

From Action Research: An Educational Leader's Guide to School Improvement, Christopher Gordon, c. 1998.

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## Steps in Action Research

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Action research is an ongoing process of examining educational problems in school settings. For those of you interested in applying action research, there are four (4) guiding steps, as shown in Figure 1.9.

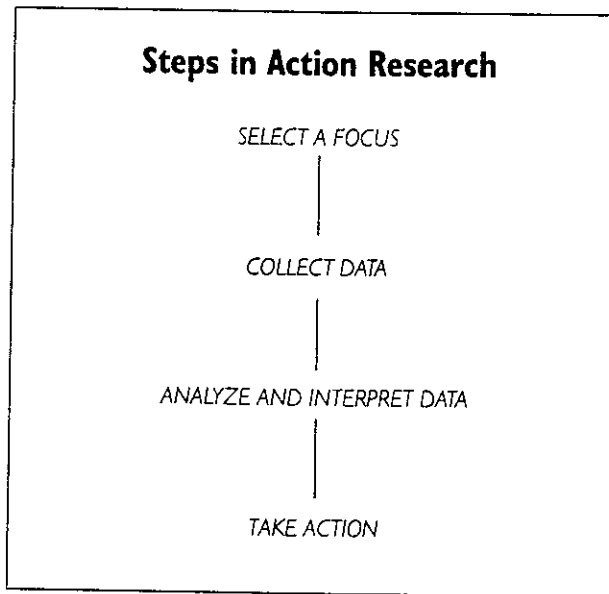


Figure 1.9

1. *Select a focus*—includes three steps:
  - a. know what you want to investigate;
  - b. develop some questions about the area you've chosen; and
  - c. establish a plan to answer these questions.

Come to an agreement on what aspect of the school program you would like 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 do I know about this program?" and "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:* e.g., achievement, attitudes, etc.

*Curriculum:* e.g., effectiveness of instructional materials, alignment with state content standards, etc.

*Instruction:* e.g., teaching strategies, use of technology, etc.

*School Climate:* e.g., teacher morale, relationships between teachers and supervisors, etc.

*Parental Involvement:* e.g., participation on committees, attendance at school events, etc.

As you focus on a specific concern or problem, you need to begin to pose some questions that will serve to 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 do these low levels of participation have on students' completion of science projects?"; "Will increased levels of involvement yield higher student achievement levels?"; and "How might parental involvement in school affairs be increased?"

Developing these guiding questions will eventually lead to specifying **research questions** and/or **hypotheses**. Selecting a focus also includes developing a **research design**, which is explained in detail in Chapter 3.

2. *Collect data*—Once you have narrowed your focus, that is, have a specific area of concern, have developed some **research questions**, and know how you plan to answer them, you are now ready to gather information to answer your research questions. Let's say you're investigating the new science program adopted by the district. You've posed some research questions about achievement levels and students' attitudes toward science. You can now begin to collect data that will provide evidence for the effectiveness of this program in terms of achievement and attitudes.

You may administer teacher-made and **standardized tests**, conduct **surveys** and **interviews**, and examine **portfolios**. What other kinds of evidence could you collect to help you understand the impact of this new science program? How would you collect such evidence? Discuss these questions with a classmate.

Quite often action researchers collect data, but do not organize them so that 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 organization is included in the data analysis phase that is described in detail in Chapter 6.

3. *Analyze and interpret data*—Once you’ve collected relevant data, you need to begin the process of analysis and interpretation in order to arrive at some decision. Data analysis and interpretation of results will be major concerns of Chapters 6 and 7.
4. *Take action*—Finally, you’ve reached the stage at which a decision must be made. You’ve answered your **research questions** about the effectiveness of the new science program. At this point, three possibilities exist:
  - a. continue the science program as originally established;
  - b. disband the program; or
  - c. modify the program in some way(s).

Action research is cyclical (see Figure 1.10). The process doesn’t necessarily have to stop at any particular point. 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 necessary to accomplish these lofty goals.

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## **The Educational Leader as a Reflective Practitioner**

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“Reflection? Who has the time?”, asks an assistant principal in an inner-city school in Los Angeles. “Certainly, we’ve learned about ‘reflective practice’ in graduate courses, but who has much time to really ‘reflect’ when you’re on the job,” complains a principal in a suburban school in Westchester, New York.

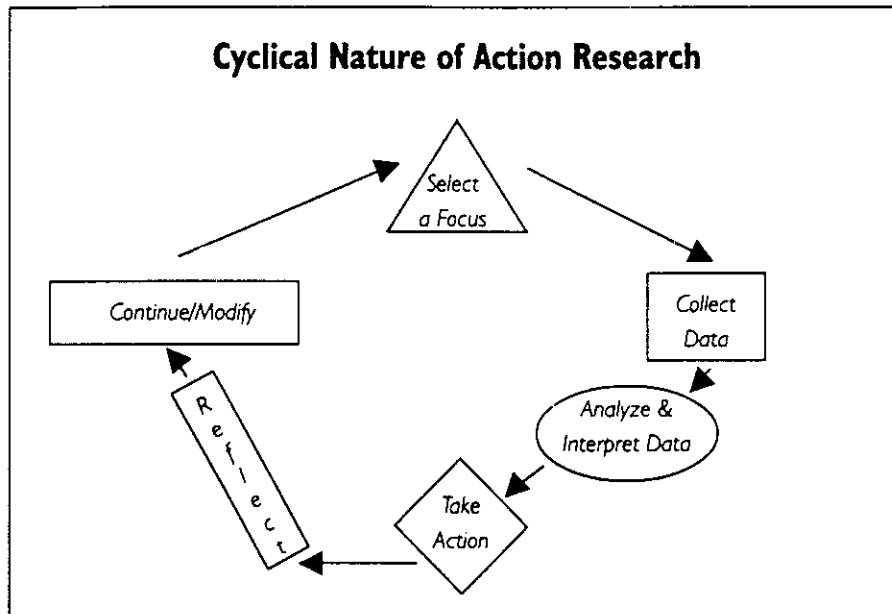


Figure 1.10

Anyone who has worked as an educational leader in a fairly large school setting realizes that “educational leadership is riddled (or blessed) with situations that demand quick action and almost immediate response” (Beck, 1994, p. 128). In spite of the fact that leaders often have to make quick decisions, reflection is indeed possible.

Donald Schon (1983, 1984, 1987) advocates reflection in and on the practice of educational administration and supervision. Schon maintains that “... the problems of real-world practice do not present themselves as problems at all but as messy, indeterminate situations” (1987, p. 4). Schon (1987) describes two types of reflective thinking: *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action*. Reflection-in-action is the ability to “think on one’s feet” when faced with the many surprises and challenges in our daily lives in schools. Educational leaders who are successful certainly are able to “think on their feet” as they face the multitude of crises that are all too common in almost any school. Leaders must often decide quickly when confronted by an irate parent’s demand that she be allowed “to whip” her child in front of the class. Even when challenged by less inflammatory

situations, leaders must act decisively. Management by crisis is, unfortunately, all too common in today's schools.

On the other hand, Schon also discusses reflection-on-action, which is most relevant to our discussion of action research. Reflection-on-action occurs when educational leaders look back upon their work and consider what practices were successful and what areas need improvement. Reflection-on-action is critical to understanding and thinking about events and phenomena as they unfold in the school. Special time must be set aside to allow for reflection-on-action.

Overwhelmed and sometimes incapable of dealing with increased demands, educational leaders think that reflection-on-action is impossible when, in fact, it is not only essential, but indeed possible (Whitaker, 1995). How then can an educational leader find the time to become a "reflective educator"? Here are some suggestions:

1. Set aside 15–30 minutes a day for reflective thinking. Build time into your schedule by informing your secretary that between 11:20 A.M. and 11:45 A.M., you are not to be disturbed, unless an emergency arises (and do give your secretary some example of "legitimate" emergencies). During this time you should close and lock your door and deliberate on the overall structure of the day or on one specific issue.
2. Some leaders prefer to "reflect" early in the morning before school begins or after school. Time for reflection should be determined by your schedule and preference. Choose a time during which you are alert and can seriously contemplate the many issues that need attention. Personally, I am a late night person and find that 1:00 A.M. suits me just fine. I am most productive when the house is quiet and I am able to think undisturbed.
3. One principal I had the opportunity to work with held a "cabinet meeting" every day, from 7:30 A.M. until around 8:30 A.M., before students arrived. Such meetings allowed supervisory personnel to "reflect" and bring up important issues for general discussion. Anyone on the faculty or staff was allowed to attend these meetings to share their concerns or simply join in on "reflecting."

One of the most important decisions an educational leader must make is whether or not to become a "reflective practitioner." A reflective leader is someone who takes the time to think about what has transpired or what steps should be taken tomorrow. A reflective leader thinks before s/he

acts. S/he is proactive, not reactive. A reflective leader takes responsibility for making those tough decisions and is willing to admit error. Reflective leaders do not act impulsively or overreact to a situation. Instead, they carefully consider options and decide on a course of action.

Reflection is the heart of professional practice. Robert Starratt (1995) explains that "practitioners who analyze the uniqueness of a problem confronting them, frame the problem in ways that structure its intelligibility, think about the results of their actions, and puzzle out why things worked and why they did not tend to build up a reservoir of insights and intuitions that they can call upon as they go about their work" (p. 66).

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## Reflective Practice

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*"Reflective process is a powerful approach to professional development."  
(Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993, p. 19)*

Reflective practice is a process by which educational leaders take the time to contemplate and assess the efficacy of programs, products, and personnel in order to make judgments about the appropriateness or effectiveness of these aspects so that improvements or refinements might be achieved. Research-oriented leaders have a vision that guides their work. As they plan and work to improve their schools, they collect and analyze data to better inform their decisions. Research-oriented leaders are engaged in ongoing self-study in which they assess the needs of their schools, identify problem areas, and develop strategies for becoming more effective.

Instilling habits of reflection, critical inquiry, and training in reflection is not usually part of a supervisor preparatory program. Supervisors should submit their own practice to reflective scrutiny by posing some of these questions, among others:

1. What concerns me?
2. Why am I concerned?
3. Can I confirm my perceptions?
4. What mistakes have I made?
5. If I was able to do it again, what would I do differently?
6. What are my current options?

7. What evidence can I collect to confirm my feelings?
8. Who might be willing to share their ideas with me?
9. What have been my successes?
10. How might I replicate these successes?
11. In what other ways might I improve my school?

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## Chapter Summary

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Action research, as disciplined inquiry, is an invaluable tool that allows educational leaders to reflect upon their practices, programs, and procedures. Many practitioners avoid research for a variety of reasons. Foremost among these reasons are that practitioners do not realize that implementing an action research project is not necessarily laborious, time-consuming, or difficult. Educational leaders who are truly concerned about improving their schools or programs will likely prioritize their responsibilities and expend appropriate energies toward undertaking some form of action research.

Although action research projects may be developed by teams of educational professionals, this book provides the impetus for individual leaders to acquire the requisite knowledge, skills, and dispositions to make action research an effective and valuable experience. This chapter has provided an overview of various categories, types, and forms of research and has argued that evaluation research, discussed at length in Chapter 4, is a primary use of action research that educational leaders are most likely to undertake on a regular basis.

Aside from providing you with a brief history, this chapter has explained the benefits of and basic steps in action research. Finally, you may better understand that reflective practice is critically important in order to make intelligent judgments about the effectiveness of various programs, procedures, and practices. Research, as a tool of an educational leader, *is* reflection in action!

Before proceeding to the next chapter, complete the following exercises: