

Using Action Research to Improve Educational Practices: Where We Are and Where We Are Going

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In the current era of school accountability triggered by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (2001), teachers and other school professionals are expected to ensure that all students reach academic standards set by each state. Pressure is on schools to make progress each year toward the goal of 100% of students reaching those minimum standards, regardless of their background or exceptionality. Though few would disagree with the merit of the intent of NCLB, one consequence of the resulting political climate is an over reliance on “scientifically-based” curricular reforms. These reforms promise broad student success but can take away teachers’ autonomy and are counter to the idea that teachers are able professionals with the knowledge and skills needed to improve their practices for the benefit of students’ academic success.

For those of us who teach and facilitate in-service teachers’ action research studies, it has become increasingly difficult to help teachers navigate school climates where they are expected to focus on students’ attainment of standards but are not given a voice in how best to meet that goal. After a year of conducting action research studies, the teachers and administrators with whom I work state emphatically that the process made them more reflective professionals who view themselves as practitioner-researchers with the ability to make real changes in schools. However, few continue with action research studies beyond their graduate program requirements because of competing professional obligations, school cultures that do not support action research, or conflicts with school and district goals.

In one case, an elementary teacher and former student contacted me for advice about a new reading curriculum the teachers at her school were required to implement. This teacher was told to adhere to the model without straying from the prescribed instructional methods, which were not working for her population of students. She subversively collected data by observing students, conferencing with them, and engaging them in think-alouds, and she was confident she could alter the curriculum to make it more effective for her students. She knew, though, that this might mean losing her job. In the end, she made the changes, kept quiet about it, and watched her students’ test scores increase. Her subversion, which was nothing more than engaging in the reflective activities of a professional educator, benefited students’ achievement. But her additions and alterations to the reading curriculum also benefited a curriculum package that, because of her students’ success, appeared to be more powerful than it actually was in her classroom.

The focus of this issue of the *Journal of Curriculum and Instruction* is using action research to improve educational practices. The articles cover diverse topics relevant to P-12 educators and university faculty interested in ways action research can make a difference in schools and with students. Sagor delves more deeply into ways action research, particularly in collaboration with others, can contribute to the professional knowledge base and enhance curricular reforms by helping teachers discover how to alter instruction and curriculum across varied contexts. Manfra discusses the theoretical divide between competing purposes of action research and suggests we begin looking for commonalities between practical and critical forms of action research. Massey and her colleagues report on an investigation of what graduate students gain and take away from action research courses and experiences. Ellison, an elementary school teacher, describes the action research study she conducted in her classroom to help students gain mathematics problem-solving skills and confidence. The articles by Sagor, Manfra, and Massey reveal barriers, both theoretical and practical, to the action research process. Ellison gives us a practical application of teacher research that reveals the reflective work of a professional educator who is using the tools of action research to guide her own professional development.

In his invited piece on collaborative action research and school improvement, Richard Sagor (2009) emphasizes the role of teachers in making schools places where all children, regardless of demographics, language barriers, and exceptionalities, can learn. Sagor expresses concern over the notion that mandated reform models and standards-based reforms can succeed simply by ensuring that they are implemented with “fidelity” within schools and districts. According to Sagor, the notion that reform models based on scientifically-based research and proven practices will, if implemented precisely the way intended, result in success for all students, is flawed. As he explains, the research that supports scientifically-based programs—even those with the strongest research bases—suggests, at best, that the programs work for most, but not for all, students.

Further, when teachers are pressured to implement instructional models with “fidelity”—especially when this means they cannot alter the model to fit the needs of those students for whom the program is not working—they lose the ability to engage in the kinds of behaviors that are vital to professionals. Like professionals in technological fields, Sagor suggests that educators engage in research and development activities in order to create “the knowledge, understandings, and breakthroughs needed for the achievement of universal success” (p. 8). These research and development activities are a natural fit with collaborative action research, which, through the professional learning community model, brings teachers together for the shared purpose of studying and improving their educational practices in an effort to achieve success for all students.

Meghan McGlinn Manfra proposes a middle ground in action research that would allow teacher researchers to study practical problems in their classrooms while also studying issues related to the social, political, and cultural contexts of schools. Manfra begins her article by tracing the history and growth of action research and describing the emergence of different forms of educational inquiry in the United States, Australia,

and the United Kingdom. As Manfra explains, in the 1980s interest in action research grew in the United States with most supporters describing action research as a method for conducting classroom research to improve instructional practices. This “practical” form of inquiry empowered teachers to study their own practices, putting them in charge of their professional development. In Australia and the United Kingdom there has been greater emphasis on “critical” forms of inquiry and action research that highlight issues of social justice and the creation of a democratic society.

While both practical and critical forms of inquiry are valuable, Manfra describes the theoretical divide between them and discusses the criticism by some supporters of critical action research who suggest practical action research is dangerous, disregards social and cultural issues, and sustains status quo political agendas. Explaining that practical and critical forms of inquiry are not mutually exclusive, Manfra suggests that advocates on both sides of the theoretical division engage in dialogue where both the practical concerns of teachers as well as the emancipatory issues focused on in critical action research can bring them toward a middle ground.

In the article by Massey, Allred, Baber, Lowe, Ormond, and Weatherly, the authors confront issues of sustainability of teacher research for those educators who learn the processes of action research in their education programs but have difficulty maintaining a research agenda after completing research coursework. Massey begins by setting the problem within the context of publications on teacher research. These articles are typically published by university faculty or in collaboration with teachers but are rarely written by in-service teachers on their own. This phenomenon led Massey to ask the question *Who is teacher research for and what is the point?*, which she answered in conjunction with five former graduate students who completed a year-long teacher research project under her supervision.

Their conversations led Massey to conclude that for these former students—whom she described as five of her most dedicated students—the research experience revealed a number of benefits. These benefits included a shift in teachers’ thinking about what counts as research and increased confidence in their role as researchers. A second benefit was the impact the studies had on teachers’ instruction and their assessment of student learning. The teachers came to value the reflective nature of the action research process as a path to continuous learning about ways to improve their teaching. A year after they completed their research projects, however, none of the five former students were engaged in formal studies of their practice, largely due to changes in professional roles and responsibilities that limited their time. They did, however, believe the benefits of becoming teacher researchers persisted, providing them with skills in data collection and analysis and a desire for ongoing learning and improvement.

Jobrina Gale Ellison, an elementary school teacher in Tennessee, conducted an action research study to determine the impact of teaching mathematical problem-solving skills on advanced students’ confidence and ability in solving math problems. During her study, she collected multiple forms of data, which revealed that the instructional strategies she used with students resulted in increased problem-solving ability, though

there were no noteworthy gains in students' problem-solving confidence. Ellison analyzed results more specifically for five of her 25 students, choosing those whose problem-solving abilities increased most significantly due to motivational factors. In her conclusions, Ellison sets her results within the literature base and defines new questions that could lead to an even deeper understanding of how best to increase mathematical problem-solving abilities and confidence levels of high-achieving students.

This special issue also includes two book reviews. Geoff Mills (2009) reviews *Creating Equitable Classrooms through Action Research* (Caro-Bruce, Flessner, Klehr, & Zeichner, 2007), a book that provides authentic examples of practical forms of action research conducted by teachers that lead to more socially and academically equitable school experiences for students. Bob Fecho reviews *Teachers Taking Action: A Comprehensive Guide to Teacher Research* (Lassonde & Israel, 2008), a text that offers practitioners steps for conducting action research as well as ways to publish results. Both reviewed books feature subjects discussed by the contributors to this special issue—the first book reveals ways action research can be both practically and critically oriented, and the second suggests ways to set practitioner studies within the educational knowledge base.

Action research has seen its greatest growth in the United States in the last 20 years. Though action research was suggested as a way to improve schools as early as the 1950s, the push toward more “rigorous” methods of research that rely on the scientific method lessened interest in practitioner-based methodologies (Manfra, 2009; Hendricks, 2009). Once again we find ourselves in a political climate that favors “scientifically-based” research, and in this climate it is difficult for educators to find support for their research efforts. What seems to be most confounding both to teachers and teacher educators is the notion that schools can be improved and students can be brought to certain levels of achievement by simply providing the right curricula. Further, though teachers are held accountable for their students' successes and failures, often they are not given the opportunity or support to engage in the kinds of reflective research studies that can positively impact students' academic growth and the teachers' own professional development.

One way to grow and nurture the action research movement is to provide more opportunities for teachers to share the results of their studies through publication and presentation. For this to occur, conversations among P-12 and university educators will have to take place, and it is likely that *what counts as research* will have to be negotiated. What is necessary is finding a balance between how to define “rigor” in studies where context cannot be separated out or controlled but must be acknowledged and valued. It is the rich, context-specific nature of action research that can help educators determine the conditions under which different teaching methods and curricula work best. Once those of us in higher education can value the context-specific nature of action research, we are less likely to try to fit it into our schema of “rigorous” research and thus are more likely to publish it.

Another way to support the action research movement is to bring theorists and practitioners to the table to discuss ways the various forms impact students and schools. The longer debates among different camps persist, the more polarized individuals within them become. Whether a practitioner is conducting a practical study or one more aligned with critical issues, the goal is generally the same: to make schools a better place for students and for educators.

Ensuring the action research movement is sustained and continues to grow will not be an easy task. It requires dedication on the part of school-based practitioners and academics who see the power of action research to improve schools and who will look for ways to more fully integrate action research in the professional work of educators. As academics, our commitment must go beyond giving our students a brief opportunity to be researchers, writing about the transformational nature of action research, or engaging in theoretical debates about what action research is and what it should look like. Though theory-building is necessary, action research is only impactful when educators are actually engaging in the process, sharing what they learn with colleagues, and setting their findings within the knowledge base (through publication, for example). We must give them space and opportunity to do that. As for practitioners, those who value action research must find ways to negotiate competing demands of the current political climate, make time for action research studies, and share with their colleagues and administrators what they have learned. These activities are risky for us all because they require redefining who we are and what we have known. For university educators, this means changing our idea of what counts as research. For practitioners, it means embracing the role of researcher. Changes such as these are difficult and uncomfortable, but they are the best chance we have for improving schools through engagement in meaningful and impactful research.

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