

# Action Research: Three Approaches

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**Differing in purpose, emphasis, and results, three types of action research allow educators to investigate areas of concern and meet the challenges within their classrooms and schools.**

**A**nita Simmons records her 1st graders' responses to questions about simple fractions after using different displays and activities with them. She wants to determine which presentations are more effective than others.

Four middle school teachers—Elitrus and Paula from Rogers School, and Angie and Robert from Wilshire School—experiment with mnemonic key words in their science classes. They want to help students better retain and understand key science concepts and terms. They consult frequently with a member of the county intermediate agency and a professor from the nearby state university, both of whom are experimenting with the same method.

The faculty at Thomas High School wants to increase student achievement. To obtain this goal, all faculty members add a new instructional strategy, such as the inquiry approach or inductive thinking strategies. They observe and record student responses to the change in instruction and discuss their findings. A leadership team meets bimonthly for technical assistance with the Consortium for Action Research, a regional group sponsored by the state department of education.

These three scenarios all describe action research. The first, carried out by a single teacher, is *individual teacher research*. The second, conducted by a volunteer group

working with a university professor and staff development officer, is *collaborative action research*. The third, involving an entire faculty in conjunction with a school consortium, is *schoolwide action research*. True to earlier concepts of action research, the work centers on the practitioner; this is research done by teachers and administrators.

Action research was here before, in the 1940s and '50s, developed by Kurt Lewin and his colleagues as a collective problem-solving cycle for improving organizations (Lewin 1947, 1948; Corey 1953). The term *action research* captured the notion of disciplined inquiry (research) in the context of focused efforts to improve the quality of an organization and its performance (action). Today, action research remains a powerful tool for simultaneously improving the practice and the health of an organization.

## Benefits of Action Research

For teachers, principals, and district office personnel, action research promises progress in professionalization. The process allows them to experience problem solving and to model it

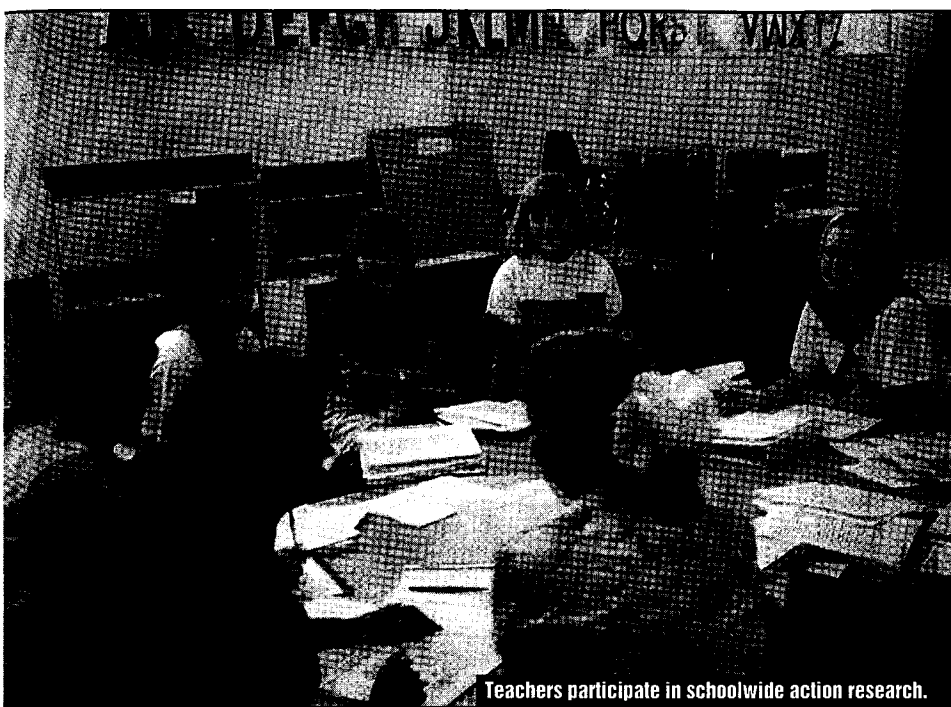
for their students. They carefully collect data to diagnose problems, search for solutions, take action on promising possibilities, and monitor whether and how well the action worked. The cycle can repeat itself many times, focusing on the same problem or on another. The process can help develop a professional problem-solving ethos (Corey 1953, Joyce 1991, Schaefer 1967, Sirotnik 1987).

Action research can revitalize the entire learning community, as well as aid teachers in changing or reflecting on their classroom practices. It can support initiatives by individual teachers, schools, schools working with communities, and districts. In addition, more than one type of action research can be used in a given setting at the same time.

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Selecting one type of action research over another has important implications for the school renewal process. From my work with action research as a consultant, coordinator, and researcher, I have gathered data on

action research from 76 schools in three states. These data indicate that besides the obvious distinctions about how many people are involved, the three types of action research vary in their emphasis on achieving equity for students, improving the organization as a problem-solving unit, and developing collegial relations among teachers. Further, each type has



Teachers participate in schoolwide action research.

Jan Lane Harper, Glynn County Schools

different long-term objectives, purposes, and results. *The key to selection is the purpose of the inquiry.*

Faculties and individuals choosing the type of action research that will best serve their needs should consider five elements: (1) purpose and process; (2) support provided by outside agencies such as universities, intermediate service agencies (for example, the Regional Service Educational Agency in Georgia), consortiums, and central office personnel; (3) the kind of data utilized; (4) the audience for the research; and (5) the expected side effects.

### Individual Teacher Research

*Purpose and process.* Individual teacher research usually focuses on changes in a single classroom. A teacher defines an area or problem of interest in classroom management, instructional strategies or materials, or students' cognitive or social behavior. The teacher then seeks solutions to the problem. Students may or may not be directly involved in helping to generate alternatives and determining effects. If parents are involved, they are usually consulted as sources of information.

*Outside support.* Individual teacher research is frequently inspired by university courses, a descriptive article about action research, or an encour-

aging supervisor, principal, staff development coordinator, or professor (see Oja and Smulyan 1989, Rogers et al. 1990, and Strickland 1988). Because support by administrators varies by site and by their personal interest in the area being explored, external agencies often provide teachers with the needed support. Sometimes the external agent acts as a mentor to the teacher.

*Data utilized.* Some individual teacher researchers use quantitative data, developing measures and forming and testing hypotheses. They experiment with different actions fashioned to address the problem, study and record the effects of those actions, and keep, modify, or discard ways of acting based on their findings. Some teachers use qualitative data in similar processes. A few teachers, operating more like phenomenologists, prefer to let the hypotheses emerge from the process (Carr and Kemmis 1983).

*Audience.* The primary audience for the results of individual teacher research is the teacher conducting the research. If students have participated directly in the investigation, then they, too, form part of the primary audience. Whether the results are shared with secondary audiences through staff development presentations, professional conferences, school district

newsletters, or articles in professional journals is at the discretion of the individual teacher.

*Side effects.* The effects of individual teacher research may or may not reach outside the classroom. Several teachers within the same school may be conducting action research on a similar topic, but they may or may not discuss their experiences and results. The amount of sharing depends on the collegiality of the individuals. Where such sharing occurs, collegiality at the school may be enhanced.

### Collaborative Action Research

*Purpose and process.* Depending on the numbers of teachers involved, collaborative action research can focus on problems and changes in a single classroom or on a problem occurring in several classrooms. A research team might even take on a districtwide problem, but focus its inquiry on classrooms. The research team may include as few as two persons, or it may include several teachers and administrators working with staff from a university or other external agency. The team follows the same investigative and reflective cycle as the individual teacher-researcher.

*Outside support.* Teachers and administrators often work with university staff, intermediate service agency personnel, or members of an educational consortium when doing collaborative action research (Holly 1991, Sagor 1991, Whitford et al. 1987). Collaborative action research frequently involves school-university partnerships and mutual support from each participating organization (see Allen et al. 1988). The relationship is similar to the interactive research

and development framework of the late 1970s (Tikunoff and Mergendoller 1983).

Teachers engaged in collaborative action research generally volunteer to participate or seek out affiliation with local university personnel who have expertise in particular curriculum areas. Professors, district office personnel, or principals may recruit teachers to explore an area in need of improvement or to field-test promising approaches. Recruiting teachers for field-testing is especially prevalent when agency personnel initiate the study.

*Data utilized.* As in individual teacher research, the data utilized by collaborative action researchers may be qualitative or quantitative. Data are more likely to be quantitative if the central office or intermediate service agency defines the study area. The larger collaborative research team might also use a greater variety of methods than the individual teacher-researcher and divide the labor, focusing on different dimensions of a problem. For example, in a study of disciplinary action, one member might survey parents, a second member might interview teachers, and a third might count referrals and organize them by cause and consequences.

*Audience.* The members of the research team are the primary audience for results from collaborative action research. Depending on their involvement in formulating and shaping the investigation, students and parents may form part of the primary audience. If the school administration, the district office, or a university sponsored the research, then these groups also form part of the primary audience.

Collaborative action researchers appear to share results with secondary audiences more frequently than do individual teacher researchers and participants in schoolwide action research. This may result from the involvement of university personnel in the process, who, besides providing support to teachers, are exploring their own areas of professional interest. Because their university positions

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require them to generate and share knowledge, university personnel often have more time to write about the action research experience and more opportunities to present the results. This writing and presentation is often done in collaboration with one or more of the participating practitioners.

*Side effects.* While the work between school or district practitioners and university personnel is collaborative and mutually beneficial, a major benefit to practitioners is the almost tutorial role university personnel play in helping them develop the tools of social science inquiry. Some groups stay together for several years, conducting several studies in areas of common interest, while their technical skills and expertise in inquiry continue to grow. Such collaboration also generally improves collegiality.

### Schoolwide Action Research

*Purpose and process.* In schoolwide action research, a school faculty selects an area or problem of collective interest, then collects, organizes, and interprets on-site data. Data from other schools, districts, or the professional literature are funneled into the collective decision-making process of the faculty, who then determines the actions to be taken. The process is cyclic and can serve as a formative evaluation of the effects of the actions taken.

Schoolwide action research focuses on school improvement in three areas. First, it seeks to improve the organization as a problem-solving entity. With repeated cycles, it is hoped that faculty

members will become better able to work together to identify and solve problems. Second, schoolwide research tries to improve equity for students. For example, if the faculty studies the writing process in order to offer better instructional opportunities for students, the intent is that *all* students benefit. Third, schoolwide action research tries to increase the breadth and content of the inquiry itself. Every classroom and teacher is involved in collective study and assessment. In addition, faculty members may involve students, parents, and even the general community in data collection and interpretation and in the selection of options for action.

A school executive council or leadership team composed of teachers and administrators often shares the responsibility for keeping the process moving. These leaders spur the collecting, organizing, and interpretation of the data, disseminate on-site data and applicable professional literature for collective analysis and study, and support the actions selected for implementation by the learning community.

*Outside support.* School leadership teams or district administrators often initiate schoolwide inquiry because of their affiliation with a consortium that promotes action research as a major school improvement strategy. Through exposure to consortiums such as the Center for Leadership in School Reform in Kentucky or the League of Professional Schools in Georgia, school leaders read about schoolwide inquiry, attend awareness sessions, or discuss it with peers who are using it. They then work to apply schoolwide inquiry in their home settings.

*Data utilized.* The data gathered from studying the school site and the effects of actions taken may be quantitative, qualitative, or both. The data collection can be as simple as counting types of writing elicited from students or as complex as a multi-year case study. Faculty members might divide the labor as in the case of collaborative action research. They

might also reach out to other schools studying similar problems and trying the same or different solutions.

For greatest effect, the data should be collected regularly, and evaluation of actions taken should be formative. Relying on summative evaluations such as yearly norm-referenced tests will lessen the dynamism of the process. Standard tests, however, can be used to corroborate the results of the formative studies. In almost all cases, multiple assessment measures are needed (Calhoun 1992, Glickman 1990, Holly 1992).

**Audience.** The audience for the results of schoolwide action research includes all the primary participants, at least the total school faculty. The faculty may decide to expand this audience to include students, parents, the general community, and the school board.

**Side effects.** Collective action may be the most complex type of action research, requiring participation from all members of the faculty. This complexity, however, generates important side effects: the faculty learns to build collegiality and to manage the group process. Teachers reflect on aspects of curriculum and instruction they might not have if they had worked alone.

Schoolwide action research may feel messy and uneven, and conflict may arise during the first few cycles, but this is to be expected when a diverse community is learning to apply a complex process. Collecting schoolwide data on an instructional initiative requires trust and mental and physical collaboration. Marshalling the efforts of all both takes and provides energy. Sharing the results from individual classrooms requires patience and understanding toward self and others.

### Reflecting on Action Research

In recent years many teachers and administrators have engaged in productive curricular and instructional improvement through each type of action research. Part of the promise inherent in the action research format

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is support of the current movement toward site-based decision making. In many cases, collaborative relationships have increased between school personnel and members of central district offices, intermediate agencies, and university personnel. Using schoolwide action research has increased the problem-solving capabilities of schools, and even districts.

As knowledge about the process accumulates and we explore action research, we will be better able to guide our school improvement efforts. Assuming that the trend toward action research continues and more and better studies about its effects are produced, we will be able to make more informed assessments of its influence on student opportunities to learn. These results should be positive, for action research has the potential to generate the energy and knowledge needed to support healthy learning communities. Our challenge as educators is to make this potential a reality. ■

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