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# Introduction

## *Practical Action Research*

**A**ction research is the study of a real social situation with an interest in improving the quality of actions and results within it. In education, it consists of using time-honored research procedures to reflect on classroom and school practice and to try out alternative interventions to improve academic outcomes. In fact, planned and systematic data collections in classrooms and schools distinguish action research from other types of staff development in education.

As an alternative to traditional research, action research helps educators reflect on their practice, collect data about their practice, and create alternative ways to improve their practice. Traditional researchers study what others are doing and try not to become personally involved within the research setting. Action researchers look at what they themselves are or might be doing, think about what they are doing, and search for creative ways to upgrade what they are doing. Action research combines subjective reflection and objective inquiry and is conducted by educators who want to improve their own practice.

Action research is participatory, reciprocal, and democratic. Teachers enlist their students' coparticipation to plan and implement the project, principals engage their faculties, and superintendents involve their staffs or boards.

Together, teacher and students, principal and faculty, or superintendent, staff, and school board carry out the action research as partners. Action research invites democratic participation and egalitarian collaboration among all members of an educational setting, whether that setting is a classroom, a school, or a district.

The two models of action research, proactive and responsive, differ in when the data are collected and analyzed during the cycle of events. In the proactive model, action precedes data collection and analysis. The educator acts first with an innovative practice and second studies effects of the new actions. In the responsive model, data are collected and analyzed before any new actions are taken. The educator first diagnoses the situation and second takes appropriate action based on the diagnosis. In both models, action and research become alternating parts of the same overall project.

All action research projects require trustworthy methods of gathering objective data. The most popular ways to collect data are questionnaires, interviews, observations, and documents. Questionnaires are printed lists of interrogative or declarative statements that individuals respond to in writing. Tests, for example, are special types of questionnaires. Interviews are conversations in which interviewers pose questions to interviewees. Observations involve attentively watching and systematically recording what is seen and heard. Documents are public records, press clippings, and private journals and diaries. Every action research project includes its own unique mix of questionnaires, interviews, observations, and documents.

Many books and articles on educational action research, written before 1995, were too abstract, arcane, and polemical to be of much practical use to practicing educators. They typically did not clearly spell out steps to take, nor were they specific about the research methods and groups dynamics to use. I sought in my book, *Practical Action Research for Change* (Schmuck, R. 1997. Arlington Heights, IL: SkyLight Training and Publishing, Inc.), to make action research concrete and practical for busy teachers and administrators. In it, I described how to carry out proactive and responsive action research within real classrooms and how to implement cooperative action research at different system levels of a school district, from simple one-on-one partnerships to the complex group dynamics of district-wide networks of educators and their community stakeholders. This collection of articles aims to build upon the practical knowledge base of that book with fifteen down-to-earth readings, published in the late 90s, that speak clearly and concretely to educators about the benefits and pitfalls of action research for school improvement.

# *Teachers as Action Researchers in the Classroom*

**by** LaVerne Warner and Polly Adams

**W**hy is Jeremy having behavior problems during center time? What does Amelia need in order to become more social with her peers? Why isn't the writing center attracting more children? How can I decrease the noise level when children move from the circle to snacktime?

Teachers are often in the very best position to act upon problems that affect daily interaction of children as they move throughout the school, socialize with peers, and become involved in curriculum experiences. When teachers study their children in systematic ways, they are participating in a form of research called action research.

## **What is Action Research?**

The goal of action research is to solve a specific problem. Its objective is not to make a scientific contribution to the field of education, although the scientific method still is applied. Many of the stringent controls required of other types of research are no longer necessary because generalization of the results of action research to another setting is not the focus of the study. For example, having a control group, large sample size, equal distribution of males and females, and determining socioeconomic status are no longer important, because teachers are concerned with their own classrooms or, if the principal is conducting research, with the entire school. In other words, action research is valuable to those who conduct it within a particular setting.

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Warner, LaVerne, and Adams, Polly. Winter 1996. "Teachers as Action Researchers in the Classroom." *Dimensions of Early Childhood* 24, 1: 22-25. Reprinted with permission of the Southern Early Childhood Association. © 1996 by Early Childhood Association. All rights reserved.

## Who Conducts Action Research?

Teachers have been doing action research all along. Because action research is designed to solve classroom problems, it is very appropriate for teachers of young children in child care, preschool settings, and primary grade classrooms. Action research is concerned with local problems and is conducted in local settings; therefore, it can provide immediate answers to questions and concerns raised by classroom teachers, principals, and consultants about children's behavior, specific programs they are participating in, and curriculum development.

## How Does Action Research Start?

Through classroom observation, the teacher recognizes a problem in need of attention. Forming a good question about the problem begins to define the focus of the study. Why is one child having behavior problems during center time? Why don't children appear to enjoy the new reading texts? How can I decrease the noise level when children move from the circle back to their tables? The question revolves around a topic—children's behavior, an academic subject area, a classroom procedure, or perhaps a teaching strategy.

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***Forming a good question about the problem begins to define the focus of the study.***

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Examples of classroom research include teachers and administrators collecting data to (1) determine which specific types of instructional strategies work best with certain ethnic groups; (2) understand how children respond to preset rules about how to behave on the playground, in the classroom, or on the bus; (3) discern which gender prefers to play in a certain center (block center, for instance) and what kinds of play are fostered by specific materials; (4) find out how special props will enhance classroom play behaviors; (5) define what types of information dissemination or planned activities are best for attracting parents to schools and centers; (6) discover why one child becomes irritable after an afternoon nap; (7) explain children's behaviors after sitting for a long time, etc. The key to good classroom research is finding out the necessary information teachers and administrators need to improve educational processes within their schools, centers, and classrooms.

Once the topic is narrowed through the formation of a question, a review of related literature can provide valuable information that will lead to an even more concentrated focus. A computer search, textbooks, or the library card catalog provide a good beginning point. The ERIC files, *Young Children*, *Dimensions of Early Childhood*, and other professional journals are helpful in providing specific information and current thinking. What others already have done or learned might be appropriate in the local setting. New, original