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What is This?

Empowering parents through an action research parenting program

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Abstract

The goal of this article is to consider action research with parents and specifically describe the experience of two parents during a parenting program that employed an action research framework and consider how action research empowered them. Data collection lasted for 24 weeks and included reflection commentaries, home journals, email communication, action plan writing, a conversational group interview, and artefacts. The two case studies exemplify how the methodology of action research as the framework of a parenting program empowered them to develop their own understanding of parenting, to generate theory and develop skills to cope with parenting issues. These cases include: the lone scientist who reflects on her own practice and re-conceptualizes her parenting and the team player who considers the playgroup as a learning community in which she learns from others. This study, especially the in-depth analysis of the two parents, highlights that action research is a promising component of parent education programs because it provides parents with the space and flexibility to be agents of their own learning and development; a framework which others can build on to enrich the action research and early education literature.

Introduction

As an early childhood researcher and a mother I am often involved in trying to theoretically and empirically understand and develop the skills that will help me

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and other parents cope with parenthood. It is vital to help parents realize that parenting needs systematic, well thought and planned actions, conscious understanding of one's self and the child's needs. These are prerequisite to having appropriate expectations of one's self, the child and the experience as a whole. Being dedicated to supporting research that enriches such knowledge, I created a parent–child playgroup at the Early Childhood Research Lab with the goal of employing action research with parents.

Literature review

Parent education programs

Although there is a rich body of literature on the process of action research much of it focuses on teachers and how to improve classroom practice. There is limited research on using action research with parents, particularly within the framework of parent education.

Parent education is a process during which parents are 'educated' to support their children's development and learning, to enhance their parenting identity and strengthen their parent–child relationship (Croake & Glover, 1977). During any parenting program specific activities are developed to enhance parents' knowledge, skills and strategies to support their children and deal with specific issues (e.g. discipline, social development). These activities are structured differently according to the goals and expectations of every program. For example, a parenting program may be led by an individual, a parent or a parent-teacher specialist during individual or group meetings (Mahoney et al., 1999). The goals set to be accomplished, as well as the structure and the length of the program, are essential aspects taken into consideration in developing and/or assessing a parent program (McConnel, Breitkreuz, & Savage, 2012). Different research projects investigate either the development or effectiveness of programs for parents such as parent intervention programs, therapy sessions, family support programs, psycho-educational programs, etc. Pearl (1997), for example, talks about the reasons why some programs for parents of gifted children work and others do not. He provides a framework of the necessary variables that can make a parent program effective, making reference to the following: content relevancy, teaching techniques and teacher characteristics. Thus, in developing a program it is important to identify the elements which seem to most effectively address the needs of the parents.

A successful example of a parenting program is the Stop, Think, Act, Respond (STAR) parenting program (Fox & Fox, 1992). It aimed to help parents think and respond to their children's challenging behaviour rather than emotionally react to it. The outcomes were positive since there was evidence of parents using less verbal and corporal punishment and their interaction with their children improved. Furthermore, the specific program is used in other studies (e.g. Nicholson, Anderson, Fox, & Brenner, 2002) and revealed positive outcomes.

Action research and education

As discussed above, the attempt to educate parents can take different forms. The aim of this study was to create space for parents to be educated 'systematically and carefully using techniques of research' (Ferrance, 2000, p. 1). To this end action research is considered as 'a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview...' (Reason & Bradbury, 2009, p. 1). The process described above was used as an alternative way of approaching parent education. 'Implicit in the term action research is the idea that teachers [parents in this case] will begin a cycle of posing questions, gathering data, reflecting and deciding on a course of action' (Ferrance, 2000, p. 2), with the ultimate goal of improving their parenting skills and strategies for the best interest of their children and themselves. The author's stance is that this research approach can be fundamental for a parent education program because 'it seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people...' (Reason & Bradbury, 2009, p. 1). The framework of this study is action research because, as stated above it provides space that 'respects and dignifies the role of parents and...[does] not imply that parents are deficient in any way' (Mahoney et al., 1999, p. 136). It also 'provide[s] people with the support and resources to do things in ways that will fit their own cultural context and their own lifestyles' (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2003, p. 14). The specific framework views parents as co-constructors of their own learning and empowers them to act based on their own understanding, knowledge, skills and family milieu. For the purposes of this study, parent education is seen as providing parents with the opportunity to reflect on their own way of approaching specific essential learning and development issues in a methodical way, through the action research phases of inquiry. And these phases can better take place within a social support system (Pfannenstiell & Seltzer, 1989) with peers as it provides space for sharing parenting experiences and practices. 'Action research is simultaneously an individual and collaborative project' (Price, 2001, p. 44). It is a 'powerful tool for change and improvement' (Cohen, Mannion, & Morrison, 2001, p. 226). The goal was to involve parents and provide them with the space and time to 'plan, act, observe and reflect more carefully, more systematically and more rigorously than one usually does in everyday life' (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1992, p. 10). Therefore, the program was structured in such a way that parents were encouraged to follow the steps of action research and were supported to understand their practice: the whys, the hows and the potential changes. There is a body of literature on the process of action research and education and this study is such an example providing an emphasis on parents.

The goal of this study was to investigate the following research questions:

1. How do parents describe their experience during a parenting program with an action research framework?

2. In what ways, if any, does action research empower them during the specific program?

For this article, I will focus on two of the parents in order to provide an in depth description of their experience (Yin, 2009) and illustrate their individuality and complexity. Case studies are used in 'refining theory and suggesting complexities for further investigation' (Stake, 2005, p. 448); in this study the two cases are employed to examine the potential of action research as a tool for the parent education field.

Methodology

Research coordinator's stance

My goal as the coordinator of the program was to provide opportunities for parents to develop skills to observe, reflect, plan, implement and assess and not provide them with answers to specific questions in reference to development and learning, as the expert. The action research framework was chosen because it can help parents develop the above-mentioned skills which can help them handle their issues/problems in a more scientific way and not passively implement other people's parenting 'recipes'. These skills, of course, are those that any action researcher should have in order to follow the process of action research: identifying the problem, action planning, implementation and assessment. Thus, I considered the parents as action researchers and supported them in going through every step of the action research process.

The parent as an action researcher

The program activities were organized around an action research framework, in which the parents assumed the role of action researchers. Participation in the program involved parents in thinking, planning and executing actions which would help better understand and potentially change their practice in relation to a specific issue of their child's development. The parents in the role of the researcher identified an issue they considered problematic in their children's behaviour and then observed and collected information on the issue for an extended period of time to ascertain the detection of actual patterns of behaviour rather than generalized impressions of behaviour. Once such patterns were identified, the parents used this data as a way to understand the child and her behaviour and consider ways of addressing the issue. Each parent was guided to set up an action plan, which involved different actions that related to the behaviour of the child or the parent. After going through the process of writing down their ideas as to how to deal with the problem and creating an action plan, the parent had to implement these actions, record the outcomes, consider their impact and reflect.

Description of the program

A parent–child playgroup program titled 'Interaction and Learning: Parent–Child Play Group (Action Research Process)' was focused on both parents and their children. During the program parents and children interacted and played freely using different materials and toys. Also parents were encouraged and guided by the researcher to consider and discuss various parenting issues during the time when the children were playing on their own. Specifically, at every session each mother was welcomed to share her experience with her child, her thoughts in terms of the issue they had been asked to consider at home and their potential actions. The program was designed to guide parents to consider essential issues that refer to the development of their children and their parenting approaches through action research (e.g. observing and scaffolding children's social skills, problem solving, language) and when necessary the research coordinator provided the necessary readings/information based on the parents' queries (e.g. enhancing my child's language or social development). The detailed process of the program is described in the Appendix Table 1.

Environment set-up

The meetings took place at the Early Childhood Research Centre of the Department of Education which provides a space set up similar to an early childhood classroom. Before each meeting the research coordinator set up the room providing multiple opportunities for children to be involved in free play using materials that were appropriate for their age. Also, if children showed interest in specific toys or activities during a particular session, these were used again in the next session. For instance, most children seemed to be very interested in the kitchen area and played with the kitchenware repeatedly, therefore were part of the set up every time. Also, the research coordinator reviewed the parents' action plans and offered specific curricular choices that matched and facilitated their objectives (for example, an area where books and pictures were displayed was included for the mother who wanted to focus on her child's language development). The goal of the set up was to help children and parents feel comfortable to explore and experiment.

Participants

A call for study participants was posted on the lab's website and was advertised on the university's weekly communication letter which goes to all university employees and students. There were four participants who responded to this call. They were all mothers and none of them had a particular issue with their child but wanted to enrich their parenting knowledge. For this article, I will focus on two of them, those who attended most of the sessions, who had a similar background and their experience was distinct in relation to the program.

Apart from the research coordinator who set up the physical environment, planned and coordinated the program activities, provided the necessary readings/information based on the parents' questions, moderated the group discussions and collected data, there were also two early childhood (EC) undergraduate students in their fourth semester of studies who signed up as volunteers to help with the program. The group met once every week for one and a half hours for eight weeks for three consecutive semesters. Every parent–child dyad had to participate for at least six times each semester to be included in the study.

Data collection

The data collection methods employed focused on the parents' individually or as a group. Thus, individual data sources included: a reflection commentary, home journal, email communication with the research coordinator, action plan writings and artefacts. Group data sources were group discussions and a conversational group interview.

Reflective commentary. Data were collected weekly either at the meetings or through email. During each session we had open and guided discussions and parents had to respond to open-ended questions at the beginning or at the end of the session in the form of a reflection commentary. They were encouraged to share their ideas with each other and the research coordinator while the children were playing. Some of the issues discussed and explored during the sessions involved: a) playing with my child (observing, listening, participating, encouraging and reflecting), b) the action research process (the phases they had to follow), c) strategies of helping children develop self-control, d) reflecting on the data recorded in the home journal and e) overall discussion on action plans and their implementation. These were chosen by the research coordinator guided by the aims of the program.

Home journal. A home journal was used to begin the process of action research and keep track of the mothers' action plan implementation. In their home journal, for example, they were guided to record changes in the child's behaviour and their actions at home before and after their action plan implementation.

Electronic communication. Parents had constant communication via email with the research coordinator especially during their action plan writing process and their reflection process. The research coordinator supported the mothers to write and revise their action plans by giving them feedback and suggestions and these were another data source for this study.

Conversational group interview. By the end of the program a conversational group interview was conducted with all the parents without their children present. We had a conversation about their experience during the program and especially focused on the process of action research. To facilitate reflection and discussion,

during this meeting the parents were asked to consider their experience by participating in different activities such as continuing the sentence: 'I am concerned about . . .' referring to issues which they attempted to work on during the program. Then, the evaluation tree (Evaluation Trusts Outcome, 2009, http://www.evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk/), a visual tool aiming to facilitate reflection, was provided to each parent in order to have them explore their feelings in terms of their experience during the program. On the tree there are different human figures in different states of mind; for example, one clinging to a branch; one on the top of the tree, one burning, etc. Each parent had to colour in a human figure on the diagram to show which one represented how they felt in reference to the program. Finally, the mothers were provided with drawing/colouring/gluing materials to convey their experience creatively onto paper and then talk about their creation.

Data analysis

The data analysis process involved two steps.

1. The research questions provided the data analysis framework. This framework involved two tenets: a) action research as a framework for a parenting program and b) the potential empowering aspects of such a program.
2. Data from all sources (e.g. reflective commentaries, home journals) was clustered under each tenet and commonalities were noted. Through this process specific themes under each tenet were noted. The themes included: a) reflection-observation, consistency and action plan writing/implementing under the tenet of the action research process as framework for a parenting program; and b) self-efficacy and parent learning community under the tenet of empowering aspects of the parenting program.

The analysis conducted by the research coordinator and the theme development were discussed with the participants during the conversational group interview. The participants had the opportunity to provide specific examples that related to the themes (e.g. reflection, action plan writing) provided by the research coordinator mainly agreeing with the analysis. The researcher chose to focus only on the experiences of two parent participants that were mostly unique, distinctive with intricate complexities. When the research coordinator begun to sketch the case of the two parents she provided them with a written report and asked them to review the information on their case. Both parents sent back a slightly revised report providing additional details of their experience. The parents were also asked to consider in what ways the action research process supported them to change their practices and thus develop a revised parenting theory. They provided an electronic response where they used examples to highlight how action research led them to practical changes and resulted in a more theoretical understanding of their identity and role as parents. These comments were in line with the case the research coordinator was developing for each one but provided more depth.

Findings

Data analysis indicated that there were common reactions to the use of action research as a framework for the parenting program. Nevertheless, the story of two of the parents is exemplified to provide a more nuanced perspective of how the program was experienced by participants and how it empowered them as parents. The cases of Betty and Chris signify two distinct profiles as they experienced the process of action research utilizing their personal experiences, expectations, knowledge and needs. The case of Betty represents a lone scientist, who went through the process of action research as an individual; focusing on herself, going through 'a self-reflective spiral of planning, acting, reflecting, critically analyzing her actions, and theorizing her parenting' (Cohen et al., 2001, p. 229). Conversely, the case of Chris represents a team player, whose self-reflection and critical analysis of her practice is deeply grounded in the parent learning community that was created through the parent–child playgroup.

Betty: An introspective reflector

Betty was the mother of twins, a boy and a girl. She attended the program with both of her 13-month-old children. She has a Bachelors and a Masters Degree in Information Technology (IT) and works full time at the IT department of a bank.

Betty had a hard time coping with two newborns but her partner and family support helped her cope with the daily issues. She was excited that she had her children but was not really prepared for the parenthood journey even though she read about parenting and dealing with specific child-rearing questions. Betty was very excited to be part of the program since she felt she had a lot to learn regarding parenting and she had several issues she believed that she needed to explore. The issues she considered working on involved helping her children cope with stranger anxiety, preparing them for childcare and working on their positive behaviour while eliminating punishment and threats on her part.

Action research as a framework for a parenting program. During the program Betty was asked to consider the action research framework of the program and in reflecting on how the specific process helped her, the following realizations were drawn: a) having to define the issue helped her identify and clarify the problem: 'I had not realized that there was a problem I thought the children acted that way due to their personality (they were shy that's why they cried when we went somewhere)'; b) any situation can be improved based on the right action: 'The process of daily recording and trying to understand why children behave a certain way made me recognize the possible issues one can face with children and think of possible solutions'; c) her own behaviour changes can bring about the desired results: 'It is not my children's fault but the way I handle the situation, with an improvement in my approach the children change their behaviour.'

More specifically, in the process of reflecting on her experience during the program Betty commented how the action research process helped her develop an action scheme to handle the issues she was encountering. This action scheme involved three stages; she would first try to understand why her children acted or reacted in specific ways, then she would consider her actions at the time and revise them, and finally in case these actions did not work, she would further think of her expectations of her children and thus revise her child-rearing again.

An example of a personal reflection quote which highlights this process is the following:

> I realized that I need to revise my action plan and find new ways of approaching the different issues. At this time I need to focus on finding an alternative to blackmail. I will try and think of children's logic and explain to them what they can and cannot do or find ways to distract their attention. Also I will try to find a way to control myself when I am tired and do not have the patience to cope with the children.

Empowering aspects of the action research parenting program. Betty started off with limited trust in potential changes since she believed that changing her children's behaviour was extremely difficult; this was the issue in her mind. Nevertheless, she persistently read the information given to her, asked questions and began to implement the action research process. The quality of Betty's experience was affected by variables such as children's health, her own state of mind, activities in which they were all involved, timing, etc. It is clear that such variables can side track the experience. In Betty's case, the fact that her children got sick affected her parenting practice and she was aware of the impact of this process. This vacillation is evident in Betty's comments below:

> Due to the fact that the children were sick, I let them do whatever they wanted without any comments thus ruined what I managed to build until now!

On the same note, Betty describes an example of struggling moments she was facing:

> Basically the method that works with my children is blackmailing and punishment. I do not like this method and would like to find another solution. Also, I am not sure how long this method will have results…

The experience unfolded positively and this gave Betty strength to become invested in and focus more deeply on the process. To her surprise, early on the children begun to change their behaviour in response to the new approaches she implemented in dealing with stranger anxiety. After one week of changing my own practice, the children changed their behaviour even for issues I did not expect they would change (e.g. Tania – her daughter – had begun to defend herself).

Betty was a parent who closely observed and considered everything that was discussed during our sessions and went through a process of intense self reflection. On the same positive note, she comments:

> This week I did not have negative reactions from the children. I think that what helped was that I was consistent with what I told them and what I did. When I say I will take the toy, I take it. Also, I try to control myself and always talk with a calm voice.

Overall though, and by the end of the program in an in-depth self-reflective mode Betty wrote:

> The most important thing that I have gained during the program was that I stopped feeling that I am the 'bad mom' who continuously punishes shouts and says 'No' to her children. I managed to find alternative ways to deal with the different situations and at the same time I realized that most of the times the way I respond depends on my mood and not on the children's actions. The children are not bad-behaved, it is my approach that's wrong.

In completing the evaluation tree to assess her experience and the point she had reached by the end of the program, Betty chose a human figure on the very top of the tree stating the following:

> I am at the very top because I do not feel a bad mom, which is very important to me. I might feel that I need more work but I feel good with myself.

Also Betty's creative response (Figure 1) in reference to how the program experience made her feel included a drawing with one circle in which there were two children, toys and an angry face and next to it an open semi-circle with the two children, toys and a happy face. In explaining this representation she stated that she used to think within rigid limits and this caused tension, anger and chaos. However, her experience empowered her to see things in a more open way and not stay within the limited frame of mind she had before taking part in the program. She added: 'The children are the same, the circle has opened.' Suggesting that it was her journey and that she learned to see things differently to understand and cope with the children's behaviours.

Chris: A team player

Chris was a mother of two and was pregnant with her third child during the final semester of the program. She participated in the program with her second child and only daughter who was 16 months old at the time. She has a Bachelors and a Masters Degree in IT and works full time at the IT department of a bank. Chris asserted that motherhood is one of her most powerful identities on different occasions and her whole life is set around her children. Chris read different books on
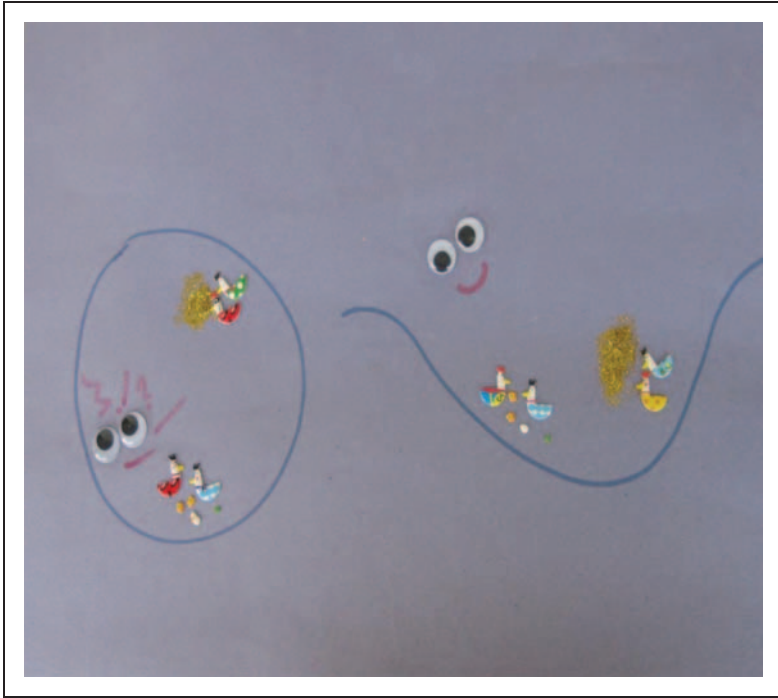
Figure 1. Bettys' creative expression of the program experience.

child development and on specific issues related to child-rearing (e.g. sleep, feeding) before she became a mother and while raising her children, thus continuously developing her own child rearing theories. In this frame of mind she attended the program to learn more and was very willing and open to new ideas and approaches.

During the sessions she shared her thought process on the issues she was facing in a very team-spirited manner and she was always very interested to hear the experiences of the other mothers and how they viewed her practices. During the program she talked about working on her child's language development –communication skills and tantrums. These were the issues that she decided she needed to work on. A very interesting question she asked during the process of action research was:

> How can I transfigure my child's tantrums into a learning experience during which my child and I will communicate and resolve the problem?

Action research as a framework for a parenting program. Chris maintained that participating in a structured program which compelled her to observe her child, reflect on

her actions, plan for changing her own and her child's behaviour was the best way to be consistent with her actions and to keep track of what she planned and implemented. Otherwise, she reported, she seemed to follow an approach which was less thought out and ignored essential aspects of the situation.

Chris asserted that the process of action research helped her in several ways such as: a) unfolding details of the issue at hand: 'The home journal helped me realize how long the tantrums last'; b) discovering commonalities with other mothers: 'Reflecting and locating my concern helped me realize that all the mothers faced common parenting issues'; c) realizing why some of her actions did not work: 'Having to write up an action plan helped me realize that my behaviour was not consistent and consistency could have been a way to handle tantrums' and d) recognizing that parenting is a continuous journey: 'Implementing the action plan made me realize that I had to rethink my actions.'

Action research as a framework for a parenting program. A question posed to all parents had to do with what their expectations were of their children. Chris was shocked by her own response to this question because her expectations were far from what the children's abilities at the specific age and from what the other mothers were expecting of their children. Later on, this question helped her see her parenting and especially the expectations she had for the issues in question in a very different way. In contrast to the lone scientist approach taken by Betty, Chris arrived at this breakthrough through a related discussion with the other mothers; this was not a personally derived realization but it arose through the team interaction.

> The discussion we had on expectations has been stuck in my mind. I realized that we can be very irrational when it comes to our expectations of our children. It especially helped me when I heard the expectations of the other mothers because until that time I had thought that my expectations were normal!

In a team-spirited frame of mind, Chris talked about how being part of a group of parents gave her strength, added new practical ideas she could accommodate and provided her with the space to be a better mother-observer because she was compelled to keep a record of her observations, think and rethink her action plan and act appropriately during the sessions. The program involved joint participation where parents played together (along with their children), thought together, talked together and problem-solved together. Facilitated and supported by the research coordinator, the program activities and especially the group discussions led to the development of a parent learning community (see Vescio et al. 2007) joined together by shared goals and challenges. Chris, particularly, highlighted the value of the parent learning community and made special reference to the process of reflecting and learning especially from each other. During the sessions and due to the structure of the program, she reflected on her own and others' parenting practices. She felt secure in the group and often smiled with relief when she heard each other's worries and exchanged approaches to specific challenges such as how

to handle a tantrum. 'Getting information from other parents or networking is an important aspect of any parenting program' (Pearl, 1997, p. 45).

Chris's choice on the evaluation tree was a human figure on the top who holds hands with three other human figures. In explaining her representation, Chris commented on how the team empowered her and enriched her experience:

> What helped me most was listening to your action plans, our discussions and comments to each other as well as the emails we exchanged. I wouldn't have had the patience to do this by myself.

During the group conversational interview, when creatively expressing, through a collage, the experience of the program using action research Chris once again mentioned the impact of the team. Her visual representation (Figure 2) included the group's participants, toys, two eyes on the side of the paper, gold leaves and

Figure 2. Chris' creative expression of the program experience.

gold dust dropping on everything starting from the top of the drawing. In explanation she said:

> This is me and Pia, Betty (other mothers), Gary, Tania, Melia and Melina (the children). We all begun with positive thinking...These are all the toys that the children played with and these are all the ideas we shared and basically they are gold, everyone's experience at the lab is like gold. It's like a veil of gold. I am not sure if I am watching all this with the hat of a scientist or if I am being watched during the experience.

Chris was a person who was very aware of her identity as a mother and was always in search of new approaches in order to ensure a quality relationship with her children. She was open and ready to listen to other parents' point of view and make comparisons. The process of action research provided her with the time and space to view issues from a distance. At the same time it made her feel like a researcher (e.g. data collection through the home journal) and provided her with the data to support or disprove her ideas, a challenging process one which she truly enjoyed.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to consider action research with parents and how it empowered them. The experience of two parents during a parenting program that employed an action research framework was exemplified.

Action research as the framework of a parenting program developed a zone of proximal development (ZPD) for parents. The ZPD is 'the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers' (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). In this case, the parents, due to their interactions with the research coordinator and each other (a parent learning community), scaffolded each other's understanding, reflection of parenting style and behaviour. This led to changes in what they considered inappropriate and/or ineffective in a systematic way allowing for a revised, or even a newly found parental theory to develop.

This study shows that a parenting program with an action research orientation has definite promise as an effective parent education/development tool. The findings suggest that participation in an action research-based program allowed the parents to view their parenting practices through a critical lens, to build a support community of co-explorers and co-learners, and to use their experiences as a tool for changing their parenting practices and for fashioning more confident empowered parenting identities.

It appears that an action research-based parenting program has the capacity to empower parents to critically analyze and reshape their parenting and to accomplish a sense of self efficacy. Self-efficacy is especially underlined by Betty who

clearly states that her journey led her to become a better mother. She affirms that she has reached a level that allows her to effectively judge and deal with parenting issues (Gross & Rocissano, 1988). This educative experience Betty had is consistent with prior research indicating that parenting programs that educate parents in managing their children's negative behaviour facilitate the process of feeling positive, empowered and enables them to cope with difficult situations (Gross, Fogg, & Tucker, 1995; Webster-Stratton, Kolpacoff, & Hollingsworth, 1988). Findings of this work reinforce prior research and suggest that the process of action research can help parents 'recognize those influences that had affected how they parent, and that increasing their self-understanding would allow them to make knowledgeable decisions, thereby increasing their power and ability to transform their current situation' (Kilgour & Fleming, 2000, p. 683). As evident in this study, a parenting program which involves action research as a process of learning to work on parenting issues provides space for successful experiences of understanding children, recognizing appropriate and inappropriate actions, and self-reflecting.

The program examined in this study, allowed the creation of a Parent Learning Community (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2007) as it involved critical reflection on daily issues parents faced with their children (Buysse, Sparkman, & Wesley, 2003) and provided opportunities for the parents to engage in their own learning and develop skills to support their child's development and learning through action research (Calhoun, 1994). Chris constantly commented on the impact of the group on her own development suggesting that the parent community provided her with the educative experience of sharing personal practices, listening to each other and also observing each other respond to their children (Kilgour & Fleming, 2000).

The aspect of reflection is one which forces parents to doubt and question themselves, their practices (Bjorn & Boulus, 2011). It also challenges their expectations and preconceived notions of their role (Weaver-Hightower, 2010) and provides the space where they become agents of their actions; compelling them to seize action and deconstruct reality. Through the examination of different episodes of their own and the children's behaviour, parents began to think about the potential actions they wanted to take, and were forced to uncover preconceived notions of the situation, in reference to how the child behaved, how they behaved and what the expectations of the situation at hand might be. This process of 'critical reflection has removed many of the illusions surrounding parenting, the family and children's behaviour' (Kilgour & Fleming, 2000, p. 688). Moreover, the fact that they were attending the specific program and had to comment on their actions forced them to consistently consider the issue at hand and constantly reflect thus making this process a daily routine. It 'enable[d] people [parents] to empower themselves through the construction of their own knowledge, in a process of action and reflection…' (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2009, p. 177).

Overall, this study demonstrated that action research provided a fruitful context for helping parents engage with parenting issues in the context of a learning community. Parenting programs can be effective if they accommodate the action

research process since through the specific process space and flexibility are provided for parents to be empowered as agents of their own learning and development.

Acknowledgement

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Author's biography

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Appendix Table 1. Detailed process of the program.

Research coordinator's actions (author)	Co-researchers' corresponding actions (parents)
Provided details of the action research process and discussed the steps to be followed along with specific examples.	Parents asked questions about the process and a discussion begun of potential issues to be explored.
Facilitated a discussion where parents begun to think of their own issue(s). Encouraged parents to write about an issue, forming a question to be considered and a draft action plan.	Identified issues they could potentially explore, clarified the problem(s) and wrote potential question(s) about their child's development, learning and/or their own actions. Prepared a draft action plan to implement.
There was electronic communication with exchange of ideas with each parent separately.	
Facilitated a discussion on the home journal episodes in the group and encouraged parents to rethink of their action plan.	Completed their home journal with episodes where the specific attitude of their child was observed and their own way of responding.
There was electronic communication with each parent providing suggestions on their action plan.	Revised their action plan considering the episodes observed. Revised further their action plan considering the coordinator's suggestions.
Parents were asked to complete the reflective commentary by considering the following questions:	Completed the reflective commentary answering specific questions that referred to their expectations of their child, practices and potential actions.
1 What are my expectations of my child (consider their developmental level, temperament and experiences)?	Implemented their action plan.
2 In what ways can I differentiate my child's behaviour?	
3 How do I control my feelings during those moments? Do my expectations relate to my actions? Think of consistency and negotiation avoidance.	
Parents were asked to relfect on the implementation of their action plan. They had to note down episodes describing	Parents completed their home journal with specific episodes related to the implementation of their action plan.
1 Changes in their own behavior and other people in the family	
2 Changes in the child's behaviour and action.	

(continued)

Appendix Table 1. Continued.

Research coordinator's actions (author)	Co-researchers' corresponding actions (parents)
Parents were encouraged to read their home journal episodes during their week's observations and reply to the following questions: • What is the biggest challenge in your child's behaviour and why? • Is there a pattern in your child's behaviour? • Why you think your child behaves like this? • Is there a pattern in your behaviour? • What have you tried and has worked? Once they replied to the questions each person shared with the group their answers and reflections. A discussion arose on commonalities, differences and potential changes in each one's action plan.	After revising their week's home journal and the specific episodes collected they completed a reflective commentary about challenges they faced with their child's behavior, pattents of behavior and successful actions.
Parents were asked to consider assessing and reflecting on their action plan and replying to the following questions: 1 Which changes were more successful? 2 How long did it take and when did the change begun? 3 How can I continue trying? 4 What works and what does not? Why? 5 How do you think of changing your action? What help do you need?	Completed a reflective commentary referring to their action plan and potential changes or furthe help they might need.
Facilitated a group conversational interview focusing on the action research process.	Parents reflected on their experience during the meetings of the program, the action research process and highlighted important aspects of the process.