

Using the Reflective Research Journal To Develop Thoughtful School Leaders

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Abstract

This study examined student outcomes through the use of a reflective thinking/research model (Kraus & Butler, 2000) in a collaborative research seminar designed as a pre-requisite to a comprehensive MA exam. Questionnaire and document analysis revealed improvement in students' academic understanding and application to professional work.

Introduction

Schools of education are under more pressure than ever before to prepare candidates for success in a results-based, accountability environment. Traditional university based programs provided a broad array of knowledge and information that critics have most recently called irrelevant (Will, 2006; Levine, 2005). In a standards-based world, teachers and school leaders, according to critics are tasked with improving student achievement, aligning curriculum with instruction and maximizing scores (Mintrop, 2004) on various tests of standards.

This view of teachers and school leaders as implementers of teacher-proof curriculum and technicians flies in the face of the principles of education for democracy (Goodlad, 1994). If the goals of standards-based education are to develop stronger populations of academically oriented students who are critical thinkers and problem solvers, then it makes little sense to reduce their teachers and school leaders to deliverers and monitors of canned, if standards-based educational experiences. Glickman, Gordon and Ross-Gordon (2004) assert the limitations of broad educational research lies in the multiple variations practitioners find in context. Needed then, are graduates who are well versed in the educational literature, yet bring a point of view and frame of reference based on inquiry and research focused on student learning in local context. More expertise, not more compliance is needed if teachers and school leaders are to bring students the kind of education required in the new century.

Purpose

We sought to understand in what ways a reflective thinking/research model could change and improve a capstone course of an MA program designed to prepare school principals and teacher leaders. We engaged students in the adoption of more powerful learning processes to achieve more successful student outcomes as measured by a comprehensive exam. Using a three-phase model (Kraus & Butler, 2000) adapted for research, reflection, and writing, it was hoped

that a collaborative learning environment could be created. Candidates' efforts to improve their practice in schools as teachers and principals would be supported by using their enhanced comprehension of the primary and secondary research they reflected upon. Collaboration with peers and guided discussion lead by university faculty supported candidate attempts to relate and apply new knowledge and understanding to school settings.

Our investigation and course re-design focused on the quality and overall rigor of the comprehensive examination from the perspective of candidate writing responses to the exam. The quality of candidate writing over two years during which the model was incorporated was compared to the quality of three years of comprehensive examinations written by students who had attended the course before the reflecting thinking/research model was incorporated into the course curriculum. It was hypothesized that through the use of the reflective research journal and guided discussions in seminar, MA candidates would be able to access, process, evaluate and critique relevant research, make conclusions about practical applications to the field and adopt a point of view toward school and teaching improvement that was supported by current research and their own experiences. Faced with increased demands for compliance with federal and state accountability regulations, it was hoped that successful completion would allow candidates to become thoughtful, consumers and practitioners of educational research in their own contexts in the field. We sought to prepare and inspire these educational leaders to enact the ideals of our department mission, education for democracy, and to support them in viewing the application of their learning as a powerful form of local community activism.

Theoretical Framework

Greenwald, Hedges, and Laine (1996), in their review of sixty studies examining the relationship between levels of teacher education and student achievement, found that increased levels of education had a significant effect on student outcomes. They claim that securing a more educated teaching staff (defined as having a Master's degree) had a stronger impact on achievement than lowering class size, increasing salaries, or increasing the average years of teacher experience. It is also evident that academic coursework and university teacher preparation programs can be valuable contexts for learning to teach (Darling-Hammond, 2001). We sought to provide more opportunity to match theory and practice by forming closer partnerships between schools of education and local schools. Educators who joined the MA program needed to review research but also to see the practicality in their coursework. Our approach was to assist them in identifying their schools as sites for clinical preparation for collegial research on teaching and learning (Darling-Hammond, 2001; Minnis, 1999). Others emphasize the necessity for research to be personal, grounded in local contexts, exploratory, and inductive (Kraus & Butler, 2000; Rudduck, 1998; Swain, 1998).

Reflective journal writing (Gibson, Bernhard, Kropf, Ramirez, & Van Strat, 2001) and thinking (Kraus & Butler, 2000) offers these teachers/educators an opportunity to process their understanding of teaching and learning and improve their practice through the formulation of questions, concepts, and theories related to their experiences (Branch, Grafelman & Hurelbrink, 1998; Gibson, et al. 2001; Niles & Bruneau, 1994). We believe that reading, talking, and writing about research for the purpose of deriving meaning and greater understanding of teaching and learning could be a powerful and effective strategy for these students pursuing their Masters of Education.

Method

Kraus and Butler (2000) describe a program-wide reflective thinking model for pre-service teachers; This three-stage model was adapted and applied to a capstone course which emphasizes the reading and application of research. The culminating activity of the course is the Master in Arts in Education Comprehensive Exam. During the foundation phase of the reflective thinking/research model, students were introduced to a variety of classroom inquiry activities, connecting the content of all their previous Masters courses to relevant educational theory in the corresponding themes that are the foundation of the MA program (Role of Education in a Democracy, Curriculum Development, Improvement of Instruction, Assessment, School Management and Leadership, (or a personalized specialty area for non-administrative candidates). During this phase, students were invited to develop a cognitive map of educational theory in each of the thematic areas.

During the process development phase, MA candidates were required to use the format of the reflective research journal to investigate and report on fifty different primary and secondary research articles that corresponded to the pre-established themes. In this phase, the students were invited to: exercise scholarly judgment, evaluate a proposition, test the merit of a hypothesis, and to judge the logic of an argument. During the seminar students were required to use the reflective research journal to engage in an open and collaborative discussion about the works they studied with their peers. The journal is parallel to the field book or laboratory notes of the scientist. The Masters candidates not only record what happened or what was observed, but in addition they record a tentative hypothesis or the development of new understanding. Though the use of the reflective research journal the Master candidates: searched out evidence, analyzed it, reflected on it's meaning within the context of their own experiences. They also drew conclusions based on the evidence, evaluated the research in order to make a pronouncement about its value to them as educational leaders and practitioners, and engaged in constructive critique of the research they read with their peers. The application stage is the administration of the comprehensive exam. In writing their examinations, students were able to apply what they had learned through participating in the reflective thinking/research model in the comprehensive exam class. The exam is designed as a culminating activity of a rigorous, thoughtful reflective research process.

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to evaluate the efficacy of the course changes in this study. A pre-reflective journal cohort (n=12) of successful candidates provided data. The comprehensive exams completed by these cohorts were read and coded for three variables: (1) total number of citations, (2) total number of different citations, and (3) total number of supported assertions. Means scores for each variable were compared. An ANOVA was calculated to determine the difference between the pre reflective journal cohort and the post reflective journal cohort on the three variables: total number of citations (TC), total number of different citations (DC), and total number of supported assertions (SA). We characterized supported assertion to consist of the following elements: taking a position, synthesizing ideas or concepts, contrasting one point of view with another and supported by appropriate citations. In addition, an open-ended questionnaire was administered to the post-reflective journal cohort and analyzed and coded for themes.

Data Source

Two primary sources of data were used to evaluate the effectiveness of this approach. First, the results from the Comprehensive Exams three years prior to and after the adoption of this model were examined. The Comprehensive Exam consists of five questions reflecting the course themes, Role of Education in a Democracy, Curriculum Development, Improvement of Instruction, Assessment, School Management and Leadership or a specialty area question for non administrative candidates). Examinees are administered the exam in one day under supervision for six hours, from 8:00am – noon, and from 1:00pm to 3:00pm. Second, questionnaires were administered with the participants and analyzed and coded for themes. This open-ended questionnaire contained seven questions linking the reflective journal to academic learning within the course and application to the candidates' professional contexts.

Results

A detailed analysis of the comprehensive exams written by MA candidates prior to and after the adoption of the reflective thinking/research model indicated a dramatic improvement in the quality of the exams as evidenced through the use of primary and secondary citations, understanding of educational theory and overall quality of the responses.

The results of the open-ended questionnaire yielded additional positive information. A major theme among the respondents was that the course was rigorous and time consuming. Many felt that finding and evaluating fifty research articles was daunting but most felt that the course more than adequately prepared them to be thoughtful consumers of educational research. The questionnaire responses also indicated that the candidates' overall confidence as educational leaders increased as a result of this experience.

Although our sample size was small, we wanted to begin this initial research to inform our work as we redesigned our approach to school leader development. The results of the ANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference between the pre and post reflective journal cohorts on all three dependent variables. The mean number of citations used by the post reflective journal cohort was 64.25 as opposed to 11.86 for the pre reflective journal cohort, $[F(1,17) = 59.54, p \leq .05]$. The mean number of different citations for the post-reflective and pre-reflective journal cohort were 14.63 and 5.74 respectively, $[F(1, 17) = 40.90, p \leq .05]$. The mean number of supported assertions for the post-reflective and pre-reflective journal cohort were 31.25 and 3.0 respectively, $[F(1, 17) = 26.99, p \leq .05]$.

Results of Content Analysis of Comprehensive Exams

Group	N	Total Citations*		Different Citations*		Supported Assertions*	
		<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>
Pre-Reflective Journal Cohort	7	11.86	5.98	10.57	5.74	3.00	3.21
Post-Reflective Journal Cohort	12	64.25	17.19	47.83	14.63	31.25	14.01

* All between group differences statistically significant, $p \leq .05$

Key Results of Questionnaire

Questionnaire

How did the Reflective Journal affect your comprehension of primary and secondary sources?

Comprehension, understanding, awareness enhanced through reading, writing, discussion. Reflection and analysis supported application for decision making.

How did the Reflective Journal help you in understanding the course themes (the role of education in a Democracy, curriculum development, improvement of instruction, assessment, specialty area or school management and leadership).

Great, immense, huge impact to access new information, organize my understanding, re-sort my own knowledge distill thoughts, reflect and form opinions. Saw themes as interconnected, intertwined.

In what ways did the Reflective Journal affect your professional work at school? Give an example of how you have used your learning or how you plan to use it at school.

Shifted my thinking, became more current, broad-minded, encourage faculty to read, not enough to understand but must reflect, speak in an educated and passionate way. Application of research to collaboration and reflection that informs practice in different

Settings.

How has the Reflective Journal changed your approach to problem solving in your professional work at school?

Research woven into decision making process, colleagues see research as a resource in the person/knowledge of the candidate. Research applied in a manner that transforms problems into potential learning opportunities for faculty.

Please identify any barriers to using your learning from the Reflective Journal in your professional work at school.

Perception of barriers varies from none to deep disconnect between candidates' new learning and school or district cultures. Time, priorities of those in the hierarchy, pressure to respond to NCLB, need to approach change slowly and systematically, inaccessibility of comprehensible research to teachers are barriers.

In what ways did the Reflective Journal affect your leadership at school?

More knowledgeable, credible, possess an advantage, empowered, better informed, more reflective, clearer understanding of what is important and why, leadership style more transparent to faculty.

In thinking about this course and the Reflective Journal, please describe any experiences that contributed most to your overall learning?

Depth and breadth of reading. Discourse, sharing, discussing ideas with classmates as active participants in learning community. Writing resulted in reflection. Relate to own schema. Result was renewal.

Educational Importance

Based on the results, it could be concluded that the changes to the course had been a success and the course was improved. A systematic approach that includes reflection, collegial support and dialogue led to an improvement in the participants writing. They more thoughtfully critiqued and supported their assertions while also using their professional experiences to contextualize their understandings. However, the questionnaires revealed other powerful benefits not anticipated. Students cited an increased desire to both engage research and wrestle with its meaning when applied to their own contexts. They expressed a desire to continue to search out the literature or new investigations around current issues they face at school. This strongly felt sense of efficacy was also accompanied by a shift in thinking about contentious problems. Principals expressed a shift away from conceptualizing problems in terms of

organizational power or political position. Issues were re-conceptualized as research themes to be explored under as kind of local inquiry project that would include all stakeholders in a transparent process resulting in common understanding.

The use of the reflective thinking research model with the reflective research journal as the template for reflective writing has the potential to provide us with a systematic approach toward the development of teachers and principals as reflective, critical and constructive educational leaders and practitioners in the field. The vast majority of the candidates seeking a Masters degree in Curriculum & Instruction or Educational Administration in this department of education are working teachers and administrators. These working professionals are already employed at public schools. Their experience through this process will enable them to return to their schools with an increased confidence and ability to be critical consumers within their roles as practitioners of educational research. It is an unanticipated positive consequence of the incorporation of the reflective research journal into this course that these candidates express a desire to bring the fruits of their engagement with the reflective thinking/research model to their schools as a model for transparent inclusive leadership, problem solving, inquiry and future staff development.

New questions that arise from our work include: What kinds of connecting organizational structures among teachers, school leaders and university faculty can be developed to support and further the development of the unanticipated benefits of this course? How can the links among schools and their local communities be leveraged to create common increase in both efficacy for engagement and understanding of the most difficult problems schools face?

References

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Appendix

TEMPLATE

Reflective Journal Organizer

1. Source/Type: _____ Date Read: _____

2. References: _____

3: Brief Summary:

Key Points (Author's main ideas, specific parameters..)	Comments (Opinion, evaluation, connections to prior experience, knowledge, other theories, feelings...)

5. Critical Analysis