

Editor's Perspective Article: Action Research for Alternative Certification Teachers

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Abstract

New teachers enrolled in alternative routes to certification can learn about their teaching and their own students' learning through conducting classroom action research. The purpose of action research is for teachers to investigate and improve their practice (Hendricks, 2009). Conducting literature reviews can help new teachers better inform their practice, as well as provide a foundation to try their own new teaching ideas in the classroom. Empirical evidence can serve to indicate the efficacy of the new approaches in instruction. This article presents the method used by the author's own institution conducted with new alternative certification teachers in order to encourage action research in their own classrooms. Teachers in an action research course were consulted in regard to the use of action research in their own classrooms.

Keywords: alternative certification, action research

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New teachers enrolled in alternative routes to certification can learn about their teaching and their own students' learning through conducting classroom action research. The purpose of action research is for teachers to investigate and improve their practice (Hendricks, 2009). Additionally, Johnson (2008) cited Henson (1996), McTaggart (1997), and Schmuck (1997) and said that "action research can be defined as the process of studying a real school or classroom situation to understand and improve the quality of actions or instruction" (p. 28). Furthermore, conducting literature reviews can help new teachers better inform their practice, as well as provide a foundation to try their own new teaching ideas in the classroom. Empirical evidence can serve to indicate the efficacy of the new approaches in instruction.

This purpose of this article is to present the method used by the author's own institution conducted with new alternative certification teachers in order to encourage action research in their own classrooms. Additionally, new teachers can be encouraged to stay current in their fields through reading the professional journals, which evaluate and report innovative methods to teaching.

Hendricks (2009) claimed that action research was first identified in the 1930s through the work of Kurt Lewin. The purpose of Lewin's work was to compare various methods used to train factory workers. Hendricks (2009) further explained that this process was promoted by John Dewey as a way for educators to be directly involved in research. Today action research is promoted for many new teachers as a way to be directly involved in the symbiotic process of practice informing research, and research in turn informing practice. The teacher is directly involved in both the process of teaching and testing innovative teacher ideas. While the results of much of the research in the literature can be generalized to various classrooms, much of the research conducted is specific to the sample used by the researcher. Hence, it becomes essential that new teachers have the skills to conduct their own classroom research to determine if the proposed methods work well in *their* classrooms with *their* students. This means empirical data must be collected and analyzed so that teachers are using self-collected data to serve as a catalyst for data-driven instruction for their own teaching.

An important consequence from having teacher-derived research is the affect it has on the perception of the professionalization of the field. Given the current difficult climate faced by the teaching profession, it is helpful for teachers to be viewed not only as conveyors of knowledge, but also as generators of knowledge. Action research places the responsibility of good instruction on the professional educator rather than giving teachers prescribed lesson plans that regard teachers as actors reading a script as opposed to critically thinking professionals who can flexibly adapt their instruction to their own students' needs.

At the institution of the author of this article the new alternative certification teachers complete their education with a semester-long capstone action research course. The course is intended to allow the alternative certification teachers to investigate educational practices of their choice in their own classroom. Since this course is taken at the end of the program, the alternative certification teachers have been in the classroom approximately 1.5 years. The course emphasizes an inquiry-based approach to education and the teachers are encouraged to experiment with inquiry-based teaching methods. The course serves as a capstone to the teachers' master's degrees and thus completes their work in the program. Teachers are expected

to use the knowledge, skills, and understanding, as well as blend theory and practice, into their projects to create a capstone research project. The instructor holds regularly scheduled classes in regard to the research methods needed for the teachers, and time is set aside for one-on-one consultation with the instructor in order to better refine the teacher's capstone paper. The paper generated from this work serves as a de facto master's thesis. Recently the department has begun an action research conference for the teachers at the end of the semester giving them an opportunity to present their work in poster format. This presentation is similar to poster sessions offered at various professional conferences.

An important aspect to this process is teachers conduct an extensive literature review on their chosen topics. This serves three purposes. One, it gives teachers the opportunity to understand what others have done in this area and to learn from that. Two, it gives them a research foundation for their own investigation. Three, it encourages the practice of staying current with the literature and reading and evaluating articles in the professional journals. Earlier to the action research class teachers become familiar with reading the literature in their areas and get practice in determining the quality and relevancy of the studies they read.

Action Research Teacher Responses

At the author's institution, 14 alternative certification second year special education teachers (nine female and five male) were asked about their experiences in action research. All 14 teachers were currently teaching while taking the action research course. Teachers were asked about their thoughts on action research and 12 had indicated generally positive thoughts on action research describing it as valuable, useful, and helpful. The two remaining teachers indicated neutral feelings on action research. The only concern expressed about action research was the time it took to conduct it in the classroom.

The teachers were also asked how the action research course changed their perceptions of action research. They generally said the course made them aware of action research and made it seem more manageable. Of the 14 teachers, eight indicated they were generally unaware of action research prior to taking the course and one indicated a desire to have the course earlier in the teaching career.

Finally, teachers were asked how they will use what they learned in their action research class in their own classrooms. They generally said they would implement action research in their own classrooms in the future as they had done during this semester. In particular, four teachers said they became more aware of how action research can improve their instruction. Three teachers, however, did indicate that they thought it would be difficult to implement action research into their own future classrooms.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that alternative certification teachers have very full schedules in preparing for and teaching their own classes, taking their graduate classes at the university in the evening, and balancing their own personal and family lives. However, action research is an important aspect to good teaching practice and should be something that balances between the teachers' school

classrooms and the alternative certification graduate program at the universities. Preparing teachers to be good action researchers gives them preparation for good practice in their careers.

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