

ACTION RESEARCH FELLOWS AT TOWSON UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

This article describes the Action Research Fellows project at Towson University. The authors provide background information about the Action Research Fellows project, present the Action Research Fellows model employed at Towson University, and briefly describe four action research fellows' projects. Finally, the authors share their reflections on the benefits and the challenges in conducting the Action Research Fellows project.

Introduction

Involving teachers in doing research in their own classrooms (i.e., action research) can help improve teaching and learning in schools (Darling-Hammond, 1996). Teachers who conduct action research are also better informed about their field (Bennett, 1993), thus increasing their ability to take leadership roles in schools. Research has shown that action research can help teachers improve their understanding of self as a teacher, of their students, and of their roles and responsibilities of teachers (Levin & Rock, 2003). Yet, challenges remain in establishing a collaborative school/university partnership to help support teachers to conduct action research in their schools (Kirschner, Dickinson, & Blosser, 1996). The Action Research Fellows project at Towson University pilot tested an action research model that helps to build a collaborative school/university partnership while supporting student graduates to conduct action research in their schools. We begin the article by describing the background information about the Action Research project at Towson University. Next, we introduce the Action Research Model followed by brief descriptions of the Action Research fellows and their projects. Finally, we end the paper with our reflections on the benefits and challenges in conducting the Action Research project.

Background

Building leadership capacity of teachers is a shared goal of Towson University and the surrounding Public School Districts. Action research is an appropriate form of leadership development because the model lends itself to the central work of leadership - "reflection in action." Lambert (1998), stresses the importance of collaboration in developing meaning and shared beliefs in order to develop leadership skills. Collaborative action research that involves university faculty and practicing teachers appears to be an excellent context for the development of leadership as well as for strengthening partnerships between the university and schools.

Undergraduate teacher preparation programs at Towson require that each student complete an action research project as part of their internship experience. Most of our preservice teachers complete their internships in a Profession Development School (PDS) setting. Although most graduate students complete courses in research methods and submit excellent proposals to conduct useful research in school settings, few have the opportunity, resources, or support to carry them out. At Towson University, all graduate programs in education require one or more research courses and many of those courses require that students complete a proposal for useful research in the schools. In recent years, our graduate programs have emphasized the benefits of action research to address problems and issues in individual schools and classrooms. For example, all students in our elementary education preservice program carry out action research during their PDS internships. A number of studies report the development of successful action research partnerships in preservice programs.

We felt that if we could support teachers who had completed graduate programming and who wished to conduct action research in their schools; it would be a productive way to enhance our PDS network, our partnerships with surrounding school districts, and provide useful professional development for teachers, and it would strengthen our own graduate programs. We were especially interested in the teachers sharing their research results and experiences with students in our graduate research courses. There also appeared to be an opportunity to work toward closing the loop between research and practice. Consequently, we decided that we would select some exemplary action research proposals completed by teachers while they were enrolled in several of our graduate research courses. Our plan was to fund these proposals and provide technical support to the "Action Research Fellows" selected. In return, we would ask Action Research Fellows to return to our research courses and present the results of their studies. We would also encourage them to share the results with teachers in their own schools. In that way we hoped to close the loop between theory and practice in our research courses, and to begin to build a strong collaborative relationship among our graduate programs and practicing teachers in our PDS network of partner schools.

We met with representatives from Baltimore County Public Schools (BCPS) in order to establish a pilot program. An initial meeting was held in the summer of 2005, between university faculty and supervisory personnel in the surrounding school district in order to determine if a proposed action research fellows program would be useful to the school system and if so, what features the program should have. Present at this meeting were faculty teaching graduate research courses, the director of research for the school system as well as a specialty area director. Recommendations based upon this meeting were forwarded for approval by the Assistant Superintendent of the school district and by the Associate Dean of the College. These recommendations were subsequently approved both by the school system and the University. One key to the successful acceptance of the proposal was measures taken to align the action research project with the school system's priorities. Key goals of the school systems strategic planning document (The Blue Print for Progress) were directly addressed in the proposal (See appendix A for a listing of the key goals).

Purpose of the Action Research Fellows Project

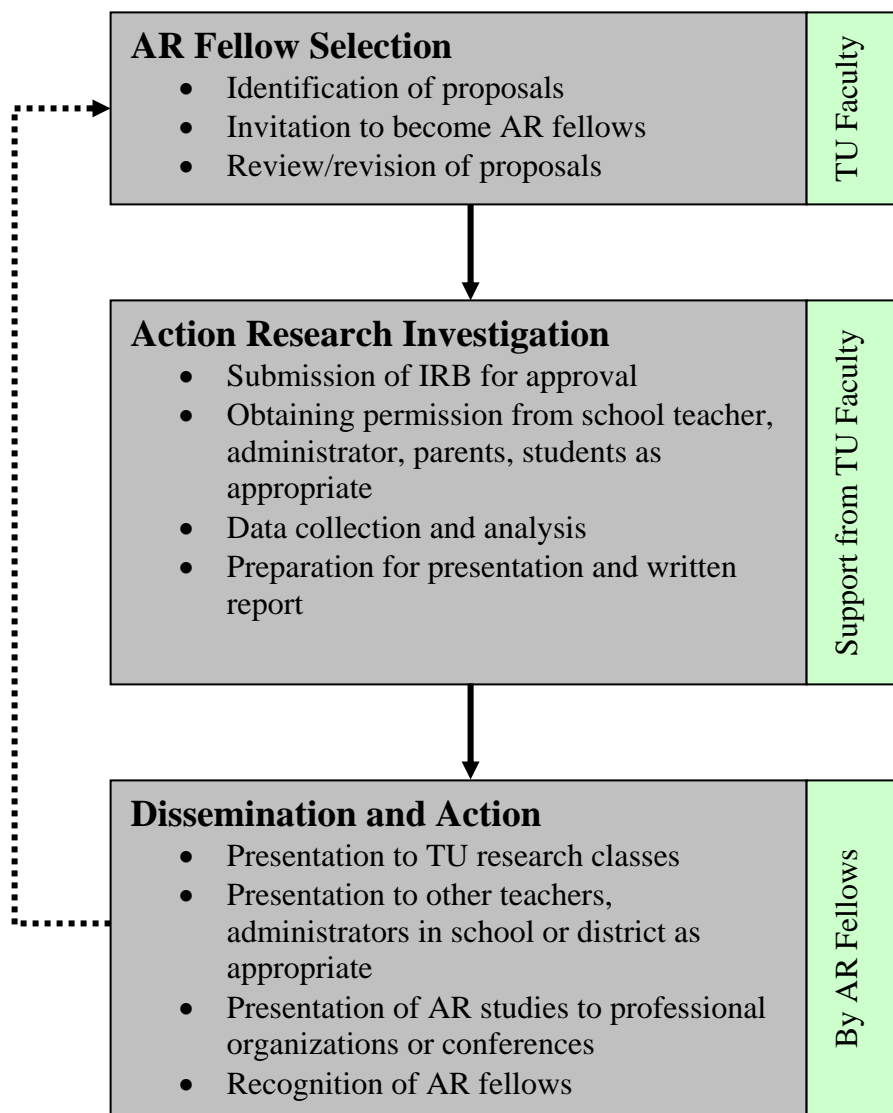
An important purpose of the Action Research Fellows Project was to select student-developed research proposals that showed promise to improve student achievement, classroom practices, or involved procedures to solve educational problems and challenges. We also intended to provide a forum to collaborate and provide support for teachers and graduate students to implement action research in their classrooms and schools. Since our college had a new doctoral program we felt a need to strengthen the action research capacity of the College of Education by providing a context in which former students could carry out action research proposals that had previously been submitted to Towson faculty in fulfillment of course work in graduate research courses. Another important purpose was to provide an opportunity for teachers to model action research and serve as catalysts among their peers as to the importance of research in decision making and leadership development. We also wanted to strengthen existing partnerships between the University and surrounding school districts.

Methods and Procedures

The Action Research Fellows Model

Figure 1 illustrates the Action Research Model that we used and the ways in which it served to close the loop between research and practice by connecting current students in our research classes with practicing educators who were conducting action research in their own schools. A key element in the model is the requirement that action research fellows present their research in progress as well as their results to graduate classes in educational research. This provides current graduate students with real word examples of ongoing action research in the schools, conducted by fellow educators.

Figure 1: Action Research Model: Closing the Loop between Research and Practice



Action Research Fellows Selection

As Figure 1 indicates, Action Research fellows (AR fellows) are selected based upon the recommendation of graduate program directors as well as faculty teaching graduate research courses. We selected two teachers and three School Library Media Specialists who had completed a master's degree at the University and who were full time professional employees in Maryland Public Schools. The group selected as action researchers were all graduates of one of our master's degree programs who had completed a high quality action research proposal that had been completed in fulfillment of graduate course work. The University research professor(s) and graduate directors recommended and invited selected teachers to complete the *Towson University Action Research Fellowship Application*. Recommendations were based on the merit of the action research proposal, its possible contribution to the goals of both University and the Public School involved, and to education in general. Action research fellows received a stipend funded by the University for their work outside of the regular salaried school day.

Applications were screened by the Action Research Approval Committee comprised of the Associate Dean, the Program Director, graduate program directors, and faculty who regularly teach courses in educational research, as well as appropriate representatives of the surrounding school districts. Some additional consideration for approval and selection included the school system's primary focus upon the delivery of services to students. Therefore, action research applications were evaluated to determine the benefits of the research in terms of the following considerations:

- Whether or not the project required excessive pupil/staff time.
- To what extent it might disrupt the functioning of the school/classroom.
- Possible negative impact upon professional relationships.
- Whether or not the study involved the replication of concurrent research/evaluation studies.

Additional revisions on the proposals may be made as needed per the discussion between the AR faculty and fellows.

Action Research Fellows Requirements

Those who were selected and agreed to participate were required to complete all Institutional Review Board (IRB) informed consent and permissions as required by the University and the school district and to conduct the research project in a professional and ethical manner. They also needed to conduct their action research proposal during the school year and abide by an approved timeline. The fellows were also obligated to make no changes in their proposals, procedures, protocols or instruments without prior written approval from the project director and the IRB. They agreed to complete the data analysis and written report outside of the regularly salaried school day. They agreed to seek publication of their results in appropriate journals or other professional forums, and to maintain anonymity of individual staff members, subjects, or schools in any report or publication. In addition, they agreed to present the results of their action research to graduate classes at the university as well as to workshops and meetings within the school district. A final written report of their studies was required to be presented to members of the Action Research Committee.

During the process when the AR fellows were conducting their action research in their schools, the university faculty members frequently communicated with them to provide technical support (e.g., data input, data collection, and data analysis strategies) via email and by way of physical school visits.

Dissemination of Action Research and Action

As the agreement described above indicate, the AR fellows are asked to present their action research experience to the current Towson University students in research classes, to other teachers, administrators in school or district as appropriate, and are encouraged to present to professional organizations or conferences. A college-wide recognition of AR fellows was implemented at a college-wide award celebration where the AR fellow's families and/or friends were invited to share the AR fellows' successful completion of their AR projects. The AR fellows will submit a final report of their action research project to AR faculty for review.

Current Action Research Fellows Projects and Status

We are in our first year implementing the AR Model. Currently, we have five AR fellows who are near to completion of their AR projects. They have all completed their data collection and are currently writing up their final report to be submitted to the AR faculty by the end of the school year. The following section describes each AR fellows and their research projects.

Table 1: Summary of Action Research Fellows Projects

Project Title	Research Questions	Research Methodology	Findings
Observation of social skills of gifted elementary students	How do gifted elementary students develop social skills in school?	Qualitative AR using observations and interviews	Perspectives of students revealed a variety of ways in which positive social skills were developed.
Computer software and writing capabilities of students with disabilities	Investigated the most effective computer software to assist fourth grade students' learning in inclusive classrooms	Quantitative AR	Of the software packages tested, Co-Writer was the most effective.
Using focus groups to improve library services	Will focus groups comprised of students and teachers make different and useful recommendations	Descriptive, AR	Focus groups comprised of teachers and students made useful recommendations that were added to

	from those of the School Librarians		those of the School Library Media Specialists
Sustained silent reading to improve reading skills of elementary students	Will planned silent reading in the classroom improve reading skills of students?	Descriptive AR	SSR did show effectiveness in one school setting, but not in another.

Table 1 summarizes the four action research fellows' projects that were selected for completion during the 2005-2006 school year. The first study was conducted by a third grade teacher in a small rural elementary school. This study was concerned with the social interactions of gifted students with their peers. Results of the study indicate that the gifted students were able to effect positive social interactions and used a variety of social interactions to do so.

Another AR project was conducted by a special educator who was interested in comparing several computer software programs to see which was the most beneficial to special needs students who were in an inclusive classroom setting. Results indicated that a word prediction program, Co-Writer, was more useful than word processing software or concept mapping software.

A third project was conducted by a secondary school Library Media Specialist. She was interested in the use of focus groups to make recommendations for priorities to improve services of the School Library Media Center. Results indicated that focus groups comprised of teachers and students had useful recommendations that could be added to their own recommendations.

The fourth project was conducted by two Elementary School Library Media Specialists in two different elementary schools. They were interested in the usefulness of a program of sustained silent reading to improve the reading skills of students. Results were positive in one setting, but not in the other. The researchers concluded that obtaining cooperation of fellow teachers and administrators were critical to the success or lack of success of the sustained silent reading program.

Benefits and Challenges in Conducting the Action Research Project

Finally, the authors would like to reflect on the benefits and challenges in conducting the Action Research Fellows project. We see many benefits using the AR Fellows Model presented in the article. First, it helped strengthen the partnership between the University and the school districts. The meetings with school administrators, district directors, and AR fellows at local schools helped publicize Towson University at both the school level and the district level, thus promoting the school/university collaboration. Secondly, by inviting AR fellows to present their studies and experience to current students, it helped the graduate students to see authentic research projects and to learn about some research strategies, which helps to close the loop between research and practice. Thirdly, the AR fellows reported professional growth in their leadership skills, research skills, as well as enjoyment in the AR experience. Finally, by frequent visits AR fellows at local schools, university faculty can stay up-to-date with the current school context, which helps connect the real world environment with their university teaching experience.

As for challenges, we see both from the university side and from the AR fellows' perspective. First, there is a challenge to sustain the AR project and continuous funding for the project. Secondly, depending on the priorities of different schools, the level of support that the AR fellows get from their fellow school teachers, administrators, and parents may be different, thus presenting a challenge to integrate the action research to the goals and priorities of individual schools. Some other challenges experienced by AR fellows include data organization and analysis strategies, which, with the support from the Towson University faculty, resulted in their individual professional growth as a researcher in the end.

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Appendix A: Sample Key Goals of Baltimore County Schools' Blue Print for Progress

Goal 1 - *By 2012, all students will reach high standards, as established by the Baltimore County Public Schools and State performance level standards, in reading/language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies.*

- Key strategy k - *Identify and consistently implement a common core of research-based instructional practices resulting in more purposeful and engaging work for students.*
- Key strategy x - *Provide ongoing support to new and veteran teachers through professional development opportunities*

Goal 3 – *By 2005-2006, all students will be taught by highly qualified teachers.*

- Key strategy f – *Provide a variety of “high quality” professional development opportunities that focus on teachers’ and paraprofessionals’ assessed needs to ensure that they meet “high qualified” status by 2005-2006.*

Goal 7 - *Involve principals, teachers, staff, stakeholders, and parents/guardians in the decision-making process.*

- Key strategy e: *Encourage teachers to be leaders in the school and community.*

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