

How Students Experience Action Research

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Abstract

This research and its findings examine how current students enrolled in a small liberal arts college's action research course experience their course. The reviewed literature examines affect, stress and stress management, effects of stress, and how individuals deal with stress. Derived from the literature, interview questions were created and posed to voluntary participants. The results revealed that there are measures the college can take to further enhance the student experience both in this course and in the general program. The participants' suggestions were funneled into one solution: the creation of a short, group orientation program held at the start of a student's graduate career.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Overview

Each graduate course at Grouper College ends with students completing a generic online evaluation. The evaluation serves as a place for students to anonymously provide course feedback. That feedback is then sent to the course's instructor and to the program's director. The researcher is a student at Grouper College and found the end-of-course evaluation process to be too general; the questions asked did not allow students to elaborate on Likert scale questions. This limitation drove the researcher to find out more about how students experience a course. Throughout this writing, the true name of the college has been replaced with the fictitious Grouper College moniker.

Grouper's graduate programs in education require all matriculated students to complete the action research course as part of their degree fulfillments—the degree being either the master of education (M.Ed.) or master of arts in teaching (M.A.T.). Students tend to take the action research course after completing many other degree requirements and either complete the course's three credits in one semester, divide it into two semesters of work, or if incomplete by the agreed-upon time, continue to take action research credits until the requirement is satisfied. Graduate program directors, faculty, and the researcher noticed that some students handle the stress of the action research course better than others and they were interested in why. The results of this action research project will help program directors, faculty, and prospective action research students to understand this unique course experience. Instructors will be able to understand the sources of student stress and students will be able to understand what the action research course is like from a student perspective.

Statement of Problem

The purpose of the study is to examine how negative affect differs from positive affect upon students in action research when they are placed under the stress of completing an action research project. As a research design was created, that original question morphed into: how does a current action research student experience the course?

Hypothesis

The purpose of this research was to glean information. This study is a descriptive study utilizing interviews (see Chapter III) as the methodology. There is no hypothesis as such in this study.

Operational Definitions, Extent of the Literature Review, and Limitations

Action research is defined as the independent-study-like course in which each student enrolled conducts a study and reports their findings. Action research begins towards the end of a student's degree progression and always after completing the research methods course. It is completed in one or more semesters, until the project has successfully met the standards as set by the program directors.

The literature review is defined as Chapter II of the action research project. This review of at least 12 sources is completed in research methods, the course prior to action research. The literature review is developed over the course of a 14-week semester. For this study, the literature review examined materials from the time frame of 1990 to 2013.

Research methods is defined as the course immediately prior to action research. In research methods, students are instructed on types of study design, statistics, ways to conduct research and is the course in which students develop their problem statement. A student's problem statement serves as the impetus for the literature review and action research.

This study is limited in the constraints imposed upon any descriptive study utilizing interviews. A more thorough discussion of this limitation occurs in the discussion of the findings (see the combined Chapters IV and V).

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Dealing with everyday stressors is part of the human experience. The sources of stressors emanate from the many interactions we all have in life – family, work, school and even friends. The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between stress and positive and negative affect. Section 1 examines the concept of affect and explains the relationship between affect and new stressful tasks. Section 2 and 3 explore stress and the effects of stress. Finally section 4 investigates various ways to deal with stress and negative affect.

Affect

Affect is defined as the expression of emotion and mood. It is a two-dimensional construct that utilizes the terms ‘positive affect’ and ‘negative affect’. Though these parts are independent of one another, a large presence of positive affect does not indicate an absence of negative affect (Rydstedt, Johnsen, Lundh, & Devereux, 2013; Heponiemi, Ravaja, Elovainio, Naatanen, & Keltikangas-Jarvinen, 2006). Affective personality is a combination of positive and negative affect and influences how an individual handles stress; that is through problem-solving or emotion-focused behaviors as discussed later (Karlsson & Archer, 2007; Arntén, Jansson & Archer, 2008).

The literature divides affective personality into four types: self-fulfilling, high affective, low affective, and self-destructive (Arntén et al., 2008; Karlsson & Archer, 2007). Individuals who express high positive affect (PA) and low negative affect (NA) are deemed self-fulfilling while individuals who express low PA and high NA are deemed self-destructive. It is these ends of the spectrum that this literature review will discuss. However it is pertinent to acknowledge

that high affective individuals are characterized by a high PA and high NA while low affective individuals are characterized by a low PA and low NA (Arntén et al., 2008; Karlsson & Archer, 2007). It is not expected that the students surveyed will fall into only two categories of either high PA or high NA. It is possible that some students will test as high or low affective in the course of this action research study.

Negative Affect

Individuals with high NA perceive their environment as unfavorable—no matter the actual circumstances. This unfavorable view is also applicable to an individual's perception of their situation and health (Rydstedt et al., 2013). Negative affect covers a broad range of moods which may include anxiety, fear, uncertainty, depression, and low self-esteem (Watson, Watson & Clark as cited in Rydstedt et al., 2013).

Feeling stressed is a significant part of a high NA experience. Those who have a high NA often report feeling high levels of stress (Heponiemi et al., 2006). In fact, it is suggested that NA influences the total perception of stress (Karlsson & Archer, 2007) and vice versa: individuals with high NA handle stress in ways that allow a high NA and high stress relationships to persist (Rydstedt et al. 2013). Additionally, those with high NA experience stressful situations more intensely (Heponiemi et al., 2006).

Stress places individuals at risk for physical and mental illness. Since there is a strong positive correlation between high NA and stress, individuals who report high NA may experience more sleep disorders, cognitive difficulty, physical pain, and anxiety than their high PA counterparts (Karlsson & Archer, 2007). Additionally, individuals with high NA are more likely to experience chronic discomfort or pain even in the absence of a stressful situation (Watson & Clark as cited in Rydstedt et al., 2013). These high NA symptoms are also linked to

poor coping strategies (Heponiemi et al., 2006; Karlsson & Archer, 2007) and significant health issues such as hypertension (Jonas & Lando as cited in Rydstedt et al., 2013).

It is notable to mention that each individual views an external demand as either a ‘threat’ or a ‘challenge’ (Chemers, Hu & Garcia; Lazarus & Folkman; Pintrich & De Groot as cited in Zajacova, Lynch & Espenshade, 2005). This decision comes down to an individual’s level of self-efficacy (Lazarus & Folkman as cited in Zajacova, Lynch & Espenshade, 2005). Self-efficacy refers to the extent to which an individual feels competently confident. In research conducted by Dowd, Zautra, and Hogan (2010), participants were asked to perform a public speaking task. The conclusion of the study indicated that participants high in NA, view the particular task as a threat.

Positive Affect

Individuals with high PA perceive their environment, situations, and health as favorable (Rydstedt et al., 2013). Those with high PA also experience a broad variety of moods such as positive attitude, activity, and control (McCraw & Costa; Watson et al. as cited in Karlsson & Archer, 2007) as well as high energy, enthusiasm, cheerfulness (Heponiemi et al., 2006), and self-efficacy (Zajacova, Lynch & Espenshade, 2005). These attributes add to individuals experiencing more social relationships and happiness than those with lower PA (Karlsson & Archer, 2007).

Unlike NA’s relationship to stress, PA has a negative correlation with the emotion. High PA also shows a significant positive correlation with characteristics such as responsibility, emotional stability, sociability, creativity, energy (Karlsson & Archer, 2007), and self-efficacy (Dowd, Zautra & Hogan, 2010). It is suggested that these characteristics may act as a buffer against stress and stress’ impact on the individual. These positive characteristics also appear to

counteract distress' physiological responses (Fredrickson & Levenson; Fredrickson, Mancuso, Branigan & Tugade as cited in Rydstedt et al., 2013). Distress is a term used to define symptoms of anxiety, depression, and loss of control (Marom & Koslowsky, 2013).

Without the harmful mental and physical effects of stress, individuals with high PA are able to have better cognitive function, allowing them to be better at problem solving and handling interpersonal conflict (Isen as cited in Rydstedt et al., 2013). Beyond these positive effects, individuals with high PA have greater memory ability, put forth less mental effort to solve a task (Gray et al. as cited in Arntén et al., 2008), and have a lower morbidity rate than those with high NA (Pressman & Cohen as cited in Rydstedt et al., 2013).

In the Dowd, Zautra, and Hogan (2010) research mentioned earlier, in opposition to their high NA counterparts, individuals with high PA approach the public speaking task as a challenge. Those with high PA display a willingness to engage and confront the task, that is, when confronted with a perceived stressful task.

Stress and Stress Management

Stress Sources

The literature describes a number of sources of stress that may be present at any given point in an adult's life. A stressful event in an individual's life can be an acute event or an ongoing strain (Zajacova, Lynch & Espenshade, 2005). Everyday stressors stem from a number of environmental sources including relationships, family, education, and work (Barnett, Steptoe & Gareis as cited in Arntén, Jansson & Archer, 2001). Additionally, stressors such as negative life events and trauma cause a significant impact. Adults experience stress through a wide variety of experiences such as divorce; hospital stays; extended unemployment; substance, physical, verbal, and/or emotional abuse; and financial difficulty (Nurullah, 2010). Children mainly experience stress via health, school, and family (Trainees; Trainees & Escobar as cited in

Escobar, Alarcon, Blanca & Fernandez-Baena, 2013). These three categories yield a number of stressors that may affect children including body image, bullying, academic difficulty, over-involvement in activities, lack of parental support, and sibling dissonance (Byrne, Thomas, Burchell, Olive & Mirabito; Trianes, Blanca, Fernandez-Baena, Escobar & Maldonado as cited in Escobar, 2013; Byrne et al.; Lehman & Repetti; Oros & Vogel; Osika, Friberg, & Währborg, as cited in Escobar et al., 2013; Hjern, Alfven & Ostberg; Kearney, Cook & Chapman; Lehman & Repetti as cited in Escobar et al., 2013; Spirito, Stark, Grace & Stamoulis as cited in Escobar et al., 2013).

During everyday experience, an individual can encounter a number of role stressors. In a study by Marom and Koslowsky (2013), three types of role stress are defined: role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload. Role ambiguity is the lack of clarity, role conflict is the force of irreconcilable demands, and role overload is the demand to do too much in too little time. It is expected that to find the most frequent stressor, an individual need only to look to their daily activities to find the culprit. A person's primary role is the most frequent stressor and has the longest duration (Ortqvist & Wincent as cited in Marom & Koslowsky, 2013).

There is research on student stress, although more limited. Part of the student experience involves getting good grades and learning material to apply to tasks immediately. The research mentions that student stress may come from poor grades (Hackett et al. as cited in Zajacova, Lynch & Espenshade, 2005). The stress of learning is not only applicable to those in formal schooling. New employees, who may consider themselves students for a short time while in training, may find that a source of great stress comes from the need to digest a large amount of information quickly in order to meet performance expectations (Saks & Ashforth as cited in Marom & Koslowsky, 2013). In terms of the study to be completed with ED 606 students, it is

critical to note that academic self-efficacy's effect on stress is determined by how a student views the work: either as a threat or a challenge (Chemers, Hu, and Garcia as cited in Zajacova, Lynch & Espenshade, 2005).

Effects of Stress

Stress can have a major impact on a person's overall well-being, mental, and physical health. More specifically, it can cause ailments such as depression, anxiety, physical pain, and cognitive difficulty. Siew et al. (2005) defines mental and physical health as indicators of a person's ability to adapt to experiences. The poorer a person's mental and physical health, the more likely they are to deal with stress in an unhealthy manner.

The research suggests that a strong positive relationship exists between stress, depression, lack of coping resources, and anxiety (Arntén et al., 2008). The more chronic the stress, the more an individual's situational well-being is impaired (Elfering et al., 2005) which leads to a higher risk for mental illness such as anxiety and depression disorders (Anderson, 2008). Depression is defined as an over active hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis which mirrors the body's neuroendocrine response to stress. Depression alone can lead to multiple ailments such as immune impairment, neck and shoulder pain, low back pain, and other chronic pain.

Strain is an important factor to consider when discussing stress. Strain refers to an individual's psychological response to stressors (Hurrell, Nelson & Simmons as cited in Rauschenbach & Hertel, 2011). It leads to psychological distress, burnout, low mental well-being, and can contribute to job dissatisfaction (Hart & Cooper as cited in Rauschenbach & Hertel, 2011). General strain is reflective of how individuals perceive themselves and their attitudes. Experience-based strain is an assessment of individuals' situational experience. Take

occupation for example, experience-based strain reflects most accurately what employees are thinking and feeling during their work experience (Rauschenbach & Hertel, 2011).

Dealing with Stress

Just as stress is an everyday occurrence, dealing with stress is an everyday occurrence. The literature identifies ways in which individuals handle stress with coping behaviors such as problem-solving and use of social networks when confronting stress. The literature indicates that the way an individual handles stress is related to his or her affective personality and to his or her general well-being.

Coping Strategies

It is noted in the research that an individual's affect causes a predisposition to how that individual handles stressful situations (Karlsson & Archer, 2007). An individual resolves stress using coping behaviors which are defined as efforts to master a stressful and/or demanding situation (Lazarus & Folkman as cited in Karlsson & Archer, 2007; Arntén et al., 2008). Like affective personality, coping strategies or behaviors are placed into categories: problem-solving, emotion-focused (Arntén et al., 2008), palliative, and avoidance coping. Of the four, problem-solving and emotion-focused were most prevalent in the literature. Palliative coping involves encouraging the individual to calm down in high stress situations. This style of coping allows the individual to facilitate problems in a calmer way, promoting well-being and good mental health (Reichert; Reicherts & Pihet as cited in Elfering et al., 2005). Avoidance coping is descriptive of wishful thinking, flight-from-reality, denial and distraction (Karlsson & Archer, 2007) which allow the individual to avoid the stressful situation. There is a positive correlation between avoidance coping and psychological distress. Those who engage in avoidance coping

report more psychological health problems whereas those who confront a situation, handle stress in a more healthful way (Siew et al., 2005).

Neither problem-solving nor emotion-focused coping are used exclusively by one kind of affective personality. Both styles of coping influence an individual's appraisal of a situation and how to respond (Lazarus as cited in Karlsson & Archer, 2007). Although there is a positive correlation between PA and problem-solving and NA and emotion-focused coping styles, both kinds of coping are employed by both kinds of individuals on a situation-dependent basis. Problem-solving, also known as active coping, is defined as the attempt to change a situation. It is most effective when an individual has more control over a situation. Emotion-focused is defined as the intent to withdraw from a situation and is most effective when an individual has little control in a situation (Folkman; Lazarus as cited in Elfering et al., 2005; Elfering et al., 2005).

When relating coping styles to affective personalities, problem-solving is most commonly associated with self-fulfilling personality whereas emotion-focused is most commonly associated with self-destructive personality (Elfering et al., 2005). As discussed earlier, self-fulfilling individuals have more self-efficacy than self-destructive individuals. A higher level of self-efficacy is more closely linked with the ability to evaluate a demand as a challenge. Further, when a task is deemed a challenge, a more effective coping strategy such as problem-solving is more likely to be used (Zajacova, Lynch & Espenshade, 2005). Self-fulfilling individuals show positive correlations for coping behaviors that involve cognitive, social, physical, and spiritual aids (Karlsson & Archer, 2007). Self-destructive individuals show a low ability to process stress with these same coping aids or tools (Andersson et al. as cited in Karlsson & Archer, 2007), instead using avoidance coping to manage their feelings. During

stressful situations, self-fulfilling individuals display high levels of performance and express less stress overall (Arntén et al., 2008). Additionally, self-fulfilling individuals display the lowest levels of anxiety, depression, and stress (Scheier & Carver as cited in Arntén et al., 2008) and high levels of self-image optimism, and energy of the four personality types. Contrary to self-fulfilling individuals, self-destructive individuals show high levels of anxiety, depression, and stress along with low levels of self-image, optimism, and energy levels. Where general health is concerned, greater well-being is positively correlated with problem-solving behavior and negatively correlated with emotion-focused coping (Elfering et al., 2005).

It is noteworthy to mention that although this paper does not cover the high affective or low affective personality types, these individuals display all of the above attributes at a sustained level where all positive and negative traits are either high or low (Arntén et al., 2008).

Social Networks Help Manage Stress

Social networks and interpersonal relationships make a large difference in the way individuals handle stress. The presence of social relationships is positively related to active coping (most commonly employed by self-fulfilling individuals) and not directly related to avoidance coping. Those who are satisfied with their social networks are found to have less psychological distress when coping with a stressful situation (Siew et al., 2005). The same occurs in children: those who maintain positive social relationships show less stress than those without positive relationships (Escobar, Trianes, Fernández-Baena, & Miranda; Trianes et al., as cited in Escobar et al., 2013). Additionally, individuals who believe they have more support resources do not tend to employ negative coping styles (such as avoidance coping) and as a result, have greater psychological well-being. The research suggests that large networks are more likely to aid in the resolution of stressful events (Siew et al., 2005).

Hardiness

A major influence in handling stress is hardiness, is defined as a combination of external and internal factors. Those are challenge (an external factor), commitment, and control (both internal factors) (Kobasa as cited in Westman, 1990; Arntén et al., 2008). Hardiness allows an individual to view a situation as an opportunity for growth. When viewed this way, the individual experiences heightened confidence in their ability to influence an outcome (Arntén et al., 2008). Self-fulfilling individuals may be high in hardiness. As self-fulfilling individuals do, hardy people tend to appraise events as less stressful, report fewer instances of stress, feel optimistic when dealing with stress, and have higher job performance. Additionally, events are deemed controllable and those that are deemed stressful are often handled with a problem-solving focus. When a hardy person describes an event, the details are vague. This vague depiction acts as a buffer for undesirable health effects that may come with recounting the event. Hardy individuals, or self-fulfilling individuals, are more resilient than their self-destructive counterparts (Westman, 1990).

Summary

An individual's affect has great effect on how stressful situations are handled. Stress, when managed using poor coping skills, can lead to a number of ailments which then influence stress. Overall, individuals with high PA handle stress more effectively than those with high NA. The employment of positive, problem-solving coping behaviors allow for individuals to approach a stressful situation with a challenge mindset, providing them an opportunity to learn from the experience, and solve the next stressful event with newly learned knowledge. The opposite is true of high NA individuals. It will be interesting to see if this holds true for the subject in this action research study.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

As outlined in chapter I, this research examines how a current action research student experiences the course at the fictitious Grouper College. The researcher and her design advisor decided that the most effective way to examine that experience was for the researcher to conduct phone interviews, allowing the study's participants opportunity for reflection and elaboration beyond the traditional anonymous, electronic course evaluation.

Design

The researcher held phone interviews to assess how current students experience the action research course. This kind of study is defined as descriptive research; it serves to take the temperature of what already exists. Descriptive research does not involve treatments or controls and this study does not involve an independent variable. However, there is a dependent variable: the difference between how students who described characteristics of negative affect versus those who described characteristics of positive affect handled their stress in action research.

Participants

There were no major demographic characteristics included in this study. To qualify for the study, participants had one or more of the following in common: current enrollment in three credits of action research, current enrollment in a repeat action research course, an active email address accessible through the Grouper College email system. Twenty-eight students qualified and were invited via individual email to participate in a phone interview with the researcher. A total of eight participants volunteered to be interviewed.

Instrument

The researcher and her design advisor drafted 11 interview questions to pose to participants. Those questions can be found in Appendix A. A sample response to those questions can be found in Appendix B.

Procedure

There were five steps in the research process: create interview questions, acquire email addresses, message participants, conduct interviews, and transcribe completed interviews. The procedure began with the researcher and her design advisor developing a set of interview questions. Next, the researcher met with the program director who provided a list of potential participants. From that list of students, the researcher used the Grouper College email database, available to any person who has an active Grouper email account, to individually message each potential participant. The email invitation is available in Appendix C.

Eight students replied to the invitation to participate and interviews were conducted on a mutually agreed-upon date and time between February 13 and 28, 2014. During the interviews, the researcher made detailed notes and later transcribed the conversations. It was from those transcribed conversations that the researcher was able to identify the themes that are defined in the next chapter.

CHAPTERS IV AND V

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

The literature review examined how negative affect differs from positive affect when handling stress. Based on that review, this study was designed to interview current action research students to understand how they experience the action research course. This chapter defines and analyzes common themes that arose during those interviews, compares themes and individual comments to the literature review's findings, and serves to provide suggestions on how the action research experience can be improved.

Discussion of the Data

Eight current action research students were interviewed as part of this study and 11 questions were posed to the participants. These questions paid no attention to age, gender, or ethnicity. The sole requirement for participation in the study was current enrollment in action research. Several themes emerged through this research including current credit load and progress toward the degree, guidance students receive, technology achievements and frustrations, obstacles to project completion, fear of the unknown, techniques for stress-management, and overall satisfaction.

Current Credit Load and Progress toward the Degree

Seven of the eight students interviewed took all three credits of action research in one semester. The outlier divided their study into two semesters of one and a half credits each. For three of the students interviewed, this course is the last requirement towards degree fulfillment. For the five remaining students, this course came close to the end of their journey. For reasons unknown, these students have approximately six credits to complete after their action research

course ends. These students expect to complete those remaining credits by the end of the calendar year.

Guidance Students Receive

Students were interviewed between the middle and end of February, when most were typically in the process of conducting their study. Although they had not yet completed the course, students were able to identify helpful aspects of action research, most notably, guidance from their assigned design advisor and technical writer (also referred to as “advisor” or “advisors”). “I’ve had a lot of access to my research and writing advisor...that has made things easier,” remarked a student. Another said:

Both my writing and design advisors are amazing. I kind of want to be able to send all my other homework to my writing advisor—she’s so good! Both of them are my greatest assets. I will get through this with the two of them and because of the two of them. I feel I can always email them or text them and they will always answer or help me find the answer.

A third student gave more specific feedback:

One of my advisors made a data sheet for me where I can collect information. That was helpful. [Also,] being able to email back and forth with advisors and using the track changes feature in Microsoft Word have been wonderful. Not all instructors use them. [Without it,] it’s hard for me to know what needs to be revised.

It is important to note that a student’s assigned advisors are not the only Grouper professionals providing guidance. While not a theme, in two separate interviews students made a point to explain how helpful it was to have a librarian guide them through the library’s online research tools. This help was provided in the research methods course students must take before they are qualified to enroll in action research. Not only did this librarian speak to the research methods class, she also made herself available during drop-in sessions at the Grouper library. One student recalled, “I met with [the librarian] last semester to talk about my literature review

and to make sure I knew what I was doing. She met with me at Grouper; she went out of her way to help me and that was incredible.”

Technology Achievements and Frustrations

In addition to email, phone calls, and face-to-face meetings, students in action research had use of GrouperLearn, an online classroom tool. At the time of this research, GrouperLearn was relatively new; students and faculty were still learning how to best use this communication and mixed feelings about the site were evident. The intention of GrouperLearn was to serve as a way for students and instructors to access course materials such as syllabi, instructor-created PowerPoint presentations, audio files of in-class lectures, and examples of past student work. It is this last part that a student found quite helpful in their action research writing, “I love that on GrouperLearn, there are student samples! I feel like each class I’ve taken has had samples [of acceptable work] and I always look at them. They have helped give me a better idea of what exactly to do and how I [should] structure my work.” A second student remarked, “GrouperLearn has been great.”

The frustrations students encountered with GrouperLearn were evident in the interviews. In describing her problems with technology overall, one student who had moved out of Maryland noted that the changes to GrouperLearn have made her use of it more difficult. Another student recommended, “GrouperLearn has been great. It’s good to go over it yourself even when your instructors may walk you through it. Playing with it on your own is helpful.”

Technology in general has become a major avenue for research. The journals found through the Grouper library’s website have helped this researcher with her literature review but have not been as helpful to others. A student described difficulty in connecting to the Grouper library’s resources from home: “I’ve tried to access databases from home, but it’s cumbersome.

I definitely have more luck finding journals when I'm sitting in Grouper's library." This same student went on to say that it was difficult to find appropriate journals, "I'm in sports administration so sometimes general education journals don't have what I need. I have done interlibrary loan, but you're limited on how many journals you can request at a time." The out-of-state student identified with this sentiment, "Me being far away is tough though; I don't have access to the Grouper library online...I have used the public library in [my new state] and my co-teacher has let me use her college's databases. Other than that, I Google the information I need to find."

Obstacles to Project Completion

Students cited three obstacles to completing the action research project: work, weather, and attendance. "I work a full-time job [during the week] and a part-time job on the weekends," one student said. The student also explained that working two jobs made it difficult to make time for action research. "Snow days have been a big hurdle," said another. This student was planning on conducting lunch-time sessions with participants but because of snow days, the lunch-time sessions had to be rescheduled and scheduled closer together than the researcher would like. "I had planned on 12 lunch-time sessions," she said, "but when school is closed or delayed, that time gets reshuffled into common core and make-up lessons so [my study] gets bumped." This problem also impacts the participants of the affected student's study: "It's a bummer for the kids too because they enjoy eating lunch with their friends and when they don't get to, it can be upsetting."

Attendance obstacles affected both researchers and participants. "My main obstacle is about being able to get to my school. My plan right now is to take public transportation or a

friend's car," mentioned one student. Another student had participant attendance issues to contend with, "The particular population [I work with] doesn't seem to care about attendance."

Fear of the Unknown

For students who felt stressed or anxious about action research, their source of apprehension stemmed from a fear of the unknown. "The process is unpredictable, you don't know all of what will happen in your study or writing in its entirety," says one student, "At first glance, I thought, 'I don't know how I'll make it through.' It's very overwhelming and even when you talk to people who have done it and you have [some idea] of what it entails, it's still unnerving." Some of the stress from the unknown came from choosing a problem statement in the research methods course. One student recalled, "I had a little anxiety in research methods with figuring out my topic." A second student shared that sentiment, "I did feel some anxiety before I knew what I was going to write on." Yet a third described how they felt about the future assignments in action research, "I am a little nervous about the presentation...I'm a perfectionist and I want my work to make a difference."

One student mentioned an important difference in this course versus past courses: "It's awkward to have had all these face-to-face courses or those that give a great deal of guidance and then to be thrust into an independent study environment." That difference of a more consistently guided course versus an independent study course brought this student to have a great deal of uncertainty.

Techniques for Stress Management

Each student had their own techniques for stress management. Most students thought broadly about this theme, saying that just figuring out their research topic or "taking things week to week" alleviated their stress. But some students were able to identify more specific

techniques. “I still need to take care of myself during this process,” one student pointed out, “I don’t stop myself from going to sleep and I try not to work on this project over the weekend.” Another student added that conventional forms of self-care are essential, “I found that regular exercise helps as does a healthy diet...right now I’m trying to maintain a regular [exercise routine].” This student also noted that carving out time each day to just relax was helpful; for this student, that time happened after homework and before bed each evening. The student mentioned further, “I tend to panic when I’m overwhelmed and stressed. I realized this semester how important it is to reach out and ask for help and to try to stay calm.”

Family can serve as a great source of support and has for one student. “[I am] part of a supportive family. I have an amazing wife who gives me the time I need and is incredibly supportive,” gushes the student. This student also recognized his Grouper family’s support, “[the staff] and my advisor have been wonderful. They really listen to me...they’re also flexible.”

Overall Satisfaction

Students had positive things to say about their overall experience in action research. “It’s a very straightforward, headache-free process. I’ve had a lot of access to my research and writing advisor, always getting prompt feedback,” one student said. Another made the point:

Action research is a worthwhile part of the program. At work, we’ve started the [student learning objectives] and action research is aligned with those ideas of doing things yourself. For me, it has been helpful to go through the process of research; finding that there’s a lot of literature out there to test things; [finding] what works and what I can change. I enjoy testing myself and this is a good gauge for that. I found that as things get more complicated, you should rely on the research to sort out a problem.

A fourth student provided a balance of positive comments and constructive criticism:

I don’t think it’s a bad process; it is interesting though. I’ll give you the pros and cons. The pros are (1) that you actually learn how to do action research. (2) Action research can be completed over multiple semesters to fit your schedule and that flexibility is great. I love that. And I love that we have the freedom to choose our own topics within the stated guidelines. The cons are (1) the logistics of how to do your study, learning how to do a

study and write it up. (2) The logistical things you have to do before research can even begin like letters to parents or permission from your school administrators. This project is big but it doesn't seem like the end of the world yet. It's difficult if you're not in a school or aren't working directly with students but you can still make what you want it to be.

Relationship to the Literature

The literature review discussed much about the characteristics of negative and positive affect. Though these interviews were not concerned with determining a student's affect, students offered characteristics of positive and negative affect through conversation. For example, students were asked to identify tools they used to alleviate their stress or anxiety. Both avoidance coping and active coping strategies were mentioned. Avoidance coping, which is defined as denial or distraction, was identified by two students, "I need to do anything but action research to make me less anxious. Taking my mind off of [my project] helps," one said. Another stated, "I try not to work on this over the weekend because it's just too much to think about with another job." Whereas active coping, defined as the attempt to change a situation, was identified by four students through stress-relieving techniques of physical activity, reliance on social networks, and individual research.

Because this study did not assess students' general affect, the researcher cannot provide information about which students are negatively affected or which students are positively affected. There is too little information available to make general inferences about the participants' affective states. For example, understanding the level of stress students have in action research does not indicate the level of stress students have in other areas of their lives. Likewise, knowing how students deal with the stress of action research does not mean they deal with general stress in the same ways. Future research must be conducted in order to adequately determine how negative or positively affected students respond to the action research project.

Suggestions for Improvement

Comments from Interviewees

Through the interviews, students brought up suggestions for improvement to the action research project and to their program overall. Five suggestions were raised including use of Grouper's Academic Center for Excellence (ACE) and writing center, a more in-depth focus on degree concentrations, implementation of a situational leadership course, expanded knowledge of the e-portfolio requirement, and the need for better connection between faculty and students.

With knowledge of campus services, one student questioned why neither ACE nor the college's writing center were advertised to graduate students by graduate faculty or staff when these resources were, in fact, available to graduate students: "It's not something that [students] have been made aware of. These resources can also help with time management, which I'm sure can help other students who are working full-time jobs, have a family, and need to run a household."

In its current iteration, the graduate programs in education offer a few concentrations within the master of education program. One student, whose concentration was in athletic leadership, was disappointed that more courses in athletic leadership were unavailable:

Overall, I really enjoyed the courses in my concentration more than the general courses I had to take for the M.Ed. First, because they were more interesting to me and second, because I thought they would better my education. I'm taking 681 [a general requirement] now and that is hugely helpful—everyone should take that. But there should be more courses in my concentration. As someone who is trying to get out of teaching and into coaching, I'd like that more. [Additionally,] some of the general courses were geared more towards new teachers. I'm a 10-year veteran so I knew about the stuff you learn in child development just from being in the field.

During another interview a student pondered ways in which the actual courses could be of more help in handling real-life situations:

I am grateful that action research can be done in one semester and not longer. But there's probably a better way to prepare leaders. There are real issues in the school that I feel I have no knowledge of how to tackle. It would be really useful to take a class where we enact real-life situations. That would give me an idea of how to handle a situation. For example, if my principal is being yelled at about something, [I think about how I would react]. I would have no idea how to deal with that if I was principal...at this point, I'm not going to walk out of here feeling that I can do my job better.

The student felt that acting out true-to-life situations in class would help her better navigate workplace politics while building her social skills and emotional-intelligence.

One of the requirements of the M.Ed. and M.A.T. program is the completion of an e-portfolio. Two students agree that completing the e-portfolio while doing action research is not wise—both require too much work. One of these students pointed out that they had been steadily completing the e-portfolio by adding documents at the end of each semester. That student noted:

I've already completed my e-portfolio so that's not an issue. Although I can't imagine doing them both simultaneously. Both would be ridiculous. Each is very time consuming and detail oriented. They are not hard, but the e-portfolio is very tedious. Action research is more about digging deep but you still have to find the information. When instructors tell you to start the e-portfolio early, it is no lie.

Conversely, the other student said:

The fact that we have to do an e-portfolio on top of action research is ridiculous. My cohort only learned about the e-portfolio three semesters ago. To do that on top of action research is too much to ask of a person with a full-time job. We should just be able to do an action research project. In its current form, it's comprehensive enough and gives us actual experience in the field that we can use later.

Making connections in a graduate program, whether with peers or faculty, can be mutually beneficial. But what happens when those connections do not develop organically? "I've heard some students talk (and I feel this way too) about feeling disconnected in that they have to reach out to their professors," instead of the other way around, described a student. The student continued:

Until I had a certain professor one semester, I really didn't know who to talk to about this program. And then I thought about students who didn't connect with anyone. Who would they go to? I found that when I talked with [a program director, that person] was always so busy and when we did actually meet, the meeting was really fast and unhelpful. I found myself going back to that one professor I connected with to ask for basic guidance on what courses to take and when. I was afraid of getting off track in this program and my fears were not allayed by the program's director. A little more formal programmatic guidance would be helpful.

Comments from the Researcher

This researcher realizes that each of the five areas of improvement suggested by the interviewees can be incorporated into one solution. All students who are enrolled in action research are required to attend an introductory meeting before the action research course commences. Just as there is an introductory meeting to action research, there is room and need for an introductory meeting or meetings to the program.

This researcher suggests implementing a group orientation held over one or more meetings in conjunction with or just before a student's first program course. Group orientation differs from the existing one-on-one meetings students have with their program directors or advisors. This researcher has noticed that in face-to-face or online courses, a student's peers serve a dual purpose: as students who share an experience and as instructors. In a group, students may raise questions others could not articulate or realize, deepening the individual's learning experience. Group orientation does not downplay the significance of the current one-on-one meetings students have with program directors or advisors; group orientation enhances the current iteration. This researcher does not suggest that the one-on-one meetings be eliminated. Orientation will serve as a space for students to make connections with each other and for directors and faculty to introduce the program's requirements including the e-portfolio, campus resources such as ACE and the writing center, and establish points of contact within the graduate office.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

1. If you are a returning student, how many times have you taken the action research course?
2. Tell me about your overall experience so far with the action research project.
3. Are there things you wish you could be doing differently? Why?
4. What resources are you finding helpful? Are there resources you need but don't have?
5. What kind of obstacles are you running into? Study issues, writing, outside forces?
6. Are there things outside of Grouper and beyond Grouper's control that are impacting you?
7. How did you approach this project from the start? Describe your mindset. Did you find yourself immediately overwhelmed? Did the project look doable?
8. If you found yourself anxious or stressed about this project, what tools (if any) are you using to alleviate your anxiety or stress?
9. Besides action research, are you enrolled in any other courses this semester? Where are you in your degree progress? Beginning? Middle? End?
10. What advice can you give me about this project?
11. Is there any other information you would like to share?

APPENDIX B

Sample Completed Interview

1. If you are a returning student, how many times have you taken the action research course?
N/A
2. Tell me about your overall experience so far with the action research project.
It's pretty early in the process, but so far it's pretty easy and straightforward. Once I completed the literature review, the rest of this process became easy. It's great to have had research methods first. Then when I got started with action research and met with my advisor, the course became even easier.
3. Are there things you wish you could be doing differently? Why?
From an interest point of view, I found that I couldn't do something as inclusive as I would have liked. I'm interested in the athletic process, what makes a student choose a school and what factors impact their decision. I'm scratching at the surface of that general question. My study hits on statistics of box scores. It would be nice to put together a number of comprehensive factors. This project is more of a "what did I notice here?" study.
4. What resources are you finding helpful? Are there resources you need but don't have?
I don't feel like I need resources right now, I'm just looking at stats from old games. My main resources are Landmark Conference scores.
5. What kind of obstacles are you running into? Study issues, writing, outside forces?
I haven't had any obstacles, it's going pretty smoothly. My advisor helps with the statistical analysis. There is a time requirement involved but it's not bad, I'm spending between three and six hours a week on this project.
6. Are there things outside of Grouper and beyond Grouper's control that are impacting you?
No.
7. How did you approach this project from the start? Describe your mindset. Did you find yourself immediately overwhelmed? Did the project look doable?
When I first heard about action research I wasn't worried. I had to do a thesis when I was an undergraduate which was about 140 pages. Compared to that, this is manageable.
8. If you found yourself anxious or stressed about this project, what tools (if any) are you using to alleviate your anxiety or stress?
I had a little anxiety in research methods when I was figuring out my topic. But other than that, I take things week to week.

9. Besides action research, are you enrolled in any other courses this semester? Where are you in your degree progress? Beginning? Middle? End?

This is not my only class this semester, I'm taking another three credit course right now. Then after this semester, I'll have one more course to take before I get my degree.

10. What advice can you give me about this project?

I can offer you two pieces of advice. First, make sure you're getting work done week by week. Don't put off an assignment or you'll get behind and fast. Second, and this is more general to the program, make sure you take the appropriate course load each semester. Don't take too many courses but if it looks like you'll have extra time, take an extra course.

11. Is there any other information you would like to share?

I like to be able to go to Grouper to get work done; the library's great and it's just easier to concentrate there. Overall, I really enjoyed the courses in my concentration more than the general courses I had to take for the M.Ed. First because they were more interesting to me and second because I thought they would better my education. There should be more courses offered in my concentration.

APPENDIX C

Invitation to Participate

Dear [First Name of Student],

Allow me to introduce myself: my name is Aliza Ross. I am one of your peers in Grouper's action research course. My study is designed to interview current action research students to determine how they are moving through this course, what obstacles they are encountering, and what advice they have for future students. If this sounds like an evaluation or exit interview, that's the intent. The difference is that this study aims to go deeper into the student experience.

Like an end-of-semester evaluation, your responses will be kept confidential. Though Gaye Brown has provided me your name, the connection between your name and your responses will be known only to me.

I would like to interview you via phone sometime before Wednesday, March 5. The interview date and time is flexible—I will work with your schedule. The phone call will take approximately 30 minutes.

Would you be willing to help out a fellow action researcher? If so, please email me a reply by Friday, February 21 and we will set up a time to talk.

Sincerely,

Aliza Ross