




Spring 2016

Researching and Reshaping Literacy Learning: Three Urban K-6 Teachers' Ongoing Transformations through Everyday Action Research

Kristin N. Rainville
Sacred Heart University

Grace Enriquez
Lesley University

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/ced_fac

 Part of the [Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons](#), and the [Elementary Education and Teaching Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rainville, K.N. & Enriquez, G. (2016). Researching and reshaping literacy learning: three urban k-6 teachers' ongoing transformations through everyday action research. *Networks: An Online Journal for Teacher Research* 18(1), 1-14.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Isabelle Farrington College Of Education at DigitalCommons@SHU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Education Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@SHU. For more information, please contact ferribyp@sacredheart.edu.



**An On-line Journal for
Teacher Research**

**Researching and Reshaping Literacy Learning:
Three Urban K-6 Teachers' Ongoing Transformations
through Everyday Action Research**

**Kristin Nicole Rainville – Sacred Heart University
Grace Enriquez - Lesley University**

Abstract

Given the vast range of diversity among children's backgrounds and needs, literacy educators must consider multiple ways in which children learn and interact with texts. Moreover, policies that increasingly require frequent assessments of children's literacy achievement place pressure on educators to find immediate ways to impact children's learning. This qualitative inquiry explores three graduate students' yearlong engagement in literacy-related action research within ethnically and socioeconomically diverse, urban K-6 classrooms. Grounded in a social practice perspective on literacy and a sociocultural perspective on literacy learning, we examined participants' constructions of action research as they developed research questions, entered various research sites, and engaged in a cyclical process of research-reflection-action in order to impact student learning in those classroom communities. With these case studies, we argue that for teachers to fully embrace and incorporate action research into their practice, they need to go beyond completing the steps to frame action research as a constant way of thinking, a daily practice, and an ongoing process of continuously spiraling mini-cycles that change instruction in incremental, yet ultimately powerful ways.

I've grown leaps and bounds as a literacy educator this year. I've learned so much about the teaching of writing from my students. Careful observation of them, within the action research framework, has allowed me to pay attention to their growth and needs as writers. . . . [I] expect to do meaningful action research in reading and writing for many years to come. In fact, due to the insights I've developed this year, there is no way I can live without doing action research since action research feels like it's the

only appropriate way to help students grow by differentiating instruction for each and every one of them. (Sarah, Action Research Project)

In this article, we present the case studies of three in-service teachers enrolled in a graduate course on action research. The course was a Master's level seminar in action research, a required course in a literacy specialist program, in which graduate students conducted action research projects around a self-chosen topic related to literacy as a culminating project for their degree. With these cases, we inquired into the ways the participants constructed meaning of action research as they developed their research questions in the course, entered various urban K-6 classrooms as their research sites, and engaged in a cyclical process of research-reflection-action in order to impact student learning in those communities. Specifically, we wanted to investigate how the teachers took up action research practices in their classrooms and how action research impacted their understanding of literacy teaching and learning in urban classrooms.

Given the vast range of diversity among children's backgrounds and needs, literacy educators must consider the multiple ways in which children learn and interact with texts. Moreover, given the changing literacy landscape impacted by a political climate that assesses children's literacy achievement on an increasingly frequent basis, the push to tie these achievement scores to annual teacher reviews, and newly adopted Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), literacy educators often feel incredible pressure to find immediate ways to impact children's learning. While many teachers engage in action research to tackle a specific challenge in their classroom, that process tends to be characterized and enacted as a single endeavor or project that is temporary, extracurricular, or exceptional, involving a process that takes a significant amount of time to complete. With these cases, we demonstrate that in order for teachers to fully embrace and incorporate action research into their practice, they need to go beyond completing the steps to frame action research as a constant way of thinking, a daily practice, and an ongoing process of continuously spiraling mini-cycles that has the potential to change instruction in incremental, yet ultimately powerful ways.

The Cs of Action Research: Controversy, Context, and Cycles

Action research falls under the umbrella of teacher research, or practitioner research. As a whole, teacher research has been greatly debated as its presence in teacher education programs and teachers' classrooms has become widespread in the last twenty years. Critics find fault with the term *teacher research*, distinguishing between "formal knowledge" and "practical knowledge." However, Cochran-Smith and Lytle refute this dualistic setup as oversimplified and assert:

[T]eacher research is about how students and their teachers construct the curriculum, co-mingling their experiences, their cultural and linguistic resources, and their interpretive frameworks. It is about how teachers' actions are infused with complex and multi-layered understandings of learners, culture, class, gender, literacy, social issues, institutions, communities, materials, texts and curricula. (1998, p. 24)

Other critics dismiss teacher research as lacking the methodical rigor or objectivity of traditional forms of research. Proponents of teacher research (and action research), however, argue that it is the epitome of responsive teaching; that is, through daily observations and assessments of

students and regular reflections about teaching and learning, teachers ground their instruction in the real, present needs and identities of their students. Moreover, teachers' epistemologies rise from knowledge that is nested in their interaction with students as knowers, reveals a set of values and social relationships, and leads to ethical stances and dilemmas about how to teach (Lyons, 1994).

Action research, as a form of teacher research, concentrates on examining one's own practice. It is primarily concerned with improving a particular context for learning and "balances a classroom culture that is personal, contextual, open-ended, and ever-changing with a research culture that is rigorous, structured, and systematic" (Caro-Bruce, 2004, p. 54). Across the literature, several principles guide the development and process of action research. The power of action research revolves around the connection of theory to practice, systematic collection and analysis of data about the learning process, significance of reflection, positioning of teacher as decision-maker and knowledge-producer, and immediate steps for change (Baumann & Duffy, 2001; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 1998; Mertler, 2006). Ideally, action research is never-ending. Unlike traditional types of educational or qualitative research, action research is not linear; nor is it terminal. Rather action research is most commonly conceived as a cycle of collecting research, reflecting on the research, implementing change through action, and then reflecting on the action taken. The cycle repeats itself as teachers' reflections on the action taken should compel further research and therefore the start of a new cycle.

A number of materials have been published over the past decade to help practitioners implement action research in their classrooms (e.g., Anderson, Nihlen, & Herr, 1994; Falk & Blumenreich, 2005; Hubbard & Power, 2003; Mertler, 2006). These texts serve largely as guidebooks that walk teachers step-by-step through the action research process. Perhaps one of the greatest testaments to the promise of action research is the growing body of literature written by teachers who describe how action research inspires and empowers them to design meaningful, effective literacy instruction for their students. For example, Cooper and White (2006) document a school-based initiative that used action research to determine ways to develop critical literacy strategies for both "early at-risk students and their teachers" (p. 86). Campano (2007) shares the story of how, by taking a teacher-inquiry approach to questions about culture and immigration, a Hmong girl in his fifth grade class began producing rich narrative writing. Before then, she had been labeled an "at-risk" and "low-achieving" student. Examples like that of Cooper and White (2006) describe schoolwide collaboration and action research, while those like Campano's (2007) account detail the powerful transformation of one teacher's instruction and of students' learning within a classroom.

What is largely missing from the literature is a close examination of how teachers make sense of action research, how they negotiate their roles as teachers and researchers, and how they pursue action research practices across multiple cycles within a particular classroom context. In other words, how do teachers move from seeing action research as a method (i.e., the particular steps for data collection, analysis, etc.) to a methodology (i.e., a theory for using particular methods) for learning about classroom instruction? In what ways do teachers in a culminating graduate literacy research course take up research practices within their particular classroom contexts? Finally, how does action research impact teachers' understanding of literacy teaching and learning in urban K-6 classrooms?

Theoretical Framework

We grounded this study in a social practice perspective on literacy and a sociocultural perspective on literacy learning. A social practice perspective on literacy suggests that literacy is always situated in particular social activities, which shape and are shaped by the social interactions and power relations inscribed in social institutions (e.g., schools, families, work place) (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 1996; Hamilton, 2000; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1984). In other words, these lenses highlight the diverse, sociocultural identities and practices of literacy learners and teachers. Literacy, therefore, is a political endeavor, with cultural, historical, and ideological implications that value some ways of constructing meaning around texts and silence others. From this perspective, it could be more appropriate to speak of “multiple literacies” than a single literacy and to consider the many diverse contexts, identities, and ideologies that impact the different ways learners interact with texts and the different ways teachers assess and value those interactions.

Sociocultural theories of language and literacy provided us with a particular lens for exploring how teachers make sense of action research. This lens enables us to push against traditional notions of literacy, literacy teaching, and literacy learning, giving us language to discuss practices, enactments, and processes in multiple and plural ways. This lens also helped us view the practices the teachers undertook as being historically situated and contextually specific. Ultimately, using this framework helped us bring to the fore the teachers’ ongoing processes, rather than just the product of their action research endeavors.

Data Sources and Analysis

This research is a qualitative, comparative case-study inquiry into the year-long journey of three graduate students engaged in literacy-related action research. The study began as our own action research, since we were the instructors for the Master’s action research course aiming to improve our practice and content for similar courses in the future. The use of a sociocultural framework and methodology aims at a process approach, which looks at socially assembled situations and activity in context (John-Steiner, Panofsky, & Smith, 1994). In keeping with this theoretical frame, case study, as described by Merriam (1998), is a particularly suited design if there is an interest in process. Case studies help us understand processes of events, projects, and programs and discover context characteristics that highlight an issue (Merriam, 1998). Through studying the details of each student’s experience of the classroom where she conducted action research, we gain insight into some of the factors that shape, and the processes through which people interpret or make meaningful the research and teaching relationship (Dyson & Genishi, 2005).

Of the 28 students enrolled in the action research course, we selected three participants for this study. Sarah, Elle, and Angelina were chosen because they were each full-time teachers enrolled in a literacy specialist Master’s degree program. Each participant had been balancing the responsibilities of completing coursework and teaching elementary school for at least two years. Sarah had been teaching fifth grade in a low-income, ethnically diverse neighborhood in a large urban city. At the school, 84% of the students qualified for free or reduced lunch. During the year of the study Sarah’s classroom was identified as the “gifted” classroom for the grade level and included 32 fifth graders, two thirds of which were female. Sarah’s three focal students were Latina females. Elle, in her fifth year of teaching, taught first grade in a different state. Of her 17

students, nine were White, four were Latino, three were Asian, and one was Black. Six of her students were boys, and 11 were girls. She also had one hearing-impaired student in her class that year. Additionally, the socioeconomic population of Elle's school ranged from working to upper-middle class. Angelina, a second year teacher, taught fourth grade in a in the same urban city as Sarah. Angelina's school served 1,376 students kindergarten through grade five, 77.8% of whom identified as Latino. The school was in the second year of a Corrective Action Plan for not meeting adequate yearly progress (AYP). Angelina's fourth grade class included 23 students, five of which had been "held over" in the past, meaning they had repeated second or third grade. Five students were identified as English Language Learners (three from the Dominican Republic and two from Bangladesh) and were receiving services.

Throughout course meetings, in their course assignments, and in their final Master's action research projects, Sarah, Angelina, and Elle expressed significant changes in their pedagogy. The fact that they taught in ethnically and socioeconomically diverse, urban elementary classrooms highlighted the power of their work. Their student population resembled the populations that many graduate students in the literacy specialist program taught, so we were particularly interested in how their cases could offer insight about action research, literacy, and urban elementary school teaching.

Aligning with the sociocultural theories of literacy and learning that frame the study, our primary data sources reflected the participants' individual understandings and included all written documents produced by the participants (Hodder, 1994; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Salkind, 2003). Such data included reflections on course topics, philosophy statements about literacy instruction, teaching materials created by the participants, and the portfolio of student work that comprised their action research project. In addition, we conducted semistructured one-hour interviews with each participant six months after the course, and audiotaped and transcribed those interviews (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Seidman, 1998). We also supplemented these data with fieldnotes from naturalistic observations of the context and events of each class session that we took while teaching the course (Hubbard & Power, 2003; Mertler, 2006).

Data analysis utilized in this research drew upon the grounded theory approach of constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Initial analysis and interpretation began in the field during course meetings (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). As the participants designed, enacted, and continually reflected on their action research projects recurring themes emerged and we began to draw connections across their new learning and generate theories (Bernard, 2002; Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; LeCompte & Preissle, 2003).

Understandings about Research: Deconstructing a Dominant Paradigm

Sarah entered the action research seminar not quite sure what she would encounter. She, like many of her classmates, believed that research was firmly rooted in organization, logic, and sequential progress. Sarah was a teacher who surrounded herself with organized binders, labeled all her folders and containers, kept punctual appointments, and responded with timeliness to parent correspondence. She planned concise minilessons to teach reading and writing, and she diligently kept precise, updated records on students' literacy learning. It was no surprise to any of us (Sarah included) when Sarah grappled with the organic quality of action research. Reflecting on

her first exposure to the term *action research*, she responded, “I did not think it looked like this. I thought it was neat and included surveys and questions.” At the beginning of her research, Sarah knew she wanted to “lift the level of my students’ writing.” One month later, she declared that after a lot of thinking, she believed she should focus on using picture books as mentor texts for student writing. The next month, she debated whether it was more appropriate to use her own writing as mentor texts. As a result, she amassed a great amount of student writing samples, observation notes, and interview transcripts. She began meeting regularly with us and other graduate students after class to figure out ways to organize and make sense of the data. Eventually, she announced that she could not report her work in any neatly organized fashion because she the work she did had produced so much data, but she said she believed all of it was valuable and “has allowed me to pay attention [students’] growth and needs as writers.”

Elle also initially believed that conducting research meant employing traditional methods for data collection. In her interview, she explained that prior to engaging in action research, she thought research meant “using books, periodicals, interviewing.” Like Sarah, she had her research topic in mind from the start: how to get her first graders to become independent readers of nonfiction text. Elle had recognized a need to change her instruction around nonfiction and was unhappy about the teacher-directed lessons and lack of student inquiry in her instruction. In her final action research project, she wrote:

I realized that the quality of non-fiction reading happening in my classroom was not good. I was not teaching my readers to read non-fiction, the way I do to become an informed citizen. . . . I was reading for about fifteen to twenty of the thirty minutes, leaving my readers about ten minutes to complete a written response, usually the form of a graphic organizer, used for assessment purposes to find out what my readers knew and learned from the non-fiction read aloud lesson.

Without books or periodicals that explained her students’ learning processes, Elle went to the first sources of information she had: their completed graphic organizers and her own lessons. She scrutinized the worksheets and studied the language she used in her lesson plans. She saw that she was only providing students with opportunities to retell what they learned:

[This lesson] left no room for my readers to draw conclusions about what they were reading and thinking. It did not allow room for readers to make critical judgments, relate it to prior or similar information, ask questions, find their own answers to their questions or form a unique interpretation about what they were reading. This type of work . . . was merely a direct assessment technique I used for my readers to spit back the new information they had heard from the non-fiction read aloud.

After this epiphany, Elle proceeded to try out different ways of using language to teach her students. She modeled through think-alouds and taught students how to create an OWL (observations, wonderings, links to real life) chart in response to the nonfiction books they read. From listening to their attempts at think-alouds, Elle then realized she needed to narrow the focus of her modeled think-alouds. She also began keeping a journal about her students’ work and reflected on the entries to determine how next to tailor her instruction. Six months after completing her action research project for the course, Elle said she felt research was now about “making adaptations, making it more hands on, and keeping really good anecdotes.”

Within the first few sessions of the seminar, Angelina saw an opportunity to try out the critical literacy practices she had learned about in other courses in her Master's program. She had just completed her first year of teaching in a large urban public K-5 school with an approximately 50 percent ELL population, many of whom were also special education students. Angelina explained that the school was also in its second year as a corrective action school since it was struggling to meet AYP standards. When she began the seminar, Angelina had 23 students in her fourth grade class, five of whom were ELL students, six had been held back in previous grades, and four were regularly pulled out for extra help in reading and math. Within the first few months of that second year, she began seeing that despite what standardized assessments revealed about her students' literacy skills, her students were constantly reading and responding to the texts in their communities and developing skills that were not counted on annual tests. In one of her course assignments, Angelina explained:

The first week in October, on our journey to the bathroom, students spot the new poster hanging on the door of the Social Studies Department. It is a satellite image of the world. As the class stops at the end of the hallway, they turn to face and stare at the peculiar depiction of the world. . . . The world is missing every single body of land except for the United States, and on the bottom there are captions that warn us that *We Are Not Alone*. For the rest of the week, students crowd around the poster to take another look at it, without my instructing them to do so. I can see them pointing at the poster and hear some students whispering to each other (after all, this is the hallway and school rules say quiet passage through the hallway). I listen in and hear them saying, *That's so weird!...It looks so real...where's the rest of the earth?*

Starting with those observations, Angelina embarked on a journey to help her fourth graders engage in critical readings of all the texts in their lives. Reflecting on that work in an interview, she asserted, "Now, research is about looking and sitting down with my students, looking at their work and seeing where you can tap into."

These examples highlight the first major shift in the teachers' research paradigms: an acceptance and understanding of qualitative data as valid research. Moreover, the teachers began to see themselves as uniquely positioned to gather pertinent qualitative data about their students' literacy learning. Owocki and Goodman (2002) assert that by closely observing and taking notes of their students' activities, what they call *kidwatching*, teachers build an insider's view that "is essential to understanding a cultural community and the individuals within that community" (p. 3). Angelina's *kidwatching* clued her in to the kinds of literacy work her students found meaningful and sought to develop instruction based on the reality of her diverse students' interests and realities. The other teachers also drew upon an insider's, or emic, perspective within the classroom to recognize which data would help them hone in on their students' needs (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). After studying the materials and questions she used in her teaching, Elle saw that her first-graders were simply retelling the information they learned from nonfiction texts; more importantly, she realized that those materials and questions directed students to do so. Sarah collected copious amounts of student writing to study and determine which kinds of mentor texts would best aid her class. Thus, valuing and developing an emic perspective about research was a crucial step for all three teachers to take as they embarked on their action research endeavors.

As the semester progressed and the teachers spent more time attempting to conduct action research in their classrooms, their understandings about research made another significant shift.

Whereas their previous conceptions of research implied neat, linear, forward movement toward answering their research questions, action research proved to involve a messy, recursive process. During course meetings, Sarah kept wavering between two research paths to determine how she could use mentor texts to help students improve their writing. On one hand, she pursued the idea that different kinds of mentor texts were needed for teaching different genres of writing, and she worked to determine what texts would best help her students' writing needs. On the other hand, she also realized that many of her students were not using their writer's notebooks in effective ways, and she thought that perhaps she should create sample notebook entries to serve as mentor texts. During one seminar meeting, while sharing her action research work with other graduate students, Sarah wrote about her discomfort in realizing that she could not simply continue forward with her current direction of research:

So I'm beginning to feel like I shouldn't have done mentor texts . . . With 14 of my kids plowing through their writer's notebooks this year, I've come to think that I should've done my master's action research project on writer's notebooks. It's not that mentor texts aren't interesting to me. However, it's so hard to show growth with this and I've shown so much growth with their entries in keeping notebooks.

Maybe I'm hitting a low because it's vacation time, and I feel like I'm not doing anything right at this second. However, trying to motivate Ella and Luz to use mentor texts regularly in order to copy craft moves is going to be challenging. Well, I did say challenging, not impossible, so maybe it is a good project.

Accepting a conception of research as nonlinear was a significant moment in Sarah's action research work. Rather than view the change in direction and backtracking work she needed to do as obstacles or marks of failure, she saw them as a necessary decisions that would ultimately help her reach her goal of improving students' writing. In her final action research project, Sarah wrote, "I've attempted to give [students] different kinds of mentor texts throughout the months in order to discover what works best in terms of mentors for each unit of study. . . . I have gone down two paths in my research, which is why this binder will not always feel linear or chronological." For Sarah, embracing the recursive, messy quality of action research marked another significant experience in her developing understanding of action research.

Elle and Angelina also wrestled with the nonlinear process of action research. Elle explained that she had to develop "a constant willingness to try different strategies" and that she would search for these strategies "from class, books, the Internet." After a particular action (a minilesson on using pictures in a nonfiction text to gather information) did not go as smoothly as she had hoped, she decided to follow the direction students were taking her in, rather than pursue her original action plan. She explained in a written reflection, "I decided (though disappointed in my failure to execute the lesson successfully) to take advantage of my readers' hard work to develop questions that would foster meaningful thinking about text. Eventually, they would be given appropriate time to answer these questions [the ones she had originally wanted them to answer], as well" (p. 24). Angelina expressed similar pulls between her research goals and the present data she gathered about students' needs and interests. In the conclusion of her project, she wrote:

So many times throughout this research process I would start with my own agenda and end up teaching using theirs. For example, all of cycle 2 was about

mentor texts that would inspire students to become text analysts and social action writers during writing workshop. And then I started to look at their writing and saw their social and cultural lives driving their social issue fictional piece. Do I think that read aloud helped them? Yes, it helped them to know that they had the power to identify, question, and change the way that we see the world as readers and writers. However, the issue they choose to write about is not up to me. I did not read about gun and gang cultures and I did not read about divorce or about the shame that comes with having a white-collar working mother.

For these teachers, action research meant constantly stepping back, literally and pedagogically, to reassess what their students were doing, how their actions were impacting student learning, and what next action steps would be most appropriate for teaching their students. Baumann and Duffy (2001) noted that methodological evolution is characteristic of teacher research. A distinct feature of action research is the recursive and reflexive process that allows teachers to make informed decisions and implement meaningful change in their practices. In order to so, Sarah, Elle, and Angelina not only paid close attention to what their students were doing, but also who their students were as particular kinds of learners with particular interests, abilities, and backgrounds.

Understandings about Teaching: Reconstructing a Teacher Identity

One of the beliefs of the literacy specialist program threading through all of the coursework is that teaching must be responsive to students. While many of the graduate students in the action research course stated that they felt this approach was important, few were actually able to translate these beliefs into their everyday teaching. All three of these teachers felt that this project helped them to transform these goals from beliefs and philosophies to actual embodied practice.

In written reflections about how she came to her research topic, Elle began to unpack the negative feelings she harbored about her past teaching practices around nonfiction texts:

I was unhappy about the teacher directed lessons I have employed with non-fiction text, the language I employed to get fixed answers....the lack of inquiry, discussion, or reporting about information my students found compelling. I wanted to learn more about how to model strategies to my students to use methods of inquiry to help them think, read, and write about non-fiction.

Elle described her previous lessons as “centered on teaching readers to use distinct parts of a non-fiction text to extract information neatly.” Elle would usually read aloud a text and then have her students answer literal level questions about it, usually in the format of a graphic organizer. This process of teaching was based on assessment of the students’ listening comprehension and ability to recall facts from the text to demonstrate their knowledge of the subject matter that Elle highlighted as important. She wrote, “My students were showing me what they thought to be the right answer to the question I had highlighted to be important in the text.” Engaging in the process of action research, which included reading articles and books on nonfiction strategies, looking closely at her teaching practices and at students’ practices, Elle began to question her teaching and the purposes behind her teaching as well as the enactments of her practices. She shifted her practices from the transmission of information about the topics they were reading to an inquiry-

based process that was engaging and started with the questions that students posed. In her action research project, she wrote the following reflection:

This project redefined how I teach my readers to guide their comprehension and monitor their thinking of non-fiction texts. My readers make observations with their naked eye, asked questions, found their own answers to those questions by reading pictures and texts, and made independent predictions and inferences through partner talk in my classroom.

This thread of responsive teaching was evident in Angelina and Sarah's work as well. In her concluding reflections, Angelina noted, "One of the seemingly obvious conclusions that I can come out of after all of this research, is that studying your students should always be done to inform your teaching....By continually letting my observations guide my planning and teaching I learned so much about my students—both their strengths and their needs." Angelina began to capitalize on and value what her students brought to their learning and their diverse perspectives began to shape and inform her lessons and "centered her teaching around her students cultures" (Angelina, Action Research Project).

Similarly, during her interview Sarah explained how "action research allowed me to be more responsive to kids needs." Although responsive teaching is a catch phrase of current educational times and a theme of many teacher education programs, these experienced teachers had not previously been able to incorporate these practices. However, this project gave all three the opportunity to study their teaching and student learning closely, engaging in the process of action research, which enabled them to transform their teaching and embrace responsive teaching. In the opening of the article, Sarah reflected that "action research feels like it's the only appropriate way to help students grow by differentiating instruction for each and every one of them."

Understandings about Student Literacy Learning:

Locating Power within Students

In the previous section, we saw how Elle shifted her perspective about literacy teaching however, we also began to see how she shifted her thinking around the role of students in her classroom. No longer were the first grade students vessels to be filled with facts but rather, they came with knowledge and questions that they could bring to a piece of text to help them better comprehend the text as a reader and use the information later on. Another shift that Elle wrote about included that during her previous years the students were answering questions posed by the teacher, on a graphic organizer, individually. During the action research project, Elle began to provide students with opportunities to discuss their thinking and learning with partners and small groups of students. She explained this decision in her action research project:

Allowing students' time to talk about texts proved to be most powerful in redefining the shape of how my readers could monitor their own thinking and become independent....my readers were interacting with non-fiction texts for the first time rather than responding to assessment questions with mundane facts.....as a result my readers took action over their learning.

Elle began to value not only what the students brought with them, but also how they worked together in groups to construct new learning and deepen their understandings of the text as well as the process of reading.

Angelina also began to value student's knowledge and experiences and began to look a student conversation as generative and a vital practice in her classroom:

It is important that teachers don't fall into the trap of imposing their own views into the student's lives. I really tried not to do this by not interfering as much in conversations and by asking questions that allowed students to talk about position, power, and perspective without letting my own voice override them.

Here, Angelina has reflected on her positioning within the classroom and her role in student conversations. In the past, Angelina would have jumped into conversations, imposing her views, beliefs, or what she thought she should say as a teacher. For example, when a student wrote a social narrative about gang activity, instead of her initial reaction to say something like "guns are bad" instead, Angelina capitalized on the power of the student's experiences and the writing and instead shifted the teaching point to focus on the inspiration of writing such a deep story (Angelina, Action Research Project).

Angelina, Elle, and Sarah were all working with students who may have been labeled "at-risk" however; these three teachers never regarded these students as such. This action research project, structured within a sociocultural theoretical frame, helped these teachers to work from an alternate perspective, capitalizing on the strengths and experiences of these students and starting their teaching there, which allowed them to be more reflective and responsive in their teaching practices. These teachers shifted their beliefs not only about teaching, but also about student learning and how they position students in their classrooms.

Conflating the Roles of Teacher and Researcher

In the opening quotation, Sarah asserted that she could not perceive the role of teacher without viewing the role of researcher. Educators have argued for the conflation of these roles throughout the last few decades (e.g., Anderson et al., 1994; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1998; DiPardo et al., 2006). The structure and process of the action research course and project encouraged teachers to view themselves as researchers and to embrace action research as a part of their practice. However, as the instructors, we were astounded by the power of action research and the transformation these teachers experienced. Each of the teachers have incorporated action research practices into their *everyday* teaching (it was not just a "project") and begun to look at themselves as researchers.

As the due date for the project grew close, Sarah reflected:

My research is by no means finished. In fact, I promised that I'll continue to work with them in the format of weekly Writing Lunches, every week through the last day of the school year. Why? They teach me how to teach writing better. I can't stop now that a rough draft is due. No, no. I'm going to keep blogging and keep researching. I'm going to keep reflecting and keep teaching. And most of all, I'm going to keep taking action each and every day, with each child, just like I've been doing for the past six and a half months.

Not only did each of the teachers continued to work on their “projects” beyond the due date and through the end of the school year, each of them embraced action research as a part of their everyday practice as teachers. In their interviews during the following school year, each of them reflected that the projects transformed their teaching. Elle noted:

Research is ongoing. It’s every day in your classroom....I used to do “carbon-copy teaching. That’s what I called it. But this year, I’m doing *all* new stuff. Now, everything I’m doing now is brand new. I’m not afraid to test things out.

Similarly, Angelina noted, “ever since the course, I still follow a [curricular] framework, but now what I do is more of a response. I do research-reflection-action every day now! It’s really made me aware and sensitive to my own teaching.”

Although these three teachers have embraced action research as a part of their everyday work as teachers, Elle and Sarah reported that they are the only teachers in their schools who are teaching in this manner. Elle has received tremendous support from her administration, which has been bittersweet. It has positioned her in conflicting ways-on the one hand Elle is seen as a mentor and has been able to become a literacy leader in the school, however, she has also been position as the “golden girl” in the school, which has caused some animosity amongst the teachers.

Alternatively, Angelina is now on the “Data Team” at her school, which was created to help the school see alternative ways of assessing students despite the continued push for AYP and accountability. She believes action research is the only way to really differentiate instruction and has helped the team to begin to see the power of teachers engaging in action research and imagine the possibilities of conflating roles of teacher and researcher.

Implications and Next Steps

This study looks at graduate students engaging in literacy-related action research in urban communities. Interest in action research has grown among the literacy education audiences as research in recent decades has viewed literacy and literacy education as a social practice. As a form of teacher research, action research is specifically geared toward studying closely the classroom community, impacting student learning, and improving one’s own practice (Falk & Blumenreich, 2005). Knowledge, then, is generated for practical, instructional purposes and sought to for immediate change within a particular community (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999).

These case studies help to expand the understandings about literacy research in teacher education by highlighting the diverse processes by which teachers themselves come to understand and engage in action research. In addition, these cases help to illuminate the complex processes, contexts, and identities that comprise urban K-6 classrooms and with which literacy researchers and educators engage. Exploring the case studies of these three graduate students will helps teacher educators and administrators to consider the issues involved in promoting literacy-related action research and the implications this work has for teacher preparation and urban education.

Further, in a rush to implement CCSS administrators may feel compelled to purchase and implement rigid use of published curriculum that claims to address the standards (Goatley & Hinchman, 2013). Instead, we urge teachers and administrators to reframe the way we view and enact the CCSS in classrooms. Rather than limiting the roles of teachers to deliverers of pre-determined curriculum, we need to view teachers as engaged intellectuals (Jones, 2014). Together,

as literacy leaders, we can take this opportunity to reimagine our teaching, to use tools like action research, much like the participants in this study, and empower teachers to take stock, make informed judgments, and take action.

References

- Anderson, G. L., Nihlen, A. S., & Herr, K. G. (1994). *Studying your own school: An educator's guide to qualitative practitioner research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Barton, D. & Hamilton, M. (2000). Literacy practices. In D. Barton, M. Hamilton, & R. Ivanic (Eds.), *Situated literacies: Reading and writing in context* (pp. 16-34). London and New York: Routledge.
- Bernard, H. R. (2002). *Research methods in anthropology: Qualitative and quantitative approaches* (3rd ed.). New York: Altamira Press.
- Baumann, J. F., & Duffy, A. M. (2001). Teacher-researcher methodology: Themes, variations, and possibilities. *The Reading Teacher*, 54(6), 608-615.
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (2003). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods* (4th ed.). New York: Allyn and Bacon
- Campano, G. (2007). Honoring student stories. *Educational Leadership*, 65(2), 48-54.
- Caro-Bruce, C. (2004). Action research. In *Powerful designs for professional learning*. Oxford, OH: National Staff Development Council.
- Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. L. (1993). *Inside/outside: Teacher research and knowledge*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. L. (1998). Teacher research: The question that persists. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 1(1), 19-36.
- Cooper, K., & White, R. E. (2006). Action research in practice: Critical literacy in an urban grade 3 classroom. *Educational Action Research*, 14(1), 83-99.
- DiPardo, A., Whitney, A., Fleischer, C., Johnson, T. S., Mayher, J., McCracken, N., et al. (2006). Understanding the relationship between research and teaching. *English Education*, 38(4), 295-311.
- Dyson, A. H., & Genishi, C. (2005). *On the case: Approaches to language and literacy research*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Falk, B., & Blumenreich, M. (2005). *The power of questions: A guide to teacher and student research*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Gee, J. P. (1996). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourse* (2nd ed.). New York: Falmer Press.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Goatley, V. J. & Hinchman, K. A. (2013). Using research to make sensible literacy decisions within current educational initiatives. *The Language and Literacy Spectrum*, 23, 57-68.

- Hamilton, M. (2000). Expanding the New Literacy Studies: Using photographs to explore literacy as social practice. In D. Barton, M. Hamilton, & R. Ivanic (Eds.), *Situated literacies: Reading and writing in context* (pp. 16-34). London and New York: Routledge.
- Hodder, I. (1994). The interpretation of documents and material culture. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 393-402). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hubbard, R. S., & Power, B. M. (2003). *The art of classroom inquiry: A handbook for teacher-researchers* (Revised ed.). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- John-Steiner, V., Panofsky, C. P. & Smith, L. W. (1994). *Sociocultural approaches to language and literacy: An interactionist perspective*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Jones, S. (2014). Engaged Intellectuals. [Blog] Retrieved from:
<http://engagedintellectual.wordpress.com/>.
- LeCompte, M. D., & Preissle, J. (2003). *Ethnography and qualitative design in educational research* (2nd ed.). San Diego: Academic Press
- Lyons, N. (1994). Dilemmas of knowing: Ethical and epistemological dimensions of teachers' work and development. In L. Stone (Ed.), *The education feminism reader* (pp. 195-217). New York: Routledge.
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (1999). *Designing qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative Research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mertler, C. A. (2006). *Action research: Teachers as researchers in the classroom*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers (2010). Common Core State Standards. Retrieved online at <http://www.corestandards.org/> on July 1, 2014.
- Owocki, G., & Goodman, Y. (2002). What is kidwatching? In G. Owocki & Y. Goodman (Ed.), *Kidwatching: Documenting children's literacy development* (pp. 1-14). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Salkind, N. J. (2003). *Exploring research* (5th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Scribner, S. & Cole, M. (1981). *The psychology of literacy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Seidman, I. (1998). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (2nd ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Street, B. (1984). *Literacy in theory and practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.