

# Classroom-Based Action Research: Revisiting the Process as Customizable and Meaningful Professional Development for Educators

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## Abstract

The approach historically used for professional development for classroom educators (i.e., a 'one-size-fits-all' delivery model, where the emphasis is on 'training' and not on 'learning') is, quite simply, outdated. Even in our 'on-demand' world, where professional development modules can be purchased and viewed online, the individualized professional development needs of teachers are not appropriately or accurately being met. Classroom-based action research—with its cyclical nature of systematic investigation of teaching and learning, followed by data-driven improvements resulting from the outcomes of the investigations—provides not only a viable, but also valuable, professional development alternative. Following the development of improvement goals, the process of action research can be used to customize a teacher's professional development, allowing for a much more meaningful approach to professional growth. This approach permits teachers to investigate *their* own practice and to discover what will and will not work for *their* students in *their* classrooms. The integration of classroom-based action research with professional collaboration and with teacher evaluation are both discussed. Recommendations for administrative support—focusing on training, availability of time, collaboration, and incentives—for classroom-based action research are also provided.

**Keywords:** Action research, Professional development, Pedagogical growth

## Introduction

Generally speaking, the over-arching focus of any sort of professional development for P-12 educators is the improvement of their classroom teaching. However, for decades, the approach to professional development in education has been a 'one-size-fits-all' model. The basic logic behind this approach is that everyone can benefit—somehow—from professional development on the same topic. I firmly believe that this is not the case. For example, imagine for a moment a fictitious school district that announces that a yearlong professional development program for teachers throughout the district will focus on the integration of technology, specifically the use wikis and blogs, into classroom practice. Consider the situation of a teacher who has maintained her own classroom blog for years, and who is really effective at doing so. Or, how about the teacher who teaches in a content area for which it is not as feasible or practical to integrate wikis on a daily basis. What do those teachers stand to gain from this yearlong professional development program? As a long-time educator, I have often found myself wondering if or to what degree those countless hours of inservice workshops and trainings have ever truly had a positive impact on how or what I teach, or more importantly,

how well my students have mastered the content and skills I was teaching.

The above situation notwithstanding, we have begun to see a great deal of options available to educators when it comes to professional development. Online professional development modules or entire courses can be purchased—in an 'on-demand' manner—to serve the needs of individual teachers. However, at the same time, I would argue that while these may meet the needs of individual teachers, they are not 'individualized' to the *specific* needs of *that* particular teacher. For example, a PD module on differentiated instruction may be an appropriate topic for a teacher, but still does not factor in the specifics of the differentiated needs of her particular classroom (nor should it be expected to do so). So, the question remains as to how educators can pursue professional growth and development that truly targets their individual wants and needs.

## A Brief History of Action Research in Education

Most educational action research experts credit Kurt Lewin with the development of a theory of action research in the mid-1940s (McNiff, 2002), as well as with the coining of the term 'action research' as early as 1934 (Mills, 2011). Lewin's theory and model of action research was really formulated out of his desire to conduct research for the purposes of solving social problems (Smith, 2001). Stephen Corey was among the first to use action research in education (in the United States in the early 1950s). He believed that the application of the scientific method in educational settings would result in positive change due to the fact that educators would be involved in both the research and the application of the findings (Ferrance, 2000). Corey further believed that the true value in action research lies in the change that occurs in practice as a result of the process, and not in the generalization to a broader audience (*ibid.*). Initially, he saw value in the need for teachers and researchers to work together.

Just as action research was beginning to catch on, it began to suffer a decline in the mid-1950s and 1960s, due largely to attacks that it was unscientific, little more than common sense, and was being conducted by amateurs (McFarland & Stansell, 1993, as cited in Ferrance, 2000). Interest in action research waned over the next several years as experimentally-designed research became more widely acceptable and practiced (Ferrance, 2000). However, it later regained momentum in the UK, in the form of the *teacher-as-researcher* movement (Masters, 1995; McNiff, 2002), largely due to the work of Lawrence Stenhouse, beginning in the early 1970s. Educational practitioners were beginning to question the applicability of scientific (i.e., experimental) research designs and methodologies as a means of truly

solving educational problems (Ferrance, 2000). The results of many of these federally-funded studies were seen as purely theoretical, and not grounded in practice.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the educational action research movement continued to grow through the writings and works of people like Jack Whitehead and Jean McNiff. Since the early 1980s (Oliver, 1980), action research has been promoted as a meaningful alternative to more ‘typical’ inservice training and professional development for educators. Oliver (1980) argued that the major benefit of action research as inservice training is that it promotes a continuing process of professional development in a climate where teachers (and other school personnel) not only pose the research questions, but also test their own solutions, as well. McNiff (2002) has been a strong advocate for the use of action research to foster substantial professional development. She has stated that action research can be utilized both formally and informally, and should begin with the question, ‘How do I improve *my* [emphasis added] work?’ This approach is very different from more traditional views of professional development, which typically takes the form of training (where an expert on some topic is brought in to offer advice to educational professionals). In this model, the emphasis typically falls more on the ‘training’ (by the expert) rather than on the ‘learning’ (by the educators).

More ‘enlightened’ forms of professional learning (McNiff, 2002) operate on the assumption that educators already possess a good deal of professional knowledge, and are highly capable of furthering their learning. These types of professional learning capitalize on a more appropriate form of support to help educators celebrate what they already know, but also encourage them to develop new knowledge. An action research approach lends itself very nicely to this process, in that it requires educators to evaluate what they are doing and further to assess how effectively they are doing so. Rather than a trainer, what is required in this process is a *supporter*—someone who will listen to ideas, perhaps even challenge them, and will help in identifying possible solutions.

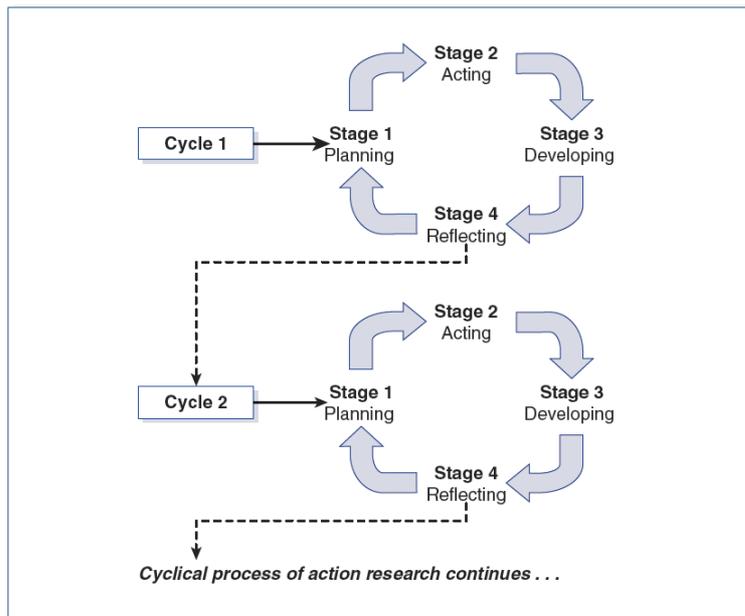
The idea of classroom- or school-based action research as a means of fostering professional growth and development is, admittedly, not an entirely new one. However, a good portion of the discussion and specifics contained in the remainder of this article provide concrete ideas for developing a system of professional development—including professional growth and learning, teacher evaluation, collaboration, and educator empowerment—grounded in an action research culture.

### **The Nature of Classroom-Based Action Research**

In this era of ever-increasing accountability and the constant need for research-based interventions and instructional techniques, educators may feel overwhelmed at where to even begin to identify potential solutions to their classroom and school-based educational problems. There are many excellent repositories of research-based solutions and strategies—and, as a trained educational researcher, I fully support this notion. However, we should remain mindful that we must always be concerned with the generalizability and transferability of these solutions. After all, remember that they were shown to be effective, but *not* with your students, *not* in your setting, and certainly *not* using your individualized instructional techniques and style. They are likely not generalizable, and do not provide an ‘appropriate fit’ to the actual problem you are trying to address (Mertler, 2012a). Based on my nearly three decades of working in schools and with educators, I propose a more immediate and appropriate solution: classroom-based action research.

*Action research* is any sort of systematic inquiry conducted by those with a direct, vested interest in the teaching and learning process in a particular setting; it is truly systematic inquiry into one’s own practice. I have formally described it as a process that ‘allows teachers to study their own classrooms... in order to better understand them and to be able to improve their quality or effectiveness’ (Mertler, 2012b, p. 4). Action research provides a structured process for customizing research findings, enabling educators to address specific questions, concerns, or problems within their own classrooms, schools, or districts. The best way to know if something will work with your students or in your classroom is to try it out, collect and analyze data to assess its effectiveness, and then make a decision about your next steps based on your direct experience. I often ask educators the following somewhat-rhetorical question: Why would you want to try to answer *your* questions or solve *your* problems about *your* students and *your* teaching by using *someone else’s* methods, data, and results? (Mertler, 2012a).

I talk about action research as a four-step cyclical process (Mertler, 2012b; see Figure 1), consisting of the following steps: planning for your action research, acting on the plan, developing an action plan for future cycles, and reflecting on the process. The action research process can serve as a mechanism for educators to directly engage in data-driven educational decision making (or, D-DEDM, for short), which can result in a high degree of professional empowerment with respect to what happens in their own classrooms or schools.



**Figure 1.** The ongoing, cyclical process of action research (from Mertler, 2012b, p. 38).

The idea behind integrating classroom-based action research into the culture and mindset of a school or district is that educators can investigate *their* own practice as a systematic means of discovering what works—and might not work—for *their* students and in *their* classrooms. I firmly believe that this adds a substantial degree of professionalism to the job of being an educator. The act of teaching is often referred to as the ‘art of teaching;’ however, a clear advantage of engaging in classroom- or school-based action research is the addition of the systematic ‘science of teaching’ into an educational and instructional repertoire. In today’s educational world, where accountability takes on greater importance each year, the art of teaching is *essential*; the science of teaching is *critical*. The act of systematically investigating one’s own practice—as a mechanism for job-embedded professional development—is, in my opinion, data-driven educational decision making and reform in its purest form.

#### **Action Research as Professional Development...and Teacher Evaluation**

The primary reason that I make the connection between action research and professional development is the ability as an educator to focus growth specifically on things that you alone (or, as part of a collaborative team) identify as being an area of your professional practice that you would like to see improve. As I’ve mentioned, the focus is on *your* school, *your* classroom, *your* students, and *their* improved achievement; the process (or, rather, the focus of the process) is customizable to meet your specific needs. One-size-fits-all professional development does not accomplish this. In addition, once you have results from your action research inquiry, you have the ability to take action *immediately*. This, in and of itself, results in professional development that is much more meaningful for educators. If we rely on the dissemination of ‘proven’ research-based solutions, we

typically have to wait for the accumulation of evidence to demonstrate the effectiveness of a particular solution—which, again, may likely be subject to generalizability and transferability weaknesses. When you systematically investigate your own instruction, etc., you collect data on your students and on your teaching; you know immediately what works and what might not work.

To extend this notion a bit, if we accept the idea that action research can serve as a sound basis for professional development, then it would make sense that it could be part of a system of annual teacher evaluation (Mertler, 2013). Educators would begin the school year by developing specific professional development goals for themselves for the year that they would pursue through a systematic action research approach. However, we must hold them accountable for what they discover through this process. If we allow—and, I might add, *encourage*—educators to develop their own professional development goals, and to systematically collect data and investigate their own practice, and if we hold them accountable for the degree of their successes (or at least for what they learn as a result of reflection on the engagement in such a process), we add the critical piece of truly examining teaching effectiveness and its impact on student learning. While arguably there is worth in utilizing standardized test data and value-added data to demonstrate teaching effectiveness, many of us would agree that there are just too many confounding variables that cloud our ability to cleanly and clearly interpret those results. Incorporating action research into teacher evaluation would add to teachers’ sense of empowerment, and to ownership over their own teacher evaluation processes.

### **Collaboration and Educator Empowerment**

Up to this point in our discussion, my focus has really been on individual teachers engaging in action research. However, I am a true believer in collaboration within an action research context. Two concepts that lend themselves nicely to this idea are collaborative action research and professional learning communities (Mertler, 2013). Collaborative action research is characterized by four key elements:

- It consists of practitioners working together as a team.
- The focus of the team is on a common issue, problem, or goal.
- There should be the development of a synergy that inspires one another.
- The focus of the research should be on creating momentum toward more insight into the problem, and greater learning and growth relative to the common issue being investigated. (Clauaset, Lick, & Murphy, 2008, p. 2)

The second concept is that of professional learning communities (PLCs). There are several key components of PLCs, many of which overlap with those of collaborative action research. PLCs are characterized by:

- A shared mission, vision, and goals;
- A collaborative culture;
- Collective inquiry into best practices and current reality;
- An action orientation (or, learning by doing);
- A commitment to continuous improvement; and
- An orientation focused on results, not on intentions. (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008, pp. 15-17)

As you can see, engaging in this collaborative approach to professional development through action research would require a shift in mindset. Working together in teams and abandoning the 'egg-crate' mentality that still permeates some schools, especially as an approach to professional development, might be a difficult transition for some educators. However, as the saying goes, 'there is strength in numbers,' and this approach just might result in substantial and collective improvements in student performance.

### **Suggestions for Administrators**

Of course, convincing teachers to buy into this action research approach to professional development might prove to be a challenge, but there must also be administrative support of this type of professional development (Mertler, 2013). This can best be accomplished through a well thought out and designed infrastructure to support action research as professional development in our schools. Four of the most important features that are necessary requirements for this infrastructure are adequate training and support, the provision of time, the encouragement of collaboration, and the inclusion of rewards or recognition. Each is briefly discussed below:

- Educators must be trained in conducting and valuing action research as a professional development activity. The concept of research is foreign to many practicing educators. They tend to be intimidated by the thought of conducting their own classroom research. They should receive formal training on the process of designing and conducting their own investigations by someone knowledgeable of the process, as well as in the application of action research to classroom settings. Often, the concept of action research is difficult to grasp or explain until one is in the process of doing it. Active engagement in the process is when it begins to make sense and become clear (Burns, 2010).
- Educators must be provided with time to do this kind of work. In all of the work that I've done with teachers on this topic, one question comes up repeatedly: Where am I supposed to find time to do all of this?! Time is an issue for all us in our places of work. The bottom line is that time must be created, carved out, set aside. There needs to be designated time to work on these sorts of professional development activities. This can be accomplished through common planning times, designated teacher work-days (or half-days), or perhaps periodic 'professional retreats,' where meetings and collaborative work might take place off-campus, away from the distractions (so to speak) of our everyday work. Let's face it—time is a precious resource if we truly want to innovate in our schools and classrooms.
- Collaboration must be encouraged throughout the process. As I've stated before, collaboration can be a key component in this process. This work can become overwhelming, and even frustrating at times. It is always beneficial to have multiple sets of eyes and ears to examine and process ideas that are being shared, interpretations of data being collected and analyzed, and alternative solutions to an identified problem.
- There must be a system of incentives in the form of rewards and/or recognition. The other question that I'm often asked by teachers is: Why would I want to do all of this work if I'm not going to be paid extra for doing it? I think it's important for us to remember that most of us did not enter a career in education for the vast amounts of money we would make! On the contrary, most of us did it because of the intrinsic rewards attached to the teaching profession. However, that being said, I do believe that there needs to be some sort of structure in place to incentivize this kind of professional development and work. These incentives could exist in the form of extrinsic rewards (perhaps, a grant-funded stipend, gift cards donated from local businesses, or prime parking spots!), or in the form of recognition efforts (such as a recognition dinner, or a school- or district-wide 'innovation conference' where educators 'show off' and share the action research they have conducted). Be creative with your incentive systems.

Our educators need to be encouraged—as well as recognized and rewarded—for these professional endeavors, which have great potential to lead to much more engaged and empowered educators in our schools, as well as the improvement of instructional practice and, ultimately, student achievement.

### Conclusions

The true benefit of engaging in classroom- or school-based action research is that educators can truly focus and direct their own professional growth and development in specific areas that *they* want to target, as opposed to having professional development topics thrust upon them. This allows for the emergence of professional development activities that are customizable in order to fit the needs of an individual educator, or perhaps even collaborative teams of educators (e.g., teachers of the students in the same grade, or teachers of the same content area). Specific areas of weakness or areas identified and targeted for improvement can serve as the focus of the personalized and customized professional growth and development through action research. Additionally, educators see this type of professional development as being much more meaningful since the focus of the activity is targeting areas of practice in which individuals want to improve.

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## Special Feature Teaching and Learning Projects

Every year, the Centre for Learning Excellence (CLE) provides up to £4000 per project to fund practitioner research aimed at developing teaching and learning. A condition of funding is that each fundholder(s) writes a report to be published in the *Journal of Pedagogic Development*. This edition features three of the six reports written by 2012-2013 fundholders: Sarah Cousins and Ulrike Dunne (Teacher Education), Malini Mistri (Teacher Education); and Mark Waters (British School of Osteopathy).

### Challenges of developing pedagogy through diversity and equity within the new Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum

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#### Abstract

A commitment to diversity and equity principles through social justice lies at the heart of many Early Years' practitioners working practices. However, the term social justice is complex, and this complexity manifests itself through its multiple meanings, in different cultural contexts. This paper investigates how diversity and

equity are linked through an understanding of social justice within the new Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum. It also explores how diversity and equity is promoted through the Early Years curriculum and what remain the potential challenges practitioners. Interviews in multi-cultural and mono-cultural primary schools with Early Years age phases were conducted.