

Literacy teachers as researchers: Developing small inclusive projects in your classroom

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Introduction

Literacy teachers have a big job. They are largely responsible for teaching reading and writing not to mention keeping up to date with contemporary literate practices such as those that are multimodal (Barton, 2019). Ultimately, literacy teachers are teachers of effective communication or how we make and create meaning (Barton & Lennon, 2020; Vasquez et al., 2019). Literacy teachers are also responsible for ensuring all students achieve positive learning outcomes, including personal growth (Luke, 2018). How then can teachers of literacy in their everyday busy lives best plan for and address diverse student needs? As teacher educators, we are responsible for teaching Master's level students in a course called Literacies Learning in Diverse Contexts. Student feedback about this course is always very positive and we believe this is because the learning is personal, reflective and relevant. Students are required to identify an issue they are interested in, related to literacy learning and diverse students. They develop a research question, research the topic and plan for implementation in schooling contexts. This short paper will outline the approaches we take in supporting our preservice teachers to become teachers as researchers.

Literacies learning in diverse contexts: Becoming a teacher as researcher

Students studying a Master's level Initial Teacher Education (ITE) program at our university are expected to undertake a course called Literacies Learning in Diverse Contexts. Having already completed a literacy course that explores the teaching of reading and writing and other early years literacy topics, the students enter this course having some knowledge and experience in literacy learning. They will have also completed a professional experience, or if part-time, will be completing a professional experience at the same time as participating in our course.

The course is divided into six learning modules introducing students to different literacy learning frameworks, policies, and pedagogies. At the core of the entire course is a personal reflection. From the beginning, we get students to reflect on their own literacy learning, their children's experiences and/or what they may have witnessed during professional experience.

The concept of teachers as researchers has infiltrated the literature. As early as 1985, Watts argued that teaching improves because of teachers becoming researchers. Teacher research is a systematic investigation into practical problems faced in the classroom. Teachers can ask what is not working? What can I change? Being a teacher as a researcher means you want to find answers to questions that come from your everyday work by seeking practical solutions (Babkie & Provost, 2004).

Sometimes such investigations come from something that is "unexpected, bothersome, unusual, or discrepant, and where we believe there is something to be discovered and understood in order to explain what has occurred" (Knobel & Lankshear, 1999, p. 6). Teachers as researchers look for possible outcomes, including improved student performance, revised practices, increased critical learning skills and developed innovative approaches to teaching.

A common approach for research in the classroom is Action Research, which involves several steps toward making change. These steps are outlined in the diagram below (Clarke et al., 2020):

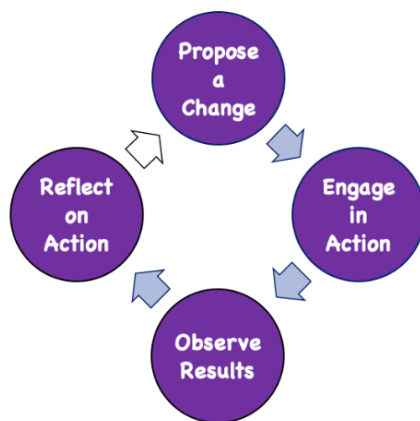


Figure 1.1 Basic action research cycle

This process often involves effective strategies in the classroom as well as feedback to the students.

1. Clear lesson goals and objectives
2. Show and tell
3. Questioning to check for understanding
4. Summarise learning in graphical ways
5. Time for plenty of practice
6. Provide students with feedback
7. Be flexible about how long learning takes

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8. Get students working collaboratively
9. Teach strategies, not just content
10. Nurture meta-cognition

Developing a research question

Lingard and Renshaw (2010) argued that research should be encouraged in teacher education settings such as universities as this builds teachers' capacities, encourages reflection and promote research in practice. The first step our students need to take is developing a research question that would be suitable for classroom-based teacher research and relevant to teaching and learning literacies in diverse contexts. Students are encouraged to draw on their own experiences when developing their research questions. This approach acknowledges "that students do not leave their existing identities, beliefs, and experiences at the door when they enter an educational institution" (Kahu & Gerrad, 2018, p. 73).

This approach also allows students to reflect on their own learning experiences, and the tutorials afford them a space where their perspectives and experiences are discussed and acknowledged. During tutorials, students spoke about the desire to improve the learning experiences of those most at risk. They found discussions about literacies learning and catering for diversity in the classroom most powerful when they could relate them to their own experience. In this forum, students challenge themselves to think differently about their practice and the nature of teaching and learning and how their professional practice can be strengthened in the future through research.

Once students have developed their research question, they use Action Research methods to write a literature review where they discuss their research question, provide a rationale for the question and investigate relevant literature on the topic. They need to consider the place of literacies in learning across curriculum areas and the understanding of appropriate and effective pedagogies when planning literacies learning for students from diverse backgrounds, including EAL/D, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This requires students to demonstrate complex understandings of current education reforms, major contemporary drivers of change in the educational environment, and implications for literacies education.

The importance of reflection

Reflection and reflective thinking are generally listed as needed graduate attributes for employability and a required skill for professionals, as illustrated in many professional standards. However, reflection has been noted as important for preservice teachers throughout their study as they move

from novice to beginning teachers upon graduation (Sutherland et al., 2010; Ward & McCotter, 2004). Throughout the course, students are expected to reflect on their practice. From week 1, we ask students to reflect on their own literacy learning journey. For example, we ask them questions such as:

- Was learning to read and write challenging for you?
- Was it a smooth process?
- Who were the people that influenced your literacy learning?

These questions compel students to think and reflect on their learning. As students draw on their own learning experiences, they develop their research questions by reflecting weekly on their research, which they share via a forum post or during tutorials. Here are examples of reflections shared by students during the initial research phase:

- *Rather than staying in my comfort zone, I have decided to expand my learning further and changed my question. I think it is in my best interests to learn as much as possible in this learning environment before working as a teacher.*
- *Reflection is important for building awareness of our own personal growing expertise but also that of our students.*
- *If we did not reflect on our work, we could limit improvements and growth and remain where we already are.*
- *Reflection allows us to more deeply consider the contexts and materials that serve the processes used in making knowledge and practice.*

Outcomes: Preservice teacher reflections – one example

An analysis of research questions developed by students over three semesters showed that most students chose topics directly related to their learning and lived experiences. For example, some students choose to investigate how EALD students can be supported in the classroom, as some students in the course come from an EALD background. One student chose to focus the research question on how to support students with Autisms Spectrum Disorder (ASD) as her son had the disorder. She was interested in learning how these students can be assisted in teaching and learning literacies in diverse context. This is how the student reflected on her research.

This question was relevant as I am interested in students with Autism, having interacted with students with Autism that I taught while on my professional experience and also having a son with ASD. The research question is important as an increasing number of students entering

mainstream schools who are on the spectrum, and schools need to have the teaching strategies to be able to teach them effectively.

After completing research on the research question, I have learnt that literacy and teaching students literacy and reading is not just about teaching them sight words and reading what they can see. However, teaching reading comprehension or the words, sentences, and paragraphs is just as important. I have learnt from my research that I need to reflect and adjust my future teaching strategies to cater to all students in my class.

Conclusion

Throughout this course we try to support our preservice teachers to reflect on their own learning (hindsight), consider other alternative approaches that are research-informed (insight), and optimise these learnings through application in the classroom (foresight). We hope that teachers are able to value the notion of teachers as researchers to support their wonderful work in supporting and improving students' literacy learning outcomes.

Read, think, explore

1. Explore AITSL's website in relation to Action Research in the classroom:
<https://www.aitsl.edu.au/tools-resources/resource/action-research-for-professional-learning-illustration-of-practice>
2. Spend some time reflecting on a 'critical issue' you have identified in your classroom. What could be a research question to explore this issue?
3. Read up about a topic of interest related to literacy learning in your context. What are some of the latest research findings?

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