

# Reflection on Student Action Research

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Joelle and Rachel’s research, documented in their article “Bridging Borders Through Writer’s Workshop,” began as an assignment chosen in the semester before their student teaching. It continued into their student teaching and beyond, as the question they posed became integral to their teaching. These two students were concerned about how best to serve the ethnic diversity they would experience as preservice teachers. Their ideas and questions seemed to multiply as they observed, interacted, and reflected. Each new question took them deeper into their inquiry, the action of their research. Joelle and Rachel developed their ability to reflect in a way that helped them arrive at creative approaches to bridge the in-grouping of the ethnic groups in their classrooms. This valuable skill—reflection—went well beyond what is typically seen in preservice teachers. Later, the modifications they made to building community both as preservice and later as new teachers had their origins in their growing ability to observe, reflect, and interpret what was happening with their children.

One of the ideas that emerged from their reflection was their very creative use of the Writer’s Workshop. They wanted to enhance children’s relationships with each other and honor the language and culture of the entire classroom by translating their published stories into both of the languages spoken by students in their classroom (English and Spanish). However, as is often the case, neither Joelle nor Rachel nor their cooperating teachers spoke Spanish. Rather than giving up, they persisted. The need to find help translating led them to uncover parent resources in the English as a second

language courses taught at the school. They *needed* the parents of the English language learners for their writing project to be successful. The power of needing and relating to parents who had felt marginalized in their child's educational setting was an unexpected and potent learning experience—one that neither Joelle nor Rachel had experienced as they read about or listened to professors espouse such practice in their college classrooms. Involving the Spanish-speaking parents resulted in all of the parents attending their children's Author's Chair event. Because the families were part of the children's written stories and presented as the stories were shared, they, too, made positive connections to the classroom community.

As preservice teachers near the end of their teacher training, the urgency seems to intensify for teacher educators to foster the shift from the mindset of dependent learners to proactive professionals seeking to answer their own questions. They come to us with a tradition of emphasis on the grade rather than the learning. Helping them see the connection between assignments and their future classrooms is not always easy. The heavy load of assignments, often coupled with employment and family life, leaves many preservice teachers struggling to stay current with “must do” work and precludes divergent thinking that might lead to formulating questions. There is no open space in the brain for questions, so they do not ponder how to examine a question more deeply to seek an answer.

The semester before our preservice teachers do their student teaching, they are required to take a course on differentiating instruction. The course underlies the importance of creating a positive classroom community along with the possibility of student choice and varied tasks for varied needs. It focuses on making connections between all the courses they have taken or are taking in their teacher preparation program. Their final assignment is differentiated for their interest and readiness and includes the choice of conducting action research to answer a question. Joelle and Rachel chose to work as a team and do an action research project demonstrating their ability to create a safe learning community for the students in their classrooms.

We have observed that providing choice in this final assessment for students to demonstrate their understanding of and ability to implement differentiated instruction is an important key to their learning. Students' engagement is high as they design their own learning experience. They take ownership and see a purpose in their work as they focus their learning in a direction they value, recognizing it as useful beyond the college classroom.

This action research project became a natural connector of content from a variety of program courses, including language arts writing methods, multicultural understanding, teaching English as a second language, classroom management, curriculum and assessment, and differentiating instruction for special populations. Each piece became an essential tool in answering the

question that was important to these student teacher researchers: How to promote community in their respective student teaching classrooms.

Writing Workshop was a teaching strategy introduced in the language arts course that the students used to build community (introduced in their differentiating instruction and classroom management courses) in a multicultural classroom. While the focus of their research was to explore ways to bridge cultural differences among the children in their classroom, the children became very excited about their writing. Given permission to choose their own topic and use their own voice (as opposed to responding to a prompt), the children chose to celebrate their culture. This project resulted in excitement about writing in the class, an increase in the writing skills of all the children, as well as the creation of classroom community.

Although Joelle and Rachel had experienced writing for an authentic audience and Author's Chair in their language arts course, the value and power of these two components of Writer's Workshop were not fully appreciated until the children experienced it for themselves. For Joelle, Rachel, their children, and their children's families, shared story forged a powerful feeling of commonality, understanding, and community. From the English-speaking students who didn't recognize their stories read in Spanish to the Spanish-speaking students who were able to share their story in their first language with parents, peers, and teachers, eyes were opened to new understandings. Culture was celebrated, connections were made, and pathways to friendships paved.

An overarching finding of this research was that at the end of the project there were more social interactions and respect between children of different ethnicities, which fostered a greater sense of community in the classroom. In turn, this enhanced classroom community (which included family participation) contributed to increased enthusiasm and participation in the writing curriculum. Their intervention was intentional and flexible, and therefore held the potential to lay the foundation for long-term practices of observation, reflective thinking, and reform (Carboni, Wynn, & McGuire 2007).

This study supports the key role that teachers can play in racially diverse educational settings. Teachers have powerful opportunities to break down barriers of prejudice and misunderstanding and to foster cross-race friendships. There are several positive outcomes when children cross racial boundaries when selecting school friends. When cross-racial/ethnic friendships are measured within the classroom, researchers have found acceptance behaviors in children also link to social confidence, adjustment, leadership skills, and empathy; they also show few disruptive or fighting behaviors (Kawabata & Crick 2008; Wasik 1987). Previous studies suggest that explicit community-building activities can reverse prejudiced behavior

and attitudes, which leads to improved student behaviors. Community-building classrooms prioritize activities that promote cooperation and respect among all ethnic groups (Battistich et al. 1995; Cochran-Smith 1995; Rule & Kyle 2009).

Rachel reports the finding: “The children made connections to each other as they shared their paragraphs about themselves.” Allowing children to share who they are supports the importance of helping them understand their own selves as they are allowed to share with classmates. Gollnick and Chinn (2008) claim that successful multicultural education builds on the experiences and cultures of the students, as in this research. At the university, multicultural education focuses a great deal on the importance of understanding who we all are in order to create a more effective learning environment in the classroom.

Another important finding in this study that caused us to reflect on how we teach multicultural education is that, as Rachel reported, “Translating content fostered the engagement of native Spanish-speaking children and families in the project.” This finding connects to research focusing on funds of knowledge, which is based on the idea that every individual is a competent, knowledgeable person with his/her own experiences and treating students as such has a variety of pedagogical values (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti 2005). Often, however, we do not allow students to use their home language, culture, or experiences in the classroom. Rachel’s findings show that by so doing, students connected more to each other and the class itself.

In light of this, we have begun to emphasize funds of knowledge research in our School of Education’s multicultural education classes. We stress the importance of allowing children to share who they are and the benefit of using available resources (language, culture, background, etc.) to enhance their learning experiences.

This study served as a pilot for faculty research to examine the extent of ethnic in-grouping among elementary students in our immediate geographic region (Waite et al. 2010). The results of this subsequent study found that there existed more social interactions and respect between children of different ethnic backgrounds than expected, suggesting children might not be as uncomfortable with difference as we tend to think. For years, multicultural education has worked under the assumption that people do not get along with those different from them. Thus, we must build on the idea that we are all different and being different is a good thing. The combined findings of the student and faculty research have served as a catalyst to rethink multicultural education in our School of Education classes.

As these preservice teachers took on the role of researchers, they gained a working knowledge of the relevance of action research in the classroom while integrating the knowledge, understandings, and skills gained in their

program courses. Both teachers reported a change in outlook regarding documented and detailed research in the classroom. They learned to identify a need and define it in a quantifiable question. They were then able to create a way to assess during instruction, to evaluate change, and to reflect on methods most relevant to effective teaching. The process shaped these preservice teachers' perceptions regarding their ability to use curriculum to shape a sense of community among children, families, and teachers. These teachers report that participating in action research heightened their awareness of the impact one teacher can make in deconstructing the social misconceptions of young children. Including an emphasis on preservice teachers learning action research techniques to inform their teaching and improve classrooms as extensions of communities may add an important reflective component to early childhood teacher education programs.

One serendipitous result of this opportunity that is evident in these two students is the metamorphic change from dependent preservice teachers to capable professionals. Rachel and Joelle changed their self-perception from receivers of knowledge to seekers of knowledge, from dependent on mentors to capable problem solvers, from teachers of content to teachers of children. Looking through the lens of action research led to deeper reflection and commitment. It filled the gap in students' learning by providing passion for and investment in children and their families.

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