JOINING THE GAME: LIVING AND LEARNING AS AN ACTION RESEARCHER

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ABSTRACT
This study reports on graduate students’ thoughts and beliefs about utilizing action research as a means of professional development two years after their graduation from a Master of Arts program in Education. Because many school districts now encourage teachers to engage in self-study and to collect data that informs their instruction, the author sought to broaden graduate students’ view of action research as a tool that can enhance several areas of practice. The article discusses feedback from students who learned the benefits of action research in their program of study, and their beliefs about the use of action research to (a) model a commitment to learning for continuous professional growth, (b) set into motion a plan for professional development, (c) create new options or solve problems, and (d) act as a path for leadership opportunities in their buildings or districts. Students generally reported the benefits of utilizing action research as a tool for continuous professional development.

KEYWORDS: Action Research, Continuous Improvement, Teacher Pedagogy, Professional Growth

INTRODUCTION
In my days as a skilled technician, I stood on the sidelines, directing the game and scoring. I was an observer and a manipulator of other people’s experience. Now I join in the game. I win and I lose; I live and I learn (McNiff, 1988, p. 52).

My experiences as an action researcher, both as a K12 educator in the public schools and as a professor of research at the graduate level in higher education, have led me on a journey similar to that which McNiff (1988) describes. Action research has become, for me, an
important part of my teaching and learning philosophy, as it has afforded me multiple opportunities to both win and lose as I live and learn about my teaching practices. This study has to do with joining the game of research on practice; it is an outgrowth of an aspiration to ignite in practicing teachers a desire to participate in action research for all of the right reasons – win or lose, to live and to learn.

This article reports on a survey that was completed by group teachers who had completed a Master's Degree in Education at a Midwestern university within the previous two years. The researcher sought to know more about these teachers' independent use of action research and their plans to utilize reflection on action as a tool for professional self-improvement. The students who completed the survey were all full-time teachers who had completed their Master of Arts Degree in Education via a face-to-face program on a part-time basis. Simply providing practicing teachers with content and pedagogical knowledge about the various benefits of action research as a tool for continuous growth did not ensure that they would continue to use action research in their practices following their graduation. Teaching teachers to (a) reflect upon their teaching and identify areas for improvement, (b) utilize data to measure their success, and (c) adjust their teaching in order to meet the changing needs of their students was a necessary foundation for preparing teachers to conduct their own action research study as a requirement for the degree; what they did as they moved on with their careers was an individual decision that each student needed to make. Whether or not they chose to utilize action research in their classrooms depended upon their beliefs and values. The content and the pedagogy of an Introductory Action Research course was designed to specifically teach the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that would assist teachers in developing a research persona. The researcher believed that the course content could influence teachers' decisions to either stand on the side-lines or join the game.

For decades, action research has been utilized as a form of professional development for classroom teachers to continuously assess the impact of their teaching. Engaging in reflection and inquiry into practice allows teachers “to facilitate understanding of the interrelationship between theory and practice in teaching” (Cole & Knowles, 2000, p. xii). In today's schools, many administrators ask teachers to engage in the kind of small scale self-study that parallels action research. With the recent emphasis on data to drive teachers' instruction, and the adoption of practices that are required to measure teacher effectiveness and student achievement, teachers can utilize classroom action research as one of the many methods to analyse their practices and engage in strategies for continuous improvement of pedagogies.

The researcher taught a class of Introductory Action Research with a goal that students would complete their studies knowing that they had discovered a tool to guide them in the reflective and ongoing assessment of their teaching practices. One requirement for the Master of Arts in Education degree was that teachers formally engaged in reflective practice that resulted in an action research study. By specifically teaching students about the benefits of engaging in action research the researcher intended that teachers might
recognize the power of inquiry and go on to develop the habits of action research in their practices.

The study involved the use of a post-completion survey to determine the impact of the systematic teaching of the action research process on the future teaching practices of graduate students. The survey was designed to collect data about several practices related to action research and continuous professional development, with the intent to summarize students’ thoughts and provide additional questions for the future. The primary goal was to determine the extent to which the respondents continued to utilize action research as a tool for continuous professional growth. Additional goals included knowing: (a) to what extent students modelled a commitment to learning for continuous professional growth, (b) how likely they were to engage in professional self-study as a result of their action research training in their master’s degree, (c) their beliefs about questioning underlying assumptions and taking professional risks, and (d) the likelihood that graduates would consider taking on future leadership roles in their professional settings. The data that were collected and analysed were intended to assist the researcher in refining future content and pedagogy that would strengthen teachers’ beliefs regarding the value of action research in their classrooms.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Reflective Practice**

Action research involves taking a critical look at one’s practice and having the courage to open oneself to the possibility of change. Inherent in this process is the ability to self-reflect, to critically explore what *is* in order to create what *might be*. In the early twentieth century, John Dewey (1933) began writing on the notion of reflection as a necessary component in the development of pedagogy. In so doing, he called attention to the power of reflection as a construct because of its ability to elevate thinking about one’s practice (as cited in Dimova & Loughran, 2009). Dewey also created a sense of value regarding the practice and pedagogy of education by encouraging a belief that educators are skilled and possess deep knowledge of practice. In 1916, he was quoted as stating that “Every teacher should have some regular and organic ways in which he can participate in controlling aims, methods, and materials of the school.” (as cited in Schmuck, 2006, p. 17). Dewey believed that reflection was the embodiment of an educated stance and an indication of the desire to examine one’s practice for increased meaning and purpose (as cited in Dimova & Loughran, 2009).

Schmuck (2006) viewed reflection and action research as two sides of a coin that he called ‘planned change’ (p. 10). Reflective thinking, as opposed to other forms of thinking, assumes “a state of doubt, hesitation, perplexity, or mental difficulty in which thinking originates”, followed by the “act of searching or inquiring to find answers to resolve the doubt and dispose of the perplexity” (Dewey, 1933, p. 12). Dewey believed that the desire to know is the result of certain attitudes that build a foundation for reflection. Those attitudes include open-mindedness, whole-heartedness, and responsibility (as cited in Dimova & Loughran, 2009). More recently, Schmuck (2006) shared that the three faces of continuous quality improvement included *reflective practice, problem solving* and *action*
research. Together, these three practices allow teachers to scrutinize what they do in an effort to improve their teaching and enhance student learning.

**Early Action Research**
The practice of action research dates to the 1930s when Kurt Lewin became known as one of the first action researchers. Lewin, a social psychologist, worked with his students in the field doing what he called quasi-experimental design studies in factories. His research was unique because it involved investigation by ordinary people who were interested in studying shared problems. Lewin (1948) termed this type of research “comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action” (p. 202-203). Lewin approached action research through the lens of ‘quasi-equilibrium’ where the unsteady balance between two opposing forces was the platform for assessing change. The importance of Lewin’s work should not simply be seen from the viewpoint of action research, but also from the continuous improvement model, as his early works included the use of Force Field Analysis to understand the many factors that can effect situations for student learning. Lewin maintained that an issue is balanced by the interface between the forces that seek to promote change, which he coined the *driving forces* and the forces that promote maintaining the status quo, which he referred to as the *restraining forces* (1948).

In the early 1990s, Elliott (1991) was influential in promoting action research and for his definition of action research as “the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it” (p. 69). Mills (2000) believed that action research “has the potential to be a powerful agent of educational change” (p. v) as it contributes to the development of teacher dispositions that embrace “action, progress, and reform” (p. v). Becoming skilled in action research is an avenue to enhancing personal and professional growth. Learning to plan, execute, analyse, and report on data that have been collected in one’s classroom gives teachers a sense of power and authority to speak confidently using data about what they once only thought to be true (Kur, DePorres & Westrup, 2008).

**Empowerment and Continuous Improvement**
Action research empowers teachers and allows them to understand the benefits of evidence-based systematic inquiry (McMillan, 2008). Engaging in collaborative action research promotes an open atmosphere where all teachers are encouraged to question, openly ponder their teaching methods, take risks, and rely upon their colleagues for deep discourse that increases their understanding of the data (McMillan, 2008). Action research becomes the ultimate *reflection in action* when teachers examine their current practices and inquire deeply how their teaching can change for the better. Empowerment is also the theme of Mertler’s (2014) works on action research; he believes that teachers gain “an increased level of empowerment” and are “much more engaged with respect to what goes on in their own classroom as well as in their schools” (2014, p. 24). Action research aims to empower teachers by increasing their awareness of “obstructive elements within a particular context” (Koutsellini, 2008, p. 2). With the power to thoughtfully examine and then make changes in their practice teachers can move away from obstructive elements, such as ineffective practices, and begin to engage in educational practices that are based upon data that are fine-tuned to the needs of the students.
One of the most important aims of a 21st century teacher is to awaken in students a desire for lifelong learning. The need for individuals to engage in habits of lifelong learning has become an important aspect of the educational system, as well as of the teaching profession. When teachers model the need for continuous growth and professional improvement, students are exposed to reflection in action – a stance that requires one to critically evaluate one’s practice in order to be nimble in the approach to meeting daily needs of individual students. Continuous growth for improvement requires teachers to scrutinize their pedagogical work and plan for their professional development in a way that meets the specific needs of their students, which requires teachers to be vulnerable, open to feedback, and willing to both cooperate and collaborate in their professional environments. Teachers who engage in action research model the quality of life-long learning as they commit to the kind of scrutiny of their practices that indicates a desire to continually develop insights about their practices and adjust their teaching to improve student learning.

The best teacher-researchers believe that the work environment is a place of continuous learning where teaching becomes the fuel for inquiry. In effect, classrooms become teachers’ laboratories, where curiosity, a desire to improve, and a willingness to rock the boat are the characteristics that fuel their passion to improve practices. The recent push for data-driven instruction demands that teachers examine their practices as well as the performance of their students in order to gain evidence that teaching and learning are at expected levels (McMillan, 2008). Action research allows educators to create new options or new approaches to old problems by working with and through others to facilitate the change.

The past thirty or more years have seen pressure from multiple angles to improve education. Student achievement data is scrutinized by all segments of the public, and many look for someone to blame for the failures that are identified as a result of this high-stakes data. Rather than place blame, would it not be more productive to empower those at the heart of education, the teachers themselves, to critically examine their practices in an ongoing fashion as part of their continuous model of self-improvement? Action research “offers a process by which current practice can be changed toward better practice” (Mertler, 2014, p. 14). Through action research, teachers are charged with the goal of life-long learning, critical reflection, and improved professional practice with the goal of increasing student learning (Mertler, 2014).

**METHODS**

Educational Action Research has its foundations in the writings of Dewey (1933), whose beliefs have provided a foundation that teachers should become involved in community problem-solving. Action researchers in education are committed to the improvement of educational institutions, and focus on development of curriculum, professional development, and applying learning in a social context.

This study was modeled on the work of Elliott (1991), who in the 1990s expanded and transformed the notion of action research when he posited that “the purpose of the action
research was to improve students’ education’ (Somekh & Zeichner, 2009, p. 8). In the current educational arena where data driven instruction plays an important role in professional practice, university-based action researchers often work with primary and secondary school teachers in an effort to promote the practice of professional growth by endorsing action research as a means of teacher professional development and student growth.

This proactive action research study endeavoured to study the practice of teaching the merits of action research as a form of continuous quality improvement to a group of teachers who were enrolled in a master’s degree program by collecting survey data from the teachers after their graduation. In the Introductory Action Research course, the researcher purposefully included lessons in the early stages of the course to increase the teachers’ understanding of the aims of action research as well as speaking to the process of developing a research persona. Carr and Kemmis (1986) describe two separate goals of action research that include improvement and involvement. The researcher proactively taught about improvement in practice, improvement in one’s understanding of practice, and the overall improvement that can result in teachers’ situations as a result of engaging in action research. Subsequent lessons engaged learners in reflective work to address the development of the research persona, or the skills and dispositions that create the foundation for the development of inquiry as a stance.

The primary goal for this study was to determine the extent to which the respondents might utilize action research in their practices as a tool for continuous professional growth. Specifically, the researcher examined four teacher practices including modelling a commitment to lifelong learning, engaging in action research as a form of professional development, teachers’ likelihood to engage in professional risk-taking, and their probabilities to consider a leadership role in their schools or districts in the near future. The data that were gathered were intended to contribute to an analysis of teaching practices in an Introductory Action Research course as a means of measuring the impact of specific lessons on the future practices of the enrolled students.

The teachers who responded to the survey were 186 former graduate students who had completed a Master of Arts in Education within the past two years at a small, Midwestern university in the United States. They were all currently practicing teachers who had completed their master’s degree in a part-time program while serving as full-time educators in the PK-16 field of education. The overwhelming majority of the respondents (84%) were female, and the largest group reported that they had been teaching between four and six years (nearly 38%), followed closely by 33% who stated that they had been teaching for more than ten years. Over 20 percent of the teachers who participated in the study had been teaching between seven and ten years, and the smallest percentage of the participants had been teaching between one and three years (6.7%).

In terms of the ages of their students, 38% of the respondents taught students in the PK-second grade range, 33% taught third to fifth grade students, 17% were currently teaching 6-8th grade students, 10% were high school teachers, and 2% were employed in a post-
secondary setting. The students resided in one of three states in the Upper Midwest of the United States including Wisconsin, Iowa, and Minnesota, and attended classes during the academic year in a weekend format and during the summer months in a daytime format.

After completing the Master of Arts in Education program graduates received an email that requested their participation in a study to examine the impact of action research on future practices. Surveys were distributed via an email link to Survey Monkey. Completion of the survey was optional and results were kept confidential. The participants could discontinue the survey at any time. The questions that comprised the survey were designed to gather data regarding how graduates of a Master of Arts in Education program perceived action research as part of their professional growth after the completion of the degree.

**RESULTS**

Emily Calhoun once defined action research by proposing the following: “Let’s study what’s happening at our school and decide how to make it a better place” (1994, 11). Because real, grassroots change often grows best out of specific needs in teachers’ classrooms, the researcher promoted the use of action research as a means of continuous professional growth over years of teaching research at the graduate level. Curiosity drove the desire to know how graduates perceived the importance of action research as a form of professional growth after completing their graduate work.

**Commitment to Continuous Growth**

As one measure of teachers’ thoughts regarding their use of action research as a commitment to continuous growth, the respondents to the survey were asked to reflect upon the *extent* to which they modelled a commitment to learning for continuous professional growth as a teacher. Figure 1 displays the results of that question.

In addition to the Likert Scale data that were collected, respondents were asked to share examples of how they have modelled continuous improvement. The major themes that emerged from their responses included (a) taking classes; (b) reading professional journals/books; (c) participating in professional development opportunities; (d) engaging in curriculum development; and (e) sharing new ideas, and (f) engaging in action research. Teachers spoke about the importance of modelling this love of learning with their students. One wrote, “I talk to my students about how I am a learner like they are. I tell them about the professional learning activities I engage in”. Another teacher shared that s/he stayed current by “reflecting on my own practices as to what worked and what didn’t and how to change it”.

These data, both quantitative and qualitative, suggested that the majority of the respondents regularly (either always or to a great extent) valued being a model for their students regarding the importance of continuous learning. Teachers’ belief in the power of learning across the ages is a first step in their development of the practice of action research as a means of professional growth and improvement.
Engaging in Action Research as a Form of Professional Development

The second area of curiosity reflected a desire to know more about teachers’ engagement in professional self-study as a result of their action research training. Self-study can be defined as studying one’s practice by systematically examining what goes on in a classroom, and determining what changes might result in improvement of practice. Survey respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement: Examining my teaching using action research enhances my own professional development. This statement probed respondents’ beliefs that action research could be utilized to customize their professional development and guide their professional growth. The results for the 186 students who answered the question can be seen in Figure 2.

Over three-fourths of the teachers responded that they believed that engaging in action research enhanced their professional growth in a very individual sense. The ability to reflect upon and use action research in one’s classroom provided these teachers with knowledge about their practices that enhanced their professional development.

Teachers’ Likelihood to Continue to Use Action Research

The commitment to be an action researcher in one’s classroom results when teachers are committed to improving their pedagogy, are informed and open to other points of view, and are willing to develop intentional actions to investigate dilemmas that occur as a part of teaching. The respondents were asked to think about the likelihood that they would continue to utilize action research as a means of creating new options or developing new approaches to old problems. The results for the 186 teachers who responded to the question can be seen in Figure 3.
As a follow-up question to the previous question about the likelihood to engage in action research, participants were asked to share if they were currently involved in an action research study. Forty-eight of the respondents (25%) indicated that they were currently engaged in action research. The responses were coded and themed with the following results: 18 teachers responded that they were engaged in an action research study of some aspect of their literacy teaching, 16 teachers specifically indicated that they were engaged in action research to study the teaching of an aspect of writing, and four teachers indicated that they were engaged in action research regarding an aspect of teaching math. Other topics that were mentioned were flipped content, student driven groups, engagement, formative assessment, active learning strategies, and co-teaching.

**Figure 2. Using action research enhances my professional development.**

Although teachers reported a variety of ways that they were currently utilizing action research, less than half of the respondents indicated that they were either very likely or likely to do so in the future. This opens a door to future research and an opportunity to explore ways to increase teachers’ likelihood to regularly engage in the practice of action research as a part of their professional lives.
Questioning Assumptions and Taking Professional Risk

The researcher was interested to know from this group of graduates of a master’s degree program how likely they were to question underlying assumptions and to take professional risks. Strong teachers with a desire to continuously improve their practices are typically more willing to approach professional risks as strategies for developing new ways of teaching in an effort to drive student learning. Teachers who believe in the value of professional risk-taking may view action research as a method of negotiating problems to promote continuous quality improvement of their teaching. Teachers who are most willing to take professional risks must possess the confidence to look at change as a pathway to improvement. The aggregated results for the 186 respondents who shared their likelihood to question underlying assumptions and take professional risks can be seen in Figure 4.

The respondents were asked to elaborate on their inclinations to take professional risks; their responses included quotes that supported this trend. One teacher reported, “I have always questioned my teaching, but with the master’s degree completed, I feel like I am evaluating more of my teaching processes. My confidence in my abilities has been boosted since completing my action research project”. Another respondent shared, “One year ago, I eliminated homework; then I got rid of all multiple choice tests; this year, I have fully implemented an online teaching curriculum”. A teacher of foreign language stated, “I now
have the tools to complete classroom research to find best practices that may lead me to better ways of teaching language”. Another graduate student wrote, “As a member of a local school board, I recently challenged the continuation of some traditional classes that were maintaining the status quo. I was trying to ‘rock the boat’ by challenging the district to make necessary curriculum changes that could take... programs in quite a different direction”. The student concluded that, although outvoted, “I'll keep trying to discover new options and find solutions that would be best for all high school students in the district”.

**Figure 4. How likely are you to question assumptions and take professional risks?**

Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014) shared that teachers’ use of action research helps to situate them as active participants in shaping the direction of the profession. The responses indicated to the researcher that less than fifty percent of the teacher-respondents were likely to challenge the status quo as a way to become actively involved in shaping educational change, with some groups being more likely than others (see DISCUSSION).

**Aspirations for Future Leadership Roles in Education**

Finally, teachers who responded to the survey were asked about the likelihood that they might consider taking on a leadership role in their professional settings. Expert leadership and strong teachers are often touted as necessary partners to develop schools where student learning is at its best. When teachers develop the habits of action research the results can be transformational. The confidence that can result from analysing data collected in one’s practice and making informed decisions about one’s teaching practices
may lead teachers to consider taking on additional leadership roles within their schools. Respondents were asked to report how likely they were to take on roles of leadership within the next two years. The results can be seen in Figure 5.

![Figure 5. How likely will you take on leadership opportunities in the next two years?](chart.png)

Respondents were asked to elaborate on their plans to pursue leadership roles in the future. Several respondents shared that they had already taken the next step, and were now in a leadership role. One graduate shared, “In my new position as Intervention Coach . . . I present to staff and facilitate meetings. I feel that it will be important to back up the information in my presentations with research, which I now have the know-how to find and evaluate for reliability”. Another student stated, “I want to be a principal or a director of special education in order to lead others to greatness”. Finally, a student spoke specifically to the strength of the data that resulted from the action research study that he/she completed as part of the Master of Arts program. This teacher shared, “My district is in the middle of a three-year process of going one-to-one with technology. My results that indicated how technology affects reading are very applicable as part of the process”.

Although not directly related to taking on future leadership roles, developing the habits of self-reflection, professional inquiry, challenging the status quo, and continuous growth certainly contribute to the kind of individual who might be well-suited to take on additional leadership roles in a school or district. The results indicated that half of this group of
teachers had considered the possibility of taking on additional leadership roles in the near future. Engaging in action research promotes a kind of professional confidence that allows teachers to recognize their abilities to affect change in the system of education.

**DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this mostly quantitative study was to explore from the standpoint of former students how the specific information about and experiences of engaging in action research as part of the requirements of a Master of Arts in Education program impacted specific current teaching practices. Each of the research questions was posed for a reason that contributed to the purpose for the study. Together, the data from the four research sub-questions provided the individual pieces of a puzzle that created a picture of how one group of first-time action researchers went on to utilize skills to improve their practices and continue on a path of lifelong learning for continuous professional growth.

**Modelling a Commitment to Lifelong Learning and Continuous Improvement**

The aggregate data indicated that over 90% of those who responded to this question believed that they modelled at least to a moderate extent a commitment to learning for continuous professional growth as a teacher. Mayhew, Wolniak, and Pascarella (2008) reported that the use of teaching practices that encourage students to reflect, put things into perspective, and then share these with other teachers were significant in developing a commitment to lifelong learning. More specifically, for the teachers who participated in the present study, those with the most longevity (more than ten years teaching) were more likely to model continuous growth (98%) than those with less experience; those teachers who taught at the post-secondary level unanimously reported the behaviour, and females (94%) were more likely than males (84%) to model a commitment to lifelong learning for continuous professional growth.

**Engaging in Professional Self-study**

Three of the survey questions drew upon graduates’ thoughts regarding the use of action research in their practice both in theory and in reality. The first of the questions asked respondents to reflect on how examining their teaching using action research enhanced their professional development. The Commission on Effective Teachers and Teaching (2011) stated, “We envision a profession in which teachers are the leading voice in determining professional standards, developing assessments, structuring learning experiences, designing and delivering professional development” (p. 3). The researcher anticipated that by empowering teachers in this Introduction to Action Research course to use action research as a commitment to professional self-study, they would become a part of this leading voice.

Over 80% of the teachers who answered this theoretical question responded that they agreed to a great extent that the practice of action research put into motion the plan for ownership of one’s professional development as a teacher. Teachers with more than ten years of teaching experience were the most likely to report that they utilized action research as a form of professional development (84%), and those who taught students in the early primary grades (K-2) were more likely than teachers of any other level of
students (90%) to support action research in this way. Female respondents were more likely (86%) to see action research as a form of professional development than their male counterparts (60%). Instilling in teachers the need to critically assess the effectiveness of their pedagogy may pave the path to change by planting the seeds of growth.

A second question about the use of action research was aimed specifically at knowing if graduates would continue to utilize action research as a means of creating new options or developing new approaches to old problems. Fifty percent of those who responded indicated that they were likely or very likely to utilize action research in this way. Those teachers who had the most longevity were again the most likely to again engage in action research (51%) in the future, while those teachers whose students were in grades K-2 were again the most likely (57%) to report that they would again engage in action research. Female respondents were slightly more likely (47%) than their male counterparts (37%) to utilize action research as a form of professional development. The confidence and empowerment that can be gained from a single action research study has the ability to propel teachers to behave in ways that they may not have in the past which leads to the next of the research questions.

The final question in this theme asked those who were currently engaging in action research to elaborate on the nature of their current studies. One quarter of the respondents shared a specific action research study that they were engaged in at the time, with the largest group reporting to study the teaching of literacy. Others reported engaging in action research on classroom climate, teaching writing, active learning, and a variety of other topics.

**Questioning Assumptions and Taking Professional Risk**

The researcher was curious to know if teachers were likely to take the professional risks that allowed them to move from the comfort of their current practices to a place where they might embrace change. Teachers were asked to respond to a question regarding the likelihood to question underlying assumptions and take professional risks that often paved the way for change.

In response to this question, nearly half of those who responded (48%) reported that they were either ‘very likely’ or ‘likely’ to question underlying assumptions in their professional practice. Less than half of the respondents were likely to question professional assumptions; however, there were interesting findings within the disaggregated data. The group of teachers with the longest teaching history, more than ten years, was the most likely to take professional risks (60%). The group of respondents, who were teaching at the post-secondary, though a very small group, were unanimously likely to take professional risk; in contrast, only about 50% of each of the groups at the K-12 levels indicated that they were likely or very likely to take professional risks. Unlike the previous questions, when asked about taking professional risks, the male respondents (60%) were more likely than the female respondents (45%) to report that they would take professional risks. The likelihood of those at the post-secondary level and males overall to engage in professional risk were two of the more interesting findings from the data.
Aspirations for Future Leadership Roles in Education

Finally, the researcher was interested to know if respondents had developed to a point in their professional lives that they would consider an opportunity to engage in a teacher leadership role in their building or district within the next two years. In a 2009 study, Bradley-Levine, Smith and Carr looked at both the process and the impact of first time action researchers who were enrolled in a master’s level course. Their findings indicated that for the twelve teachers who participated in the study, confidence increased during the time that the study was conducted.

The results from the 186 respondents indicated that overall 60% of the teachers were either likely or very likely to take on a leadership role in their building or district within two years. The teachers who were in the group with the most experience were the most likely (64%) to take on roles of leadership. Teachers who instructed students in grades six through eight reported that they were more likely (74%) to assume a leadership role than those who taught students at other levels, and males (73%) were more likely than females (57%) to consider a leadership position in their schools or districts. The data that supported the males’ desire to take on roles of leadership in the school or district should not be surprising as leadership roles in education have historically attracted more males, but was interesting, nonetheless.

CONCLUSION

Reeves (2010) very simply stated what is needed in order to guide teachers in their use of data-driven instruction as follows: “If we expect teachers and school leaders to improve professional practices and decision making, then we must first give them different knowledge and skills than they have received in the past” (p. 15). Teachers need to be taught and have opportunities to practice in order to develop the dispositional traits, such as confidence and risk-taking that would support the kind of professional development for change that builds strong teachers. Teachers who engage in action research are encouraged to reflect upon their professional problems, their professional challenges, to ‘wallow in their questions’, and to discuss their questions with peers, classmates, and their faculty members. Teacher-researchers courageously examine their practices to assess the strength of their pedagogies in an effort to maximize student growth.

As a result of the data that were collected for the study, the researcher will examine the specific lessons for the course that address the goals, benefits, and reasons to engage in action research as a part of the continuous improvement process in hopes to strengthen students’ awareness and commitment to the practice of action research in their classrooms or schools.

This study is truly the beginning of on-going inquiry regarding the values and behaviours of students who complete the master’s degree in education programs at this small university. The data that are collected will add to a fund of data from which future questions can be answered. Toyama (2015) recently stated that “Good pedagogy is a delicate dance, with instructors sometimes leading, sometimes following, as in the hope that the student will
find her own beat so that she can go solo (p. 64). This researcher will continue to promote the practice of action research as one was to learn the dance and actively participate in the game that is called continuous improvement.

**REFERENCE**


**Biographical note:**

Dr. Susan Hughes is an Assistant Professor in the Graduate School of Education at Viterbo University located in La Crosse, Wisconsin. She has held this position for the past four years. Prior to serving in this capacity, she was a teacher in the K-12 schools for 30 years. Her research interests include classroom best practices for teachers, assessment and data driven instruction, and teaching scholarly writing at the graduate level.