

The Pre-Service Educator as Action Researcher and Leader

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Abstract

Action research (AR) is a means to investigate practical issues and can be employed to improve the practice of education, with pre-service teachers-researchers studying their own problems or issues in a school or educational setting. AR can be viewed as a reflective habit of mind, crucial for teachers to be effective, as it can be infused into practice; and a level of freedom can be realized in pre-service teaching via AR.

Keywords: Action research, pre-service, reflective, teacher development

1. Introduction

For many years Action Research (AR) has been recognized as an effective way for pre-service and in-service teachers to professionally develop while working in the classroom, school and community (Ryan, 2013). The history of this belief can be traced back several decades to an early supporter who concluded: “The action researcher is interested in the improvement of the educational practices in which he [she] is engaging. He [she] undertakes research in order to find out how to do his [her] job better-action research means research that affects actions” (Corey, 1949, p. 509). AR is adaptable and has been utilized in many environments, situations and disciplines yet it is in education that AR is undertaken by graduate and undergraduate students, educational professionals and professors of education to solve problems while locating answers and examining situations (Ryan, 2014). Applied to pre-service AR can assist and support student teachers completing a pre-service program (Barbre & Buckner , 2013). With a prerequisite foundational knowledge of reflection (Dewey, 1933), data collection and analysis, student teachers move deeper into their own learning, teaching and self-development (Ryan, 2008). A reflective habit of mind, crucial for teachers to be effective, can be infused into practice and a level of freedom can be realized via AR (Ryan, 2014). Nonetheless, AR faces specific ethical issues of the potentially problematic role of the “dual role of the teacher and the researcher” (Creswell, 2012, p. 588).

Pre-service teacher preparation is a time for all stakeholders to reflect upon *'field'* readiness while confronting and overcoming problems, dilemmas and challenges that surface in pre-service. It is a stimulating time that requires the application of theory to practice (praxis) as pre-service teachers transform and construct identities within often unfamiliar practicum environments. Professional teacher training programs provide a wide array of topics and areas of focus for pre-service teachers. Terms such as curriculum, classroom management, and lesson planning, which are extremely important within a beginning teacher's vocabulary, surface, confuse and instigate questions. Some argue that, . . . beginning teachers need to be armed with clarity in their own vision of the purpose to which they wish to put the act of teaching, before they step into a classroom. Once in the classroom they need to be guided by experienced and supportive colleagues who have both time and commitment enough to make a real impact upon the thinking and actions of the beginning teacher. (Illingworth, 2012, p.183)

Is this guidance present? Do pre-service programs and practicum stakeholders need to provide supplementary training, support, and guidance as new teachers' endeavour to become teachers and leaders? These questions motivate researchers, educators and teachers to examine the teacher training landscape often via an AR lens.

2. Ontario Pre-Service Education: Training and Development

Each Ontario teacher completes a pre-service training program that includes a minimum of 50 days of practicum placement within a regular classroom setting under the guidance of an in-service contract teacher (prior to 2015-16 school year, when training programs are extended to either four concurrent terms or two years) (Ontario College of Teachers, 2014). This, or an equivalent, must be successfully completed before the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) will certify and license a new teacher. The current Ontario government has created guidelines (policy/legislation) and content (curricula) directives, however, Universities can infuse subjects such as curriculum, assessment/evaluation and planning with both theory (Vygotsky, Dewey, Piaget) and practical material to support and nurture the teacher in training. And yet, "the emphasis here is on learning to be a teacher rather than learning to be a teacher of a particular subject" (Illingworth, 2012, p. 184). This insight is much more applicable when describing elementary pre-service training programs (Kindergarten through grade 8). At the K-8 levels teachers can be responsible for teaching

all subjects. This training does provide realistic exposure to the broad curricula and exemplars provide practical guidance, however, actual teaching experience (practicum) is limited. Some pre-service teachers depart teacher training admitting that, “beginning teachers leave . . . with a healthy understanding that they can work with others to develop all aspects of their on-going professional learning journey” (Illingworth, 2012, p. 189). “This collaborative element to teacher training in universities is important if the beginning teacher is to see the potential for change and for them to become agents of that change” (Illingworth, 2012, p.189).

3. Pre-Service Education and the Associate Teacher (AT)

Practical experience can be identified in the practicum where teacher candidates learn ‘how to teach’ in an authentic and carefully observed clinical environment (Beynon, Geddis & Onslow, 2001). Much of the oversight of practicum training is the domain of in-service contract teachers better known as Associate Teachers (AT). The practicum experience is fraught with success, disappointment and constant challenge as the fusion of personalities, ideologies, opinions and work ethic can produce varied outcomes (Ryan, 2008). Each teacher candidates’ ability to grow as a classroom leader is somewhat dependent upon whether their AT is able to lead, coach, teach and mentor (Beynon, et al., 2001). Yet, one researcher found that pre-service teachers valued and trusted practicum learning and AT wisdom more university-based coursework (Cook, 2007). As well the practicum is an authentic ‘live’ stage for trial and error action research and teaching which is essential for preservice teacher development (Conderman, Johnston-Rodriguez, Hartman & Walker, 2013).

Recently an AT explained: “I felt that my most important role was to provide a critical professional friendship to teacher candidates in the post-observation meetings conducted during the practicum portions of the program” (Bullock, 2012, p. 149). “I assumed that teacher candidates would be interested in trying new teaching strategies on their first practicum. Instead, teacher candidates used teaching strategies designed to fit in with the perceived expectations of their associate teachers” (Bullock, 2012, p. 149). This illustrates the learning moments possible for both the pre-service teacher candidate and the AT. It is an opportunity to engage in purposeful research for instance, the use of AR within teacher education is a means to professionally develop via recursive reflective efforts occurring naturally in the practicum (Ryan, 2014) as depicted in figure 1 below. This cycle of

acting, reflecting (Dewey, 1933) and revising is well suited to the education profession with its inherent cycles of planning, action and revision (Ryan, 2009a).

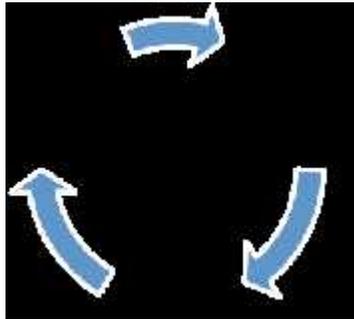


Figure 1. The Action Research Cycle

Action research is a means to investigate practical issues to locate answers, solutions and remedies (Stringer, 2014, p. 8). Action research “addresses a specific, practical issue and seeks to obtain solutions to a problem” (Creswell, 2012, p. 577). Action research can be employed “to improve the practice of education, with researchers studying their own problems or issues in a school or educational setting” (Creswell, 2012, p. 592). One pre-service student used the AR mode within a practicum to produce the following reflection:

Act, Reflect, Revise Practicum Task 2

For my last reflection paper I wrote about how I pushed a student too far and caused him to lash out against me in class and had the class get out of hand because of it. This time I would prefer to write about a more positive experience with the same student, who I will refer to as S. S was a difficult student to manage at times. He was prone to disrupting the class, using inappropriate language, not completing his work and generally pushing the limits. After my experience last time I decided that I needed a new approach (revision) because the authoritarian approach did not produce the results I was looking for.

During this placement I adopted a different approach and praised S for all the little things he did right. I put forth a considerable effort in trying to get him to become a class helper and constantly solicited his assistance for random tasks. I gave him responsibilities like cleaning the board and writing the date. This approach was far more successful as S began to become more engaged in the class and not only did his behaviour improve but he also began to do slightly better in his academic studies as

well. This strategy worked well for S and gave me a new perspective on how the role of the teacher, in motivating students, can be multifaceted.

This was a very important lesson for me to learn as it has given me insight into how to create a more positive class environment and also on how to get students to behave in an appropriate manner. The next time I am in a class where a student is consistently disrupting the class rather than trying to get them to behave by threatening punishment I will try to get them involved in the class by granting them some responsibility and trying to create a sense of belonging within them. Another aspect of your class that I found to be very insightful and very true is the concept that management issues are less prevalent when the class is engaged in an interesting well-planned lesson. For the class I was in for my placement I noticed that most of the disruptions and issues occurred in long individual work periods or in the down time between lessons.

I believe also that a lot of time the students that are the most challenging probably hear so much negative feedback and threats that it can create a kind of resentment in them and does not necessarily produce the desired results. It may perhaps even become a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby students internalize the negative feedback and become more like the behaviours they are condemned for. Though it is important to have clear guidelines and rules with firm, fair and consistent consequences it is also important not to solely or heavily rely on punishments to influence behaviour as I found out in my first placement.

In the case of S, he responded much better to positive comments and the opportunity to have some responsibility in the class. It is important for me not to go overboard with this strategy either because as a teacher one does not want to be seen as playing favourites. In the future I will continue to search for the proper balance between rewards and consequences and will remain conscious of how perhaps the kind words I offer may be the only ones a student hears on a given day. Hopefully as I continue to learn I will become more aware of how to inspire students to want to learn instead of trying to coerce them into completing work and behaving properly.

This act, reflect, revise exercise illustrates one cycle, taking place in a second practicum within the pre-service training program. This excerpt demonstrates many

attributes of reflection in pre-service as the product can be revisited, re-examined and shared many times before the next practicum. It is an opportunity to prepare for a third practicum.

4. Pre-Service Practicum and the Faculty Advisor (FA)

Another factor in this developmental process is the evolving relationship with the University who provides AT directives via practicum booklets and visiting Faculty who Advise (FA) (Clarke, Triggs, & Nielsen, 2014). The FA may be acting, reflecting and revising actions based on an AR model which is quite prevalent in post-secondary education. This will need to be communicated to the student teacher and the AT to enable synergy to rise up. Unfortunately, “Faculty advisors [FA] tend to be transients in schools” (Beynon, et al., 2001) who may only work with the student and not the AT. In spite of these efforts by the training institution “... co-operating teachers receive little or no training ...resulting in communication with the university [being] tenuous at best” (Ryan, 2009a, p. 67). ATs are busy people teaching therefore the practicum instruction booklet may not be enough to inform and guide. When a FA visits the school they may confuse the practicum with unclear directives, new understandings of the guide book and contradict the directives of the AT who is much more situated and conversant with the particular local teaching contexts and landscapes (Rolheiser, 2008). Some may say that the better the AT the better the result for the Pre-Service Teacher (PST), yet I would add that the better the overall quality of the experience which includes the FA, AT, and PST, the higher quality of the outcomes. Each stakeholder is well intended yet “the ethical imperative to *do good*, rather than simply *doing no harm* in the context of qualitative inquiry significantly increases the obligations of the researcher to understand the ethical principles...” (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014, p. 175). “Action research works on the assumption, therefore, that all stakeholders -those whose lives are effected by the problem under study- should be engaged in the processes of investigation” (Stringer, 2014, p. 15). The problem(s) within the practicum may relate to the readiness of the student teacher to professional development in the classroom and school. These problems can be tacitly linked to past performance as Chehayl (2007) concluded:

Every human experience brings with it previously constructed impressions or pre-understandings, so that no experience is purely devoid of consideration. Pre-understanding is how an individual thinks about these ever present horizons *prior* to experiencing engagement with them. . .

.Through the lens of our pre-understandings, we navigate the unknown events or circumstances that lay before us on the “horizons” of our life journey. (p. 74)

The pre-service student therefore has to sort, sift and organize past experience to a point where their past not only informs the present but guides them to new levels of success.

5. Communication: Authoritative Leadership

“Communication is an integral component of the supervision process” (Beynon, et al., 2001) and has three distinct phases which include the planning conference, observation and data collection phase, and the feedback (phase) conference which complements AR with its action phase (observation and data collection), reflection (planning conference) and reflection (feedback conference) (Ryan, 2009b). Communication is a tool since “the relationship between teacher educator and teacher candidates also helps address the problem of the epistemological barrier between formal and informal knowledge” (Bullock, 2012, p. 154). “It may be that teacher educators represent, for teacher candidates, an embodied representation of formal knowledge that conflicts with their informal knowledge of teaching and learning” (p. 154). The ‘book’ (theory) learning that happens in school during pre-service is different than the authentic practicum with the AT. A pre-service teacher needs to be able to make connections that fuse theory learned in classroom sessions to practicum experiences. Arguably, it is leadership as the ‘student teacher’ leads the class (students) while communicating, reflecting in the moment (Schon, 1983) and reflecting (Dewey, 1933) following the actions of teaching and leading. An Ontario study “...attempted to determine the effect of the student-teacher practicum experience on prospective teachers' impressions of formal and informal leadership in schools” (Cherubini, 2008a, p.92). This is an area of concern since impressionable pre-service teachers are being exposed to leadership in classrooms and schools perhaps for the first time as an authority figure and the new perspectives can be uniquely perplexing for a pre-service teacher. For instance, Cherubini (2008b) concluded:

Participants, and particularly those in the Intermediate and Secondary level, observed school administration recreating the traditional structure of power relations in the school. As they reported, teachers catered to furthering the educational value of teaching and learning in

the classroom while principals administered over the school organization and exclusively made executive decisions (p. 87).

Traditions remain in place as pre-service teachers encounter a familiar hierarchy where the authority of position dictates what and how one communicates. Therefore when issues and problems surface in a classroom it is the principal who must often answer the call, message or email from a concerned parent. The teacher as authority is only over their students traditionally and not over other teachers, parents or the wider community hence the school leadership (administration) is ultimately responsible for all pre-service teacher issues.

Cherian & Daniel (2008) suggest, “the principal is a critical agent in the lives of novices and mentors them in a variety of ways, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly, through the culture established in the school” (p.2). Principals are the dominant leaders of the school, and their actions influence each of their teacher leaders. It is this influence that helps or hinders the culture of the school and the ability of teachers to experience growth as leaders and followers within their school. It is also important for principals to be able to, “...recognize the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and assumptions that new teachers bring” (Cherian & Daniel, 2008, p. 4). Role support and collaboration is essential for the growth of new teachers: “Indeed, on-the-job nurturing and support by mentors can accelerate growth and promote change, of not only the student teacher but also the profession” (Ryan, 2009a, p. 68). Without this support growth will slow and teachers could begin to experience unwanted feelings, which can have an adverse effect upon the students and school community.

Ringler, O’Neal, Rawls and Cumskey (2013) found “all teachers in this study indicated that the level of their principal’s support was essential” (p. 40). This statement is binding in any context if a principal shows their support there is a much greater chance of successful implementation of a new program or learning model than if they did not show support. For any induction program, new teachers require support to ensure they are extracting the most from the available learning opportunities (Clarke, et al., 2014). Fantilli and McDougall (2009) conclude: “expanded levels of support offered by induction and mentorship programs are central to successful initiation to the teaching profession” (p. 824). The movement and pace of growth experienced by pre-service teachers can be strongly influenced by an AT and FA as illustrated in Figure 2 below which suggests the movement of one can influence the other via interdependence. Prudent communication can inspire,

motivate, and propel a pre-service teacher and a lack of this can cause inertia or even deterioration of performance during a practicum (Ryan, 2012).

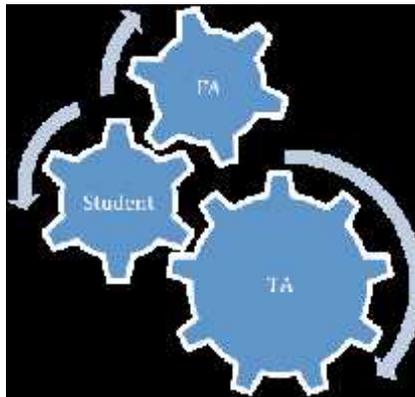


Figure 2. *The relationship of the FA, Student and TA.*

As teacher candidates embrace (hopefully) in-class theory, they build an awareness and knowledge base that can be impacted by discussion with peers, faculty and themselves (inner forces/reflexivity). “Teacher candidates are going to make a much stronger start if they have some theoretical and practical learning before standing in front of a class” (Illingworth, 2012, p. 191). “The practicum and *real* teaching experiences were found to be the most influential aspects of the induction programs” (Faez & Valeo, 2012, p. 451). Practical experiences are often the most important and formative forces teachers encounter, which can drive growth (Conderman, et al., 2013). A teaching placement (practicum) can be the catalyst for growth and development yet; the process is at risk, however, when there is a lack of communication and shared understanding. This is something that needs to be overcome by actively working towards a functional relationship between the student teacher, co-operating teacher, and the Faculty advisor. (Ryan, 2012, p. 68)

Communication is the most important tool a teacher has in their teaching toolbox. Impaired or dysfunctional communications can lead to upsetting outcomes both inside and outside the classroom. We learn how to be a teacher and leader from observing our AT’s as well as other teacher colleagues within the school. Cherubini (2008a) found pre-service participant expectations of professional dialogue amongst teachers were substantiated by their qualitative responses. One participant expected that ‘new teachers will be able to learn by conversing with experienced teachers,’ while another noted that ‘the entire staff will be unique and educated people and a lot of sharing of knowledge can take place.’ Post-teaching

practicum reflections suggested a very different reality. As this participant suggested: “I was surprised to hear the amount of non-professional discussion.” A different individual candidly recorded, “I often heard teachers speaking poorly of their colleagues,” while another referenced “the unprofessional discussion about students.” (p. 47)

Unfortunately, these types of observations (unprofessional communications) are made frequently since teacher stress and frustrations can lead to verbal venting. Ultimately given their role and position as a new teacher it requires discretion as to where and when this venting is appropriate. Negative experiences may jade and impede growth as they begin to question held ideals, educational values and assumptions about students. The opinions of the AT can be a mediating force in communications and growth (Clarke, et al., 2014).

The term ‘new’ teacher no longer holds the same definition as it did when NTIP programs were first initiated in Ontario. Fantilli and McDougall (2009) believe, a gap in research may be addressed by conducting research that seeks to gain insights from new teachers’ perceptions of the influence of the administrator role on their experiences as a beginning teacher, as well as insights from administrators on their perceptions of what new teachers require to meet in-service needs with success. (p. 824)

Further research is needed to be able to uncover how the new system has affected these perceptions. Swain, Nordness, and Leader-Janssen (2012) similarly concluded more research is needed to identify the context (characteristics) and praxes (practices) of exemplary practicum experiences (settings) to determine what is best for pre-service teacher growth and development.

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