



Florida Literacy and Reading Excellence Professional Paper *Action Research*

“At its best teacher research is a natural extension of good teaching. Observing students closely, analyzing their needs, and adjusting the curriculum to fit the needs of all students have always been important skills demonstrated by fine teachers.”

~ Ruth Shagoury Hubbard & Brenda Miller Powers, 1999
Living the Questions: A Guide for Teacher Researchers, p. 3

The notion of conducting research in a classroom setting can be an intimidating idea to some teachers, especially if the teacher is to be the researcher. This intimidation can be driven by thoughts connected to traditional research, such as engaging in statistical analysis or establishing control and experimental groups. When teachers conduct research in their own classrooms, the process is not as formal as traditional research due to the nature of student learning. Therefore, teachers must respond to the instructional needs in their classrooms on an ongoing basis. The process they use to study their own instructional practice should reflect the cyclical process of learning. In contrast to traditional research, the teacher researcher's actions should change as their students' needs change. This method of research that supports ongoing change in student and teacher learning is called action research.

WHAT IS ACTION RESEARCH?

Action research is not a new method or idea to education. In the 1950's, action research principles were applied to the teaching process (Corey, 1953). It is now regaining legitimacy in the United States as an integral part of teacher professional development due to its successes in education reform in England and Australia (McKay, 1992). The action research process can be defined as a recursive ongoing process of systematic study in which teachers examine their own teaching and students' learning through descriptive reporting, purposeful conversation, collegial sharing, and critical reflection for the purpose of improving classroom practice (Miller & Pine, 1990). Action research is a search for answers to questions relevant to educators' immediate interests, with the

primary goal of putting the findings immediately into practice (McKay, 1992). The immediate interests are usually driven by the teacher's instructional concerns related to student learning. Teachers who conduct action research often ask,

- “*Why is student learning breaking down?*”
- “*How can I align my instruction to my students' learning needs?*”
- “*Am I making an impact on student learning?*”

Through their investigation, specific classroom problems are identified, instructional techniques are studied and implemented, and classroom data is collected and analyzed to ensure optimal learning for all students.

Action research is a cyclical, continuous process that involves four steps or phases: *investigating area of concern, studying and planning a course of action, implementing a plan of action, and determining effectiveness of the plan of action.*

Investigating Area of Concern – Teachers usually begin the action research process with an instructional concern in mind. As they observe students and reflect on their teaching, certain questions arise. In order to answer these questions, teachers must investigate these concerns with the goal of identifying a specific classroom problem or issue to study. This is achieved through collecting and analyzing sources of data that align to the teacher's questions. This is an important step of the process as it serves as the focus of the action research study.

Planning a Course of Action – Once the classroom problem or issue has been clearly identified, the teacher plans his or her course of action. This step focuses on how the teacher is going to improve student learning. At this time, teachers study professional literature and resources, confer with colleagues and support personnel, and attend professional development to identify instructional techniques that can address the specific learning needs of their students. The course of action is then drafted and includes the instructional techniques or strategies to be implemented, the process of implementation, materials needed, and data sources used for monitoring student learning.

Implementing a Plan of Action – The instructional techniques identified on the course of action are implemented during this step. The teacher should follow the plan accordingly and collect the necessary classroom data in order to determine the effectiveness of instruction.

Determining Effectiveness of the Plan of Action – At this time, teachers make instructional decisions based on the analyzed classroom data. The findings will assist the teacher to make critical choices on whether to continue, adjust, or discontinue the course of action.

The process of action research is driven by classroom data and teacher reflection. Through purposeful analysis, the data may pose new questions to consider and/or validate the teacher's instructional practices. Either way, this process provides teachers with multiple opportunities to lead change in his or her classroom due to the deliberate actions initiated to impact student learning.

THE BENEFITS OF ACTION RESEARCH

The primary purpose of action research is to help teachers understand their students and improve their practice in specific, concrete ways (Hubbard & Powers, 1999). Through careful reflections and self-assessments, teachers can develop and refine their craft. The significance of the teacher's study is how it informs and changes their teaching (Hubbard & Powers, 1999).

Conducting action research can also change how teachers view themselves as professionals. Positive experiences with the action research process can build confidence in teachers as they collect evidence of successful teaching or decision-making. Christine Bennett (1994) conducted a study to evaluate teachers' perceptions of action research. She found that teachers who conducted action research viewed themselves as being more open to change, more reflective about their teaching practices and decision making, and more effective teachers with fresher attitudes toward the educational process.

Glanz (2003) discussed how action research benefits the field of education, teachers, and their students. The benefits he described are as follows:

- enhances decision making providing an intelligent way of making decisions,
- promotes reflection and self-assessment,
- instills a commitment to continuously improve,
- creates a more positive school climate in which teaching and learning are more foremost concerns,
- impacts directly on practice, and
- empowers those who participate in the process.

Action research that is supported in the school and district can provide teachers ongoing opportunities to deepen their knowledge of teaching and learning. This can be an empowering experience for teachers. If the approach to action research is organized in a collaborative manner, this professional development approach can create a collegial, collaborative environment that fosters risk-taking, professional dialogue, and reflection. Ultimately, students will benefit, as their learning is the focus of the action research study.

HOW TO GET STARTED WITH ACTION RESEARCH

To develop teachers into action researchers, professional developers and administrators should consider the teachers' experiences with action research and their knowledge of teaching and learning. Their professional learning may need to be

scaffolded and supported depending on their experiences, knowledge, and willingness to conduct action research. Teachers' attitudes toward research change as a result of knowing, understanding, and using action research methods (Bennett, 1994). Teachers who are knowledgeable of the process may see the value and benefits of conducting action research. On the other hand, those who have not experienced the process may need to understand the relevance of action research and how it connects to teaching and learning.

With the diverse experiences and learning needs of teachers, how can professional developers and administrators support the learning environment to provide teachers with positive experiences with the action research process? Certain necessary conditions need to be built into the working environment of the schools if action research is to succeed as a professional development approach (Miller & Pine, 1990).

- Provide teachers time during the school day to discuss, reflect, and investigate.
- Provide teachers with a safe environment to experiment and try out new ideas, to identify and initiate their own problems to study, to express their ideas and develop them into a course of action, and to share and defend these ideas with administrators and colleagues.
- Provide teachers with professional development, technical assistance and professional support through knowledgeable personnel.

- Provide reasonable materials and financial support (grants).
- Provide university credit or inservice hours to teachers for conducting action research.
- Provide opportunities for teachers to share their work through inhouse publications, professional conferences, workshops, and journals.
- Administrators and professional developers should recognize and support action research as a viable professional development approach.

As teachers engage in the action research process, ongoing support is needed regardless of the level of experience. Professional developers must consider learning and growth as not only cognitive, but also affective processes that occur as teachers venture into the role of action researchers (Bennett, 1994).

CONCLUSION

Action research is a professional development approach that can benefit both teachers and students. The cyclical process of action research provides teachers opportunities to continuously monitor student learning while studying their own teaching practices. If schools or districts are considering this approach to professional development, the learning environment for teachers must be well supported to foster professional growth, inquiry, reflection, and collaboration.

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