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Action Research as Professional Development: A Study of Two Teachers

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ACTION RESEARCH AS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:
A STUDY OF TWO TEACHERS

by
Wade Glathar

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of the thesis submitted by

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This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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ABSTRACT

ACTION RESEARCH AS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: A STUDY OF TWO TEACHERS

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Master of Arts

This study examines the experiences of two teachers in a public charter school who implement action research in their classrooms. The study explored the key elements of professional development as well as action research and makes the case as to why action research is an effective tool for teacher development. Participants were selected based on having little teaching experience and familiarity with action research. The study examined the experiences of teachers who have had limited professional development as they use action research in their practices. Data for the study will be drawn from interviews as well as researcher and participant journals.

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I am grateful for the support of my graduate committee, all of their sage input and positive encouragement. Thanks goes to my graduate committee chair and the graduate coordinator who have spent hours and hours schooling me on how to be a researcher.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Professional development, including workshops, conferences, and in-service meetings, are aimed at improving teachers and teaching. However, teachers are not always impacted by professional development activities (Yoon, Park, & Hong, 1999). Some teacher development activities leave teachers feeling frustrated that their time has been wasted. Supervisors, principals, and specialists are constantly searching for professional development activities that will be worthwhile and effective.

Additionally, teachers often do not participate in teacher-sharing activities (Corder et al., 2008). There may be a number of reasons why teachers do not share with their colleagues (Collison & Cook, 2000). Along with others, some of the reasons for this lack of sharing may include: lack of confidence, perceived lack of time, lack of relationships with colleagues outside of the school context, and ignorance as to how to share their thoughts, work, frustrations, and questions (Hew & Hara, 2007). Research toward finding solutions to the following challenges are needed: teachers find some professional activities do not really impact their teaching, and teachers aren't sharing with each other (Kain, 1998).

Statement of the Purpose

In the last thirty years, action research has become more common as a means of professional development (Yoon, Park, & Hong, 1999). While the formal existence of action research and its terminology may be limited to less than seventy years (Kemmis, 1997), some teachers have been informally implementing many of the steps of action

research for as long as teachers have existed. The reflective teacher strives to look at his/her own classroom and, through inquiry and trial, improves practices. Action research seeks to attain a similar goal (Tompkins et. al., 1996).

In many ways reflective teachers and action researchers have similar practices and goals. In some cases, it appears that only the systematic, formal steps of action research separate those researchers from their reflective colleagues (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990). The differentiation of reflective teachers and action researchers is the problem this study seeks to understand.

Research Questions

The intent of this study is to add to the body of research regarding action research. The study will answer the following questions:

1. How is participating in a formal action research project different than the regular practices of reflective teachers?
2. Does action research offer anything worthwhile to the already reflective teacher?
3. Can reflective teachers use action research to improve teacher sharing and professionalism?

Earlier studies (Yoon, Park, & Hong, 1999) suggest that of those teachers who do not participate in action research, 24% reject participation as unnecessarily formal. However, this study will identify experiences and opinions of teachers who *do* participate in action research and benefit from its formality. There will be no attempt made to persuade non-participants to join in action research. The focus will be to determine the benefits for already reflective teachers who are interested in or participate in action research.

Limitations

This research is based on data reported to the researchers by the participants, which has several limitations. Self-report data are limited in their ability to be replicated and generalized to a larger population. Furthermore, reliability can be an issue with self-report data. The research proposed will also involve self-reporting of teacher reflection. Reflection, in and of itself, seems to be unsuited to quantitative measurement (Sumsion & Fleet, 1996). As with self-report data, reflective practices can be very vulnerable to criticisms about their credibility (Sumsion & Fleet, 1996).

Definition of Terms

Action Research. A method of systematic inquiry undertaken and documented by classroom teachers for the purpose of improving their own practices (Tompkins et. al., 1996).

Professional development. Any professional growth opportunity in which teachers develop their craft, help share school practices, and build learning communities (Way, 2001).

Reflection. Process by which experiences and actions are analyzed and viewed in the context of thinking and decision-making (Schön, 1987).

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In recent years, action research has become increasingly popular as a form of professional development for teachers (Licklider, 1997). This can be seen in its presence in staff development guides and workshops (Halsall, 1998). The purpose of this paper is to describe the experiences of two teachers in an elementary school as they were introduced to the action research process and conducted individual action research projects in their classrooms for the first time.

Professional Development

Professional development can be defined as any professional growth opportunity in which teachers develop their craft, help shape school practice, and build learning communities (Way, 2001). Teacher development is the building of skills, practice, and knowledge that will enhance a classroom, a school, or a community. Effective professional development also includes practices which result in leadership strategies, institutional commitment, research, or action planning (Wlodkowski, 1990). At the same time, effective professional development is relevant to educators and their everyday environment as it addresses the foundations of solid educational practices (Lawler & King, 2000). Furthermore, it is focused on student outcomes, collaborative in practice, linked to subject matter, integrated into the teacher's day-to-day culture, and tied to the school's improvement process (Way, 2001). Professional development can be evaluated based on participants' reactions, participants' learning, participants' use of new knowledge and skills, and organization support and change (Guskey, 2002).

There are dozens of lists that have been published in recent years, which outline the elements of effective professional development. The lists have been compiled by researchers as well as by organizations such as: Educational Testing Services, American Federation of Teachers, National Partnership for Excellence and Accountability in Teaching, the U.S. Department of Education, and the National Staff Development Council (Guskey, 2003). While there is some disagreement among researchers as to what makes effective professional development, some recurring themes can be identified (Guskey, 2003). After researching 21 of these lists, Guskey (2003) found that the majority of research on professional development concurs that effective development is centered around the following: enhancement of teachers' content and pedagogic knowledge, attainment of higher-order thinking skills within a subject, use of sufficient time and resources that are carefully structured and purposefully directed, promotion of collegiality and collaboration, building of leadership capacity, and meeting of teachers' identified needs. Effective teacher development is also marked by the fact that teachers involved gain the feeling that they are moral educators doing important work, thereby avoiding burn out (Higgins-D'Alessandro, 1998). In other words, effective teacher development inspires and uplifts participants.

Reflective Practices

Many have contributed to the vast research on reflection. Although John Dewey is often credited with the earliest foundations on reflection theory, reflective practices can be traced back thousands of years earlier to the likes of Buddha, Plato, and Lao Tzu (Hatton & Smith, 1995). These great teachers recognized reflection as the state of being awake to knowledge and beliefs (Macy, 1994). Dewey further emphasized that reflection

is more than merely examining or thinking; it involves an active and deliberate cognitive process that uses connected ideas of beliefs and knowledge in order to gain deeper understanding and attain goals of improvement (Dewey, 1938). Reflection has also been described as a type of out-of-body experience in which actions are analyzed and viewed in the context of thinking and decision-making processes (Schön, 1987). Reflection involves intention; it is not a passive process. Furthermore, the process of reflection necessitates a slowing down in order to examine and analyze. It cannot be rushed (Montie et al., 1998). Finally, in the context of education, reflection involves teachers thoughtfully adapting, applying, and evaluating their knowledge of pedagogy and content in order to improve student learning in a particular context (LaBoskey, 1994).

Reflection can have many faces and offers varied benefits. It can take the shape of journaling, videotaping, analyzing, dialogue groups, partner coaching, and even on-line chats (Montie et al., 1998). Reflective practices offer support, assist in gaining of knowledge, give opportunity for growth and challenges, open more perspective and solution possibilities, and help to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Just what can be called reflective practice as well as benefits of reflective practice is difficult to narrow to one exclusive definition. Both the practice and the benefits come in many forms.

Van Manen (1997) describes three main types of reflection: technical, practical and critical. Technical reflection focuses solely on the attainment of an outlined goal. Efficiency is a key. Practical reflection not only focuses on a goal, but also analyzes the strategies and means involved in achieving that goal. Here, effectiveness is a key and justifying a goal becomes important. Critical reflection analyzes a goal and means to that

goal in a context of morality and justice. Here, purpose and growth are key. Reflective practices can fit into one or more of the three types of reflection simultaneously.

Over the decades there have been hundreds of models of teacher development with effectiveness ranging as broadly as the models themselves. Many have incorporated ideas used in reflective practices. Models that encompass the elements of effective professional development are more likely to become long-term, effective alternatives to traditional professional development activities. One such model of increasing popularity in recent years is action research (Licklider, 1997).

Action Research as Professional Development

Action research can be defined as the process of studying a classroom or school in order to improve the quality of teaching (Hensen, 1996). It is, however, a very systematic, scientific study which promotes inquiry-based and contextually-driven professional development (Crow & Spencer, 2003). This organized, studied process is reflective of and motivated by hopes of growth and improvement in instruction.

The action research process has five main steps: identify a problem or question, determine the data collection needs and method, collect and analyze the data, create an action plan and describe how findings can be used, and report data and plan for future action (Johnson, 2002). This is actually more of a cyclical process than a step process. These steps help to ensure that the action research will be professional, complete, and valid. Action research does not start with an answer, although it is structured, and the question to be explored may be refined or changed during the course of the research. Regular observations are very important to action research (Johnson, 2002). Action research is not meant to be complicated, elaborate, lengthy, or quantitative in nature

(Johnson, 2002). Due to these characteristics, action research is user-friendly and requires little prior experience on the part of the researcher.

Not only is action research increasing in popularity, the current emphasis on reflective teaching practice makes action research easy to use and practical (Neapolitan, 2000). Recent studies of action research have revealed its many benefits as a tool for teacher development. One such study concluded that action research efforts produced significant gains in faculty professional development (Raudenheimer, 2003). Some of the gains included: improved skills, amplified motivation to accomplish goals, enhanced collaboration and interpersonal relationships with colleagues, and increased teacher credibility (Raudenheimer, 2003).

Results of action research studies show that teachers believe that engaging in action research enhances their personal and professional growth (Neapolitan, 2000). Teachers also identify action research as a useful tool for impacting and influencing other teachers. Action research aids teachers in becoming role models, change agents, and in establishing their credibility with other teachers (Neapolitan, 2000). Additionally, participation in action research can improve teachers' confidence in themselves and their teaching abilities. Teachers who engage in action research report increased confidence in changing and adjusting their instruction due to their methodical and structured testing of new strategies and scientific study of the results (Neapolitan, 2000). Therefore, teacher participants in action research gain more confidence in redesigning their classroom instruction. Empowered teachers are able to bring their talents, experiences, and creative ideas into the classroom and implement programs and strategies that best meet the needs of their students (Johnson, 2002). In addition to an empowered approach to change in

classroom instruction, teachers gain other skills through action research. They report more autonomy, a higher level of problem-solving skills and an increased ability to use classroom data more effectively (Neapolitan, 2000).

As action research calls for the teacher-researchers to be reflective and self-determine the direction of their improvements, teachers have ownership of their goals. Action research allows, and almost demands, that only teachers of the classrooms can set goals for development. When teachers have ownership in creating and processing goals, they are more likely to accomplish the intended goals (Kraft & Wheeler, 1997). Therefore, because action research calls for individual teachers to be the authors of the research (Johnson, 2002), action research, more than any other forms of teacher development, facilitates ownership and accomplishment of goals.

Another benefit of action research is the transformation that occurs in teacher communication. Teachers who have participated in action research enhance their relationships with their colleagues, shifting from a no-talk or polite-talk level to a candid-conversation level of association (Russo & Beyerbach, 2001). As communication between colleagues becomes more substantive, opportunity for support, sharing, and growth increases. Additionally, cooperation and collaboration flourish as a result. Action research fosters meaningful and collaborative teacher-teacher relationships and provides opportunities for focused, helpful dialogue (Levin & Rock, 2003).

The benefits of action research as a model for professional development are many and varied. They range from subtle impacts on individual teachers' views of their teaching to continuing efforts to engage in action research and report findings (Salzman & Snodgrass, 2003). Action research can be used as a meaningful replacement of

traditional teacher inservices (Johnson, 2002). Does action research generate a standardized experience for all teachers? Do the experiences vary for teachers with very limited professional development experience? While past research has explored the experiences of teachers and action research, this qualitative case study specifically documents the experiences of two elementary school teachers in a public charter school as action research is implemented in their practice. This study is valuable in understanding how action research can function as professional development for teachers. The experiences of the participants can inform school leaders as to the pros and cons of using action research school-wide with teachers as a professional development model.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Context of the Study

This study is comprised of the individual action research projects of the participants in addition to my own action research as I examined the experiences of the participants in the context of professional development. It is multi-level or layered action research in that while the participants were conducting their own research, I too was conducting action research of their action research. As lead administrator, I am responsible for the professional development of the teaching staff at my school. In order to better understand whether action research would be a viable option to fill the need I have to provide professional development to my faculty, I conducted action research regarding its use as professional development while the study participants conducted their own individual action research projects.

The pseudonym Central School will be used when referring to the setting of this study. Central School is an accredited K through 8 public charter school that was chartered by the Utah State Office of Education in 2005. Central School was selected as the location for this study for two main reasons: I know the school and the faculty well and because action research will afford many of the faculty opportunities for professional development that would otherwise not be available at this time to Central School. As Central School is my current professional assignment, I have an insider's view with an understanding of how the school operates—its administration, students, and faculty—and it is a sample of convenience. This will allow me access to the school to perform my research with virtually unrestricted opportunities to interact with the participants. At the

same time, I have a vested interest in the success of the school and assume that action research will be of benefit to the faculty and students. I am currently a member of Central School's Curriculum and Development Committee, and as such I will conduct this research not only to report the experiences of the teachers involved, but also to help the committee and determine if action research will be used on a more long-term basis as professional development at Central School.

As public school employees, Central School teachers must adhere to identical licensure requirements as district schools, as outlined by the state education authority. With an enrolment of 675 students, the school employs approximately 36 teachers. Fourteen percent of the teachers have been licensed through non-traditional programs. Fourteen percent of the teachers have received Masters Degrees, including some of those licensed through non-traditional programs. Some of faculty teach elective courses such as yearbook, chess, volleyball, band or orchestra. The school employs 39 additional staff in non-certified positions, including office and custodial staff and classroom teaching assistants.

Socioeconomic status of the faculty and staff varies somewhat, although they may be less representative of the local population than their counterparts in other local schools. The majority of the students are members of families who fit into the middle to upper middle class segment of the local population. At the same time, several families who currently attend the school qualify for free and reduced lunch based on Federal guidelines and their incomes place them in the low to middle class segment of the population. Nearly all of the faculty are in the middle class range, earning salaries comparable to their district school colleagues. While some of the female faculty

contribute to their two-income households, many of them work in order to be at the school with their children.

The ethnicity of the faculty and students of Central School is relatively homogenous. The student body is largely comprised of White, American-born individuals. While there are a few students native to Romania, China, Russia, and the Czech Republic, their combined numbers account for less than one percent of the school's 675 member student body. Non-White ethnic backgrounds at Central School are similarly small relative to the size of the student body. Central School's student body consists of the following: 31 Hispanics, 6 African-Americans, 6 Chinese, 4 Japanese, 3 Middle Easterners, 2 Nepalese, 2 Basque, and 2 American Eskimos. Similarly, 3 of 75 faculty members, or 4%, were born outside of the United States. The Central School faculty includes one native Chinese and two native Pacific Islanders. The remaining staff members are White.

Participants

Individual faculty members at Central School simultaneously teach across a wide variety of grades and subjects. Their formal educational backgrounds range from early childhood to secondary education. Over 83% are female. Eight hold Masters Degrees. The teaching experience of the faculty members ranges from 1 to 33 years.

The fundamentals of action research and the research project were introduced to teachers at Central School during a regular monthly all-faculty meeting. Prior to the meeting, all of the teachers were given the finding questionnaire. From the finding questionnaire I learned that of the 36 teachers at Central School, only two had ever heard of or participated in action research. During the all-faculty meeting, I exposed the faculty

to the basics of action research. I presented to them a brief history of action research, the steps of action research and some examples of action research projects conducted by teachers. A discussion ensued and teachers were able to have their questions answered. Teachers were then instructed to plan out an action research project to conduct in their classrooms.

In order to narrow down my participant pool, I considered gender, age, teaching experience, teaching assignment, and attitudes toward teacher reflection. The intention was to select two participants who would be able to offer differing insights based upon difference in gender, age, teaching experience, and teaching assignment. In considering the information from the finding questionnaire, I looked for potential participants who were not familiar with action research per se, but who were inclined to participate in professional development activities, including routine teacher reflection.

After reviewing the data from the finding survey, together with experiences from the all-faculty meeting, I selected eight possible participants for the study. I then spoke with them individually and explained the scope of the action research project I was conducting and the involvement which would be required of the study participants, including the commitment to keep a research journal and meet with me on a weekly basis. I asked each one if they were interested and willing to be a study participant. Of the eight I met with, only two felt like they were willing to committed to the time and effort involved in being study participants. The process naturally yielded two participants for the study. While other teachers at Central School were engaged in action research, my study shifted focus to examine the experiences of the two study participants as they conducted action research in their classrooms for the first time.

Mary and Rita were selected as the study participants and agreed to their roles. In large part my goal was met, in that Mary and Rita differ in their backgrounds, years of teaching experience, and teaching assignments. However, my intention to find participants of different genders remained unmet. Mary and Rita are pseudonyms used for the purpose of concealing the identities of the participants.

Mary is a novice teacher in her second year of teaching. Her previous teaching experience was at a middle school as a science teacher. Her initial undergraduate degree was in the area of science, and she obtained a teaching license in secondary education science teaching through a state-sponsored alternative licensure program. A few years have lapsed from that teaching experience to her current assignment. This year, after obtaining her elementary teaching license, she is teaching an upper elementary grade for the first time. Mary is very goal-oriented and has already earned many of the graduate credits necessary in order to obtain a Masters Degree. In fact, she was recently awarded a scholarship to finish her graduate studies. For her age, she has considerable experience as a researcher and in reading and assessing research. Since her graduate degree will not be in education, however, Mary had not previously heard of action research. The concept was new to her, although elements of action research, such as data collection and analysis were not. She has an analytical mind and enjoys opportunities to hone her craft through professional development.

Rita is an experienced teacher with 11 years teaching experience, all with lower elementary grades. She holds a traditional early childhood teaching license and has experience teaching within a traditional school district as well as a private school setting. While she has been highly involved and motivated to stay current and informed regarding

best practices in early childhood education, she is relatively unfamiliar with the research process and has never been involved in a formal research project of any kind. She had never heard of action research prior to this study. She is motivated by a desire to understand young children better in order to improve her practice and serve their learning needs. To this end, she is highly motivated by professional development opportunities and strives to employ best practices in teaching as well as expand her knowledge base and skill set.

In order to create a point of context and reference, both participants were asked to describe their prior experiences with reflection and reflective teaching excluding any knowledge of action research attained by participation in this project. Both participants had identified themselves as reflective therefore I wanted to delineate their understanding of the concept of reflective teaching and ascertain what specific experiences they may have had with reflection in their teaching practice. Rita explained, “In the past when I taught, I feel like I’m a reflective teacher in general. The type of reflective practice I used to have was more abstract. But I don’t know that I was always conscious that I was always doing that, you know what I mean? I think I did it informally” (Rita, Exit Interview, June 19, 2008). Mary also identified herself as a reflective teacher. She stated, “Well in the past, after I did an activity, I would stop and think how it went and if it met my expectations and accomplish my goals with my students” (Mary, Exit Interview, June 19, 2008).

Data Collection

Data were collected from participating teachers using two methods: interviews and journals kept by both the participants and the researcher. An informal interview was

conducted with each volunteer participant prior to the study to determine what they already knew or thought about action research. Questions included: Have you ever heard of action research? What are the steps of action research? What is your experience using action research? It is important to this study that participants have not had extensive experience implementing action research. Also relevant are general attitudes participants have toward teacher development. If the participants were not interested or open to professional development, the experience would be much different.

Weekly interviews were held with the participants throughout the project to ascertain what impact action research was having in their classrooms. My research journal was used to log information recorded by audiotape during the weekly interview sessions and later transcribed. Sample interview questions included: What problem or area have you identified for improvement in your classroom? Where do you find yourself in the cycle of action research? What have you found helpful? What has been particularly stressful or challenging?

In addition to weekly interviews, both the participants kept weekly research journals. Participants were asked to record any thoughts and outward experiences—positive or negative—they had while implementing action research in their classrooms. They were also asked to describe their feelings toward the experience and any benefits or drawbacks they attributed to action research. Participants sent electronic copies of their research journals to me on a weekly basis.

Once the two participants completed their action research projects and shared the results, I conducted a separate exit interview with each of them. The exit interviews were tape recorded and transcribed for later analysis. The purpose of the exit interviews was to

allow the participants a final opportunity to share their experiences and thoughts about their action research projects from beginning to end. Participants were asked to review the project experience as a whole and compare it to their previous reflective practice. Questions in the exit interviews included: Does the action research process offer anything worthwhile to the already reflective teacher? What was different about conducting an action research project compared to your regular reflective practice? When comparing your previous reflective practice and action research, which was more helpful to you?

The interviews, journals, and transcripts were reviewed for indications of what the participants were thinking or feeling about action research. Using inductive analysis, the data was searched for recurring items, themes, or patterns to emerge (Johnson, 2002). By looking at the experience from the perspective of each of participants, as well as reviewing the perspective of the researcher, triangulation of the data was possible and assisted in ensuring the validity of the research and the results (Johnson, 2002). The data were read to identify experiences that supported the attitudes of the participants toward action research and its effectiveness as a professional development tool. Some of these experiences are representative samples of a way to have the research and results come alive (Johnson, 2002). After the data were coded, participants conducted a member check for accuracy and correct understanding.

Training sessions. The topic of action research was introduced to the faculty of Central School during a school-wide staff meeting. Participation in and attitudes during the meeting influenced the selection of the two study participants. Two more training sessions were conducted by me and included only the two selected participants. During these meetings, instruction and examples of action research and the action research

process were presented and discussed in greater detail. Topics of the training included: the action research process, articulating a research question, planning, data collection, reflection journals, field notes/observations, conferences/interviews, surveys, analyzing data, drawing conclusions, and sharing results. The participants were provided materials and literature about action research and were asked to follow a protocol in preparing their action research projects. Additionally, we discussed several timelines for their participation, including a timeline for selecting a research question, data, data analysis, and sharing results. They were also asked to develop an outline schedule of our weekly meetings. Our training sessions culminated in the participants submitting a research plan, which outlined not only their research questions, but also plans and timelines for information review, project implementation, data collection, data analysis, and results sharing.

Individual action research projects. Mary struggled the first half of the school year with the fact that she had so few students in her math group who were doing their homework and bringing it back to school the next day completed. In examining what she would like to see improved in her classroom, she decided that she would like to find a way to motivate students to bring their completed math homework back each and every day. Accordingly, increased homework completion was her desired outcome. She chose to implement an action research project in her classroom to determine whether a weekly reward for 100% homework submission would motivate her students enough to bring about a general class-wide increase in the amount of homework completed and submitted. Mary created a wall chart which tracked homework submissions and began

hosting a weekly rewards ceremony with prizes for students with 100% homework submissions for that week.

As Rita reflected on her classroom and what she would like to “change,” she decided to conduct an action research project which aimed at discovering the most accurate account of her students’ attitudes toward a particular curriculum program, Shurley English Grammar. Furthermore, she wanted to determine whether certain factors had a lasting impact on the attitudes of her students regarding the time spent during Shurley English Grammar lessons. She conducted interviews with her students and logged her observations of their moods, dispositions, and attitudes during grammar lessons. Rita then implemented different teaching approaches and strategies during the lessons over the course of twelve weeks, throughout which time she continued to conduct interviews with her students and logged her observations of their moods, dispositions, and attitudes during grammar lessons.

Researcher journals. The participants were asked to keep a daily researcher journal. Each day they logged their experiences, thoughts, and feelings in the journal. Both participants chose to keep electronic journals. Rita often jotted notes down throughout the day which she later transferred to her electronic journal. Mary had a set time each day when she would sit down at the computer and record in her journal. Both Mary and Rita sent me copies of their journals electronically each week. I reviewed the data in the journals each week and occasionally commented or requested clarification on content during a subsequent interview.

Weekly interviews. Over the course of the action research project, each participant met with me at least weekly. These meetings took place one-on-one separately

with each participant. The purpose of the meetings was not only to gather data regarding the status of the individual action research projects, but also to gather data regarding the participants' feelings and attitudes toward their action research. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed for later data analysis. As I met with them each week, I posed to them the same eight questions. These questions included: Where are you at in the action research process? What have you enjoyed about this research project? What have you not enjoyed about this research project? What has been the most difficult part of implementing this project? What have you done differently this week as a result of the action research project? Describe how your experiences compare to your previous reflective practice. How would you say the action research project has enhanced your practice, if at all? What changes have you made in your practice as a result of your project? I relied on responses to these eight prompts to supply me with the data I needed in order to determine if the two participants were felt that the action research projects were offering them something worthwhile and to understand the emotions, feelings, frustrations, and successes they were experiencing as they implemented action research in their classrooms.

In addition to data collection, the interviews were also intended as a means of supporting the research participants as they completed the steps of the action research project for the first time. During our weekly interviews, Mary and Rita were given the opportunity to ask questions and clarify any points of confusion. The interviews further allowed for discussion regarding progression along the pre-determined timelines. The weekly meetings were a venue to offer encouragement and excitement for each stage in

the action research process. It was also an opportunity to mentor Rita and Mary through the action research process.

Exit interviews. My final communication with Mary and Rita regarding their action research projects was in the form of an exit interview. I interviewed the participants separately and asked each of them the same 24 questions. Each interview last approximately 90 minutes and was tape recorded. The recordings were later transcribed for the purpose of data analysis. The exit interviews were critical in the data collection stage. They provided the participants one final opportunity to share anything and everything about their action research projects as well as allowing them to reflect on the entire process from start to finish.

Data Analysis

The data were collected from all the project data sources; from the participants' researcher journals, the transcripts from the weekly interviews, and the transcripts from the exit interviews. Data from the finding questionnaires and from the participants' results sharing reports were also considered. I reviewed the data several times and identified five codes which emerged: past experiences with reflection, benefits of conducting action research, challenges of conducting action research, comparing reflective practice with action research, and weekly meetings with me. Data were then coded based on reference to one of the five areas. I further considered the data in their coded parts and analyzed them for recurring themes within the codes which would address the research questions of this study. In doing so, I identified three themes: awareness, systematic approach, and accountability. Data from these three themes were then used to answer the questions of this study: How is formal action research different

from regular reflective practice? Does action research offer anything worthwhile to the already reflective teacher? How can action research improve teacher professionalism and teacher sharing?

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

In the initial phase of data collection, a finding questionnaire was handed to the entire faculty at Central School. The data from the questionnaire was fundamental in the selection of the two participants. In particular, it identified teachers who already viewed themselves as reflective. It was the data, however, from the researcher journals and weekly interviews which showed the beginnings of some of the themes that permeated throughout the entire research project. The themes were: awareness, systematic approach, and accountability. The first theme was the awareness participants had that they were being reflective and that they were conscious of and recognized elements of reflective teaching in their practice, including a heightened awareness that resulted from participating in a formal action research project. Participating in a formal action research project also introduced and supported a more systematic approach to the teachers' reflective practices. Finally, the research showed that having deadlines and expectations of teacher sharing as well as formal steps to complete resulted in follow-through by the participants in their research. These three themes were supported by the data in the researcher journals, weekly interviews, and exit interviews.

Awareness

Mary and Rita both identified themselves as reflective teachers prior to conducting their action research projects. This is substantiated by the data found in the finding questionnaires. When asked whether she considered herself a reflective teacher, Mary answered, "I reflect on the success of past lessons. So yes, I do think I am reflective" (Mary, finding questionnaire, February 2, 2008). Similarly, Rita considered

herself a reflective teacher and commented that she “make(s) notes about making [her] lessons more engaging next time” (Rita, finding questionnaire, February 2, 2008). Both participants were aware of their reflective practice to some degree prior to this study.

The two participants’ individual researcher journals also provided data regarding awareness. The following statement demonstrates that Mary became aware of what conducting an action research project would really mean to her practice:

I am simply trying to understand what is going on in my classroom. All I can try to accomplish is to find an answer to a question that I want to know. [Action research] seems like a structured process of discovery, rather than simple trial and error. It will force me to keep a record of what happens in the process so that I can remember the results of my ‘experiment’ rather than relying on my memory. (Mary, Research Journal, March 2, 2008)

Mary also became aware of the benefits that the formal steps of action research provided. She stated, “I can help the teacher who will work with [these students] next year by sharing what I find, whether it works or not. The results [of my research] are valuable information” (Mary, Research Journal, March 11, 2008). She further stated, “Analyzing the data was useful to me” (Mary, Research Journal, May 21, 2008).

Rita’s research journal was even more explicit in regards to how participating in a formal action research project brought awareness to her teaching practice. “[The action research project] encouraged me to do some reflecting on what I’ve done. I liked that doing the research project encouraged me to think through what I am doing in my teaching,” she said (Rita, Research Journal, March 7, 2008). She also recognized that her participation in the formal project had somehow enhanced her previous reflective practice. She stated, “I am learning not to make prejudgements and that my guesses in the past are usually wrong or misguided. [Action] research could really be a useful tool for

all teachers. We all make assumptions that aren't always true" (Rita, Research Journal, March 12, 2008). She continued,

I feel that I am improving as a teacher during this process. I am making effective changes as a teacher. I was more reflective than usual today. I noticed that I now tend to be more serious with my teaching. It's good for me to be aware of my research. I really think this research project has helped me to be a more attentive and effective teacher. I am more focused on my teaching and the students. (Rita, Research Journal, April 23, 2008)

Not only did the participants keep daily researcher journals which they shared with me on a weekly basis, they also met with me on a weekly basis for support and to answer interview questions. These weekly interviews provided valuable data showing that the action research process instilled in both Mary and Rita a more concrete and refined awareness of their reflective practice. During the weekly interviews, Mary made the following comments, "It had made me more aware of my classroom" (Mary, Weekly Interviews, March 6, 2008). "With action research I am actually looking at results and analyzing results. Normally I would do something and think I know the results. I would have just thought I knew the results and moved forward thinking that" (Mary, Weekly Interviews, May 22, 2008). Mary added,

Action research enhanced my practice by letting me know what is actually going on versus just my impressions of what is going on. If I was just going by impression, I would not have the "right" or same answer as when I actually followed through with this as a research project. In the future, knowing the [action research] process and answers to this project, I know better how to handle my questions. (Mary, Weekly Interviews, May 30, 2008)

Again, Rita's comments were even more telling of the awareness she felt she had acquired by participating in a formal action research project. She explicitly stated that the action research process not only enhanced her previous reflective practice, but also made her more aware of her reflection and how she used her reflective practice in her teaching.

Doing the research really encouraged me to make more connections with my students whereas my previous reflective practice really didn't necessarily involve that. I am a more observant teacher now. I'm looking for specific data rather than inferences and thoughts floating around in my head. I think the project made me more reflective as a teacher. It's been really interesting and made me more aware that my reflection now is based more on concrete example and data rather than reflecting in an abstract way on assumptions or judgments. I realize now that I need to get data and hard copies of things rather than just having an abstract awareness of what is happening in my classroom. (Rita, Weekly Interviews, May 22, 2008)

"The 'normal' way I used to reflect was a lot more abstract than what I am doing now"
(Rita, Weekly Interviews, March 7, 2008).

Once the participants had concluded their research, completed their data analysis, and reported their findings, I conducted a final exit interview with each of them. These longer, more detailed interviews focused on the thoughts, feelings and experiences of the participants as a result of conducting a formal action research project versus their previous reflective practice. Rita addressed that comparison with the following:

In the past when I taught, I feel like I'm a reflective teacher in general. The type of reflective practice I used to have was more abstract. I would just think in my mind about what I'd just taught. I never really thought about each specific child. When I would reflect, it was more abstract. In my previous reflective practice I would look for the answers I wanted. I was not objective. I was biased. I didn't have concrete data guiding me and helping me see in an objective, non-judgmental way. I think my former reflective practice wasn't necessarily bad, and I believe I will continue that previous reflective practice. But, the action research process is a great way to delve in-depth into an area that I'm concerned about or that I may want to change in that area or I may want to improve as a teacher in that area or I may want my students to improve in that area. (Rita, Exit Interview, June 19, 2008)

Mary also felt that the action research was more concrete than her reflective practice and therefore something that she could more easily keep at the forefront of her mind. Without the formal steps of action research, ideas and results of reflective practice can get lost and forgotten. Mary stated,

When I am just reflective, I tend to not really think about it like I did when I was doing the research project. Doing the research versus being reflective kept the data on my mind and brought the project to my thoughts at least everyday. It kept me on track and kept it on the front of my mind. I learned that my general impression of what had happened was a little bit different than what the data told me. So it made me realize that maybe I should be collecting information like that to look at because maybe my impressions aren't as correct as I thought they were. Also, I think that teachers may be reflective, but may feel like they don't have the power in the classroom to really find a solution to their problem. I think that is a big value of action research compared to just reflective teaching. It changes your mentality to "this is what's happening to me so I need to deal with it" to "how can I change it?" I think the value of the project for me was how it altered my perception about what was going on in the classroom. (Mary, Exit Interview, June 19, 2008)

The participants noted that at times they were not even aware that they were really being reflective. They were not cognizant of the reflective process when it occurred and had not previously articulated exactly how they were being reflective. Rita stated:

I don't know that I was always conscious that I was always doing that, you know what I mean? I would have a question in my mind, but since the question was just kind of floating around in my brain and I wasn't really sharing it with anybody else, I wasn't always aware I had that question and so sometimes I'd be addressing the question. Sometimes I'd have a question but I'd forget about the question because it wasn't a concrete, solid, almost tangible question. (Rita, Exit Interview, June 19, 2008)

The data do support the notion of awareness. Rita felt that previous to the action research project she was not always aware that she was being reflective. This is likely due to the abstract nature of her previous reflective practice versus the steps of a formal action research project (Rita, Exit Interview, June 19, 2008). Conducting an action research project made her more aware of her reflective practices (Rita, Weekly Interviews, April 28, 2008). Conducting an action research project also heightened Mary's awareness of her classroom teaching practices (Mary, Weekly Interviews, March 6, 2008).

Approach

Another theme provided by the data was the participants' recognition of and appreciation for the systematic approach of action research, especially when compared to their previous reflective practice. This element of a systematic approach first appeared during our initial all-faculty meeting in which the topic of action research was introduced. Once the participants were identified and accepted roles as research participants, two additional training sessions were conducted. From the outset of the training on the action research process the participants were recognizing the formal steps of action research and its systematic nature. The preparation and training required of action research created a more organized, structured, and systematic approach to evaluating their teaching than had been evident in their previous reflective practice. Both Mary and Rita made note of the systematic approach of action research throughout their researcher journals, weekly interviews with me, and the final exit interview.

Mary's research journal contained several references to the systematic nature of action research, specifically during the early stages of the action research project. She wrote, "I feel this project is focusing my attention. In the past, I have just worked with ideas as they have popped into my head. This project is a more concerted effort to really track what is going on [in my classroom] rather than just wish things were happening" (Mary, Research Journal, February 26, 2008). "It seems like a structured process of discovery rather than simple trial and error. It will force me to keep a record of what happens" (Mary, Research Journal, March 2, 2008). Later in her journal, she commented that not only did she feel more organized as a result of the process of action research, but

that she even had “parents thanking [her] for being so organized with the project in math” (Mary, Research Journal, April 1, 2008).

I coded Mary’s research journal and found 27 references to activities which were related to the steps of action research. She mentioned writing a research plan, reviewing information, planning, collecting data, following a timeline, keeping her timeline goals, analyzing data, coding her data, and working on her final results report. References to these activities further illustrate the systematic nature of action research. She had a specific plan of what she was doing and a clear outline of how she wanted to accomplish it using her action research project. She wrote, “Having due dates certainly help with completing a plan that has been made” (Mary, Research Journal, February 28, 2008).

I coded ten references to activities which were related to the steps of action research in Rita’s research journal. She mentioned writing down her research question, attending the training on action research, setting deadlines, collecting data, logging information, and conducting interviews. She likewise had a specific plan of what she was doing and a clear outline of how she wanted to accomplish it using her action research project. Like Mary, she made references to keeping to a schedule and a timeline. She wrote, “I know if I organize in advance that it will go much better” (Rita, Research Journal, March 21, 2008). “I see the value of setting deadlines for myself in advance, so I have goals to attain and so I stay on track” (Rita, Research Journal, Feb 29, 2008).

Both participants also made references to the systematic structure of action research during our weekly interviews. I found 33 references to the steps of action research or the systematic nature of action research made by Mary over the course of our 12 weekly interviews. She referenced the planning process, timelines, her research

journal, recording information, collecting data, analyzing data, and reporting results. She also made some references to the fact that her action research project was more systematic than the reflection in which she had engaged in the past. She said,

With the action research, I premeditated a plan. In the past, there was no record or official plan, just ideas in my head and things I would try out and keep that info in my head. Now, at least it is written down instead of all in my head. This can help with future problems that may be similar. I can look back at what I have written. (Mary, Weekly Interviews, March 6, 2008)

“The action research is more formal. I’m keeping a written record and procedure for my reflection instead of just thinking of it in my head” (Mary, Weekly Interviews, March 13, 2008). “This whole process is different than what I have ever done before. I never recorded or wrote down my impressions and findings before” (Mary, Weekly Interviews, May 30, 2008).

In my coding of the 12 weekly interviews with Rita, I identified 29 references to the steps of action research and the systematic nature of action research. She referenced researching her question, data collection, student surveys, interviews, project implementation, data analysis, observation logs, keeping things organized, staying on schedule, planning ahead and being prepared, her research journal, and coding data. She also made reference to the systematic nature of action research, most often using the term structure to describe the systematic characteristics of action research. She stated, “I like how structured and methodical [the action research process] is. This project is forcing me to have structure and I like structure” (Rita, Weekly Interviews, March 7, 2008). “I can already tell it’s more structured than what I was doing before. Now there is a system in the way I reflect. The way I reflected before was a lot more abstract. It’s nice to have it broken down into steps in a process; I enjoy a sense of accomplishment with each step”

(Rita, Weekly Interviews, March 13, 2008). Further, during the weekly interviews Rita compared the systematic nature of action research with her former reflective practice, particularly in relation to how she made decisions regarding her teaching practice. “With the project I am getting data and hard copies of things that make me realize what needs to be changed rather than just abstract decisions” (Rita, Weekly Interviews, March 13, 2008). “I am trying to make changes and improvements based on data and information that is concrete rather than making a guess or inferences” (Rita, Weekly Interviews, March 26, 2008). “My lessons are being planned based upon collected data rather than my opinions, my guesses, and my judgements” (Rita, Weekly Interviews, April 11, 2008).

The exit interview provided a final set of data which included references to the steps and structure of action research as well as comparisons of action research with the participants’ traditional reflecting practice. Mary’s exit interview contains 35 comments which I coded as references to the steps of action research. These references are similar in nature to the references made in the weekly interviews and the research journal. In addition, the during exit interview Mary also mentioned, “sharing methods and results and record keeping,” (Mary, Exit Interview, June 19, 2008). She compared her previous reflective practice with the formal steps of action research. She stated,

Doing action research made me look at the situation in my classroom more scientifically. It kept me on track and kept the research on the front of my mind. And I had to keep track of everything, so that made it more official. Official, that is a word I would use to describe [action research]. Official in that it was formal and it reminded me of the steps I should take to satisfy my curiosity and made me a bit more careful about finding the answer to my question. And I really like doing experiments, so why not do it a bit more formal? Before, I never wrote [my reflective practice] down. Usually just an idea came up that I tested to see if it worked or not, but that was all in my head, not written down. (Mary, Exit Interview, June 19, 2008)

Rita's exit interview contained the most comprehensive and detailed data relating to the theme of structure and the systematic characteristics of action research of any of the data sources. Her exit interview contained references to the steps and structure of action research. Most of these references are the same or similar to those mentioned in the researcher journal and weekly interviews. I found 23 such references when I coded the transcript of her exit interview. In comparing her previous reflective practice with the formal, structured, systematic process of action research, Rita said,

Reflective practice—I feel like I did that often and yet it wasn't really very concrete, it wasn't really a set, methodical or systematic way that I did it. In the past, I didn't have concrete data guiding me and helping me see an objective, non-judgmental answer to my questions. With action research, there is a system to it. There is a method to it. It is an organized way of reflecting. There's a lot more steps involved. It's more concrete. For example, you're writing things down and you're collecting concrete data, rather than having these thoughts come fluttering through your head like I would do with just jotted down notes. (Rita, Exit Interview, June 19, 2008)

During Rita's exit interview, she noted that conducting action research increased her personal feelings of professionalism. Further, she hypothesized that because action research is systematic and therefore accepted as more official or valid, it could potentially aid in elevating societal opinions of the professionalism of the teaching field by informing the public of teachers' participation in systematic research, such as action research projects. Rita explained it this way:

With action research, I learned how to be a researcher, something I never would have called myself before. Now I can say that, in some aspects. I did a research project! When you do research, like action research, you can back yourself up with data, whereas a reflective teacher cannot. As a reflective teacher you can say, "This is what I think," and there is some value and validity to that, but if you do action research you can say, "Here's my concrete valid question. Here's my research. Here's my data." You can just back up everything you say. If you had a debate between a reflective teacher who wasn't doing a project and someone who was an action researcher, the reflective teacher would lose because they wouldn't

have anything concrete to back them up. They've got evidence to back up the things they talk about. I think the world in general would look at us as teachers like we had more substance to us and that we are smarter and have more to contribute and that we are capable of so much more, especially if we were to share the data we collect. I think that it could really help us as we become really good researchers and share our findings. (Rita, Exit Interview, June 19, 2008)

The data show that Mary and Rita noticed and appreciated the systematic nature of action research. Mary identified action research as a structured process of discovery (Mary, Research Journal, March 2, 2008). Rita called it structured and methodical and described it as a process with steps (Rita, Weekly Interviews, March 7, 2008). Both participants drafted project outlines with timelines, due dates, and details of the research process as it pertained to their individual projects. This was different than their previous reflective practice in which they simply kept ideas in their heads and did not record information (Mary, Exit Interview, June 19, 2008 & Rita, Exit Interview, June 19, 2008). Action research proved a more systematic approach to studying their classrooms.

Accountability

One of the distinctive characteristics which differentiates action research from reflective teaching practice is the element of accountability; that thoughts, reflection, ideas, and impressions are acted upon in the form of planned-out research and that the results of the research are ultimately shared with others. Because action research has clearly defined steps, follow-through is a built-in characteristic, especially when your research steps require accountability to others. Individuals innately follow-through with more consistency when they are accountable to others. When teachers engage in individual reflective practice they do not usually take action, record results, or share with others, because the practice is meant only for them. Mary and Rita both mentioned this idea in their researcher journals, weekly interviews, and exit interviews.

The steps of action research which facilitated accountability were part of the training Mary and Rita participated in prior to beginning their own action research projects. During the training sessions the topics of analyzing data, triangulation, drawing conclusions, and sharing results were discussed. Often reflective teachers study and make mental notes of things they see in their classrooms, but lack the follow-through to formally analyze what they see or hear in their classrooms. As a result they often drew conclusions that are not based analyzing hard data. Very rarely do teachers who have been reflective about a situation in their classroom share the results with anyone else. This may be a result of reflective teaching not having an inherent mechanism for accountability, whereas formal action research requires teacher sharing. The sharing of the research with colleagues is an accountability mechanism which is part of the action research process. From data found in the research journals, weekly interviews, and exit interviews of both participants, I surmised that time was the main factor in lack of follow-through for Mary and Rita. Their frequent references to time and lack of time is a telling insight as to why they have not followed-through with things they had seen or wanted to do in their past reflective practice. For that reason, I will also reference the idea of time and time commitment in this section about accountability.

In Rita's researcher journal, I coded 13 references to events, situations, or activities which involved some level of accountability on her part. These included such things as "bouncing ideas off of colleagues, setting deadlines, staying on track with deadlines, meetings to discuss progress with the project, and regularly recording data in an observational log and researcher journal" (Rita, Research Journal, February 28 & Rita, Research Journal, March 24, 2008). She stated, "Having consistent times to have

meetings with my supervisor has made it much easier to stay on track” (Rita, Research Journal, March 20, 2008).

Mary echoed similar sentiments in her research journal. I found 26 references in her research journal which address accountability of some sort, including talking to colleagues and having colleagues ask her about her project, having due dates as a part of the project, having regular meetings with me to assess the status and progress of her action research project, and writing a results report to share with others at the conclusion of the project. This was expressed in such statements as, “Due dates certainly help with getting things done that you have planned” (Mary, Research Journal, February 28, 2008). “I reminded myself all day today that I needed to write things down about my project” (Mary, Research Journal, March 4, 2008). “I had another conversation with my [colleague] today about my project” (Mary, Research Journal, April 10, 2008). “I spent some time this afternoon working on my [results] report” (Mary, Research Journal, May 21, 2008).

Items of accountability were less explicit during our weekly interviews, although our weekly interviews themselves were a form of accountability. During these weekly interviews, both Rita and Mary referenced activities which forced them to follow-through with the steps of action research, since movement from one step to the next cannot occur without some level of completion. Rita and Mary knew I would be asking them about the status of these steps. This arrangement proved to be an effective method for follow-through and accountability. They referenced such activities as outlining their planning process, interviewing their participants, starting data analysis by a certain date, writing in an observational log, writing in the research journal, and writing a results report. These

steps each served as accountability points for the action research project as a whole. Mary mentioned ways in which she followed-up. She stated, “I had to write myself a note in order to remember to write in my research journal. Eventually, I put an automatic reminder on my Outlook calendar, which reminded me to write in the research journal” (Mary, Weekly Interviews, March 6, 2008). “I’ve had more of a focus on timelines and doing this action research project is definitely helping me to follow-through with keeping more on top of my students’ work” (Mary, Weekly Interviews, March 19, 2008).

The data from the exit interview with Rita also provided references to the idea and elements of accountability. She contrasted the type of record keeping she had completed previously with the type of record keeping she practiced during her action research project. She found that writing and recording in a tangible way, as done during the course of the action research project, increased the likelihood of follow-through and accountability to the process. Rita said the following which illustrates this point:

Before there wasn’t always a set time or set place where I would reflect. I wasn’t really writing down very much about the things I was reflecting upon. But I don’t know that I was always conscious that I was always doing that, you know what I mean? I would have a question in my mind, but since the question was just kind of floating around in my brain and I wasn’t really sharing it with anybody else, I wasn’t always aware I had that question and so sometimes I’d be addressing the question. Sometimes I’d have a question but I’d forget about the question because it wasn’t a concrete, solid, almost tangible question. (Rita, Exit Interview, June 19, 2008)

Rita shared different parts of her project with different colleagues at times. By sharing what she was doing, she opened the door for her accountability to others as her research became a topic of conversation with them. She shared with her immediate grade-level team members. She stated, “I regularly met with my team teachers and remember talking about some of the things I was observing in my data collection” (Rita, Exit

Interview, June 19, 2008). She also planned to share her results with the entire school faculty.

I chose to share my findings in a PowerPoint presentation. I'm guessing it could be used at a professional development day with the entire faculty and I could share the ideas that I found through the research. Teachers could be sharing more and sharing more often to more audiences and to a wider variety of people. (Rita, Exit Interview, June 19, 2008)

She also shared with me during our weekly meetings. These meetings in particular seemed to facilitate accountability during all stages of the action research process. Rita found the time helpful, as apparent in the following statement:

The meetings that we had every week in your office were helpful and I think they were helpful because they definitely kept me on track. Every week when we were meeting I felt that I would kind of report to myself on where I was at in the project as well as reporting to you. It was a good time to give myself a self-check and see where I was as far as the deadlines I'd set up for myself. If we wouldn't have had those weekly meetings, I think it would have been really easy to let a lot of things slide in the project and be too loose and to not be strict with those deadlines. (Rita, Exit Interview, June 19, 2008)

While Rita found it helpful to be accountable at our weekly interviews and report her weekly progress to me, ultimately any sharing helps facilitate accountability, even if it is not sharing with a supervisor. During the exit interview she stated,

I wouldn't necessarily need to report to a principal or an authority figure in my life to do an action research project. However, I think it would be helpful to continue to have set meetings or even an informal check-in with a colleague. I think if another colleague at the school, even if it wasn't someone on my team, just someone at the school that I could relay it to that I could be checking in with them saying, "Where are you at?" and the other person even could say it. Or, we could even have a dialogue of where we're both at and help each other stay on track and stay motivated to complete the project. That would be effective for me. If I only had to answer to myself, I could try to do it, but I think I'd be nervous about only answering to myself. I think I'd get off track. (Rita, Exit Interview, June 19, 2008)

Mary's exit interview included similar data. She compared her previous reflective practice as something that was done "all in [her] head and never really written down"

(Mary, Exit Interview, June 19, 2008). She continued, “With the action research, I actually recorded things because I wanted to track it over a period of time to see the effect. I wanted to have a paper trail or something so I can look back if I need to. And also by writing it down it’s more likely to get done that way” (Mary, Exit Interview, June 19, 2008). She also compared the different expectations inherent in action research to her previous reflective practice. She found herself wanting to share in a much more formal, wider-reaching manner when she was conducting action research. She stated,

Well, I think that the expectation of sharing results is a difference between action research and my previous reflective practice. With what I had been doing before I only shared if the topic came up or I thought it would help someone with what I had discovered in my classroom. But with action research, it would prompt me to want to share at a faculty meeting or something like that if I thought it was a result that I thought might benefit everyone. (Mary, Exit Interview, July 19, 2008)

Like Rita, Mary shared stages of her research with different people and found that sharing was an important factor in her accountability. She shared with her classroom teacher aide, team teachers, with me during our weekly meetings, and the entire faculty through a written results report. She described sharing with her team teachers as follows, “It was kind of a question and answer session because I had mentioned my question to a team teacher and asked how she dealt with it. I told her what I was doing and asked her opinion she said she thought we should all give it a try. So it was just kind of in passing that I shared with her” (Mary, Exit Interviews, June 19, 2008). Mary felt that sharing with me was more formal—a time to meet deadlines and keep to her schedule. When asked about our weekly meetings, she said,

That weekly touching base with you helped me to keep my focus on the research and thinking about the information that you were going to ask me about. It kept the journal on my mind, kind of as a deadline for the journal so it would return the journal to my thoughts at least everyday. Having those meetings kept me on track

for that and kept my project on the front of my mind. (Mary, Exit Interview, June 19, 2008)

Both Rita and Mary felt that their accountability increased during their action research projects as compared to their previous reflective practice. There were many things in the action research process which helped to facilitate accountability. At the same time, the time commitment involved with action research often made follow-through and plan completion in a timely manner very challenging. The entire data set of research journal, weekly interviews, and exit interviews for both Rita and Mary contained 95 comments which I coded as references to the amount of time the action research demanded and their assertion of the lack of time they felt they had to devote to an additional task, an optional action research project. Rita stated, “It’s a lot to juggle and as a teacher we’re always lacking on time and so that was really difficult. At times I felt the project was too overwhelming, too cumbersome and too time consuming. Finding a way to make the action research project consistently a top priority was difficult for me” (Rita, Exit Interview, June 19, 2008). “Time—that is still the biggest challenge” (Rita, Weekly Interviews, March 13, 2008). “It’s becoming important to figure out how and when to find ways to carve in little bits of time for my project” (Rita, Research Journal, March 4, 2008). “Time is always an issue, everyday” (Rita, Research Journal, March 10, 2008). Mary added similar comments, “Time management was probably the most difficult part of the project. The struggle for me was finding the time to write in my research journal each day” (Mary, Exit Interview, June 19, 2008). “The [action research project] is not particularly hard, but it’s hard to find the time to do it. I have to find time each day” (Mary, Weekly Interviews, May 30, 2008). “My spare time is non-existent, quite frankly. My project is on my mind, but it keeps getting put off due to other, more urgent things.

It's amazing how you intend to do things so quickly and efficiently, and then life gets in the way" (Mary, Research Journal, May 1-16, 2008).

Accountability was a major theme of the action research process for Mary and Rita. Mary commented that the action research project and the timelines involved with the project helped her to be more accountable with her work (Mary, Weekly Interviews, March 19, 2008). Rita regularly discussed her project with colleagues who frequently asked her about the progress of her research, thereby creating a venue for her to be accountable with her work and share it with others (Rita, Exit Interview, June 19, 2008). Mary felt that the action research process prompted her to share what she learned with as many colleagues as possible who might benefit from her research (Mary, Exit Interview, June 19, 2008). Through setting deadlines and sharing with colleagues, the idea of accountability as a theme of this study is supported by the data.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was three-fold: to delineate how participating in a formal action research project differs from the regular practices of reflective teachers, to determine whether action research offers anything worthwhile to the already reflective teacher, and to understand how reflective teachers can use action research to improve teacher sharing and professionalism. The results of the research are helpful in answering these three questions. The data collected from the researcher journals, weekly interviews, and exit interviews were used in meeting the purpose of the study.

I coded the data collected from the participants of the study and three major themes emerged which address the questions of the study: (a) action research helped the participants to be more aware of their reflective teaching practices, (b) action research was a more systematic approach than reflection, and (c) action research resulted in increased follow-through and accountability.

Action Research Differs from Reflective Practice

The participants in this study found that action research differed from their previous reflective practice. It was different in that it increased reflective practice as well as their awareness of the elements of reflection and their consciousness that they were being reflective. It was more systematic than their reflective practice, and included more accountability than they were accustomed to with their previous reflective practice.

Mary and Rita not only became more reflective through conducting a formal action research project, they also became more aware of their reflection and the elements of reflection. The action research project encouraged Rita to be more reflective (Rita,

Research Journal, March 7, 2008). It also made her more aware of her reflective practice (Rita, Weekly Interviews, May 20, 2008). Mary's action research project resulted in her being more aware of her practice, including reflection (Mary, Weekly Interviews, February 29, 2008). This awareness is one of the differences from the previous reflective practice experienced by the participants.

Another difference from the previous reflective practice experienced by the participants is the systemic approach involved in conducting a formal action research project. Mary called action research a structured process (Mary, Research Journal, March 3, 2008). She described it as being more formal and scientific than her reflective practice and different from what she was doing as a reflective teacher (Mary, Weekly Interviews, March 13, 2008 & Mary, Exit Interview, June 19, 2008). For Rita, the action research project was more structured and methodical system than her previous reflective practice (Rita, Weekly Interviews, March 6, 2008 & Rita, Exit Interview, June 19, 2008).

Both Mary and Rita felt that action research encouraged and required more accountability than their previous reflective practice. Accountability was encouraged through deadlines and due dates as well as meetings with colleagues, during which progress on the research was discussed (Mary, Weekly Interviews, March 6, 2008 & Rita, Research Journal, March 20, 2008). Accountability was also encouraged as each participant followed-through on each step of the action research process and ultimately shared their research with others. This was in contrast to their previous reflective practice in which no timeline for completion or a concrete plan existed (Rita, Exit Interview, June 19, 2008 & Mary, Exit Interview, June 19, 2008).

Action Research is Worthwhile Practice

Mary and Rita were both reflective teachers prior to this study; yet conducting a formal action research project offered them something worthwhile. They found that the awareness it brought their practice as well as the systematic nature of the research and accountability it provided all proved worthwhile benefits to them as reflective teachers. By being more aware of the practice of her students brought about by project participation, Rita was better able to meet the needs of her students (Mary, Exit Interview, June 19, 2008). Mary cited increased confidence in her abilities as a teacher as a result of the action research project (Mary, Exit Interview, June 19, 2008). The systematic approach of action research helped Mary to feel more organized (Mary, Research Journal, April 1, 2008). Both participants recognized the benefits of accountability through using a process of formal data collection and analysis in order to avoid drawing conclusions which may be flawed and unsubstantiated (Mary, Exit Interview, June 19, 2008 & Mary, Exit Interview, June 19, 2008). Mary and Rita experienced worthwhile benefits of conducting an action research project which they felt were not things they had experienced in the previous reflective practice. Conducting a formal action research project was worthwhile to them as reflective teachers.

Action Research Improves Teacher Sharing and Professionalism

When compared to their previous reflective practice, Mary and Rita felt that participating in an action research project improved teacher sharing and professionalism. Their heightened awareness, systematic approach to research, and accountability all added to improved teacher sharing and professionalism. Once Mary and Rita became more aware of their reflective practices and more aware of what was going on in their

classrooms, they were able to adjust their practices accordingly. Decisions regarding changes in practice, or even minor decisions such as a change in a lesson, were grounded in concrete data and analysis rather than assumptions and trial-and-error (Mary, Exit Interview, June 19, 2008 & Rita, Exit Interview, June 19, 2008). This decision-making process results resulted in increased professionalism since the teachers could justify and explain their reasoning and purpose. The systematic approach to classroom study afforded by action research led to increased professionalism as well.

When a concrete plan is outlined and recorded and can be replicated, validity and substance are recognized by the teaching profession as well and scholars at large. The element of accountability, which is so much a part of the action research process, is perhaps the most powerful tool in the process in improving teacher sharing and professionalism. The action research process itself demands that results are shared. Sharing can occur in casual colleague meetings, school-wide faculty trainings, or through a publication. Mary felt that sharing action research could improve the image of the teaching profession in society (Mary, Exit Interview, June 19, 2008). Rita likewise expressed that if teachers shared their findings more, and those findings were founded in concrete data and analysis, then not only would teachers be viewed as more capable by society, but funding for education could possibly increase (Rita, Exit Interview, June 19, 2008). In this way, the heightened awareness, systematic approach, and accountability elements of action research can result in improved teacher sharing and professionalism.

Implications

Overall it appeared that through conducting action research, the two participants improved their teaching sharing practices and professionalism by heightening their

awareness of, providing a systematic approach to, and establishing an expectation for the follow-through of their reflective practice as well as the accountability of sharing their research with others. The data also show that participating in a formal action research project differs from the regular practices of reflective teachers in that it makes teachers more aware of their practices, is more systematic, and facilitates accountability. These characteristics of action research were deemed worthwhile to the already reflective teachers who participated in this research. While it was not one of the official research questions of this study, I also examined my own question of action research as professional development for my staff. The experience taught me that action research could be a viable tool for school-wide professional development, although further research is necessary to support this idea.

It would be beneficial to follow-up with the study participants and determine if their reflective practice post-action research project has changed from their reflective practice pre-action research project. Has participating in a formal action research project impacted their reflective practice when they are not engaged in an action research project? If yes, then how so? Have their attitudes toward action research changed over time? These would be questions to research and continue where this study left off. Future research may include a similar study but with participants of different genders as my study participants were both female teachers. It would also be beneficial to examine how my involvement impacted the experiences of the research participants. This study did not aim to answer any of these questions but are questions for future studies.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix A

Finding Questionnaire

1. Have you ever looked at your classroom or what you do with your students in order to decide to change things the next year?

2. How do you make decisions about what you do in your classroom?

3. Have you ever taught a lesson and known right away that you would have to change it next time? How?

4. Do you consider yourself a “reflective” teacher?

5. Have you ever heard of “action research”? Where?

6. Have you ever participated in a formal action research project?

7. How do you combat teacher “burnout”?

Appendix B

Weekly Interviews

1. Tell me about your experiences this week with your action research project.
2. Where are you in the action research process?
3. What have you enjoyed about this research project?
4. What have you not enjoyed about this research project?
5. What has been the most difficult part of implementing this project?
6. What have you done differently this week as a result of the action research project?
7. Describe how your experiences compare to your previous reflective practice?
8. How would you say the action research project has enhanced your practice, if at all?
9. What changes have you made in your practice as a result of your project?

Appendix C

Exit Interview

1. Tell me about the reflective practice that you have already done this year, prior to starting the action research project.
2. Did you ever write anything down?
3. Did you ever formulate a research question?
4. Did you ever collect any data?
5. Did you ever share it with a colleague?
6. Now tell me about this project.
7. Now compare the two, your former reflective practice and the action research project. Which did you find more helpful? Why and how?
8. How did the project change what you are going to do now as a reflective teacher? (if at all)
9. Did getting feedback during our weekly meetings help? How so?
10. Would you do an action research project in the future on your own without this support?
11. What will you do differently in the future when weekly meetings are not a part of the process?
12. Tell me about preparing your report or presentation.
13. Tell me what it was like for you to share your project.
14. Did you ever share before?
15. Would you have come to the same conclusion without the formal action project?
16. Talk to me about the value of the action research project for that conclusion.
17. Is this what you expected? Were you surprised?
18. Were you ever surprised when you were just a reflective teacher?
19. Tell me about ways you struggled in conducting action research.
20. What was the most difficult or challenging part of the project?
21. Do you feel the challenges were worth the benefits?
22. How is participating in a formal action research project different than the regular practices of reflective teachers?
23. Does action research offer anything worthwhile to the already reflective teacher?
24. Can reflective teachers use action research to improve teacher sharing and professionalism?