berne, 1999) and action research projects such as this one provide authentic and situated learning opportunities. As a result of observing David’s writing, Elena began to encourage journal writing and she noted many other students also using their journals to write about nutrition and their thoughts about the foods they were preparing and their experimentations with new types of food.

Once the nutritional activity became viewed as a literacy activity, it was easier for Elena to justify the amount of time spent on nutritional issues. In fact, after presenting this experience to other colleagues, many tried to implement this approach in their own practice. Furthermore, with students initiating the writing activities, Elena noted a radical change in how students perceived themselves within the classroom community as well as how they perceived writing. They had now become active makers of knowledge rather than passive recipients. In terms of writing attitude, writing was no longer a discrete task to be completed for the teacher. For

Elena, action research allowed her to not only see her students as “experts” but also to value and implement their expertise in her own learning especially in regards to organizing classroom activities. Like Erick’s after school basketball project, Elena’s action plan to change nutritional attitudes lead to developments that were not anticipated yet valuable to the overall goals of her community of practice.

Changing Writing Attitudes for English Language Learners

While shifting writing attitudes was not the initial goal in Elena’s action research project, Patricia, who was an eight-year veteran at a Title I, predominantly Latino elementary school, designed an action plan that would positively impact the prevailing negative writing attitudes in her first grade class. If the kids felt that writing didn’t have any relevance in their own lives or in their own development or writing was simply to fulfill some authoritative figure’s expectations, this was considered a negative attitude toward writing. This assessment was borne out of Patricia’s initial focus groups with nineteen first graders where she concluded, “Most of the students perceived that school and parental expectations were by far the main reason people need to write.” Patricia was troubled by the fact that “Very few students viewed communication as an important purpose for writing and they already were conditioned to think that mechanics were the most important aspect of writing.” If students in first grade were alienated by writing then the academic forecast for these students would be grim given the importance of writing and communication to the academic language development of ELLs (August & Hakuta, 1997; Cummins, 1989).

These findings in her site were particularly troubling in light of the research on ‘best practices’ for second language learners such as integrating writing, drawing on multiple modes of communication, and providing “a balanced curriculum that includes both basic and higher-order skills that enhance understanding and opportunities for practice.” (August & Hakuta, 1997, p. 171). Thus, Patricia set out to change the writing attitudes of the students so that they would eventually see themselves as writers and authors. Drawing on sociocultural theory and Vygotsky’s notion of learning as socially mediated (Vygotsky, 1978), Patricia designed a holistic writing program that included aspects of traditional process writing through writer’s workshop, autobiographical journal writing, and expository writing while maintaining a writing portfolio for each student and regularly reviewing and sharing her feedback with the students individually as well as in small groups.

According to Patricia, the concept of learning as socially mediated helped her to “see the importance of socially organizing learning, positioning students to assist one another, and designing tasks that challenge them by drawing on multiple tools and expertise.” Another critical point she appropriated from sociocultural theory is that writing should be “purposeful and meaningful for the students.” She viewed

the “Writer’s Workshop” as “a great model” toward changing her students’ negative writing attitudes.

The “Writer’s Workshop” was designed as an interdisciplinary writing program focused on the process of writing (Harwayne & McCormick Calkins, 1987; McCormick Calkins, 1994). The focus is on meaning and content, conferencing with peers/teachers, revising, and developing in young writers the confidence to be authors. In Patricia’s class, students wrote during Writers’ Workshop two to three days each week for between one and one-and-a-half hours. In order to change the perception that writing is a discrete task, Patricia felt it was critical to integrate writing across the curriculum and across multiple activities so that writing became integral to the culture of the classroom. Not only were Writers’ Workshops integrated across the core curriculum like social studies and the sciences, they were also integrated into field trips and other non-classroom activities. Autobiographical journal writing, expository writing, poetry, and letter writing were also incorporated in the program. Students also maintained a portfolio where they would store their published work and self-selected pieces from their journals.

Patricia began each writer’s workshop with some modeling of writing conventions and strategies, discuss the writing process, and then reflect on selections from the student portfolios. In addition, she discussed how to provide constructive feedback to their peers. More importantly, Patricia regularly stressed the importance of writing for communicative purposes and downplayed the emphasis on mechanics that seemed to impact the children’s attitudes toward writing. Patricia conducted regular focus groups with the children in order to document their voices on writing and to assess the effectiveness of her program. While examining the portfolios provided insight into the development of writing itself, the focus groups were most instrumental in gauging the children’s metalinguistic awareness *vis a vis* writing. Patricia explains a gradual progression of kids describing themselves as authors and writers. The emphasis on “neatness, punctuation, and correct capitalization” had clearly become secondary indicators of “good writing.” According to Patricia, “The overwhelming majority now believed that strategies, such as details, descriptions, voice, audience awareness, and expression was what good writing was made of.”

Overall, Patricia found the action research project both rewarding and challenging. As she examined each student, several students didn’t respond to the degree that she had hoped for, but action research had provided her with a mode of inquiry that had “empowered her to persist in finding solutions to everyday pedagogical issues.” For Patricia, the most dramatic shifts in writing attitude were the most compelling and rewarding. She cited the case of Marvin who “groaned” throughout the early months when a writing activity was introduced but later showed “much excitement and enthusiasm” for writing and, especially, sharing his writing. Patricia concluded that “sharing” proved to be the most important aspect of her action plan toward fostering positive writing attitudes and altering her students’ perceptions about their identities as writers. Sharing created a peer centered community of writers

whereby each member assumed rights and responsibilities towards each other. Thus, it became evident to Patricia that the best way to affect “writing attitudes” is not to locate them within individuals to be “fixed”; but rather create a community context equipped with mediational tools directed toward a genuine and engaging purpose for writing.

Discussion and Implications

The participating teachers in this study reflected on five questions related to their action research journeys, namely *empowerment of self and/or constituents, transformation of self and/or constituents, challenges, methodological issues, and changes in their schools*. Overall, this analysis illustrated how educators engaged in critical self-reflection and systematic inquiry aimed at directly improving the conditions of their own communities of practice can make transformative educational practices a reality. This process was not without struggle and persistence and required flexibility not generally associated with traditional forms of research. The synthesis of these narratives into a “meta-narrative” provides a framework for unpacking key epistemological and identity issues experienced by teachers engaged in action research. These narratives also provide examples of how these educators engaged in theorizing and developed a range of methodological tools through mutual engagement and collaboration with colleagues, teacher-education faculty, and community stake-holders to manage the challenges and uncertainties of their everyday practices. These teachers were able to name and redefine mandated scripted and formulaic pedagogical norms that typically marginalize students’ opportunities to learn, especially Latinas/os and English language learners. In the course of conducting action research, uncertainty and sometimes ‘chaos’ were no longer strangers, but rather familiar faces to embrace as opportunities for continued growth and learning.

In a time when definitions of valid knowledge and modes of inquiry are narrowing (Erickson & Gutiérrez, 2002; Gee, 2005), more action research projects that demonstrate rigorous, systematic and positive transformative change are needed as further evidence of viable alternative epistemological approaches to teacher development. This account of the action research process shows that the fundamental divergence of action research and traditional forms of ‘empirical scientific research,’ especially in educational contexts, are less about empirical rigor and more about the presumptuous identity of the researcher as a detached, unbiased, and neutral observer. Instead, participatory action research has the potential, as demonstrated in these cases, to provide an alternative to what counts as knowledge and research by foregrounding change as the objective of the work rather than mere description of a phenomenon. The researcher, in this case the teacher-researcher, becomes a central participant and an explicit agent of change. Philosophically, it challenges many of the tacit and overt assumptions of what counts as rigorous inquiry, namely

the role of uncertainty, researcher position, and flexibility within scientific modes of knowledge construction.

This work also builds upon the conversation on *empowerment* and *transformation* collected in the special issue of *Teacher Education Quarterly* by reiterating the importance of choice, systematic data collection, reflection, support from school administrators (e.g., the after school basketball program), and the discomfort that emanates from uncertainty. Thus, it provides a broader coalescing of the common threads found across the action research literature in teacher education (Ada, 1997; Freire, 1970a; Nagda et al., 2003). Finally, for teacher education programs with an urban mission, action research is consonant with teachers and faculty who make issues of social justice, equity, and access the *raison d'être* for their activity. As Wilson-Cooper (2006) states, "Collaborative inquiry is difficult, messy, and demanding, as it lacks the straightforwardness and efficiency that characterize some hierarchical research approaches. Yet, it aligns with democratic and social justice-oriented values."

Conclusion

The significance of this study hinges upon the voices, perspectives, and experiences of teacher researchers engaged in urban schools with socioeconomic, academic, and linguistic/cultural challenges. They developed an action-based research orientation and consciousness and learned to pose problems/questions about the complexities of issues. They learned to become flexible and comfortable with the uncertainties of implementing their plan of action. Finally, through the focus groups and other discussions with colleagues they demonstrated critical reflexivity about the process. Over the course of the study, the teachers critically reflected on the five questions related to *empowerment of self and/or constituents, transformation of self and/or constituents, challenges, methodological issues, and changes in their schools.*

While there was variation in terms of content and scope of projects, there were many similarities in terms of process. The evidence showed how teachers engaged in action research can become empowered to ask critical questions, pose problems, and challenge the status quo in order to build toward a more participatory and democratic ideal (Nagda et al., 2003). More importantly, by taking greater responsibility for their students' learning, the TRs no longer waited for change to come from the outside and trusted themselves enough to take risks. As the cases of Erick and Elena demonstrated, each step taken opened new possibilities and challenges; the impact expanded "like concentric circles around the stone thrown in water" (Glesne, 1991, p. 11). This sometimes led to difficulties in project management, documentation, and assessment, since other participants were not nearly as invested (especially in terms of time) as they were. In each case, the TRs became more active participants in not only their local communities but also the teacher education research community.

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While the lessons from this study are profound, especially in terms of the teachers' experiences, there is a need to examine these changes longitudinally. The goal of the action research projects was to engender change in self, students, and site; however, the perspectives and involvement of other colleagues (beyond the TR cohort) would greatly enrich the analysis. The fifth question regarding "change in site" was the most difficult to answer and one of the limitations of this study. Erick's after-school program represented one of the more vivid examples of change within site and community. Furthermore, the five critical questions posed to the TRs, especially the ones regarding empowerment and transformation, need to be discussed by students, parents, and other teachers. Questions regarding the "lasting effect" of action research, the impact on students' academic achievement, and challenges in assessment need further investigation in order to validate studies such as this one. Given the reality of administrative pressures to demonstrate gains through high stakes testing, the incorporation of more formal and standards based assessments might serve as a viable tool for not only corroborating the findings but also gaining support.

Note

¹ For a more detailed review of CHAT and an overview of the '5th Dimension' refer to Cole (2006).

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