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# PRESERVICE TEACHERS BECOMING AGENTS OF CHANGE

## PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTION RESEARCH

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*This article examines the construction and experience of change agency within action research courses in preservice teacher education. Four preservice teachers' experiences of action research are analyzed, and tensions and challenges teacher educators and preservice teachers face as they attend to change processes in learning to teach are explored. This analysis suggests five central tensions in the process and pedagogy of action research: individual and institutional change, action and understanding, support and challenge, passion and reason, and regulation and emancipation. Rather than selecting one side of a tension over another, the authors argue that teacher educators need to work with tensions to develop understandings of change in relation to biography, teaching, and context. The authors argue that such contradictory and complex dimensions provide a useful frame for a pedagogy of action research. They are integral to the process of helping teacher candidates develop conceptions of teaching that embody change agency.*

**Keywords:** *action research; teacher research; teacher education; teacher education pedagogy; change agency*

Action research implies change. It requires the researcher to be an agent of change. But the concepts of change and change agency are often left unexamined in the literature. In fact, the widespread use of the terms *teacher research* or *classroom research* as more context and role-specific versions of action research have the effect of muting the change component even further. The image of teacher as change agent is displaced by the less activist image of a traditional researcher. Although these terms are often used interchangeably in the literature,<sup>1</sup> they also signal different histories, commitments, and intellectual traditions (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990; Noffke, 1997). We consciously use the term *action research* in our teaching and scholarship to forefront our interest in social and political

change derived from critical traditions as well as in individual change. The standard definitions of teacher research as "research that is initiated and carried out by teachers in their classrooms and schools" (Hubbard & Power, 1999, p. 2) and classroom research as "an act undertaken by teachers, to enhance their own or a colleague's teaching" (Hopkins, 1993, p. 1) do not convey that intent; neither do teacher or classroom research projects that emerge from these traditions.

Although action research has become prominent in teacher education programs (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990; Noffke, 1997) and is touted as a tool to engender reflective practice, little has been written about what happens to preservice teachers as they begin to think about

themselves and act as agents of change (see e.g., Beyer, 1996; Bissex & Bullock, 1987; Goswami & Stillman, 1987; Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995; Hopkins, 1985). And yet, the idea of being a change agent is clearly problematic for preservice students. Not only are they in relatively powerless positions to effect change within their school contexts, but as novices, they often have difficulty even thinking of themselves as teachers, much less as change agents. These difficulties are compounded by not knowing what kind of change action research is supposed to promote. Should it "be geared toward changing and improving the teacher's style," as one of our teacher candidates asked, "or toward changing the students?" Or could the focus and purpose of change be something else entirely?

The answers to these questions are not obvious to those who undertake an action research project for the first time. And they should not be, given the multiple forms and purposes action research can assume. Because of these persistent issues, we became curious as teacher educators who teach action research courses about notions of change and change agency within the literature and our own teaching. What meanings are embedded in the literature? What meanings of change and change agency do we construct with our teacher candidates in our semester-long courses? And most pressing for us, what are the pedagogical implications of teaching about and for change in preservice action research courses?

## CONCEPTIONS OF CHANGE

How does the action research literature conceptualize change, and what does it tell us about engaging preservice teachers in a change process? Several aspects of change are dealt with, at least implicitly. Although language and categories differ somewhat from author to author, the main ideas deal with the focus, or purpose, of change and the conditions under which change occurs. Although not all of the literature specifically deals with the preservice preparation of teachers, implications can be drawn.

## Focus and Purpose of Change

Most academic writing about action research addresses the various arenas, or "sites of struggle," in which action research can bring about change. Where does it happen, and what is its focus? Zeichner (1993) and Noffke (1997) offered two useful typologies. For Zeichner, action research has the potential to effect change in (a) individual teacher development and the quality of teaching, (b) the control of teaching knowledge, (c) the institutional context, and (d) the broader social context. Using the word *dimensions*, Noffke described what Rearick and Feldman (1999) labeled the *purposes* of change: personal, professional, and political. Personal change is similar to what Zeichner referred to as teacher development or teaching quality; professional development corresponds closely to the control over teaching knowledge; and the political dimension or purpose of action research resonates with changes in the social context that aim at greater justice and democracy. None of these writers claim that these dimensions are separate and distinct from one another. Quoting Weiner, Zeichner (1993) discussed the "dual aims of increased self-knowledge and increased social justice" (p. 215). And Noffke concluded from a comprehensive review that "the professional as well as the personal dimensions of action research are distinct from the political only if they are constructed that way" (p. 331). The claim is that change in teaching practice or greater knowledge about one's students gained through action research can impact broader social values such as democracy, justice, and equality.

Examining the possibility of action research to effect change in teacher education programs, Cochran-Smith (1994) argued that its real power

lies in its challenge to the traditional discourse of learning to teach—a discourse that commonly emphasizes the primacy of teaching methods, mastery of skills, and outside expertise—and its support instead of an alternative discourse that centers on the construction of knowledge, teachers' ways of knowing, and critical pedagogy. (p. 143)

This alternative discourse links her preservice change emphasis to the professional and politi-

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cal emphases described earlier. It challenges traditional notions of teaching, research, and the ownership of teaching knowledge by helping students develop a stance as “activists and agents for school and social change” (p. 152).

### **Conditions for Change**

In addition to having a purpose or focus, change is always affected by the contexts in which it occurs. Historically, varying traditions of action research have focused on different workplace conditions as supports or impediments to change (Noffke, 1992). The *democratic teacher* tradition emphasized the need for administrative support and a balance between local autonomy and central control; the *teacher investigator* tradition highlighted the importance of personal relations in the workplace and restructuring the use of time; and the *extended professional* tradition touted the benefits of ameliorating workplace isolation. Taken as a whole, these traditions signal the need for teacher education programs to consider seriously the power of context on the individual, particularly those individuals as vulnerable as student teachers. Significantly, the *teacher learner* tradition, first associated with Hilda Taba, gave little attention to changes in workplace conditions. Conceptualized as a way to identify problems in new teachers and change them, this tradition did not inquire into the school as a workplace. By implication, this tradition accepts the workplace as fixed, with little acknowledgement of human agency in the making of a teacher’s identity. Teacher learners adapt to the school’s goals and agenda; they are not meant to be agents of change.

In the case of action research courses, the conditions for change are in large part programmatic norms and structures that themselves are shaped by broader institutional, social, and political contexts. As Cochran-Smith (1994) stated, teacher research is embedded “within the ideologies and philosophies of particular programs, and within the larger contexts of reform” (p. 151). In examining a preservice action research class at the University of Wisconsin, Gore and Zeichner (1991) offered some socio-

cultural reasons why preservice teachers fail to develop a more critical view of change agency. Those reasons include their students’ personal biographies, unpoliticized views of schooling, the relative unimportance of academic work, and cultural factors such as technical rationality, individualism, and instrumentalism. Surprisingly, these authors do not examine their own pedagogical practices as a possible contributing factor. Additional reasons offered by Ross (1987) are the need to promote good relations with cooperating schools, avoid sensitive issues, and select topics of mutual interest with cooperating teachers. Because of these real-world conditions, in which student teachers are guests of the school, Zeichner and Gore (1995) cautioned against romanticizing what can be accomplished during a preservice program: “Pedagogy within educational institutions has always functioned, in part, to regulate groups of people. Emancipatory action research, as a course requirement, struggles to maintain any emancipatory effect within such a context” (p. 21).

Even this cursory review of the literature suggests that teaching preservice students about being change agents is more complex than simply giving them a set of basic research tools. For one thing, it requires an understanding of positionality: Who are the teacher candidates? What are their orientations to teaching and schooling? What are their roles in the school? The multiple forms of action research also suggest the importance of intellectual exchange about the very purposes of research, change, schooling, and teacher learning. Although our own orientations to action research have been most strongly influenced by critical theory’s attention to the large social issues of justice, democracy, and equality, we are sympathetic to postmodernist cautions against certainty and essentializing categories (Brown & Jones, 2001). We worked to destabilize our assumptions and commitments by constantly asking ourselves, “What kinds of change do we see as worthwhile? How should we influence what our students value as change?” Although we were not satisfied with change efforts that failed to attend carefully to student thinking, that were

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unsupported by sound reasoning, that altered classroom practices only in superficial ways, or that were conceptualized apart from their social/political context, we addressed these differences with our students through dialogue and negotiation, not imposition. At the same time, we acknowledge that differential power was always present.

## METHODOLOGY

Each of us separately conducted an action research project on our own action research course. Linda taught in an alternative, 2-year master's certification program in which students were hired as full-time instructional assistants (IAs) in a local school district. Jeremy taught in an intensive and selective 1-year master's certification program.<sup>2</sup> To push our thinking and to develop a common frame of reference, we met regularly during the semester we taught these classes. With the permission of each of our students, we collected and analyzed data from class meetings, surveys, teacher-researcher journals, student journals and assignments, e-mail correspondence, informal interviews, videotapes, policy documents, and our own research meetings. Student interviews as well as classroom presentations and discussions were audiotaped and transcribed. These multiple sources collected across time enabled us to compare information, trace evidence, search for discrepant cases, confirm hunches and assertions, and generally establish data trustworthiness (Lather, 1991). To write the case studies, we used descriptive techniques recommended for qualitative work such as narrative vignettes and direct quotes "to make clear to the reader what is meant by the various assertions, and to display the evidentiary warrant for the assertions" (Erickson, 1986, p. 149).

Both of us wanted to understand what prospective teachers learned about teaching, inquiry, and change. In keeping with a critical social science tradition, we constructed action research as a way for our students "to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried

out" (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 162). We each however had our own pedagogical agendas and interests. Linda was interested in the relationship between action research and school improvement, whereas Jeremy focused on subject matter pedagogy and social justice. These very differences inspired us to work together to discuss the benefits and drawbacks of our approaches and to remind us to keep fluid and tentative our constructions of such core ideas as reason, justice, and improvement (Brown & Jones, 2001). Through this process, which some call *second-order* action research (Altrichter, 1991), we acknowledged and modeled that like novice teachers, we had much to learn about teaching and that teaching is a complex, moral activity that warrants continuous inquiry and improvement.

Drawing from our separate analyses of all student projects in each of our classes, we selected the projects of four students to develop as case studies. In keeping with rich traditions within qualitative research, we believed that the development of thick descriptions of contrasting cases would best help us uncover issues involved in learning about change. Such in-depth analysis of select cases has an advantage over a more superficial, "disembodied" variable analysis of all cases, which can obscure complex relationships and processes. In contrast, the thick descriptions of case studies help the reader "vicariously experience these happenings and draw conclusions (which may differ from those of the researchers)" (Stake, 2000, p. 439).

We still, however, needed to answer more specifically, "What do we need cases of?" Because we wanted to look at the purposes of and conditions for change, we agreed that we should have cases at both the individual and institutional levels that were more or less receptive to change. So we selected two cases from Jeremy's class, where teacher candidates were encouraged to focus on individual and classroom change, and two cases from Linda's class, where teacher candidates were encouraged to focus on school-level change. Both sets represent the extremes of resistance and receptivity to change that we found in our classes as a

whole. From Jeremy's class, we selected Irene,<sup>3</sup> who initially saw no reason to study teaching, and Gretchen, who was eager to "teach against the grain" (Cochran-Smith, 1991). From Linda's class, we selected Vanessa, for whom institutional resistance proved to be an insurmountable obstacle, and Toni, whose institution fully supported her change agenda. We each analyzed our own preservice teachers' experiences with action research by tracking how their topics evolved and changed, noting their rationale for choosing particular topics, and tracing our influence on individual projects.

Because these cases were chosen from our initial analyses of all student projects, we felt confident that they would not lead to conclusions that were atypical but would serve—by their very contrast—to illuminate issues and challenges within the group as a whole. To confirm that hunch, we returned to our full data sets after we analyzed these four cases to determine if the implications we drew held across the full range of action research projects. We found that no major themes were omitted and that the themes we identified in the four cases were evident in the other action research projects. To check the accuracy of the cases, we asked six participants for feedback: three from Linda's class and three from Jeremy's. All members independently confirmed the accuracy of the cases. After the case writing, we provided feedback to one another, discussed what obstructed and facilitated what kinds of change in each case, and derived pedagogical implications. We initially probed the cases for a list of lessons. However, these lessons left us feeling uninspired as a contribution toward understanding the pedagogy of action research. Thinking about the implications as a set of tensions proved to be a more generative approach, reflecting the way we actually engaged in teaching.<sup>4</sup>

### **JEREMY'S CLASS: TEACHER CHANGE**

In Jeremy's class, eight White women and three White men, mostly in their mid to late 20s, were placed in a predominantly White, economically diverse suburban school district.

They had spent 1 day a week the previous semester observing in the classrooms in which they were student teaching and had established a working relationship with their cooperating teacher. The course was framed around the following four overlapping domains of teacher knowledge: reflection and inquiry, students, pedagogical content knowledge, and democracy and social justice. Teacher candidates systematically collected data related to these domains: reflective journals, videotapes of lessons, students' work, curriculum materials, and student surveys. Jeremy's role during the process was to provoke their thinking while not imposing his own, ask probing questions, and help his students make connections between self, theory, and practice. Subscribing to the notion that action research should help teacher candidates discover and develop their own theories in and of practice (Cochran-Smith, 1995), his main goals were to provide opportunities for teacher candidates to examine their practice from a social justice perspective and produce their own teaching knowledge. Political issues such as forging democratic practices in the classroom, students' roles in knowledge production, and issues of students' social and cultural exclusion in the curriculum were core strands that contributed to students' images of self as change agents. Of the 11 novice teachers, 10 exhibited various degrees of eagerness to conduct action research; 1, Irene, was initially very reluctant.

To consider the kinds of changes students underwent, we examine two teacher candidates' experiences of action research, Irene and Gretchen. Gretchen, who student taught in a second-grade classroom, believed that action research broadened her role as a teacher. At the beginning of the semester she described herself as "someone who respects and loves kids; listens intensely, cares about content, is reflective and open to change; basically is passionate." During the semester, she expanded this description to include attending to ways in which students came to learn and interact in her classroom. In contrast, Irene was someone who altered what she thought counted as teaching. She changed from viewing teaching as a proce-

dural enterprise to one that encompassed intellectual and social relationships with students. Initially, Irene viewed teaching high school as explaining material, giving homework, and constructing tests, not surprising given what we know from research on teacher beliefs and socialization (Richardson & Placier, 2001). At the beginning of the semester, Irene resisted engaging in action research; her view of self as teacher had no need for being a change agent. But as time went on, she began to examine her assessment practices and relationships with students and thereby shifted her understandings of teaching.

### ***Irene: Learning to "See" and Listen to Students***

At the beginning of the semester, Irene had difficulty coming up with an action research question. She wrote, "At the beginning I couldn't think of any 'question' I wanted answered, or wrong I had to right. I just wanted to learn how to teach well." She described herself as "more of a content person than a 'save the world' person" who "was always happy doing math problems without regard to why I was doing them." In an e-mail message and subsequent meeting, Jeremy encouraged her to think about what it would mean to be a good *teacher* of mathematics. A week later, Irene came to class with a description:

A good mathematics teacher should have a strong knowledge of mathematics and be able to explain the same concept in a number of different ways so that students can understand it . . . should be able to follow students' lines of thinking in order to understand and then answer students' questions . . . should be able to look at the material through the eyes of the students, to figure out which concepts will be harder to understand.

After sharing this perspective, Irene declared that she was not having a "problem with any of these things." She expressed confidence in her mathematics knowledge, which for her translated into confidence in being a mathematics teacher. Most of the other teacher candidates expressed surprise with this perspective because they were still exploring and developing ideas about teaching. One class member suggested

that figuring out how to understand mathematics "through the students' eyes" might be a useful way to proceed. Although Irene did not find this suggestion helpful, Jeremy asked her to keep a journal that focused on her personal and intellectual relationships with her students. She reluctantly agreed and subsequently indicated that she would like to "mix" traditional and constructivist methods, describing the latter as "fun stuff." She adapted some of her instructional techniques to provoke more discussion in her classroom through cooperative groups and inquiry-oriented questions.

This instructional change was primarily a response to poor performance on a test Irene had given her students. She was puzzled about why they did poorly and began to think that her mode of teaching might be limiting her understanding of student learning. Irene claimed that she knew how to assess students, yet she was still asking the question, "How do I know if they learned something?" This question came from a discrepancy she saw between students' test scores and her view of their understanding based on classroom discussion. Her cooperating teacher, who Irene claimed taught mathematics in a "traditional way," suggested that part of the problem might have been that the test was "too hard" for the students. Irene felt there was more to the discrepancy she noticed. She began to talk about her "struggle" with assessment and to investigate the connection between her teaching more systematically, students' participation in classrooms, and their test performance by video- or audiotaping lessons, analyzing student work, and writing almost daily journal entries. The heart of Irene's action research involved studying the assessments she created and considering how assessment results might inform her understandings of her students, their learning, and her teaching practices. She focused on two students, an active class participant whom she expected to perform well on tests but did not and a quiet student who did perform well. Puzzled by this discrepancy, Irene interviewed the students and more closely examined their written work and oral contributions.

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Toward the end of the semester, Irene began to think about making connections between students' lives and mathematics:

While as a student I was not interested in applying the math I knew, the more I experience, the more I find and enjoy mathematical and logical application to real life. I have begun to understand the necessity of applications in the teaching of mathematics. Most students are not like I was. They want to see math as it applied to their lives. Without this connection they may easily become bored and uninterested in math. Because of this, I strive to connect math I teach with the everyday world.

Through conversations in the action research classroom and reflections in her journal, Irene began to approach teaching by building on student experience. The action research project prompted Irene to rethink the relationship between teaching and learning. Student learning was no longer merely the product of her teaching but an active influence. In her final paper she acknowledged the difficulty in understanding student thinking: "I tried to judge all my students based on whole class interactions and . . . did not necessarily do a good job. I know now that I need to spend a lot more time on the individual students."

### ***Gretchen: Attending to Democracy in Classroom Teaching and Learning***

In contrast to Irene, Gretchen started the semester with a notion of teaching that centered on student learning and being a change agent. Throughout the semester, Gretchen thought about the role of democracy in her teaching. This was evident in how she structured classroom participation and linked ideas about democracy to curriculum content. An accomplished journalist, Gretchen has a passion for writing and decided to experiment with Writers' Workshop as a vehicle to facilitate students' capacities and potentials as writers. This was a new idea to the students in her classroom, an idea that her mentor teacher initially resisted. As Gretchen described her experience of teaching writing:

I felt like myself in Writers' Workshop. . . . There was a good feeling in the room—the kids seemed excited, as if they wanted to work, and I was excited to have

this positive energy and feedback. . . . In essence, Writers' Workshop was in my voice.

But after being in her classroom for only 2 weeks, Gretchen announced in class that she might change her topic. Although her cooperating teacher was friendly and gave her "much freedom to change the classroom," Gretchen engaged in what she later called "self-censorship." Because Writers' Workshop was so different from "the climate already established in the room," Gretchen worried that this approach to writing would be "frowned" on. Her cooperating teacher had previously voiced concern that the goal of promoting ownership of writing for second graders was unattainable. After Jeremy urged Gretchen not to make a hasty decision and offered support and options, Gretchen decided to speak with her cooperating teacher. Although she still had reservations, Gretchen's cooperating teacher let her use part of each day for Writers' Workshop. By the end of the semester, the cooperating teacher praised Gretchen's approach and said she would seriously consider using it the following year.

Gretchen's experience with action research gave her an opportunity to examine her ideas about teaching writing. One of her first goals was to find ways to develop "more openness to students." Gretchen not only used her reflection journal to trace patterns in her teaching and her students' growth as writers, she also collected all student work and regularly audiotaped her classroom teaching and her conversations with individuals or groups of students. Drawing from these multiple sources, she developed the themes of teaching ownership and voice in writing. In her final paper she wrote,

Ownership and voice are central themes in my teaching philosophy. These aren't just qualities I want students to exhibit in writing, but ways of living and learning I want them to claim for their entire education—indeed their entire lives.

This excerpt, like much of Gretchen's analysis, reveals the ways in which she translated her passion for writing into a pedagogy for writing, a pedagogy that connected to student experience in school and beyond. Through her inquiry, Gretchen enriched her understanding of voice, ownership, and structure. She found

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that in attending to student voice and ownership as manifestations of classroom democracy, she had initially and mistakenly dismissed the need to think about classroom structure. In her final paper she reflected on this problem:

In rejecting a traditional definition of structure as authoritarianism, I failed to replace it with some other, more flexible structure, and denied children opportunities to grow. Structure as I defined it then, inhibited ownership because it took away the kids' control over their writing. But lack of structure (chaos) inhibited voice, in that students had no predictable, regular place in which to practice writing and thus develop it. What I see now is that there can be another type of structure.

### ***Understanding Individual Change***

Gretchen's and Irene's experiences with action research reveal shifts in understanding teaching and in constructing their roles as teachers. Irene moved from a technical, didactic orientation to one that centered on inquiry into student learning and her own teaching. Gretchen began with an inquiry orientation toward her students and teaching but broadened it to include more attention to the relations among writing, student voice, democracy, and classroom structure. These changes did not arise in a vacuum. Gretchen's and Irene's learning is situated in their own histories, the context of the ideas and experiences of the teacher education program, and more specifically, their student teaching experience. Irene's love of mathematics made her wonder why that wasn't true for most of her students, and Gretchen's love of writing made her want to provide a creative writing environment for her students. Both students had to overcome some hurdles. At a personal level, Irene had to develop a reason to examine and change her teaching; Gretchen needed to change her ideas about democracy and structure in teaching. At an institutional level, neither Gretchen nor Irene had strong interpersonal support. Gretchen's cooperating teacher was hesitant to let her try something she herself was unfamiliar with; Irene's cooperating teacher, though willing to offer suggestions, had difficulty helping her assess teaching in

relation to unanticipated student learning problems.

### **LINDA'S CLASS: INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE**

In the 2-year master's degree program in which Linda taught, diversity in both the curriculum and recruitment efforts was an explicit goal. Of the 15 students, 2 were men, 2 self-identified as Latino/Latina, 5 as Black, and 8 as White. In marked contrast to most teacher education programs, many of the students had worked in the school system prior to entering the program. A unique feature of the program was the commitment of the school district, which partially subsidized tuition and allowed the students to use a third of their paid Instructional Assistant (IA) time for classroom observations and program assignments. As such, these teacher candidates had more than the typical guest status of traditional student teachers. Their full-fledged, albeit entry-level, employee status within the school district seemed to offer them a more generative positionality to engage in institutional change.

In the proposal submitted for human subjects clearance, Linda described her research purpose as "understanding . . . how I go about promoting understandings of action research, teaching, and the interconnections among action research, teaching, and school improvement initiatives." With this research agenda in mind, she prepared to teach the action research course by placing more emphasis on connections to school improvement than she had in the past. Although only a few students selected an action research project explicitly linked to a school improvement agenda, all students heard about these projects in class presentations, and all participated in readings, discussions, and activities that explored action research/school improvement connections. Drawing on critical traditions of action research, Linda selected readings and developed assignments to help students consider the broad social implications of classroom practices and school improvement plans (e.g., equity, fairness, cultural responsiveness, etc.).

To study institutional change efforts, we selected two contrasting cases: Vanessa's discarded idea of examining her school's "pull-out" program and Toni's analysis of her school's new second-grade reading program. Ironically, the initial concerns of Toni and Vanessa were quite similar. Each worried about the adverse impact of pulling students out of regular classrooms to receive "special" attention. However, as might be predicted from research on schools as organizations (Richardson & Placier, 2001), their institutional contexts and the professional relations within those institutions powerfully shaped their experience of change agency.

**Vanessa:**  
***Challenging Accepted Practice***

During the third class of the semester, Vanessa asked,

Does action research have to effect change? Or can it be a start? What I'm thinking about, I can't do anything about. Our kids are being pulled out of the class all the time. How can you learn second grade if you're not in second grade?

Her concerns were that pull-out students have difficulty catching up on missed class work, that what happens during pull-out time was not always related to class instruction, and that this lack of alignment limited her ability to provide support to these students. A related concern was that as just one classroom teacher, she was not in a position herself to change an established schoolwide practice. This issue generated intense interest. Using Noffke's (1997) framework, students discussed ways in which this topic could address the personal development needs that Vanessa had as a new teacher, how it could promote the professionalization of teaching, and how it could achieve emancipatory goals. We agreed that Vanessa's action research project would not have to change the pull-out practice itself: that studying the practice and the possible ramifications, positive and negative, for students in her school would be sufficient. One suggestion for Vanessa was systematic data collection on a representative sampling of students: who was pulled out, for what purpose, for how long, when, what were they miss-

ing, and so forth. Sharing the data for future decisions the school might make would be a significant contribution to the school's professional staff and would constitute the action part of the research. Although this project would not strictly adhere to Carr and Kemmis's (1986) definition of action research as "improving" the institutional context, we would argue that there was still much to be gained from this project and that few projects can or should guarantee success at the outset.

Unfortunately, in the next class, Vanessa announced that she was changing her topic. As she explained later in a private conversation:

I pulled away from "pull-out" because it was politically not correct. I talked to my coach and two other teachers who said you can't do that. I wouldn't have had support or help. There wasn't anyone who could have helped. I'm relatively low in the school. It's not something that could be done in the school at this time.

She further explained that during the 3 to 4 years her principal had been at the school, student scores on the state's mandatory test had declined and many veteran teachers had left. Although Vanessa called it a wonderful school with wonderful teachers, concern about the school was so great that an external "fact-finding" team was coming to evaluate the situation. The principal was under considerable stress, and Vanessa was worried about selecting an action research topic that appeared to criticize a school practice. When she discussed her concerns about the pull-out program with other teachers and showed them data on one student's absence from class, they agreed with her problem assessment: "They thought it was an important issue but that I shouldn't do it. I don't think they cared any more, not enough to do something like this themselves."

Problems with the school and principal were not, however, the only reasons for dropping the pull-out study. As an instructional assistant new to the school system, Vanessa said she would have "felt presumptuous" challenging an established practice. She likened the projected study to stepping on other people's toes because it is "the kind of project where you are judging what other people do." Vanessa

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doubted that she would have taken on the project even as a tenured teacher, stating that she would have to be “the resource teacher, because then I would be judging myself.” Local collegial norms had a clear impact on Vanessa’s construction of the appropriate role of teacher as change agent.

### ***Toni: Resonating With Colleague Dissatisfaction***

Like Vanessa, Toni was concerned about institutional practices that were not systematically studied. Linda’s most vivid recollections of Toni are frustrations voiced about the constant change in school programs without any effort to evaluate success. This comment was typical:

The focus changed from year to year for no apparent reason except that test scores weren’t showing marked improvement. . . . I could not see that there was any plan of action to find out what . . . worked and what we were doing that didn’t.

Unlike Vanessa, Toni had a longer history at her school. Not only did she live in the neighborhood and send her children to the school, she had been a parent volunteer, chair of the school’s PTA, member of the school improvement team, and instructional assistant before entering the program. Well into her 8th year of active participation in the school, Toni described it as a welcoming environment. The school’s principal prompted her to become a teacher.

From her 3 years on the school improvement team, Toni knew that students’ reading scores on the annual state assessment were a consistent concern. With a large English Language Learner (ELL) population and approximately half the students on free or reduced lunch, the school had 3½ English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teachers and a reading specialist. A modified Reading Recovery program had been developed for below average readers. However, inadequate training and resource materials, lack of time with individual students, and competing demands for her as an instructional assistant caused considerable frustration for Toni’s entire second-grade team.

With the simultaneous arrival of a new principal and reading specialist, the team decided to recommend a different approach to reading instruction.

With her teammates, Toni redesigned the second-grade reading program. They eliminated the 30-minute per day one-on-one instructional assistant tutoring of students who were furthest below grade level. The team disliked removing IAs from the classroom when help was needed for reading instruction. So the second-grade teachers proposed not to refer any students for tutoring if their IAs could stay in the classroom to work with small groups of students. The administration agreed, and the teachers redesigned their reading program with direct instruction, small reading groups, individual activities, and independent learning centers. The second-grade team reasoned that the IAs could be of greater benefit to more students by leading small group instruction than by assisting a small number of students individually. Through this new strategy, IAs would become more familiar with good practices in reading instruction because they would be planning with, observing, modeling, and seeking advice from the classroom teacher.

Toni’s action research plan was to determine if the team’s new approach to reading instruction was better than the pull-out approach. To answer this question, she learned to use a computer software package to compare the average gain score of the previous year’s second graders with the gain score of this year’s students. Toni was disappointed to find the achievement results of the study inconclusive. But she did find overwhelming enthusiasm for the new program among teachers and marked improvements in reading attitudes among the second graders. She recommended continuing the program for at least another year to allow for additional data collection and analysis and to determine whether there were any lasting effects from the program.

### ***Understanding Institutional Change***

Comparing these two cases gives a sense of what facilitates and what obstructs change

agents. On a personal level, both students were passionate about their topics. Toni believed in and helped create the second-grade team's new approach to reading. Vanessa was so bothered by pull-out students missing classroom instruction that she informally started collecting data and discussing the issue with trusted colleagues. Both students had similar IA positions in their schools, and both started as parent volunteers, although Toni had a longer, more comprehensive history as a member of the school improvement team and a leader in the parent association. Perhaps more important, Toni had the full support of her principal and teammates; Vanessa did not. Toni's redesigned reading program was not a burden or threat to anyone. All the teachers wanted to find a better way to use valued resources (IAs) to bring students up to grade level in reading. Toni was part of a jointly conceived program to which she could offer a desired evaluation component. This evaluation was about the redesigned reading program as a whole, not about individual teachers.

In contrast, Vanessa lacked Toni's interpersonal network of support. She worried that her ideas about studying the pull-out program would threaten the principal and resource teacher, and trusted colleagues discouraged her from pursuing the idea. Nonsupportive interactions with her principal on other issues also caused her to be wary. Although the study might have been of great benefit to the school, Vanessa was simply not positioned to be a legitimate agent of change on this issue. Given her relatively powerless, vulnerable position in the school, the ramifications could have been harmful to her as a beginning teacher and to an already unproductive school climate. These cases indicate that an individual's passion, skill, and access to data are not enough to guarantee a project's success or warrant its execution. The interpersonal support of colleagues, a healthy school climate, and collegial norms about initiating school change are all essential.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION

We began the analysis of these four cases, which cover a broad range of experience of

being change agents, to inform pedagogical thinking about preservice action research. Our insights into these cases and their implications for teacher education are summarized here as a set of tensions or dilemmas. We do not claim that these five tensions are the only possible way of framing the challenges of action research. Our more circumspect claim is that they provide a useful way to think about pedagogical implications for action research courses and that attending to tensions like these can enhance the experience of change agency for teacher candidates. As a whole, the tensions construct a view of teacher as change agent and provide additional evidence that such a role is not only feasible for student teachers but preferable to the seemingly nonpolitical and nonreflective alternatives (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Zeichner & Gore, 1995).

### *Individual and Institutional Change*

Both individual and institutional change are important to the action research process; students must be open to examining their own teaching assumptions and practices as well as the fairness of institutional arrangements. Our comparative analysis of our two courses indicates the limitations of an exclusive focus on one level of change. Failure to give any attention to institutional change, for example, can lead teacher candidates such as Irene to think about their work solely as an individual endeavor, thereby reifying the isolation of the teacher. Irene's focus on assessment helped her transform her understanding of the relationships among assessment, teaching, and learning. Although this was a profound shift for her, she stayed focused exclusively on her own classroom. There was no indication that she thought about assessment as a schoolwide issue. At the same time, to focus only on institutional aspects of assessment practices might have resulted in maintaining her initial and limiting beliefs about her role as a teacher of mathematics.

Gretchen and Toni, who were both successful in accomplishing their goals as action researchers, also limited their learning about change by their research choices. Toni learned about the

importance of a positive school climate in transforming institutions, and Gretchen learned about the importance of action, understanding, and knowledge in the development of her pedagogy. Both embraced the action research process to pursue their individual goals and commitments. To ask either to expand their study might have been foolhardy. Toni was too overwhelmed to simultaneously study her own teaching in the context of the new reading program, and Gretchen was in no position to institutionalize change in writing practices in her school, although her cooperating teacher was positively affected. Yet to ignore individual or institutional dimensions entirely would be to shortchange learning about change.

This analysis suggests the wisdom of situating action research at the intersection of individual and institutional change. For students like Irene and Gretchen, individual change would still be foregrounded. However, they could be asked to consider, hypothetically, institutional changes consistent with their classroom focus on writing and assessment. For students like Toni and Vanessa, institutional change would remain in the foreground. However, they could be asked about implications for the individual teacher: How would changes in pull-out programs affect Vanessa as a classroom teacher? Was she prepared to be successful in an inclusive environment? What insights about herself as a teacher did Toni gain from teaching reading to a small group of students? Failure to help teacher candidates make the links between institutional and individual change limits the power of action research and the possibilities for significant school improvement (Cochran-Smith, 1994; Noffke, 1992; Zeichner, 1993).

### **Action and Understanding**

This tension references the dual nature of action research. As educational praxis, action research implies two things: that knowledge should be used for purposeful action and that knowledge and action are not separate but tightly interwoven (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Both inform and guide the other. Moreover, in praxis, one's own teaching practice is a primary site for

understanding. Understanding does not come solely or even primarily from a priori research and theory applied to practice (Cochran-Smith, 1995). For teacher educators, the challenge is to keep understanding and action in constant interaction, to know what to emphasize in each particular instance. With Irene, the challenge was to help her understand teaching as a complex practice worthy of study. She thought she knew teaching because she knew mathematics; only gradually did she begin to learn from her own practice. Gretchen, on the other hand, was predisposed to action. But ironically, she too had to be coaxed to learn from practice. Much like Irene, she presumed that because she knew how to write and had studied about Writers' Workshop that she simply needed to apply her knowledge. The pedagogical challenge in working with both students was to "break into their habitual ways of seeing things with a view to considering alternative understandings of their practice" (Brown & Jones, 2001, p. 169).

Vanessa and Toni's cases taught us something different about the tension between action and understanding. Both students had a clear understanding of the issue they wanted to study even though the institutional context prevented Vanessa from carrying out her plan. These contrasting cases underscore the fact that school-level change needs the shared understanding and approval of a critical core of school personnel (Ross, 1987). Advocates of collaborative action research are right to argue the power—and generally the necessity—of working with others to transform school cultures and structures (Clift, Veal, Johnson, & Holland, 1990; Cochran-Smith, 1991). Vanessa did not have that. However, as pedagogical tools, both Toni's and Vanessa's proposed projects were highly effective. The fact that Vanessa's action plan was blocked did not prevent it from being a source of learning. Her simple articulation of the concern provided rich opportunities for the whole class to expand their understandings of institutional change. Teacher educators can help students explore actions that might not be feasible but can further understandings of change.

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## **Support and Challenge**

An integral aspect of the action research process is novice teachers creating and pursuing their own research agenda. But we ask, "Is any research agenda worthwhile merely because the novice teacher creates and names the agenda?" On one hand, our task as teacher educators is to support teacher candidates in their learning; on the other hand, we want to guide them into paths of productive inquiry. Although Linda encouraged Vanessa to pursue her interest in pull-out programs and with the class offered ways in which that might be done, she also supported Vanessa's shift to a classroom-level question. When Toni voiced reservations about being able simultaneously to study her own teaching and the new reading program, Linda approved the more restricted agenda. Jeremy also offered supportive suggestions to Irene while simultaneously challenging her to look more closely at her intellectual and social relationships with her students. And while Jeremy supported Gretchen's vision of democratic classrooms that promote student voice, he had to challenge her to examine more closely how Writers' Workshop was being enacted in the classroom.

Not every action research agenda is possible or worthwhile. Teacher candidates need help in framing and reframing their questions, methodologies, and conclusions as they develop different approaches to change. This means that teacher educators need to support individual student teachers' interests while simultaneously helping them pursue generative areas of inquiry (Cochran-Smith, 1994; Zeichner & Gore, 1995). Our task as teacher educators seems to be one of ushering teacher candidates into arenas that are morally and ethically responsible to children in K-12 contexts and to the novice teachers. By naming our commitments, we use our institutional power to shape the student teachers' agendas. By not naming our commitments, we still use our institutional power to suggest that any agenda is worthwhile. Acknowledging the power differential does not mean we should embrace or ignore our positionality; rather, we live inside the contra-

diction and share our understandings of such contradictions with our students. This tension of both supporting and challenging novice teachers seems integral to promoting professional orientations and relationships and perhaps best illustrates the complexity of power relations in the pedagogy of action research.

## **Passion and Reason**

Passion can be an important source of action research. But passion must be tempered and informed by reason. Teacher educators must draw on their students' passions while helping them realize their liabilities. This was evident in different ways for all four students. Irene's passion was her enjoyment of solving routine, abstract mathematical problems. This gave her important content knowledge for teaching but also blocked other conceptions of mathematics. Even worse, it prevented her from differentiating her role as mathematics teacher from mathematician and from understanding that her students were not carbon copies of herself. Until she began reasoning about the discrepancy between testing outcomes and her own observations of student understanding, her personal passion for mathematics prevented her from seeing a need for change. Gretchen was similarly passionate about writing. She wanted to give her students the power that came from finding and expressing their own voice. But this passion was insufficient to help her construct meaningful writing opportunities for them. As she developed change strategies, she had to reason through her worries about coercion and authoritarianism to determine what kinds of classroom structures would facilitate student voice and ownership of their written work.

Negative passion initially fueled Vanessa and Toni. They were both upset by school practices they believed to be detrimental to student learning. Following that passion would have been potentially disastrous to Vanessa's career and harmful to collegial relations. She had to temper that passion for change by considering her positionality and the power relations in the school. Vanessa had the maturity to reason through those issues herself, but teacher educa-

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tors must be prepared to prevent students from serious norm violations (Ross, 1987). Because Toni's passion for institutional change was shared by valued colleagues, she was able to fully engage in her action plan. However, she took care not to inadvertently evaluate individual teachers by the type of data analysis and reporting she used. Thinking through that threat to peer relations was an important aspect of her success.

### **Regulation and Emancipation**

Historically, action research has had a political, emancipatory dimension. That dimension is more or less dominant in different traditions of action research and in different social and institutional contexts (Zeichner & Gore, 1995). Within the contexts of compulsory schooling and teacher education programs, that impulse is regulated and constrained but not eliminated. As an early proponent of the emancipatory potential of action research, Stenhouse (1983) promoted the idea that emancipation can operate at the level of students, teachers, and schools. These levels are used here to analyze our four cases.

Views of oneself as teacher regulate interactions with students as well as classroom constructions of curriculum and assessments. In Irene's case, these views stifled her ability to determine what or if students were learning and to engage students in an understanding of mathematics. For her, emancipatory change had to occur at the level of personal consciousness. Whereas Irene had to be carefully nudged to examine her limiting views, Gretchen needed no such push. The most obvious emancipatory impact of Gretchen's action research was for her students. She worked hard to free the classroom environment from arbitrary rules and imposed curriculum, to move away from teacher-dominated instruction, and to actively involve students in decision making. In more subtle ways though, Gretchen was like Irene. Views of herself as teacher that initially regulated and limited her practice broadened. By the end of her project, she was able to see how classroom structure needed to be analyzed, not

merely rejected, in relation to student voice and ownership.

In Vanessa's and Toni's projects, the tension between regulation and emancipation resided in the school context. In Vanessa's situation, regulation remained the dominant force. Challenging taken-for-granted practice was not possible for her at that time; the school climate was too tenuous. In contrast, Toni's project had quite an emancipatory effect on her school. She was part of a group of teachers who successfully proposed and developed an alternative reading program. More important, she set in motion a process that altered the way in which the school handled change. By developing a useful model of program evaluation, Toni helped break the school's pattern of constantly implementing, then discarding new programs without assessing them. In relation to this project at least, Toni's school became an example of Stenhouse's (1983) school-level emancipation. It had partially liberated itself from bureaucratic traditions and habitual practice by collecting and using evidence as a basis for decision making. It was a place where teachers had some control over both the production and assessment of knowledge.

The analysis of the tension between regulation and emancipation conveys two important lessons for teacher educators. First, the possibilities for emancipatory action should not be automatically discounted as too controversial for schools or too lofty for beginning teachers. These cases as well as others published elsewhere attest to quite striking (if not wide-ranging) liberatory changes. Second, teacher educators should consider the goals of justice, equality, and democracy, often associated with emancipatory action research, as deeply embedded in everyday pedagogy. These goals can be pursued in the confines of individual classrooms, as in the cases of Irene and Gretchen, as well as in broader social and political arenas.

### **CONCLUSION**

This exploration of novice teachers' experiences of change helped us learn more about the fluid, contradictory, and evolving nature of ped-

agogy. As indicated by these case studies, the purpose and context of action research and action research courses are neither uniform nor self-evident. Embracing action research as a vehicle for educational change does not name the process or kinds of change that are envisioned. The analysis reveals complex notions of change and suggests the difficulty of action research courses focusing on multiple dimensions of change simultaneously. The teacher educator is confronted with managing a range of meanings of teaching and change and also with managing a range of purposes and contexts for the work of teaching and action research. To ignore dimensions of change or emerging pedagogical tensions has consequences for what teacher candidates might learn about action research and change and what teacher educators might learn about their practice.

Given the dearth of literature about the pedagogy of action research, our analysis attempts to contribute toward developing a theory of the teaching and learning of action research in preservice teacher education. What would such a theory include? This analysis suggests the centrality of certain elements. First is the importance of attending to the complex notions of change that are embedded in the various versions of action research. Being aware of personal, professional, and political purposes as well as the individual, institutional, and social contexts of change complicates teaching and learning about change but also broadens possibilities. In offering multiple notions of change, teacher educators can position themselves—at least tentatively—without requiring students to take a similar stance. A second element for pedagogical theory is attention to the conditions and contexts that can facilitate or obstruct change. As indicated in the literature and our case studies, these conditions can be personal-biographical, interpersonal, and institutional. Teacher educators must be prepared to help students examine and reframe assumptions about themselves as teachers and change agents as well as examine taken-for-granted school practices and processes. As illustrated by Vanessa's case, there can be pedagogical value in explor-

ing action research proposals that might not be immediately possible to carry out.

A third contribution this article makes toward a theory of action research pedagogy is in the analysis of tensions. We noted a number of tensions, including individual and institutional, action and understanding, support and challenge, passion and reason, and regulation and emancipation. These tensions emerged through our own and our students' experiences of research and teaching as well as the programmatic contexts in which we worked. They may not arise in other teacher educators' action research courses. However, our analysis suggests that careful examination of pedagogical tensions can help teacher educators better understand the complexity of learning about teaching, action research, and change. Rather than steering toward one side of a tension over another, we argue that teacher educators should work with tensions to enhance understandings and possibilities of change.

## NOTES

1. Throughout this article, we retain the term *teacher research* where other scholars employ that term even when it matches our definition of *action research*.

2. Although both programs were at the master's level, their purpose was to prepare students for their initial teaching license and for that reason are called *preservice*.

3. Pseudonyms are used for all teacher candidates.

4. See Altrichter (1991) for another generative use of *tensions* in building a theory of pedagogy of action research derived from an analysis of program structures rather than from an analysis of student projects.

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