

Guiding Questions

1. What are issues related to practice that you are passionately interested in learning more about?
2. What is action research? How has it been defined, and what are the main features of this methodology?
3. How can educational issues span multiple layers of the educational system? How might action researchers begin to tease these issues apart?

Keywords and Glossary

Action research: a research method for systematically and intentionally studying issues related to practice. It follows a cycle that includes problem posing, action, observation, reflection, and sharing.

Action research cycle: the cyclical approach to action research and the manner in which it follows a series of steps, each building on the previous and leading to the next.

Craft knowledge: the everyday knowledge about practice that teachers and other practitioners use to guide decision-making.

Reflection in action: the process of intentionally engaging in reflection about practice both during the active phase of practice (reflection in action) and before or during (reflection on action).

Systems theory: when applied to action research, promotes the inclusion of all stakeholders in the design of effective educational systems and the recognition that stakeholder participation is necessary to bring about change within educational systems.

Defining Action Research

How do you know that you are an effective practitioner? How do you know that you are making a positive impact on the students, teachers, or colleagues you work with each day? What are ways that you can improve your practice? There are many personal and professional benefits of reflective practice, and **action research** can be a powerful tool for engaging in this work.

Action research methodology follows a systematic and intentional cycle of problem posing, action, observation, reflection, and sharing. Action researchers ask and answer questions that emerge from issues related to everyday practice. This approach effectively flips the typical top-down approach to educational reform to provide a new space for practitioners, empowering them to bring about change across educational systems.

This book introduces action research methodology, including the history of action research and ways it has been used to address issues relevant to education reform. Each chapter will introduce you to various aspects of action research, including strategies for initiating a study, methods for collecting and analyzing data, and opportunities for sharing findings. We will begin by exploring the relevance of action research to contemporary school reform and then strategies action researchers can use to change their practice.

Action Research and the Context of Contemporary School Reform

The passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001 ushered in a new phase in educational policy, with increased federal and state control of curriculum and instruction and high-stakes testing (Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2005). To some, NCLB marked another event in a long history of social efficiency in education, further eroding the professionalism of teachers, principals, and teacher educators through its mandates (e.g., Apple, 2005). Educational policy in the United States since the 1980s has increasingly focused on top-down reform measures designed to evaluate teacher performance and student growth (Eisner, 1992).

Contemporary teachers are buffeted by increasing oversight into their daily work. This includes a continued push by educational “reformers” to use student test scores on standardized tests and other value-added measures to account for teacher effectiveness. This age of accountability and high-stakes testing impacts teacher autonomy, professionalism, and decision-making. Yet practitioners everywhere know the truth: Each day thoughtful, reflective educators enter their classrooms or schools planning to positively impact the well-being and knowledge of their students. It is in this space of practice—the day-to-day activity of classrooms and schools—that learning occurs and, many would

argue, where the real joy of teaching exists. Teachers matter. They make a difference in the lives of their students, and their relationships with students transcend professional concerns to include the nourishment and care of young people (Noddings, 1996).

Action research provides a structure or framework for teachers and other educational practitioners to study issues of importance related to educational practice. Unlike current top-down educational reform initiatives, it provides a space for practitioners to become the decision makers and knowledge creators—to effectively respond to contemporary educational contexts. Action research provides an opportunity for practitioners to make sense of educational policies within real classrooms and school settings. Rather than passively consume educational research conducted by an outside “other,” in action research, practitioners make the decisions about the scope and direction of the research. They collect and analyze data, and draw and share conclusions. By making their insider knowledge public, action researchers contribute to the general knowledge base while also honing their own expertise. Whereas much of contemporary educational reform attempts to define the narrative for teachers and other practitioners, action research provides an opportunity for practitioners to add their insights about persistent issues related to educational practice.

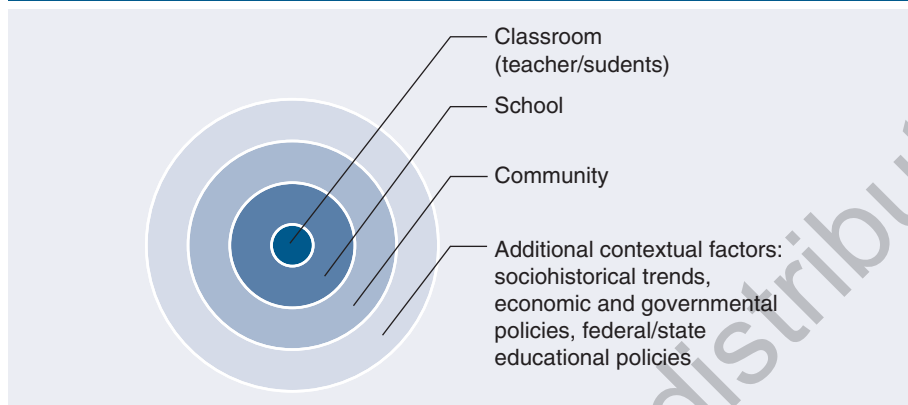
Complex Educational Systems

Although research demonstrates that teachers are one of the most significant factors in student achievement (Rand Education, 2012; Rockoff, 2003), we also know that teachers do not act alone. Teachers act as “curricular-instructional gatekeepers” (Thornton, 2001) and are part of complex educational systems that include other teachers, school leaders, community members, and, of course, their students. A study of personal practice often evolves to become a study of these networks and the extent to which the system is healthy and supportive of student growth. Figure 1.1 illustrates the multiple layers of a typical education system in the United States.

The center of the educational system in this case is the classroom. Here, factors such as teacher background and experience, teacher philosophy and worldview, instructional strategies, curriculum resources, and the students themselves, with their own special talents, interests, needs and outcomes, impact the day-to-day life of classroom practice. However, classrooms do not exist in a vacuum. Rather, they are impacted by social, political, cultural, and economic factors often beyond the control of individual teachers and their students.

At the school level there are a variety of factors that impact classroom practice. These include cultural factors, such as the mission or vision of the school. For example, a public, magnet program or a parochial school will set a different

Figure 1.1 Nested Layers of Education Ecology



tone regarding the scope and direction of academic activities. Personnel factors, including the effectiveness of school leadership teams and the talent and training of teachers and staff in the building, will similarly impact the school climate. Curriculum and instructional guidance and support, resources and materials, and building facilities all impact the day-to-day practice of teachers and students.

Schools, of course, are institutions situated within local communities, often reflecting the relative level of wealth or lack of resources of those communities. Geographic and regional factors as well as urban, rural, or suburban locations may also impact school resources. Schools reflect the demographics of local communities, and they are fundamentally impacted by local policies that determine the availability of infrastructure and resources. For example, schools in communities that lack quality health resources will serve students who may be dealing with health issues or crises. At the same time, schools situated in high-wealth districts tend to have stronger parent–teacher associations to supplement district funding. Local communities are the decades-long products of larger sociohistorical trends as well as economic and political policies. More specific to the educational context, federal and state educational policies, including testing programs, curriculum standards, and textbook adoption (to name a few), delimit curriculum and instruction in classrooms.

Action research problems can originate at any of the layers of the educational system described here—classroom, school, and community. Once you begin your action research study and delve more deeply into issues related to practice, you may find that issues related to practice can straddle multiple layers of the educational system. Mary discovered this as she pursued her action research in her fourth-grade classroom.



Vignette: Mary's Story

Policy and Practices Related to Homeless Children

Mary, a beginning fourth-grade teacher at an elementary school located in a small city, was in the middle of her action research project focused on developing strategies to motivate students to learn when she noticed that several of her students were checking out early at 3:00 p.m., although school was not dismissed until 3:30 p.m. Since she was a new teacher she was reluctant to ask questions. Instead, she admonished her students about the importance of staying for the full day and even considered assigning extra homework to those who left early. She felt that motivation and engagement could be greatly improved if her students stayed until the final bell. As part of her action research, Mary set aside time each morning during individual seat work to interview her students about their views of school and what motivates them to learn. During one of these interviews, a student somewhat reluctantly explained that she left school early to check into the nearby homeless shelter with her family. Upon further investigation, Mary discovered that

the homeless shelter admitted clients for the night beginning at 3:00 p.m. During the winter months beds filled up quickly, so parents were taking their kids out of school early to ensure they would have a safe place to stay for the night.

Mary's experience provides just one example of the ways that organizations within one community, both with similar goals, may fail to communicate. In this case, both the school and the homeless shelter provided public services to vulnerable populations. Yet leaders in both organizations failed to consider the broader systems in which they operated. The shelter was unwittingly disrupting the education of children whose families relied on the shelter. Mary little knew, nor understood, the conditions in which her children were living. No amount of goading or punishment could overcome her students' need for safety and shelter. Her action research challenged many of her preconceived notions and led her to work with her students in new ways, as well as to advocate for them.

Systems Theory

Systems theory (von Bertalanffy, 1968) and systems thinking have long been fundamental concepts in educational reform and instructional design. Proponents argue for a recognition of the interdependence and interconnectedness of educational systems; if one part of the system is changed, it alters the rest of the system (see Capra, 1982). Applied here to action research, systems thinking promotes the inclusion of all stakeholders in the design of effective educational systems and the recognition that stakeholder participation is necessary to bring about change within educational systems. "Stakeholder engagement is essential to the success of the design, adoption, and implementation of broad innovations such as new educational systems" (A. A. Carr, 1997, p. 6).

Returning to Figure 1.1, *stakeholders* refer to participants in each level of the educational system including teachers, students, school leaders, and community members. For those seeking change and improvement, approaches that are *systemic*—“holistic, contextualized and stakeholder-owned”—are preferred over systematic approaches that are “linear, generalizable, and typically top-down or expert driven” (A. A. Carr, 1997, p. 7). By engaging stakeholders who represent multiple perspectives and positions within educational systems, systemic change may occur. According to Carr (1997), “systemic change is broad in scope and large in scale. It entertains the whole system as a context for understanding change and organizational learning” (p. 9). While systems thinking takes into account the big picture, change is still largely dependent on the active participation of individuals. Since changes in one aspect of the system leads to changes in other areas, “systemic change recognizes the importance of user participation and responsibility within an organization that seeks change and improvement” (A. A. Carr, 1997, p. 9).

Perhaps systemic change in educational reform has been so difficult to achieve in the past because of a failure to actively engage individuals at all levels of the educational system. Much contemporary reform “pushes out” initiatives from a top-down perspective, ignoring the local and the contextual knowledge of individuals. Educational reformers seem to ignore teachers, imposing curriculum and instructional changes without engaging those charged with implementing change. Action research approaches educational change from a different direction—from the inside-out—and emphasizes personal interests and self-efficacy. Action research provides an approach to research that may engage whole communities and individual stakeholders in creating systemic change (Park, Brydon-Miller, Hall, & Jackson, 1993).

Rationale for Action Research

With such complex education systems in place, it is often difficult to tease out one or two particular factors that might improve classroom instruction and student outcomes. What action researchers understand is that there is much work to be done to better understand the nuance of each aspect of the educational system, even as we work for change.

Action research can be used to examine the complexity of schools and classrooms and enable all stakeholders to make more informed decisions about how to bring about change that will benefit students. Referring back to Figure 1.1, we might envision action research taking part at any of the levels of the educational system or across the levels. For example, within the classroom, the teacher might conduct teacher action research by studying issues associated with everyday practice and becoming a student of her students. According to Lytle and

Cochran-Smith (1994), “what distinguishes more productive from less productive teachers may not be mastery of a knowledge base, but rather standing in a different relationship to one’s own knowledge, to one’s students as knowers, and to knowledge generation in the field” (p. 31). Individual teacher researchers might join together to conduct school-wide action research about topics relevant to larger issues facing the school. (See, for example, Painter’s 2004 description of teacher research projects at Deer Park School.) And, of course, teachers and schools are not limited to their own building; they may reach out to engage community members in action research projects and/or across schools. By reporting their findings to policy makers at the local, state, and national levels, action researchers have an opportunity to shift the educational ecology. Action researchers refine and share their **craft knowledge** through reflection in action. This work has profound import for both the individual practitioner-researcher and the educational community as a whole.

Defining Action Research

There are various forms and affiliated approaches to action research, including teacher research, participatory action research, self-study, and practitioner research. “Practitioner research” is often used as an umbrella term to describe approaches to research focused directly on issues related to practice. For example, Borko, Whitcomb, and Byrnes (2008) also describe “action research,” “participatory research,” “self-study,” and “teacher research” as distinct genres of “practitioner research” (p. 1029; see also Rearick & Feldman, 1999, for a description of various distinctions across these types of practitioner research).

This text will refer to action research as “systematic and intentional inquiry” into practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 7). Action research goes beyond casual observation or reflection to follow a formal structure of inquiry. Action researchers identify issues of deep importance relevant to practice, collect and analyze data, and share their findings. By formalizing the process of inquiry, the structure of action research creates a space for practitioners to pursue issues of real importance and to engage stakeholders through their data collection and analysis.

Due to the range of approaches and outcomes, there has been considerable discussion within the research literature about the relative merits of practical and more critical forms of action research. Practical action research studies may focus on teaching strategies and issues of practical interest or everyday relevance. Critical action research goes deeper toward the study of social, cultural, and political contexts of schooling in the pursuit of more just and democratic schools and society (e.g., W. Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Elliott, 1985; Hyland & Noffke, 2005; Kincheloe, 1991, 1995). Table 1.1 provides an overview of the differences between practical and critical action research.

Table 1.1 A Summary: Practical Action Research Compared to Critical Action Research

Practical Action Research	Critical Action Research
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Practical-Deliberative” (McKernan, 1996) • Concerned with practical knowledge or craft knowledge • Interest in day-to-day issues of practice • May result in improved practice and student performance but not social or cultural change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Critical-Emancipatory” (McKernan, 1996) • Concerned with social and cultural factors that impact school • Interest in democratic participation and emancipation • Seeks deep change and enlightenment within the classroom • Implicit goal toward improving society

Source: Adapted from Manfra (2009).

Practical Inquiry

According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999), action research theorized as practical inquiry is a “way to generate or enhance practical knowledge” (p. 19). They contend that “theorizers in this [practical] group assume that some of the most essential knowledge for teaching is practical knowledge” (p. 19). Here action research becomes a tool toward improving teaching and learning. For example, by focusing on specific pedagogical strategies and other topics that impact daily practice, the action researcher may focus on ways to improve the day-to-day outcomes of classroom practice. According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle, “practical inquiry is more likely to respond to the immediacy of the knowledge needs teachers confront in everyday practice and to be foundational for formal research by providing new questions and concerns” (p. 19). Practical action research can address concerns related to curriculum and instruction, as well as logistical issues related to planning and implementing teaching.

Perhaps due to the close coupling with everyday practice, practical action research is viewed as being more relevant and authentic for teachers. According to Glanz (1999),

[practical] action research is a kind of research that has reemerged as a popular way of helping practitioners, teachers, and supervisors to better understand their work. In action research, we apply traditional research approaches (e.g., ethnographic, descriptive, quasi-experimental, and so forth) to real problems or issues faced by the practitioner. (p. 301)

The emphasis here is on practical, everyday problems that hinder effective practice.

Critical Inquiry

Proponents of critical forms of action research go beyond issues related to daily practice, to emphasize action research for real social change and the development of a more just and democratic society (e.g., Elliott, 1985; Gitlin & Haddon, 1997; Gore & Zeichner, 1991; Hyland & Noffke, 2005; Kemmis & Grundy, 1997; Kincheloe, 1991; Noffke, 1997; Van Manen, 1990). According to Kincheloe (1995), “the critical teacher researcher asks questions of deep structure of his or her school or classroom settings—in other words, he or she takes Habermas’s (1972) notion of emancipatory interest of knowledge seriously” (p. 81). Here the action researcher is able to conceive of individual classrooms or practice as situated within complex sociocultural and political systems.

The aim of critical action research is not only to bring about change in one facet of the system but to eventually transform the whole. According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999), “the emphasis is on transforming educational theory and practice toward emancipatory ends and thus raising fundamental questions about curriculum, teachers’ roles, and the ends as well as the means of schooling” (p. 18). Proponents of critical action research are often critical of more “benign” forms of practical action research. According to Johnston (2005),

On this [critical] view, we are encouraged to critique the social norms and practices that underlie our teaching practices and that may obstruct schooling for social justice. From this point of view, it is not enough to examine only teaching practice; teachers must also consider social and political influences on the teacher and students, as well as on schooling more generally. (pp. 65–66)

The aim for critical action research is to work toward social justice and to interrogate the contexts of practice.

Middle Ground

The relevant literature regarding practical and critical action research appears to polarize the two camps. Yet the realities of practice and the work of individuals within educational systems cannot be so neatly divided into practical and critical concerns. In creating a dichotomy between practical and critical action research, theorizers seem to have needlessly created opposing camps. Practitioners understand that the day-to-day issues of practice cannot be separated from the complex contexts of educational systems. Exploring the seemingly mundane may reveal critical sociocultural issues. Often both practical and critical concerns are interwoven across the classroom, school, and community contexts.

This text will focus on a middle ground whereby practical action research studies can lead to critical outcomes for teachers, students, schools, and communities. Envisioning a middle ground provides space for teachers and other practitioners to negotiate the tensions, practical concerns, and critical issues they face

in their daily practice. Regardless of the scope of the issues confronted, action researchers follow a cycle that includes the same systematic steps.

Main Features of Action Research

The main features of the **action research cycle** tend to parallel the inquiry cycle followed in educational and ethnographic social science research—posing questions and collecting and analyzing data to answer those questions. One major difference exists, however: Action research follows a cycle of inquiry in which each iteration builds on the previous and leads to the next. Also, unlike positivist or postpositivist versions of scientific research, conclusions are co-constructed with research participants (often students or other teachers) and findings are more context-specific and tentative. This approach to research honors the professional knowledge or craft knowledge of the researcher while also acknowledging subjectivity and positionality in educational research.

Over the course of this book, we will explore the major parts of the action research cycle:

- Problem posing (posing research questions, reviewing literature)
- Action (planning and initiating the study)
- Observation (collecting data)
- Reflection (analyzing data and writing final reports)
- Sharing (disseminating findings and developing an action plan)

These steps should be viewed as part of a cycle, as in Figure 1.2.

Figure 1.2 The Action Research Cycle

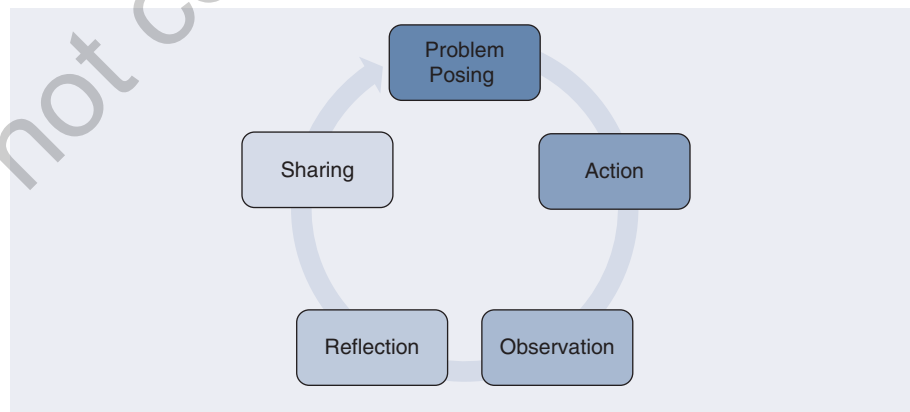
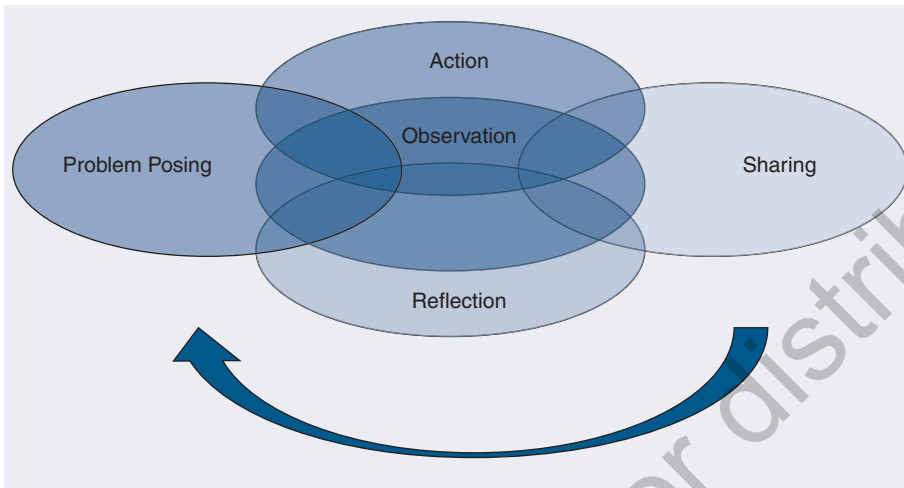


Figure 1.3 Action Research as an Iterative Cycle



However, although the steps will be described in separate chapters, they should be viewed as overlapping and iterative. Figure 1.3 demonstrates how these steps overlap and inform each other; for example, observation is a part of action, and analysis and reflection are ongoing.

Change as the Desired Outcome

Regardless of the scope or topic under investigation, action research is not a static approach to conducting educational research. Whereas traditional approaches to research focus on expert knowledge, here the role of the researcher is facilitative and self-reflective. The overall aim is to bring about change through the research process. According to Johnston (2005), “taking action and studying its consequences for student learning is the hallmark of action research. The action is intended to create change for the better and the study is intended to find out if it does” (p. 60). This change may include changing “craft knowledge,” changing educational practices, and changing the culture of schooling. By its very nature, action research is defined by change.

Action Research and Craft Knowledge

Craft knowledge refers to the tacit knowledge or implicit insights a teacher holds about practice; it guides daily practice and teachers come to rely on it to make decisions in the classroom. Action research provides a systematic and intentional approach for practitioners to reflect on and improve their craft knowledge.

According to Grimmer and MacKinnon (1992), “craft knowledge consists of pedagogical content and pedagogical learner knowledge derived from considered experience in the practice setting” (p. 387). Thus, they combine Shulman’s (1987) pedagogical content knowledge—“[the] special amalgam of content and pedagogy” (p. 8)—with pedagogical learner knowledge—“the procedural ways in which teachers deal rigorously and supportively with learners” (Grimmett & MacKinnon, 1992, p. 387). Craft knowledge refers to the judgment teachers exercise as well as the “glue” that brings all of the knowledge bases to bear on the act of teaching” (p. 387). It is the contextualized knowledge that experienced, skilled practitioners possess through the “wisdom of practice” (Shulman, 1987). Craft knowledge guides the daily curricular and pedagogical decisions that teachers make—it is the “know-how” that practitioners rely on regularly and can be “a powerful determinant of teachers’ practice” (p. 388). At the same time, it has its limits. Craft knowledge fails if it “do[es] not improve practice from the learners’ perspective” (p. 388) or if it does not take into account changing contexts.

Action research provides a structure for practitioners to study, interrogate, and reflect on their craft knowledge. By making implicit understanding explicit, teachers reveal their insider knowledge. By taking an inquiry stance toward this knowledge base, they can systematically and intentionally study their assumptions. As a result, teachers can make more reasoned decisions about their practices and work toward improvement. Teachers may also find evidence to support the efficacy of their craft knowledge. Falk and Blumenreich (2005) explain, “an unanticipated, but pleasant outcome for teachers who have engaged in research about their own questions has been finding affirmation for ideas and practices that were previously intuitive” (p. 177). By making intuitive knowledge more explicit, action researchers make sense of their work.

The action research process may also challenge previously held beliefs. Through the action research process, teachers may extend, refine, and improve their pedagogical content knowledge. An important part of this process is for action researchers to share their findings. By sharing their craft knowledge through action research reports, conference presentations, or more informal avenues, teachers can provide insights with “profound implications for the education of practitioners” (Grimmett & MacKinnon, 1992, p. 388) and the educational community in general.

Reflection in Action

Reflection is an important element of action research and has been shown to contribute to the development and refinement of craft knowledge. Teaching practice especially is developed and improved through reflective practice. “Teaching should be viewed as a craft that includes a reflective approach toward problems, a cultivation of imagination, and a playfulness toward words, relationships, and experiences” (Tom, 1984, p. 113). This reflective approach goes beyond the casual reflection most teachers engage in on a daily basis to include a more systematic and intentional approach to **reflection in action**. Schön (1983) referred to “reflection-in-action” and “reflection-on-action” as two interrelated approaches to changing practice through

systematic reflection. The assumption is that reflection about practice both during practice and before and after will necessarily impact the practice under study.

The emphasis on reflection in action research has also been traced to the work of John Dewey (1933), who emphasized that the process of reflective inquiry must become “persistent” in education. Action research provides a framework for ongoing or persistent reflection. According to Cochran Smith and Lytle (1993), “Dewey emphasized the importance of teachers’ reflecting on their practices and integrating their observations into their emerging theories of teaching and learning” (p. 9). This approach to defining and refining knowledge about practice is fundamental to action researchers. Reflection is an important part of the cycle because it leads to new questions and sparks further inquiry.

Rigorous reflection leads to changes in practice. According to Price (2001), reflection and inquiry can help teachers and teacher candidates “develop their ‘habits of mind,’ through looking retrospectively on the teaching that has occurred, reconstructing, re-enacting, and recapturing events, and critically analysing their students’ and their own actions, with explanations supported with evidence” (p. 48). Critical analysis or reflection leads to new habits of mind or professional knowledge. This work is complex and includes focusing on aspects of practice across the educational ecology. According to Price, “this [reflection] involves, for example, using knowledge to understand oneself, the complexity, uncertainty, and risky nature of teaching, the political and social dimensions of teaching and learning processes, and the consequences for children” (pp. 48–49). Ultimately, through reflective practice, teachers gain greater awareness of their impact on student learning and can adjust their teaching accordingly. Rogers, Noblit, and Ferrell (1990) note, “action research is a vehicle to put teachers in charge of their craft and its improvement” (p. 179). Here, teacher decision-making is informed by systematic and intentional inquiry into practice. In the process, teachers formalize their craft knowledge and work as professional decision makers.

Academic and Community Development

The benefits of conducting action research have been well documented in the relevant research literature. Beyond making craft knowledge more explicit and improving practice through systematic reflection, Falk and Blumenreich (2005) detail the positive outcomes for teachers engaging in teacher action research, including developing self-efficacy and becoming part of the professional community or feeling more like a profession. This is because, by making craft knowledge more explicit and generating theories of practice through the action research process, teachers find themselves in new positions within the educational system. According to Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1994), “if we regard teachers’ theories as sets of interrelated conceptual frameworks grounded in practice, then teacher researchers are revealed as both users and generators of theory” (p. 28). The notion of practitioners as generators of theory, not just consumers who enact theory, alters the traditional top-down approach of most school reform. As action researchers, practitioners are empowered to share their knowledge, to influence the practice of others, and to provide leadership within the educational system.

In the next chapter, we will explore strategies for posing questions about issues of deep importance that can spark an action research study. We will examine ways that action researchers develop questions by exploring issues of practice at various levels of the educational system. By identifying topics that are both professionally and personally important, practitioners can discern how their experiences fit within the larger frame of the educational system. By working with co-researchers and sharing findings from their action research, practitioners at all levels make their craft knowledge more explicit and provide new ideas about ways to bring about change.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Action research provides a more personal and nuanced approach to addressing contemporary educational reform issues.
- Action research flips the typical top-down approaches to educational reform and engages practitioners as problem solvers.
- Action research can be used to solve issues across the educational system.
- Systems thinking or systems theory points to the interdependence and interconnectedness of educational reform issues.
- Action research can be used to examine the complexity of schools and classrooms and enable all stakeholders to make more informed decisions about how to bring about change that will benefit students.
- Action research refers to the systematic and intentional approach to studying issues related to practice.
- The action research cycle follows a series of steps, including problem posing, action observation, reflection, and sharing.
- Through reflection in action and reflection on action, action researchers engage in the study and implementation of changing practice.

SUGGESTED WEB-BASED RESOURCES

Understanding Action Research (Center for Collaborative Action Research)

<http://cadres.pepperdine.edu/ccar/define.html>

Action Research (BBC)

<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/action-research>

Action Research

https://www.brown.edu/academics/education-alliance/sites/brown.edu/academics/education-alliance/files/publications/act_research.pdf

QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

Reflection Questions

1. In your own words, how do you define action research?
2. What role might action research play in contemporary educational reform?
3. What are research topics that might originate at each of the layers of the educational system described here? (e.g., classroom, school, and community level)
4. How can action research improve practice?
5. What are differences between practical and critical action research?
6. What are differences between action research and other forms of educational research?

Practice Activities

Activity 1A: Understanding Action Research Through Inductive Analysis

Action researchers often use inductive approaches to analyzing data. This activity will engage students in inductively analyzing action research reports, while also engaging them in developing their own definitions of action research.

Select three action research studies to read. Suggested examples include the following:

- Ballenger, C. (1996). Learning the ABCs in a Haitian preschool: A teacher's story. *Language Arts*, 73, 317–323.
- Bouillion, L. M., & Gomez, L. M. (2001). Connecting school and community with science learning: Real world problems and school–community partnerships as contextual scaffolds. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 38, 878–898.

- Burns, T. J. (2009). Searching for peace: Exploring issues of war with young children. *Language Arts*, 86, 421–430.
- Catapano, S., & Song, K. H. (2006). Let's collaborate and infuse citizenship education: Kids voting in primary classrooms. *Social Studies Research and Practice*, 1(1), 55–66.
- Fecho, B. (2001). “Why are you doing this?” Acknowledging and transcending threat in a critical inquiry classroom. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 36(1), 9–37.
- Hackenberg, A. J. (2010). Mathematical caring relations in action. *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education*, 41, 236–273.
- Hyland, N. E., & Noffke, S. E. (2005). Understanding diversity through social and community inquiry: An action research study. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 56, 367–381.
- James, J. H. (2008). Teachers as protectors: Making sense of preservice teachers' resistance to interpretation in elementary history teaching. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 36, 172–205.
- Kelley, L. (2006). Learning to question in kindergarten. *Social Studies Research and Practice*, 1(1), 45–54.
- Levin, B. B., & Rock, T. C. (2003). The effects of collaborative action research on preservice and experienced teacher partners in professional development schools. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 54, 135–149.

Martell, C. C. (2015). Learning to teach culturally relevant social studies: A White teacher's retrospective self-study. In P. Chandler (Ed.), *Doing race in social studies: Critical perspectives* (pp. 41–60). New York, NY: Information Age.

Wade, R. C. (1999). Voice and choice in a university seminar: The struggle to teach democratically. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 27, 70–92.

Also, see examples reprinted in: MacLean, M. S., & Mohr, M. M. (1999). *Teacher-researchers at work*. Berkley, CA: National Writing Project.

Compare and contrast across the readings. Note key features of each study, including the approach to research, the interests of the researcher, and the outcomes. Ultimately, respond in writing to the following prompt: “Based on these readings, how would you define teacher research? What seem to be common characteristics across the studies?”

Activity 1B: Exploring Action Research Interests

Write a brief (one-page) explanation of an aspect of your practice that you would like to study more deeply. (This might form the basis for your project proposal that you will submit at the end of the semester.) Describe your research questions and offer a rationale for the significance/importance of the topic for study. Locate two or three articles related to the topic(s) you are interested in studying. Create brief annotations for each article.

Activity 1C: Understanding Your Worldview and Positionality

Unlike positivist or postpositivist forms of research, action researchers acknowledge their worldview and positionality. They understand that their experiences and perspectives will guide the choice of research questions they pursue and the manner in which they pursue them. By being clear about one's position, action researchers can develop more authentic accounts of their experiences. In this activity you will answer a series of questions to help you clarify your position.

Answer the following questions in as much detail as possible:

What is the purpose of schooling?

What knowledge is of most worth?

What should school teach?

What should be the role of the teacher in the classroom?

What should be the role of the student in the classroom?

What should be the relationship between the school and the community?

If you are a member of a class or research collaborative, you may wish to share your answers after answering these questions. You may also return to these questions from time to time over the course of your action research project to monitor how your own research may change or clarify your thinking on each item.