

TEACHER EMPOWERMENT THROUGH ACTION RESEARCH

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A teacher of needlework was assigned to teach Environmental Studies (EVS) to IV and V Graders. Though she had studied science in school as well as college, she was faced with several challenges: she had been the Dining Hall Manager, later a needlework teacher - and now, being new to teaching, she had to recast herself as an EVS teacher. She had to confront students as well as peers who had stereotyped her as a needlework teacher. In addition, she was replacing an extremely popular teacher who had left the institution, and had to face the expectations of students that she would teach just like their previous teacher had. Above all, she had to manage a class of children who could easily see that she was too soft to be firm with them. This paper recounts how she undertook to carry out Action Research, framed and reframed her problem, found and implemented solutions that changed along the way. It also contains observations made by the facilitator of her action research, about the ways in which her approach, focus and practices changed, as her research unfolded.

ACTION RESEARCH AS A ROUTE TO TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

Several methods have been used for developing reflective teachers [Conderman & Morin's (2004)]. Journals (Powell 1985), portfolios (Guba and Lincoln 1985), self reports (Pak 1985), collaborative diary-keeping (Brock, Ju and Wong 1991), autobiographies (Gore 1993), case studies (Chambers & Clarke), peer coaching (Costa & Garmston 1994), group discussions (Fazio 2009), peer feedback (Richards & Lockhart 1991) and/or video- and audio-recording of classroom processes (Pak 1985) are only some of the methods that have been successfully tried out. This paper describes how a teacher conducted action research and how her facilitator observed the ways in which the teacher-researcher was impacted by the whole process. It therefore contains the observations of both teacher-researcher and facilitator. Having conducted a successful research study (Raghavan & Sood, 2015) where teachers of a semi-urban school showed enhanced reflection as a consequence of doing Action Research (Costello 2011), the Principal Investigator¹ of that study (the facilitator in this) adopted action research as a way of enhancing reflective thinking in the teacher.

METHODOLOGY

The following method was adopted in this work:

¹ The Principal Investigator of the cited study is now Founder Director of THINKING TEACHER, (www.thinkingteacher.in), an organisation that engages with teachers of schools to develop reflective practitioners.

- A one-day workshop was conducted by the facilitator to acquaint this teacher (and some of her colleagues) with Action Research
- This was followed with monthly meetings, as well as one classroom observation every month. The facilitator kept a record of her own observations of the classes that she observed. [During the class, the facilitator was a silent observer, and after the class, she shared her detailed observations with the teacher.]
- The teacher maintained regular documentation of her classes and e-mailed these to the facilitator.
- In every monthly meeting, the teacher and facilitator discussed the current situation and brainstormed about the way ahead.

This work was completed in a total time frame of six months (two of them being a period of summer vacation, and therefore, no action research or classroom observations.) Thus, the actual work was done in a period of four months. Analysis of observations, issues, strategies and their impact was done through discussions between teacher and facilitator. These were face-to-face (once a month), and over email and telephone a few times each month.

BACKGROUND

There were several stereotypes that this teacher had to confront, in her journey as a teacher. She was, initially, the Dining Hall Manager in this residential school. Having discharged her duties satisfactorily in this regard for some years, she was pleasantly surprised when the Principal asked her to teach needlework and craft. Trained as she was in Home Science (and in Science), this was relatively easy for her to do. What came as a bigger surprise was when the Principal asked her to teach Environmental Studies to Classes IV and V, and to complete her B Ed degree in parallel, in order to fulfil statutory requirements.

In the Principal's words, her reasons for this choice were: *"Ratna seemed to be doing her job as Needlework teacher very well. However, she seemed to be missing a certain intellectual stimulation in her job. In a residential school such as this, teachers need to feel an active part of whatever is happening in school, and Ratna seemed to feel that she was not in the 'thick of things'. Ratna has a science background, a highly methodical mind, and is very reliable and highly motivated to do her best in any job that she is given. Given all these factors, and the need for a science teacher in Grade IV & V, I felt that she would be the best person for the job and would do very well – with, may be, a little help initially."*

The teacher complied by investing considerable time and effort in acquiring the B Ed degree (before embarking on this Action Research), even as she taught EVS. However, this was not without struggle: the typecasting of a senior lady like her as being 'better equipped' to handle 'domestic tasks' like managing a kitchen (or teaching needlework) being only one of them.

FRAMING OF THE PROBLEM

As Schon (1983) points out, the framing of the problem is a critical step as it then lends itself to the development of strategies. The teacher began by framing her problem thus:

In my assigned class of heterogeneous learners (mix of IV and V²), how can I get all students to be completely engaged in EVS?

[The class strength was 23, with 11 from Class IV and 12 from Class V.] The facilitator then led her through a process of analysing her problem. Simply by posing questions such as the following: *What do you mean by ‘completely engaged’? How do you know that a student is/is not engaged? What do you think are the obstacles to being engaged?* the facilitator found that the teacher quickly realised that her core problem was one of classroom management. Indeed, this had become obvious to the facilitator in the very first observation of her class, but this analysis of the Action Research problem led the teacher also to conclude the same. [Interestingly, the facilitator had also observed another teacher’s classes *with the same set of children*, and noted their rapt attention without any disruptive behaviour there. This was later acknowledged by this teacher as well.]

Thus, the reframed problem was as below:

In my class of heterogeneous learners (mix of IV and V), how can I bring about a harmonious atmosphere that lends itself to effective communication?

STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS THE PROBLEM

Before embarking on Action Research, the teacher had switched from one strategy to another in her desperation to learn how to manage a class. She noted: *“I was either shouting, or just keeping quiet, for whatever they did. I did not know how to be soft yet firm with them.”* The facilitator’s notes of their conversations ran thus:

She admitted candidly that she was new to teaching so that when she started teaching here, her classes were usually in chaos. Just calming the class would take five to seven minutes each time, and even thereafter, the classes would get so noisy that teachers from neighbouring classes would come and ask her how long it would take for the children in her class to settle down. This would repeat itself during evening prep. Although she tried several strategies (like thumping the duster on the table to catch the attention of noisy children), the restlessness did not abate. So in desperation, she searched the Internet to see how others had handled this - or indeed, whether they needed to handle this at all. To her relief, she found that this was one of the commonest problems faced by teachers on an ongoing basis. “It was not all about me,” she sighed with relief. One suggested strategy that she found on the Internet did not work for too long, i.e. raising her arms up high so as to calm the children down. This would work only momentarily. So she again resorted to various means like shouting, being firm – in short, “beating around the bush” as she just couldn’t zero in on a final solution.

Clearly, the teacher did not experience any of her learning objectives being met: instead, just getting the class to listen to her, and for her to communicate meaningfully with them proved to be a challenge in itself. She noted in her diary: *“Needlework needs a lot of organization and has a methodology. If I was able to teach that to the children, it is not very difficult to teach them EVS. It is just a little time-taking, and I may need a little guidance.”* She now found that teaching EVS made the following demands (different from needlework) on her:

² Since this is a residential school that starts taking in students only from Class IV, the school has found it effective to mix these newcomers with Class V, in order to help them learn from each other and settle down better.

- A structured way of transacting content in EVS, unlike needlework where she could alter content and speed of coverage, as she went along
- A differentiated approach towards learners of varying levels, unlike needlework where all of them had been at the same level (“*None of them knew how to thread a needle!*”)
- A firm grasp of EVS content so that she could then think about pedagogy: she was so comfortable in needlework, that she had experienced no problem in devising new approaches to deal with different children
- Delivery of content in a manner that held the attention of her students, unlike needlework where she had not been expected to deliver content in the same way

It never occurred to her, she now confessed, that she could share her dilemma with the children – by asking them *why* they were so unmanageable. “*Only after I began doing Action Research did I realize that this was an option,*” she admitted. “*You see, I was always thinking that I was the cause of the problem.*” Her acutely felt disadvantage by being a popular teacher’s replacement was also shared by her. “*This was explicitly thrown to me as a challenge by two of the kids,*” she confessed. “*It became more of a burden for me than I could bear. I was so enmeshed in the problem that I could not come out of the situation to look at it objectively.*” Despite all this preoccupation with classroom management, however, she did manage to cover the prescribed content in the first term. She also noticed that the problem became acute only when the new entrants from Class IV joined those in Class V. “*I was new to teaching, so initially, I was more preoccupied with transaction of content. But soon classroom management became the core issue.*”

As soon as she embarked on Action Research, the teacher employed an initial strategy of storytelling to hold the attention of her otherwise chaotic class, followed by an integration of the current lesson on *panchayati raj* (rural self government) into the management of her class. (Both the story-telling as well as the integration of the *panchayati raj* into classroom management had been suggested to the teacher as possible strategies, by the facilitator.) As she described the system of *gram panchayat*, she suggested to the class that they elect their own ‘*sarpanch*’ (village head) and arrive at their own form of classroom management. The ensuing excitement amongst the nine- and ten-year-olds resulted in her acceding to their request to elect a new *sarpanch* every week, as every child wanted to be the ‘village’ head. The teacher left it to each week’s *sarpanch* to decide upon the corrective action to be taken against errant children. This sometimes resulted in harsh punishments being doled out by children to their fellows, something the facilitator came to know of – and sought to address – in the next month’s visit. In the teacher’s words:

They wanted me to take the responsibility of giving consequences for their misbehaviour. That did not work anymore, so the system had to be dissolved.

The facilitator observed that the teacher was resisting taking firm action against errant children, and now the students were turning the problem back to her. Using Tony Ghaye’s (Ghaye 1998) approach of building on the strengths of a teacher, the facilitator wrote as below to the teacher:

I have been doing some thinking as to how I can be of help to you in addressing your core issue. I suspect that we have focused solely on the problem and forgotten your core strengths: one of them being your loving and compassionate nature. Many teachers would envy you for the asset that you possess: not a single child is scared of you, I think! That is a very great strength...In

order to help you think this through, I am listing below some questions that I culled from an excellent book (Ghaye 1998).

Among the questions posed were the following: 1. What was your best day at work in the past month? What were you doing? 2. Why was it the 'best day?' How far do you think you could re-experience it? 3. What was your worst day at work in the past month? What was going on? 4. Why did it drain or weaken you so much? What frustrated or bored you?

This resulted in a change in strategy employed by the teacher, who now acknowledged the need to forge individual bonds with the children. She waited for the right opportunity and employed different strategies with each child, e.g. with some, she spoke to the parents, while with others, she observed their special interests and used those as entry points. For instance, she recorded one such case as below:

I made her participate in group activities - growing a patch of grains as a project, and she fared very well, as she was sincere and hardworking. Her patch of grains grew so well that it became a model for the others. That made me understand her strength.

With another boy, she employed a different strategy:

During one of his parents' visits, he was very scared that I would give a bad report about him. But I did not complain about him. That instilled respect towards me and he started responding differently. Earlier, he never bothered to listen. Now he tries to convince me, and if I reason it out, he responds.

Slowly, a turnaround began to happen in the class. The teacher recorded that her class was becoming manageable. She felt confident enough to direct a skit staged by this class in the school's assembly. During rehearsals, she forged stronger bonds with the children. The facilitator, in turn, noted that a focus towards content and pedagogy was beginning to rear its head:

So she is now reflecting on ways and means of balancing firmness with love, kindness with fairness, etc. I can also see the beginnings of a concern with pedagogy (her original Action Research problem) creeping in, now that class management is slowly getting resolved. I hope to see more of this emerge in the days to come, provided, of course, that classroom management truly does get resolved for her in a sustained manner.

During discussions, the facilitator found that the teacher was raising more questions of the type: "How can I teach this better?" in place of "How can I get the kids to settle down and pay attention?"

In turn, the teacher's notes ran thus: "Now I can see clearly that children are enjoying the classes. The project of the Chinese dragon is going on parallelly. I will be starting Asia next week, and go to the countries, so that I will have time for all the countries planned. So far so good."

SHIFT IN ACTION RESEARCH PROBLEM

By the third month, the teacher had reached a high level of comfort with her students, as they, too, had with her. She noted in her diary:

Now my main concern has shifted to the content of the lesson. I am so happy that from the non-cooperation level, they have come to a stage where they listen - or if not, at least sit quietly, without disturbing others.

Indeed, by the fourth month, only one student in this teacher's class could be seen to *not participate at all*, but this student did not interfere with the others' attention as he had, in fact, been doing in the past. [The teacher has decided to work with this student differently, and at a slower pace.] In turn, the facilitator recorded as below:

- *From January, February to March, I can see a remarkable shift.*
- *R is much firmer with her students and there is far greater attention.*
- *The periods of attentive silence are now far longer than the noisy interludes. Previously, it was the reverse.*
- *I would say she has addressed about 70% of classroom management issues. She still needs to tackle the die-hards appropriately. [e.g. One boy blithely told her he didn't have his notebook, and when she asked him why, he shrugged airily and said – 'I told you that I lost it three weeks ago.' R left it at that.]*
- *Several questions were raised by children - all related to the subject, though some were tangential to the lesson. Till date, I have only seen kids ask irrelevant questions in her class. ["Akka, why is he saying this/that...", or "Akka, why is she pulling her desk?" etc.]*
- *Even today, she had a child walk into her class full twenty minutes after it started, and apparently, she did not feel free to take firm action/address the issue appropriately. The boy also smiled his way into class.*

The electronic exchange between facilitator and teacher now began to gradually shift more to issues related to content and pedagogy. Slowly and surely, the Action Research Problem shifted back to the original issue:

In my class of heterogeneous learners (mix of IV and V), how can I get all students to be completely engaged in EVS?

The discussions between teacher and facilitator now veered around learning outcomes, lesson plans, activities and their alignment with learning outcomes, and assessments that tied the whole lesson together. The facilitator noted the enthusiasm and interest shown by the teacher in enlivening her lessons with contextual examples and activities. By the fourth month, there was a dramatic shift in classroom transaction, as noted by the facilitator:

It is remarkable how the discussion with R these days is mainly on pedagogy and content and hardly ever about classroom management. She has shifted a great deal from her original location.

Some extracts from the teacher's diary at this stage are as below:

I have grown a lot during this process. First of all, regular documentation helped me immensely. I knew day-to-day whether I was performing properly in terms of quantity and quality, if I was fair to every child, was I taking all the children into consideration, etc. I am very happy to note that I did not have a single incident where I felt sorry for my behaviour. The action research process really instilled a lot of confidence in me - in spite of my age - that I will be able to do my job without constraints, as I knew I had continuous, unconditional help from the facilitator. The timely suggestions helped me to overcome problematic situations. Looking back, I don't see any

strategy which failed... only a couple of children are still a little away, to be on board. But I am very happy to say I have won over most of them.

In addition, the facilitator's observations of a class in the fourth month was recorded (and exemplified) as below:

- *Questions were being raised by R about the likely cause of magnification (lesson was on this topic today)*
- *Children asked questions, some of them very good questions indeed.*
- *She made me think: and she certainly made many kids think! She was not in a hurry to provide the answer; instead she kept prodding them to think more and more*
- *She managed to elicit fairly good responses, albeit from the same boy over and over again*

Students asked questions like what would happen if they looked at an object through a flat glass slide (wherein they saw minimal distortion), and followed this with placing a drop of water on the slide and *then* viewing things through this. Would the image then be magnified? Instead of giving them the answer straight away, the teacher asked the students to try this out - and then, *take a guess* as to *why* the flat side of a slide did not magnify images but placing a drop of water on it did. Another student asked how things would look if viewed from the flat side of the slide with a drop of water on the *other* side. This led the teacher to talk about concave and convex lenses. The facilitator noted with interest the simple language used by the teacher to explain the bending of light, magnification of images by curved surfaces and apparent distortion of the image of a pencil standing in a glass of water. It was a new way of understanding these concepts for the facilitator, as she had been trained in Science and was accustomed to employing technical jargon. The facilitator experienced a fresh way of looking at the process of magnification of the bent pencil as well as apparent distortion of the immersed part, as she listened to the teacher transact this content in class.

Four months into the action research process, this teacher shared with amusement how she had been called by one of her colleagues to 'manage' a class during the absence of their scheduled teacher. *"From one who was being told by neighbouring teachers to hurry up and get her class to settle down, this was certainly a new experience!"* she chuckled. On another occasion, the Principal heard students excitedly share with each other (over lunch) how much their EVS teacher had changed. *"Ratnakka has become strict - but I like it!"* During an informal exchange with more than one student of this class, the facilitator heard students say: *"I like EVS classes, especially Science. I really like the way akka teaches..."* When the new academic year began, the teacher shared as follows in her electronic exchange with the facilitator: *"For the past three days, class V children- who were in class IV last year- kept asking me: 'Akka, why don't you come for Science and Social for us?' So it is that children get used to a teacher, and take time to adjust to a new one."*

CONCLUSION

The framework of Action Research proved to be very effective for this teacher, despite her being new to teaching and her beginning to teach fairly late in life (she is a senior citizen). Simply by delving into the day-to-day issues that she faced in a systematic and sequential manner, this teacher overcame what initially seemed to be insurmountable issues. Stereotypes are inevitable in any community and fighting them is seldom easy. Coupled with her natural (and remarkable)

tendency to disallow the taking of any opinion personally, this teacher made effective use of the Action Research framework to swiftly move out of the mould that many appeared to have cast her into. Also, her systematic approach brought her well out of the complex set of problems which she had initially felt enmeshed in. Today, her palpable enjoyment in teaching the subject (after her initial struggle to just communicate to her class) has brought her a long way from her original location. Doubtless, the persona of the teacher plays a huge role in the way that this process pans out, as seen by the experience of the facilitator who has been working with several teachers over the past year. It is, of course, not realistic to expect such dramatic results for every teacher in a matter of four months. Nevertheless, it is quite likely that this method could, in time, meet with success with other teachers who encounter similar issues.

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