

Action Research: An Effective Staff Development and School Improvement Tool

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As new programs and practices for school renewal and improvement of student learning are implemented in schools, questions regarding their success and effectiveness arise: Is the program working? Is the innovation making a difference? How do we know student learning and behavior are improving? Too often these legitimate questions cannot be adequately addressed due to lack of information or systematic evaluation.

Action Research "respects teachers' professionalism, intelligence, and decision making abilities."

Action research, which is "self reflective inquiry," provides a process for the collection of evidence regarding educational practices for purposes of increased understanding of both the practices and the contexts in which they are used. Action research requires people to put their practice "to the test" through collecting compelling evidence. As a result, it allows the action researchers to give reasoned justification of their education work to others (Henry and Kemmis, 1989).

Many educators in Washington who have used action research in their classrooms and schools have gained useful insights about their own work and have enthusiastically reported these results at the International Symposium on Action Research held in recent years in Seattle and Portland. Schools for the Twenty-First Century received training in conducting action research.

Examples of action research projects are reported by Henry and Kemmis (1989):

- A woman teacher interested in gender issues discovered bias in her own actions in the classroom,
- A teacher wanting to increase student understanding of science realized he had been dominating the class discussions,
- A teacher discovered that her interaction with students contributed to discipline problems in the class.

Definition and origin

Action research is inquiry or investigation combined with action embedded in the specific work environment. There are two aspects to the process of action research. In both, research is ongoing.

- It is a sequence of events and activities within an iteration (data collection, feedback, studying the data, and taking action based on the data)
- It is a cycle of iterations.

The origin of action research has been attributed to two separate sources: Kurt Lewin and John Collier. Lewin developed theory and practice in action research for use in the social sciences in the 1940's and 1950's (French and Bell, 1990). Although action research has been applied in educational settings over the intervening years, there has been renewed attention to using these processes in the context of school improvement and reform.

Understanding the school context, generating knowledge, and planning for action are essential components of action research. Carl Glickman, in his book *Renewing America's Schools*, includes critical study as a fundamental component for school renewal. Action research is essentially a critical study process.

Action research holds promise for practitioners because it is a relevant, active, hands-on process linked fundamentally to the school's "real world." It is an effective tool particularly for teachers who wish to improve their own instructional practices to impact student learning. Action research, according to Richard Sagor (1992), has another important dimension in that the process enhances the professionalism of educators who can make meaningful contributions to the knowledge and craft of teaching.

The process

Although action research requires a systematic procedure, there is no single prescription. Several resources describe practical methods which may be appropriate: *How to Conduct Collaborative Action Research* (1992) by Sagor; *How to Use Action Research in the Self-Renewing School* (1993) by Calhoun; *The Developing School* (1989) by Holly and Southworth; and *Teachers and Research in Action* (1989) by Livingston and Castle. A sample process based on essential steps outlined by Sagor follows:

- Identification or formulation of a problem to be investigated
- Collection and organization of data
- Analysis of data
- Reporting results
- Planning action

Henry and Kemmis (1985) describe the action research spiral as "Plan, Act, Observe, Reflect, Revise Plan, Act, Observe, and Reflect."

Sagor (1992) maintains that collaborative action research which involves teams or groups of educators is a "process that respects teachers' professionalism, intelligence, and decision-making abilities." A collaborative approach reduces teacher isolation, promotes professionalism, and increases collegiality, mutual support, creativity and shared knowledge. Calhoun (1994) supports schoolwide action research which asks for the participation of all members of a school embarked on school improvement. Livingston and Castle (1989) support teachers as thinkers and decision makers who become reformers themselves when "well-informed by research and practice" (p. 8). Other research, such as that conducted by Judith Warren Little, reinforces the importance of collaboration, collegiality and experimentation as essential components found in the work culture of instructionally effective schools. However, action research can be a individual endeavor producing profound results for the teacher-researcher who wants to do something to improve his or her situation.

Formulating a problem

In his book, Sagor describes various activities which can be used to initiate collaborative action research, such as reflective interviewing and analytical group discussion to explore teachers' current understanding and framing questions around the identified topic. However, the only real prerequisite is that there be a sincere desire to work with colleagues to improve teaching and

learning. The two guidelines which are fundamental are that the study pertain to some aspect of the teaching and learning process and that the selected areas are within the practitioner's scope of influence.

Collecting data

Data can be gathered from existing sources (such as archival records and student work), evidence relative to daily activities (such as journals, logs, and observations), and questioning tools (such as interviews, tests, and written surveys). Sagor and Calhoun both provide specific suggestions to assist with data collection. They also recommend the use of multiple sources of data in order to increase reliability. Use of multiple sources offsets potential imperfections in data gathering instruments and increases confidence in the results and may raise important follow-up questions. The use of a third party as a "critical friend" who is sympathetic to the process but provides an objective third eye can be a helpful assistance to the study process.

Analyzing and reporting research

Data analysis involves two distinct steps: skimming the data to identify themes and interrogating the data or "squeezing" it for as much evidence as possible. Reporting the research serves the important functions of disseminating important findings, heightening the organization, articulation, and quality of the results, thereby, contributing to the knowledge base and fostering a school culture as a community of learners.

Action Research is a vehicle for staff development embedded in the classroom context.

Planning action

Finally, and most importantly, action research informs practice. Therefore, making further decisions, which are based upon what is learned, and shaping what happens in the classroom are next steps for the teacher-researcher. The cycle is then repeated.

Successful teaching, Sagor writes, is a mixture of "art and craft honed through experience." Action research extends and enhances that experience. While "to teach" and "to do research" may seem mutually exclusive for many educators (Burnaford, Beane, and Brodhagen, 1994), action research is a vehicle for staff development embedded in the classroom context. Data provide powerful evidence to assist people in questioning their assumptions and their past practices and in encouraging them to change. The action research process through its reliance upon data assists in the improvement of teaching.

Resources:

Burnaford, G., J. Beane, and B. Brodhagen. (1994). "Teacher Action Research: Inside an Integrative Curriculum." *Middle School Journal* (November).

Calhoun, E.F. (1994). *How to Use Action Research in the Self-Renewing School*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

French, W.L. and C.H. Bell, Jr. (1990). *Organization Development: Behavioral Science Interventions for Organization Improvement*. Fourth Edition. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Glickman, C.D. (1993). *Renewing America's Schools: A Guide for School-Based Action*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers

Henry, C. and S. Kemmis. (1985). "A Point-by-Point Guide to Action Research for Teachers." *The Australian Administrator*. 6:4

Holly, P. and G. Southworth. (1989). *The Development School*. New York: The Falmer Press.

Livingston, C. and S. Castle. (1989). *Teachers and Research in Action*. Washington, D.C.: National Education Association.

Sagor, R. (1992). *How to Conduct Collaborative Action Research*. Alexandria, VA: Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development.

(Note: This article originally appeared in the *Center for School Improvement Resource*, Winter 1995, published by Educational Service District 113, Olympia, WA. Although the information in the article is pertinent and provides a useful summary, an internet search will produce more recent information on the use of action research.)