Leading Participatory Action Research for Teacher Agency

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Abstract

Participatory Action Research (PAR) can benefit teachers and students. Based on student-led PAR projects utilized within the author's secondary classroom, student researchers provided instructional strategy recommendations based on student researchers' analysis of peers' survey responses. Yet without a transformative leadership approach, allowing for teacher agency and empowerment, PAR projects will not be successfully implemented. The author describes a set of teacher and leader dispositions that are expected to allow PAR projects to be successful.

Keywords: Participatory Action Research, leadership, teacher agency

Introduction

Various theories have shaped (inter)actions among teachers and students over time. Establishing strong relationships (Souers & Hall, 2019) and learning partnerships (Hammond, 2015) have influenced many educators with the aim of supporting students' learning successes. Relatedly, the origins of action research are associated with an active, new learning process for teachers, offering "empowerment" (Mirra et al., 2016, p. 21). Establishing new learning – based upon instruction and curricular decisions that lie within teachers' responsibilities – can contribute to bolstering classroom-based relationships. After all, the goal of action research is for teachers "to improve their practice and foster their professional growth by understanding their students, solving problems, or developing new skills" (Efron & Ravid, 2020, p.4). As teachers access action research within their classrooms, they can bolster relationships with students – all while experiencing empowerment and a sense of agency over their instructional decisions.

Notably, action research affords opportunities for teacher agency within educational settings. Yet without the support of transformative educational leaders, teachers will not successfully utilize action research as an effective tool. Within the research literature, aspects of transformative leadership include "attempts to effect both deep and equitable changes" and "a focus on liberation, democracy, equity, and justice" (Shields, 2010, p. 562). At its heart, transformative leadership aims to effect significant change within schools and intentionally strives to achieve equity and social justice. When leaders afford teachers agency and autonomy to explore action research within the classrooms, they can potentially establish more equitable learning experiences for both teachers and students.

Participatory Action Research (PAR)

Extending beyond action research, PAR involves students within the action research project – and it is not a new educational concept. At its core, PAR can legitimize students' capacities as students engage as researchers themselves (Mirra et. al, 2016), sharing their ideas for improved learning environments. Since students' voices can often be disregarded, PAR can provide various opportunities for them to directly influence their own experiences as learners. PAR allows students to "provide their insights into how and for what purposes they want to be educated" (Mirra et. al, 2016, p.4). Garnering insights and making instructional changes relies upon educators' valuing students' voices and is predicated on strong foundational student-teacher relationships within classrooms. Without trust (Hammond, 2015), students will not willingly engage in risks of articulating their ideas. PAR can foster learning partnerships (Hammond, 2015) via shared power.

(Re)examining the role of power is central for education (Welton et al., 2015). Educators have the power themselves to reconsider shifting focus to embrace adjustments based on student

input. PAR fosters opportunities for power structures to shift (O'Neill & McMahon, 2012) which can reveal students' presence as powerful (Cook-Sather, 2006). By engaging students to voice their opinions about their preferred instructional experiences, students gain power; their voices can be heard. Power shifts to students as they provide their "unique perspective on learning" and "actively shape their education" (Rodríguez & Brown, 2009, p. 22).

Having direct influence over instruction can positively affect students' perceptions of power. Fostering an authentic sense of power within students provides all students the opportunity to engage in activities that can directly change their educational experiences. Providing students with a sense of power depends upon teachers being provided autonomy to engage in PAR projects.

Still, if teachers engage in PAR, it readily associates with equity. "At its best, student action research engages youth, particularly underrepresented and disadvantaged youth" (Rubin & Jones, 2007, p. 364). Fostering opportunities for all student voices – particularly those of underrepresented youth – to have direct input into their learning environments is crucial. After all, seeking multiple perspectives is a commonly recommended equity-focused strategy (Hanover Research, 2017). Student-led action research can benefit all involved: students, teachers, and administrators.

A Teacher's Perspective

Developing learning partnerships (Hammond, 2015) is vital for student success as related to relationships and relevance. PAR can generate increased engagement within the framework of a learning partnership; as teachers rethink their instructional practices, their revisions serve as new and deeper communications with students (Rogers et al, 2007). Beyond relationships, relevance is key. Further, PAR activities also associate with relevance: they engage students in

student-conducted research with the intentional goal of affecting their school environments: these are "embedded in purposeful and authentic work" (Rubin & Jones, 2007, p. 367). True, authentic school-based action research can have a significant (positive) impact on classroom experiences for both students and teachers.

In 2018-2019, a student-led participatory action research project was conducted by the author within her ninth-grade classroom in Connecticut. From February 2019-June 2019, eight students individually selected an instructional strategy to be implemented within their English classroom. They each became the "expert" on their selected strategy. The collective strategies were brain breaks and physical movement activities; community circles; formative assessment; growth mindset applied to language; growth mindset applied to assessment; Socratic Seminar; mindfulness and stress; and in-person discussions. The student researchers determined how frequently their selected strategy would be implemented. They debriefed the implementation with me and suggested instructional adjustments to incorporate across all class sections. The student researchers generated strategy-specific end-of-year survey questions for their grade level peers to answer; they analyzed the qualitative and/or quantitative survey data and made recommendations for teachers to consider. They co-authored a paper entitled, "Student Researchers as Instructional Influencers: How Participatory Action Research Validates Student Voice" (Hellerich et al., 2021). This paper can be found under "Embracing Student Voice" at www.reframinginstruction.com.

Since the project focused on student voice, I wanted to gauge the student-researchers' perceptions of the PAR process, as related to their voice. When asked, "To what degree do you feel you were able to have your voice be heard?" the results revealed a strong sentiment of them feeling heard (see Figure 1).
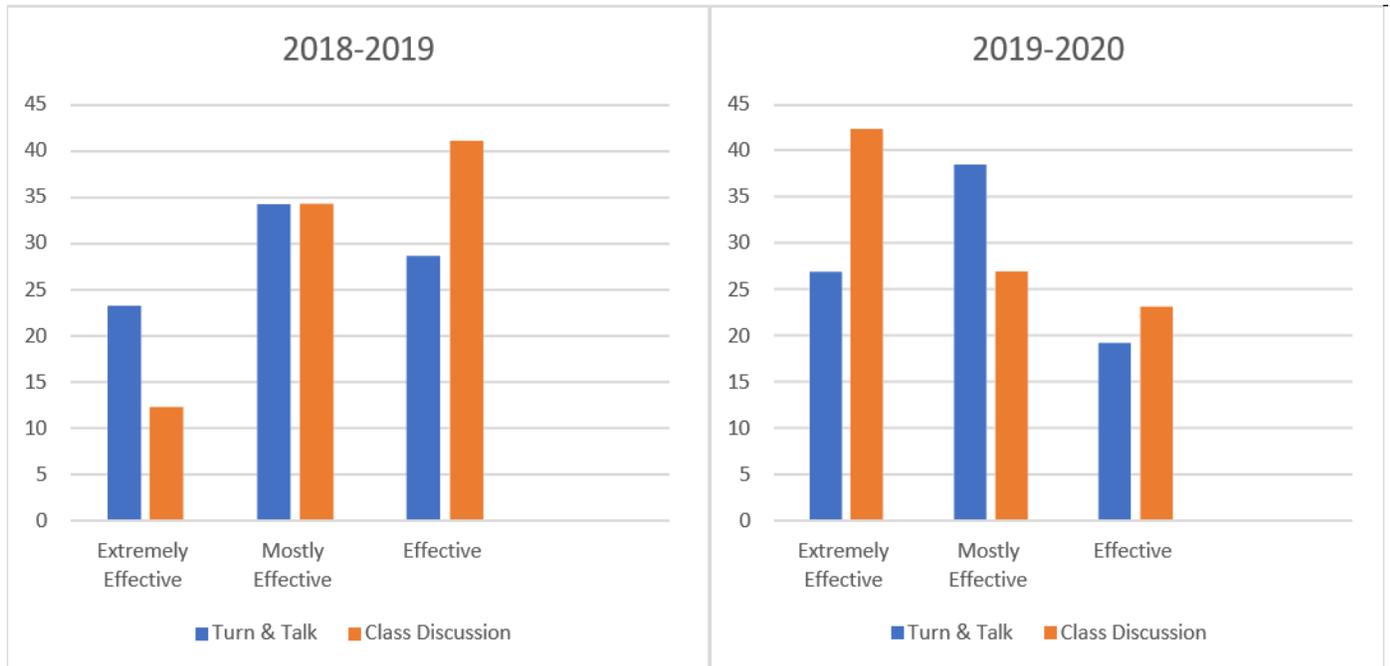
Figure 1

Student-Researcher Responses
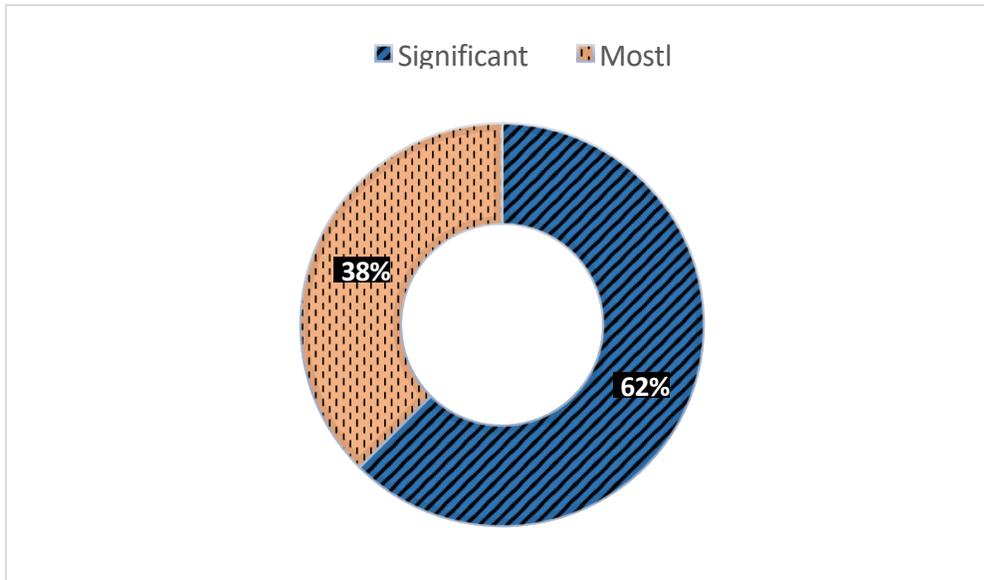
The research group's survey data revealed their feelings that they had a voice within the instruction occurring within their classroom. Beyond the research group, the collected survey data revealed the entire ninth grade students' collective perceptions on the student-selected activities they deemed successful. Teachers' willingness to share power with students is key (Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). Encouraging students to determine instructional approaches and strategies that work best for them can serve to guide teachers' instruction for years to come. These data results informed my planning and instructional delivery during the subsequent school year. I replicated the student-selected strategies, and garnered additional student perception data about the strategies' effectiveness at the mid-year survey in January 2020 (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

PAR Student-Selected Strategies Influence Subsequent Instructional Planning

When examining student perceptions of how effective community circles were, the comparison

results also indicated significant increases during the second year of implementation (see Figure

3).

Figure 3

PAR Student-Selected Strategies: Student Perception Data at Levels 4 and 5
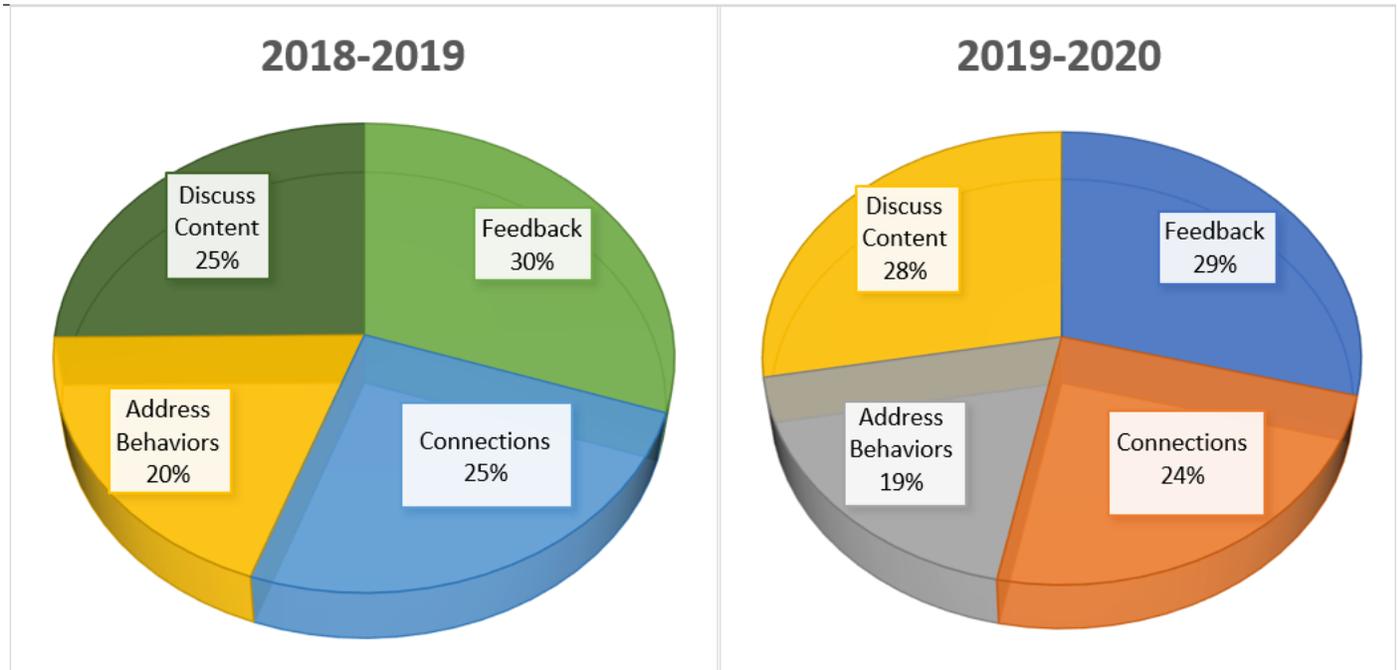
As noted within the collected data, my implementation of the student-researchers' selected

strategies garnered even higher perceptions of effectiveness during the subsequent school year. I

transparently shared the previous year's PAR project and the strategies selected by students; the

open dialogue about my willingness to engage in PAR – and have suggestions directly influence

my instruction – was intentionally planned.

In January of 2020, tenth graders (the student researchers) presented their findings to the

entire faculty at their high school. They planned their presentation to include a PowerPoint, an

interactive brainstorming session for professional learning communities (PLCs), and an exit slip

to gather presentation feedback. The student researchers shared their selected strategy, relevant

research from the literature, their data analyses, and their recommendations. Grouped in PLCs,

teachers brainstormed ways they could incorporate the students' selected strategies, with the

researchers rotating to address teacher questions.

Anonymous faculty member comments on exit slips included: "Thank you for reminding me of how important it is to incorporate varied strategies to motivate students" and "Very well articulated! I loved hearing your insight, it really made me pause and reflect on what I can change in my teaching." These reflections demonstrate the potential influence over staff from a student-led PAR project and presentation. This PAR project successfully transformed my implementation of instructional strategies and the students' presentation to the staff had the potential to influence all teachers within the building.

From a Leadership Perspective

Having served as a middle school administrator for 11 years before returning to the classroom in 2018-2019 as I pursued my doctorate, I can readily apply a leadership lens to the PAR successes my students and I collectively experienced. Rubin and Jones (2007) showcase benefits of student action research for leaders. Knowing that students "frame issues quite differently from school administrators" (Rubin & Jones, 2007, p. 371), when student co-researchers can contribute, they are "engaged in an authentic study of a relevant educational issue at their school site" (Rubin & Jones, 2007, p. 371). Recognizing students' varied perspectives is vital for educational leaders. Incorporating PAR encourages authentic research and values student voice both at the classroom and schoolwide levels.

Having experienced PAR myself, I believe educational leaders can benefit from the invaluable perspectives shared. Viewing PAR through a dual lens (as teacher and administrator), I espouse that leaders and their teachers should demonstrate several dispositions for PAR projects to flourish (see Table 1).

Table 1

Recommended Dispositions and Possible Actions by Leaders and Teachers

Recommended Dispositions	Possible Actions
Leader	
o Value shared power with teachers *and* students	o Honor teacher leadership and autonomy with PAR project topic
	o Empower teachers and students through PAR by elevating the equity-focused projects
o Demonstrate "pivotability"	o Flexibly embrace and enact suggested changes based on collected PAR data
	o Allocate necessary resources (creative scheduling and faculty meeting time for student presentations)
o Develop trust(worthiness)	o Dependably elevate the PAR projects' importance by showcasing projects – even if results are not as successful as the PAR group had hoped
	o Prioritize PAR projects as a vital responsibility
Teacher	
o Value shared power with students	o Empower students' voices to directly influence the way their school/classroom community functions
	o Embrace providing students power to change the class/school
o Demonstrate "pivotability"	o Enact student suggestions – exactly as articulated by students
	o Make implementation adjustments according to students' suggestions
o Develop trust-based learning partnerships with student researchers	o Value student voice by seeking their input
	o Engage in self-reflection so students can truly have authentic voice and input within their school/class environments

For the most part, Table 1 depicts my vision of how leadership and teacher dispositions mirror one another. Distinctions are delineated regarding the aspect of trust. For the leader, developing trustworthiness as perceived by teachers and students engaged in PAR projects will be critical. If PAR project groups identify an area within the school processes, protocols, or policies they deem important, educational leaders must elevate the project's importance by prioritizing it. Showcasing a PAR project's importance can be reflected when educational leaders honor the requested change, arrange for the PAR project group to engage in necessary discussions (such as a proposed policy change at a district level), or through transparent communication to share each project's progress (via newsletters, websites, parent communication, etc.). These actions can invite a sense of trustworthiness to be developed. Ultimately, PAR projects will be most successful within schools that are led by transformative leaders. PAR can serve as a tool by which leaders can foster a community that emphasizes student voice, equity, and social justice.

Final Thoughts

The success of PAR projects begins with educational leaders. If teachers are provided autonomy to engage their students in PAR projects, students are expected to benefit – as are teachers. From strengthened student-teacher relationships, to student empowerment, to teachers developing new learning that can directly influence their instructional decisions – the entire school community can benefit.

As defined by Shields (2010), transformative leadership "inextricably links education and educational leadership with the wider social context within which it is embedded" (p. 559). This interconnection can create equitable, authentic opportunities for *all* students' voices to be heard and directly influence their learning experiences. Transformative leaders can foster authentic

learning opportunities within their schools via PAR – to the potential benefit of students,

teachers, administrators, and the entire school community. The potential increase in student-staff

relationships and accessing "engaging pedagogies and high expectations for all children"

(Shields, 2010, p. 582) can demonstrate how transformative leadership and PAR interrelate.

Ultimately, students, teachers, and educational leaders can transform school environments if PAR

is embraced.

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