By
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**Action research helps reinforce and cement the belief that together we can make a difference."**

*– Carl Glickman*

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# ACTION RESEARCH

## DEFINITION

**ACTION RESEARCH is a form of disciplined inquiry that has reemerged as a popular way of involving practitioners, teachers, and supervisors to better understand their work.**

**Action research can be as simple as raising a question about some educational practice and collecting information to answer the question, or can be as complicated as applying a t-Test to determine whether or not post-test results from an experimental group are statistically significant.**

Action research can involve the application of traditional research approaches (e.g., ethnographic, descriptive, quasi-experimental, etc.) to real problems or issues faced by practitioners.

Anyone in a school district could do action research – teachers, principals, paraprofessionals, clerical staff, subject area specialists, etc.

Because action researchers usually use very small samples, results are almost never generalizable. Yet action research, in its variety of forms, can help practitioners glean valuable insights into practice.

Extant literature on action research indicates that action research:

- **Creates** a systemwide mindset for school improvement – a professional problem-solving ethos;
- **Enhances** decision-making – builds greater feelings of competence in solving problems and making instructional decisions;
- **Promotes** reflection and self-assessment;
- **Instills** a commitment to continuous improvement;
- **Creates** a more positive school climate in which teaching and learning are foremost concerns;
- **Impacts** directly on practice; and
- **Empowers** those who participate in the process. Educational leaders who undertake action research may no longer, for instance, uncritically accept theories, innovations, and programs at face value.

Action research is one powerful design, among others, that can be used by practitioners to renew their schools and classrooms, and promote instructional improvement.

## METHOD

There are four basic steps in action research.

**STEP 1. SELECTING A FOCUS.** This includes three steps: 1. Know what you want to investigate; 2. Develop some questions about the area you've chosen; and 3. Establish

a plan to answer these questions.

Agree on the aspect of the school program you want to study. Ask, "What am I concerned about?" and "Why am I concerned?" Identify what is known and what needs to be known about this program or practice. Ask, "What information should be known in order to improve the program?" Identify specific aspects of the program that might need scrutiny, such as:

- **Student outcomes** (achievement, attitudes);
- **Curriculum** (effectiveness of instructional materials, alignment with state content standards);
- **Instruction** (teaching strategies, use of technology);
- **School climate** (teacher morale, relationships between teachers and supervisors); and
- **Parental involvement** (participation on committees, attendance at school events).

As you focus on a specific concern or problem, you need to begin to pose questions that will guide your research. If, for instance, low levels of parental involvement are a concern in your school, you might ask:

- How can I document these low levels of parent involvement?
- What impact does this low participation have on students'completion of science projects?
- Will increased involvement yield higher student achievement levels?
- How could we increase parental involvement in school affairs?

Developing these guiding questions will eventually lead to specifying research questions and/or hypotheses.

**STEP 2. COLLECTING DATA.** Once you've identified a specific area of concern, developed some research questions, and decided how you plan on answering them, you're ready to gather information to answer your research questions. Let's say you're investigating the district's new science program. You've posed some research questions about achievement levels and students' attitudes toward science.

## RESOURCES

**Corey, S. M. (1953).** *Action research to improve school practices.* New York: Teachers College Press.

**Elliott, J. (1991).** *Action research for educational change.* Bristol, PA: Falmer.

**Glanz, J. (1998).** *Action research: An educational leader's guide to school improvement.* Norwood, MA-Christopher-Gordon.

**Glickman, C. D. (1995).** *Action research: Inquiry, reflection, and decision making.* (Video 4-95037). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

**McLean, J. E. (1995).** *Improving education through action research: A guide for administrators and teachers.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

**McNiff, J. (1991).** *Action research: Principles and practice.* London-Routledge.

**Sagor, R. (1992).** *How to conduct collaborative action research.* Alexandria, VA:Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

**Stringer, E.T. (1 996).** *Action research: A handbook for practitioners.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Now, you can begin to collect data about the program's effectiveness in terms of achievement and attitudes.

You may administer teacher-made and standardized tests, conduct surveys and interviews, and/or examine portfolios. Many other pieces of data may be collected as well to help you understand the impact of this new science program.

Quite often action researchers collect data, but don't organize them so they can be shared with others. Raw data that just "sit around" in someone's file drawer are useless. Collected data must be transformed so that they can be used. Data that are counted, displayed, and organized by classroom, grade level, and school, for example, can then be used appropriately during the data analysis and interpretive phases. In order to present action research in the most concise and useable way possible, data must be well organized.

**STEP 3. ANALYZING AND INTERPRETING DATA.** Once you've collected relevant data, you can begin to analyze and interpret in order to arrive at some decision. The purpose is threefold:

1. To describe or summarize data clearly;
2. To search for consistent patterns or themes among the data; and
3. To enable us to answer our research questions and/or prove hypotheses.

At this phase in the action research cycle, lay out the data collected and interpret the data using previously specified standards. Chart expected results for each data collection instrument employed and note the extent to which the standard was met. Then, you can draw conclusions. Final decisions are based on the conclusions you've reached.

**STEP 4. TAKING ACTION.** You've reached the stage where a decision must be made. You've answered your questions about the new science program's effectiveness. Three possibilities exist:

- Continue the program as originally established;
- Disband the program; or
- Modify the program.

Action research is cyclical. The process doesn't necessarily have to stop here. Information gained from previous research may open new avenues of research. That's why action research is ongoing. In the role of educational-leader-as-action-researcher, you're continually involved in assessing instruction and seeking ways of improving your school. Action research affords you the opportunity and tools to accomplish these goals.■