“I am the Master of My Fate”: Professors and Teenagers Conduct Action Research on Student Motivation

It’s Thursday afternoon, and school has just ended as we arrive at Lincoln High School on Tacoma’s Eastside. The term “Eastside,” as known in town, signifies a number of cultural and social attributions – large concentrations of minoritized people, a place replete with the rich dynamics of urban life, economic challenges, growing social disparities, and high population mobility. Within the school, students have historically neither scored as well on standardized test measures nor received the same level of community support as other schools in the city. In other words, students at Lincoln have not always been served well by traditional or dominant school practices (Kohl, 1995).

As we walk into the school, there’s a richness of diversity, a cacophony of teenage noise, and frequent hallway traffic jams epitomizing a school after the bell rings. While most of the students quickly vacate the premises, a significant number remain for the Lincoln Center program. Lincoln Center is essentially a “school within a school” at the high school. Students commit to spending time after school each day and attend school on Saturday for further enrichment activities. Modeled after the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP Schools), Lincoln Center works with students to address many of the challenges they confront in their community and to prepare for post-secondary education.

On our way to Ms. Lavold’s room, we discuss our plans to work with 22 seniors on their senior research projects. Although we are near the end of the project, new issues continue to arise--issues often unforeseen but to be expected in the unpredictable environment of an American high school. Walking through the classroom door, we notice at the top of the white
board the phrase, “I’m the master of my fate.” It is this assertion that intrigues us – and partly what got us involved in this project in the first place.

**The Development of an Action Research Project: Background**

In the spring of 2010, Ms. Amy Lavold, an English teacher at Lincoln Center, sent out an invitation to local community members to attend a day of student presentations regarding the achievement gap and the work of Lincoln Center. Rather than hearing about the achievement gap from traditional sources, the focus of this presentation was to hear how students perceived the issue and to relate it back to their own development as learners. One of Ms. Lavold’s teaching goals is to have her students engage with authentic social issues and then communicate their thinking with real audiences.

As two invited community members (we are both white males; Ms. Lavold is a white female), we came and listened to the 10th graders’ presentations. They gave insightful comments on the achievement gap within Tacoma and on their own academic pathways. Students told stories of failing middle school and seeing little meaning to their schooling. However, when they came to Lincoln High School, they were provided with the option of Lincoln Center, a decision proving for some to have a positive effect on their academic motivation.

Following the presentation, one of us (Mike Hillis) commented to Ms. Lavold that students appeared to be undergoing a shift in their academic attitudes – a movement toward a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) with higher levels of academic attributions focused on effort rather than ability (Weiner, 1985). One year later, Ms. Lavold invited Professor Hillis to come to her class of juniors¹ and make a presentation on academic motivation and the research process. Looking toward their senior year, Ms. Lavold wanted to change the traditional “senior project”

¹ Lincoln Center teachers often “loop up” with their classes – so the junior class comprised roughly the same students from the year before.
for her Lincoln Center students and to explore the possibility of students conducting original research. Mike agreed and spent one day in May 2011 presenting information on student motivation and the basics of academic research. Importantly for this project, co-author Fred Hamel had also been involved at Lincoln Center for a number of years in a school-university partnership. Fred’s work has included professional development meetings with teachers to study issues of urban literacy, four years of observations in an English classroom, classroom visits with his university classes, and supporting teaching internships.

Following Mike’s presentation, Ms. Lavold asked about the possibility of university professors mentoring her students during their senior year on the research projects. Intrigued, we both (Mike Hillis and Fred Hamel) began to discuss how this project could build into an action research project, the type of project which is “a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes” (Reason & Bradbury, 2008, p. 1).

As we began the project, we recognized that action research is often conceptualized as something done by teachers and for teachers (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). In taking on this project, therefore, we were entering something that seemed less clear. While we certainly hoped that the project would contribute to the work of the teachers at Lincoln High School, we also recognized that the project could contribute both to our own work as teacher educators and to the students as beginning inquirers. To focus our work, we posed the following questions: 1) How do we involve teenagers directly in action research and do so in the context of a school-university collaboration? 2) What might an action research project between professors and teenage students contribute to the multiple stakeholders involved – i.e., students, teachers, and professors? 3) Why might we do it?
A Chronological Description

To explore the questions above, we provide below a chronological description of our efforts in conducting action research with 22 teenagers at Lincoln Center for one year. We describe four phases of our work, along with reflections on specific insights and challenges. A claim we hope to make is that such collaborative initiatives, as suggested by Margolin (2011), undertaken with students and teachers in schools, should be an essential part of what it means to be a teacher educator.

Early Phases

In the fall of 2011, the two of us met to discuss the work of mentoring Lincoln Center seniors, a racially diverse group of 7 boys and 15 girls who volunteered to complete their senior projects with us, building on the earlier work they had done on student motivation. As suggested earlier, we saw several benefits to this work. More specifically to the project, we hoped to:

- increase our understanding of student motivation in academic settings,
- enhance partnerships with a local school, where pre-service candidates sometimes teach, staying connected to teenagers, concrete school reforms, and teacher challenges,
- help Lincoln Center staff make sense of its goals and effects on students,
- help students engage in authentic action research, i.e., build understandings and skills with research, provide tools for intellectual empowerment, and meet one of the goals of Lincoln Center by helping students envision post-secondary academic work.

Our own preliminary discussions focused on the scope of the project, the specific information and skill development the students would need, and how to organize the work logistically across the year. Ms. Lavold suggested we meet with students twice a month for one hour each – using the Lincoln Center extended day time from 2:30 – 3:30pm (classes end at 2:30,
but Lincoln Center students are usually on site until 4:55pm). In the middle of October, we had our first meeting.

For our initial meeting with students, we had four primary goals. The first was to address the perceived distance between our roles as university professors and that of high school students. As Ms. Lavold commented, the students were initially daunted by the prospect of
working with us on a research project, and we hoped to assuage some of their fears. A second goal of the first day was to set out a calendar of the work to be completed. Prior to the meeting, and using our experience supporting college students through research projects, we mapped out a yearlong timeline backward – that is, from their final presentations to the initial stages of planning.

As Figure 1 illustrates, the planning consisted of five major stages: Development of research groups around questions, development of research proposals, gathering of data, synthesis of data, and completion and presentation of projects.

The third goal of our first session was question generation. After presenting the timeline, we revisited earlier work students had completed on student motivation from spring 2011, and we discussed the first step of conducting research: What do we want to know? We situated our initial inquiry around the concept of academic motivation and whether Lincoln Center was having an effect. From this sizeable proposition, we focused discussion on developing specific research questions. We structured the question-development phase around three primary criteria: 1) Researchers must care about the question, 2) Questions must be focused, and 3) Questions must be researchable and feasible. We asked students to brainstorm questions about motivation at Lincoln Center and to write their ideas on the white boards around the classroom. A significant number of questions were generated, and we found patterns that reflected four general areas: Lincoln Center programs, effects on students, role of teachers, and social context of the community.

We then moved to our final goal of the session: development of preliminary work groups. This part of the process was predicated on our first criterion for conducting research – researchers need to care about their question. Consequently, we asked students to put their names
on the board next to any question they found especially compelling. With some adjusting, this gave us a rough semblance of five potential groups. We assembled students in groups and provided them with homework for our next session: confirmation of group members, to develop and re-word a single focused research question, and to give a brief rationale for why their question was important (see Figure 2a for the assignment and Figure 2b for an example response).

LINCOLN CENTER SENIOR RESEARCH GROUP -- HOMEWORK FOR THURS. OCT 27th

For next time, work on finalizing your group’s research question. Talk it over with your group members. Make adjustments as needed.

Homework Task

For each group, turn in 1-2 pages with the following:

1) All group members’ names at top
2) your research question
3) a rationale for your question (1-2 pages max, typed)

A rationale is WHY you want to study this question. Why is the question interesting to you? What has made you want to study this question? What do you hope to learn? What might the benefit be to others?

Remember:

* do you all care about the question?
* is it focused enough?
* is it actually researchable and feasible?
* getting the question right is sometimes a process (it takes a few attempts)

Figure 2a: First Homework assignment.
What part of Lincoln Center helps contribute to student motivation?

We are interested in researching this question because its answer will affect us so intimately. We must understand what part of our environment is causing us to seek success in order to maintain that cause, and provide a similar environment for others. If the ultimate goal is to make every student successful, then understanding the source of what motivates them to become successful is key.

In this research unit we want to learn what motivates us within Lincoln Center. We also wish to learn how teachers and peers motivate us to keep going. To learn these things, we will focus on student/teacher relationships, grading standards, and the effect of the extended day. Focusing on the topics will help show us what has made this program successful.

While researching this topic we hope to learn the causes of student motivation in the Lincoln Center. This will benefit future generations of Lincoln Center students because it will cause teachers to realize how and what motivates high school students. Thus they will be able to effectively educate those students, because they will have attained the knowledge that will cause their students to be successful not only in high school but in college as well.

Figure 2b: Student Group 3 Initial Question and Rationale

Challenges and learning. In reflecting on this phase, we recognize there were processes that worked well and that we would want to reconsider. First, this project did not happen by “just showing up” and engaging in a research project. We had existing relationships at the school, and as a result, there was an openness and trust that significantly facilitated the start of the project, a finding supported by previous work in this area (Breault & Breault, 2010). Second, an important step that continued to be an anchor for the project was the developed timeline (Figure 1).

Although minor modifications were made, the time we invested in the initial timeline proved worthwhile, giving all of us a clear barometer of expected progress at various points during the year. In terms of reconsiderations, we believe that trying to decrease the distance between ourselves and the students was an important step; however, we also realize spending even more time on this at the beginning of our work would have been beneficial. In the first few weeks, for
example, while students seemed engaged, we found it difficult to track names of all the students and to establish personal connections with individuals.

**Development Phase**

The next phase of our work focused on refining the questions, learning about research methodology, and writing research proposals—a process that took about two months, or four meetings. In the question-refining process, the primary challenge was to help the students understand the second and third criteria as noted above—“focus” and “research feasibility.” Since the primary aim of the research is on motivation, the challenge was to help students understand that this academic construct needs to be deconstructed into specific behavioral and, therefore, researchable indicators. For example, one group initially asked, “What part of Lincoln Center helps contribute to student motivation?” As we worked with these students, we helped them become clearer on specific variables to study, including student/teacher relationships, grading standards, and the impact of the extended day model. See Figure 3 for the final research questions for each group.
### Research Question by Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 1</th>
<th>Group 2</th>
<th>Group 3</th>
<th>Group 4</th>
<th>Group 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What factors weaken motivation for pushing oneself academically? What parts of LC strengthen motivation against these factors? (study grades 9, 10, 11, 12)</td>
<td>What kinds of motivational shifts occur when students decide to leave LC? (or when students waver and decide to stay?)</td>
<td>How does the extended day model contribute to student motivation? (how are grading standards &amp; the student-teacher relations affected by the extended day?)</td>
<td>To what extent do student-teacher relations contribute to why students in LC are positively motivated? (do grades correlate with student-teacher relations?)</td>
<td>What caused our motivational shift to stay in Lincoln Center? (self-study)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 3: Group Questions**

We next introduced research methodology. We attempted to provide enough information to offer tools and awareness without raising expectations to a graduate level research methods seminar. We addressed why methods matter, the nature of qualitative research, subject sampling, and how to develop a research proposal. As we introduced them to methodology, we discovered the students were able to engage in sophisticated conversations about the intent of research, the limits of what can be gathered, and how research provides us with a way to arrive at tentative conclusions. This final issue was one we had to reinforce with the students because of their
desire to “find the answer” or “silver bullet” to their questions. One concept discussed at length was the use of triangulating data points. Since the students often had a direct, causal understanding of research, we spent time discussing how social science research relies on evidence from multiple vantage points. As we would often say, “There’s a reason why people continually study these issues – there are no simple answers.”

One technique used to probe these issues was a “thinking question” for the session. For example, as students developed their proposals, we posed the question: “Why does the way you collect data matter as much as your findings?” We stopped and held a discussion. The purpose of the question was to help the students move beyond a view of research as simple knowledge acquisition. Since we know many research issues are messy, we encouraged the students to become involved in this conversation.

This phase ended with the final submissions of each group’s research proposal. To facilitate this, we created a template for the students requiring an abstract, statement of question(s), a rationale, methods of research, preliminary hypothesis, and, as an option, additional connecting literature. Working both during the bi-weekly sessions and during Lincoln Center time on their own, students developed drafts of their proposals at two different points, and we provided feedback on a form we developed using a BAME scale (beginning, approaching, meeting, exceeding), with which students were familiar.
GROUP 3:
QUESTION: How does the extended day model contribute to student motivation?

Please review the feedback below with your group and work together to revise your proposal for our next meeting on Thursday, December 8th. Final proposals are due at that time.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Level &gt;</th>
<th>Beginning</th>
<th>Approaching</th>
<th>Meeting</th>
<th>Exceeding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Readiness of Question</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comments: We have your core question as “How does the extended day model contribute to student motivation?” Even though this question is broad, we think it is promising and very close. As you design your study, you will probably want to look at specific aspects of the extended day – for example, does it help motivation by building relationships? Does the extended day provide for a greater feeling of confidence and competence because students are getting more academic work done? Does the extended day help students see that their effort matters? Does it help students feel more a “part” of something unique and different – and is that the motivating thing? etc.

| Connection of Rationale to Question |         | X |         |         |         |
Comments: Your Rationale overall is strong, but it currently doesn't reflect the revised question on “extended day” enough. See if you can focus a bit more on why studying the “extended day” aspect of LC is a good idea. You can definitely use some of what you have already written...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level &gt; Criteria</th>
<th>Beginning</th>
<th>Approaching</th>
<th>Meeting</th>
<th>Exceeding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appropriateness of Methods</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*aligned with question</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*enough detail</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comments: Your methods are not detailed enough yet. For example, under “Sources,” you need to give more detail on how each of these activities will take place. What kind of survey...? What kinds of interviews? Observations how, where?

Under “Participants,” explain why you want to study only 9th graders. Why not 10th or 12th graders? How many 9th graders would you involve in the survey? In the interviews? How many teachers? How will you decide which teachers? This will help us see how “feasible” your study actually is. Finally, make sure we can see how your methods of research relate to the extended day specifically.

| Writing Conventions | | | X |
|---------------------| | | |
| *mechanics | | | |
| *grammar | | | |
| *spelling | | | |
| (proposal is edited) | | | |
Comments: Overall very good. Spelling of “Rationale” – includes an “e” on the end.

Other comments:
TITLE: Be sure to give your project an original, tentative title. For example, it could be called: “The Effects of the Extended Day.” You decide. ABSTRACT & STATEMENT OF QUESTION: Be sure to adjust your Abstract and Statement of Question so that these reflect the extended day focus.
HYPOTHESIS: Your hypothesis at the end is not actually a hypothesis. You describe the goals of your research, but a hypothesis is when you make an educated guess at what your findings might be. You might start out with the words: “We believe that our study of the extended day will show that….,” and then make at least one educated guess about what the results will be. What do you think you will learn about how the extended day affects motivation?
OVERALL: This has the potential to be an excellent study.

This process prepared students for their final submission, due by the end of the fall prior to winter break.

Challenges and learning. The most significant challenge during this phase was content coverage. Given we did not have extended periods of class time, we had to make decisions about what was critical information and what could be excluded. However, these decisions were never easy as significant pieces of research methodology were not addressed (e.g., the development of a literature review). A second challenge was the social dynamics of the groups. Ms. Lavold, for example, might tell us: “Group 3 is falling apart – they can’t agree on their question and are driving each other crazy.” Ms. Lavold provided significant help with management in this regard – helping the students process the issue or, in some cases, making adjustments to groups.

We also discovered through this phase that students were willing to engage in weighty discussions about the research process and appreciated intellectual challenge. The “thinking questions” became a crucial dimension to our lessons – making time for substantive exchange
through open-ended questioning. Such discussions were especially enjoyable and sometimes even difficult to end.

**Data Collection Phase**

This phase of the project began at the beginning of January 2012 with work on refining methods of data gathering. While students had thoughtful methods detailed in their proposals, the finer nuances and practicalities of preparing to do actual research remained. We focused our work on two areas: research surveys and interviewing.

To explore survey research, we discussed the merits of three types of surveys: categorical response, scaled response, and short answers. Our intent was to help students understand that the type of survey used allows for different types of data and, ultimately, data analysis. With interviewing skills, we spent time considering the interpersonal dynamics of interviews. To demonstrate, we role played an interview demonstrating some of the common problems encountered: the use of closed questions, non-responsiveness from interviewees, vague questions, etc. From this activity, we co-developed with students various principles on conducting effective interviews. These included building rapport with the interviewee, using open-ended questions, probing with follow-up questions, and the need to re-word questions when necessary. Students wrote practice questions, and we had them rehearse conducting interviews with each other.

By the end of January, the students began their interviews and distributed surveys throughout Lincoln Center. They started by clearly identifying their sample needs and then working with Ms. Lavold and other teachers to find willing participants. Data collection was supported by using the extended day at Lincoln Center and the time of our scheduled meetings. The latter allowed us to watch the students conduct the interviews and provide feedback to our
emerging researchers at the end of the day. We used two of our meeting times in February for this process – scheduling actual interviews, observing the students conduct interviews and surveys, and giving feedback. On one such Thursday, we re-gathered for 15 minutes at the end of the hour and debriefed – the students were perplexed by the reticence of certain research participants. They asked: “What do you do when a student seems nervous and doesn’t say much?” Some realized their freshmen participants were intimidated by senior researchers and that several variables can affect participant response (e.g., the number of interviewers present, a camera, tone of voice, speed of question,). We were able to share our own challenges in conducting interviews, point out successful techniques we had seen, and provide counter-questions.

**Challenges and learning.** Through this phase, Ms. Lavold was a significant resource in contacting teachers and helping the seniors gain access to students for interviews and surveys. Without this logistical support, in collaboration with a few other teachers in Lincoln Center, we would have been unable to manage the various issues that inevitably arose with scheduling and access. Positively, the “lived experience” of research was crucial. Many student insights about interviewing came only after the direct experience of having questions “fall flat” or having interviewees “clam up.” We also discovered how critical the use of student exemplars can be. For example, in observing students conducting interviews, some students knew intuitively how to establish rapport and engage in meaningful conversations. As a result, we would highlight certain students as models for others to emulate. This was an important addition, since in some cases students were able to demonstrate appropriate “easing in” interactions far better than us. In addition, we noticed how groups began to create their own data management systems – some brought binders with multiple sections, or some had separate folders for “freshmen interviews”
and “sophomore interviews,” and so on. Such organizational steps we did not teach but we highlighted and reinforced as they emerged.

**Final Steps**

We completed the data analysis stage by helping students learn to sift and summarize data, categorize and code data, and recognize themes that emerged from the data. We invited students to write research memos in order to capture early impressions and possible themes or ideas. We provided students with examples and stems to work from – like “One thing I’m noticing….” “I’m struck by….” “One thing I’m wondering….” Students wrote and shared initial ideas within their groups and then with the full group. Then we asked thinking questions, such as: Why might a memo not be enough for data analysis? What else might be needed? Why does it matter how we analyze our data?

During this stage, we worked with the students on preparing presentations for a local Youth and Family Summit. The summit, now in its fourth year, gathers educators, parents, students, and community members to discuss important issues related to “education and excellence” within marginalized communities. Although we did not require students to participate, we encouraged them for several reasons. First, the presentation would be an opportunity for the students to prepare for their final senior presentations in June. Second, we knew their work contained important information for the attendees. In addition, the summit provided our students with an outlet to test ideas, receive authentic feedback, and be recognized for their work. The summit, held at the end of April, was a significant success. Having an authentic audience forced our students to clarify their research methods and their primary

---

2 The Youth & Family Summit was held at Lincoln High School and is sponsored by Dr. Hamel’s university (http://www.pugetsound.edu/news-and-events/campus-news/details/1006/).
insights – and the stakes became real. The majority of students presented, and each of our five
groups was represented during the day.

Finally, the students completed their projects by the end of May and made final
presentations in June. Since each group had 2-6 members, we spent time talking about how
researchers share and divide workloads in completing projects. We detailed all the areas of
expected writing and then had groups talk extensively about how they might fairly share the
workload. As students wrote their final papers, we also arranged with Ms. Lavold to spend one
day at Dr. Hillis’ university, using a writing lab on campus so students could have sustained time
to write and collaborate. All 22 students made their way to the university, and students were
extremely productive on this day.

The final written projects ranged from 25-30 pages long and contained important insights
on motivation. A few excerpts are provided below:

“With our research studies, we have observed that low-income students are more
motivated with a supportive group that opposes the suppression that stereotypes create.”

“By these themes we concluded that the Lincoln Center is in fact working for students.
How it is working is that it is encouraging students to take risks and at the same time,
teaching them to accept their failures and break the barriers that self-limitations have …
LC is a healthy muscle – the strengths of LC exceed far past weaknesses of the program.”

“I have concluded from this project that collaboration transforms the way a person
approaches a problem or an unanswered question. Perspectives change. Mine did for
sure!”

One consistent finding was that students were more highly motivated by teachers who
were rigorous and demanding of the students but also built relationships with their students,
something facilitated by the additional time afforded by the Lincoln Center model. Students were
able to share such insights at an exhibition night, where community members came, including
members of the district’s school board. In addition, some students were invited to present their work to the Lincoln High School’s professional development team.

**Discussion and Implications**

At the beginning of this paper, we stated that we focused our work in this project on three questions. The first was how to engage high school students in an action research project. A primary goal of this paper has simply been to describe how we have approached and conducted action research with teenagers. A second question involved the potential benefits to the multiple stakeholders involved. Over the past 12 months, we have discovered that this project has yielded positive outcomes for our 22 students, for the teacher, for their school, and also for us as teacher educators. Students have been empowered to pursue questions they care about regarding their own academic motivation and the motivation of those around them. They have deepened their knowledge of research processes and how knowledge is constructed and produced. They have experienced research activity firsthand and learned to ask critical questions about methodology. Practically, they have been able to pursue a meaningful, rigorous culminating project for their senior year. As their mentors this year, we have seen firsthand how important it is to keep “thinking” questions central to the research process – and how actively students engage when intellectually challenged.

We also hoped that a project of this kind could contribute to Lincoln Center and the reforms they have implemented. Now in its fourth year, Lincoln Center has already won several awards, yet through our work this year we have deepened our understanding of an extended day model and how it can contribute to student achievement. By studying its impact on students and tracing issues of motivation with greater clarity – distinguishing rhetoric from reality, bringing student voices to the center, and identifying both strengths and limits of the extended day model.
we can support stakeholders in understanding the nature of Lincoln Center’s impact on students. We saw this most concretely in feedback we received from the school’s professional development team – who said they had learned significantly from what our students had shared with them. We believe we serve the education community in this way – adding resources to a local, concrete, and emerging reform project.

Finally, we asked ourselves at the beginning of the project, why might we do it? Ultimately, we have learned tremendously in our roles as teacher educators. This action research project has helped us better understand possibilities for school-university relationships – and how university-based teacher educators might both participate in and learn within school-based contexts. For example, we recognize how important it is that such work involves reciprocal relationships and benefits – where each participant (student, teacher, school, university faculty) brings important strengths to the table and each gains something. We are more aware now how such initiatives must develop over time – how it took almost two years from our first engagement with the sophomores in 2010 until we started this project. We see how small engagements over time – Professor Hamel’s partnership work at Lincoln, Professor Hillis’s presentation with Ms. Lavold’s class – eventually led to further connections and to more substantial engagement. All of this has helped remind us about the importance of teacher educators having direct contact with K-12 students – in this case experiencing the concrete joys and challenges of work in school buildings. We’ve been amazed by the work of these students as we watched them interview students, analyze data, and write their final reports. We have been impressed by their insights and discussion, which has affirmed for us how powerful K-12 public education can be – regardless of the contrary narratives depicted in the media.
Through this project we’ve also experienced the challenges our own university education students meet in schools – interpersonal problems within groups, student absences, not turning work in, intercom interruptions, unforeseen schedule changes – all of which provide us with resources and narratives for our work with teacher candidates. For instance, in one of our early meetings, we asked a thinking question to our 12th graders, but quickly realized that in a room that was mostly non-white, two white students consistently raised their hands and offered confident answers to the question. After noticing this pattern but worried about cold-calling other students, one of us made an impromptu adjustment -- asking another question and stating, “I’m not going to call on anyone – I just want to see if you are thinking about this question – so raise your hand if you have thoughts forming on this question.” Suddenly, over half the students in class raised a hand. As a result, we’ve been able to draw on specific teaching moments like this when talking with teacher candidates about cultural and racial dynamics in classrooms – about who seems authorized or privileged to speak academically – and how practically we might intervene to interrupt default discourse patterns. In sum, we’ve found our own concrete knowledge and credibility as teacher educators enhanced through the experience of action research.

Our project with 12th graders may or may not lead to new insights into motivational research, which is a question for another time. However, we can state that our professional lives have been enhanced by this work. Consequently, we would argue that projects like this, which generate forms of “mutuality” in partnership (Breault & Breault, 2010), must be an integral part of future teacher education. Perhaps the quote hanging proudly in Ms. Lavold’s classroom, “I am the master of my fate,” should be applied to us – the need to take risks and open ourselves up to the tremendous opportunities that exist in deeper partnerships with schools and students.
References


