CHAPTER

2

Approaches to Action Research

Guiding Questions

1. What are issues related to practice that come to mind as you reflect on your work?
2. Who might support your action research project or collaborate with you?
3. How might your worldview and experiences impact your action research?

Keywords and Glossary

Critical friends: provide feedback to action researchers about their work through each stage of the research process.

Gap analysis: is used to determine areas in need of further study; the difference between the desired and actual situation.

Interpretivist inquiry: emerges from a worldview that acknowledges the context-dependent nature of human experience and the importance of working alongside research participants to develop a more nuanced understanding of their experiences while also acknowledging the positionality of the researcher.

Needs assessment: is a systematic approach to understanding the status quo, by identifying what is and what ought to be.

Nominal group technique: provides a structure for gathering ideas from members of a collaborative group in the initial phases of a needs assessment or other form of collaborative inquiry project.

Positivist inquiry: emerges from a worldview in which knowledge claims and theories are derived through experimental or quasi-experimental means usually through a deductive approach to analyzing quantitative data.

"Something That Matters"

Action research might be undertaken by individual teachers or groups of teachers, across schools, or with community members. For each of these approaches, below are example action research projects, each situated within the nested layers of the complex educational system described in Chapter 1. Chapters later in the book will go into more detail about many of the methodological topics mentioned here.

This chapter serves as a starting point for reflecting upon and identifying potential research questions related to practice. Here we will explore various approaches to conducting educational research and develop a deeper understanding of purposes of action research. The approach we take here presupposes a middle ground between practical and critical forms of action research. The overall aim is to identify an issue that impacts daily practice while also working to bring about real change. Action researchers should begin in thoughtful contemplation about daily practice as well as how their actions respond to and are affected by various educational stakeholders.

Approaches to Educational Research

Often when practitioners are confronted with the responsibility of conducting research it seems like an overwhelming endeavor. This may be due in part to commonly held assumptions about research as controlled experiments. When research is seen as only being done by an objective outsider under controlled, lab-like conditions, it can feel impossible to integrate into daily practice. That approach to research originates from a **positivist inquiry** view of research in which knowledge claims or theories are derived through deductive means and most often through the collection of quantitative data.

However, there has been growing recognition within the educational research community that this positivist approach to defining research is too narrow. It does not take into account the importance of context and ignores insider knowledge. Proponents of action research and other forms of **interpretivist inquiry** have expanded the understanding of what "counts" as research to include more contextual, narrative, and critical approaches.

Teacher-conducted classroom-based inquiry has not always enjoyed such a prominent place in educational research. However, over the last decades, action research has been increasingly embraced by members of the American educational research community (Lagemann, 2000). This may be due in part to a growing interest in qualitative research methods and community-based and culturally relevant educational practices. It also aligns with contemporary understanding about the contextualized nature of educational research and the importance of working alongside participants to gain a more trustworthy understanding of their experiences. Willig (2014) explains the degree of appropriation that takes place during research and the consequences:

> To interpret another person's experience means claiming to have access to (some of) its underlying meaning. During the act of interpretation the interpreter moves beyond the surface meaning of a description or representation and asks: "What does it mean?" As a result, the act of interpretation always involves a degree of appropriation; the interpreter processes what he or she sees, hears and/or reads, digests it, metabolizes it and generates something new. (p. 11)

Since interpretation is such an important component of educational research, it is essential that university-based researchers engage participants, especially practitioners in research endeavors. Action research provides a framework for engaging practitioners in interpreting their own practice.

The subjective nature of educational research requires that researchers clarify their beliefs, views, and values. By reflecting on what matters most, action researchers become clearer about their education philosophies or worldviews. All of which has implications for future directions of the research since "people tend to adhere to the methodology that is most consonant with their socialized worldview" (Glesne, 1999, p. 8). For example, Egbert and Sanden (2014) suggest a tree metaphor in which epistemology serves as the roots of a research project and the conceptual framework is the ground from which the tree grows.

Many have argued that the very nature of action research—engaging practitioners and other stakeholders actively in the research endeavor—necessitates approaching research from an interpretivist conceptual framework. According to Schwandt (1989),

> Our constructions of the world, our values, our ideas about how to inquire into those constructions, are mutually self-reinforcing. We conduct inquiry via a particular paradigm because it embodies assumptions about the world that we believe and values that we hold, and because we hold those assumptions and values we conduct inquiry according to the precepts of that paradigm. (p. 399)

In this sense then, action research aligns with a particular paradigm—one that values multiple perspectives, the contextualized nature of experience and knowledge, and the willingness to empower voices that have been traditionally marginalized.

For example, a teacher interested in engaging in action research is turning the tables on traditional power relationships in the classroom by providing voice to students and becoming a "student" of her students. According to Glesne (1999), "In recent years, increased sensitivity to issues of power and authority has encouraged a rethinking of research design and implementation" (p. 9). Whereas some believe that the "authority for research decisions resides with the researcher" (p. 9), action researchers challenge this notion. "In particular, they [action researchers] cause us to rethink the purpose of research and, thereby, researcher-researched

partnerships" (p. 9). An important starting point for action research is to reflect on your positionality and to identify issues that might be addressed through systematic and intentional inquiry about practice.

Identifying an Action Research Topic: Problem Posing and Reflection

In action research, the practitioner becomes the meaning-maker, generating new knowledge or theory through the systematic and intentional investigation of issues related to practice. As such, action research projects originate from issues of real importance for practitioners. They often emerge in the gap between the desired outcomes and the realities of day-to-day practice. Action research projects might also emerge from special circumstances—for example, issues raised in contemporary teacher evaluation practices including value-added assessments, edTPA, and National Board certification (see the special section dedicated to these issues below) or through graduate education and other extended professional development opportunities.

An important first step toward identifying an action research topic and posing a problem to study is to engage in observation and reflection. Observation may include the collection of data as well as more informal information gathering, for example, discussing ideas with colleagues or other stakeholders. It is also important during this stage to review relevant literature and to reflect on issues raised through conversation or in writing in a researcher journal. (See Activity 2A for suggested prompts to guide your thinking, writing, and reflection.)

Gap Analysis and Problem Posing in Action Research

Another strategy for developing an action research project is to conduct a **gap analysis**—exploring the difference between what is and what ought to be. In order to understand the "gap" between the desired outcomes and the actual outcomes or status quo, researchers gather data about what is actually happening and compare this to the desired outcome. By identifying the gap, the action researcher identifies an important area in need of attention and further study. An action research project might then go on to determine why the gap exists and how to bring about change to correct it. (See Activity 2B for an example Gap Analysis Worksheet.)

Action Research Case Studies and Understanding Your Impact on Student Learning

Arlene's action research study emerged from her interest in learning how to better impact student learning. Student learning is an issue of deep concern for stakeholders at all levels of the educational system and an ethical imperative for teachers and administrators. Meta-analysis studies of action research have demonstrated

Vignette: Arlene's Action Research

Creating a More Culturally Relevant Middle School Classroom

Arlene was concerned that the African American male students in her seventh-grade classroom were underperforming on classroom-based assessments. Her gap analysis was fairly simple and straightforward: She compared assessment data between her African American students and their classmates and noted a disturbing pattern. Whereas her desired outcome would be for all of her students to be achieving fairly consistently, in practice, student assessment scores ranged widely. She also noted marked differences in behavior and motivation during her teaching—her African American students seemed disengaged and frustrated. Arlene reflected on the initial data she gathered as well as her own experiences teaching. She sought out literature to help her understand what other educators had discovered about the achievement gap and ways to address it in the classroom.

that action researchers can positively impact student learning when they systematically and intentionally focus on student achievement.

Perhaps one benefit of contemporary educational reform is the persistent focus on improving student learning outcomes. Many states and districts have developed teacher evaluation programs that include measures related to student learning. Preservice teachers at most accredited institutions are expected to provide evidence of their impact on student learning as part of edTPA (formerly the Teacher Performance Assessment; edtpa.aacte.org) and experienced teachers must do the same to achieve National Board Certification (www.nbpts.org). These outcome-based assessments go beyond previous approaches of teacher assessment to include data about actual student performance.

Although current measures of teacher effectiveness include a focus on student learning outcomes on standardized tests, teachers still have latitude in determining how to measure their effectiveness. In fact, it seems crucial that teachers include qualitative data to help explain and provide more nuance to test score data. For example, on a recent survey conducted by *Education Week* (2016) teachers overwhelmingly agreed that motivation and engagement are two of the most important factors in student achievement. At the same time, "more than half of the teachers (51%) said it is a challenge to reach struggling, apathetic, or resistant students" (n.p.). If the perceived link between student achievement and student motivation is so strong, its follows that teachers must better understand not only the level of achievement in their classroom but also the level of student motivation. Stated another way, any study about improving achievement must also connect with research about how to motivate and engage students.

Standardized test scores could become one part of a more complex effort to understand a teacher's impact on student learning. By becoming "students" of their students, action researchers learn about not only what their students know but

why they know it and how they came to know. Perhaps most importantly, they also begin to understand how they, as teachers, have contributed to student learning. Getting a good sense of student achievement at the beginning of an action research project, through a gap analysis or some other method, provides practitioners with an important baseline on which to build future work.

Given what we know about the complexity of educational systems, it is not surprising that action research projects that embark on a study of student learning often lead to directions not previously considered by the action researcher. These might include issues related to learning contexts, curriculum materials, instructional strategies, student factors, and assessment strategies. There are numerous additional text and web-based resources for understanding your impact on student learning (see resources listed at the end of the chapter).

Collaborative Action Research Projects

Understanding issues related to practice, particularly student learning outcomes, is a complex process and it may be beneficial for action researchers to engage in collaborative action research projects with peers and colleagues. It may even be possible for collaborative action research groups to leverage preexisting organizational structures within schools and communities to support their work. For example, many schools use a departmental structure to organize teachers by grade level or subject areas in professional learning teams (PLTs) or communities (PLCs).

Endeavoring an action research project as a department or PLT provides an organizing framework within which individuals might work. Here, research groups are usually composed of about three to five teachers and may meet every two to three weeks throughout the school year (MacLean & Mohr, 1999). Within these groups, teachers can develop working relationships to support each other during each stage in the process of action research. For instance, research group members might refine research topics and data collection methods through deliberation and conversation. In addition to providing support, research group members might challenge each other's assumptions, provide feedback on written drafts of reports of findings, and propose alternative ideas or interpretations. Cornelissen, vanSwet, Beijaard, and Bergen (2011) explain that the "relationships in the research partnership can be collaborative with a high degree of mutual engagement; the research agendas, methods and outcomes are negotiated and collective research activities are undertaken" (p. 148). Effective research partnerships provide ongoing support while also enabling researchers to pursue individual lines of inquiry. Within collaborative action research groups, individual members are free to both explore issues of personal concern and contribute to the group's investigation. For action research projects that engage more than one researcher, the members of the group may also decide to conduct a needs assessment—a strategy for more systematically understanding the current situation and posing problems to address over the course of the action research.

Needs Assessment

Needs assessment is a common feature of program evaluation. Often used by schools, it can be adapted to larger- or smaller-scale action research projects. To get started, a common technique for conducting a needs assessment is to follow the "gap model" (e.g., Kaufman & English, 1979). The model includes three phases: "1. goal setting, identifying what ought to be; 2. performance measurement, determining what is; 3. discrepancy identification, ordering differences between what ought to be and what it is" (McKillip, 1987, p. 20). The needs assessment will provide an understanding of a baseline or starting point, which is invaluable for action researchers intent on bringing about change. This systematic approach to understanding the status quo not only helps the researcher identify *what is*, but it also brings into focus *what ought to be*.

In order to begin the goal-setting stage of a needs assessment, you can follow a **nominal group technique** (Moore, 1987). This approach is often helpful in early stages of needs assessments in which you plan to engage multiple stakeholders. According to Moore (1987), "the [nominal group] technique is helpful in identifying problems, exploring solutions, and establishing priorities" (p. 10). Most importantly, this technique provides an opportunity for everyone to share their input and ensure diversity of ideas.

In the nominal group technique, the facilitator begins by outlining an issue or topic. Each member of the group is given a set amount of time to silently brainstorm ideas and jot down as many as possible. Once the time is up, each member of the group reports one idea. At this stage, there is no group discussion. Rather, the facilitator simply records each idea, going around to each member of the group until all of the ideas have been recorded. Next, each idea is discussed as a group. Individual ideas can be combined, altered, or deleted based on the consensus of the group. Finally, the group prioritizes the list to determine the most important items for the group to pursue. The vignette below demonstrates how the nominal group technique was used to guide a needs assessment conducted in a large school district.

Professional Learning Communities

Many schools and districts in the United States have already adopted a collaborative culture through the formation of PLCs (DuFour & Eaker, 1998) and PLTs. These may also be leveraged for action research projects. Since inquiry and change are both hallmarks of PLCs and PLTs, it is likely that members of well-functioning groups will be able to pick up the research cycle and use it to more systematically study issues of importance. According to DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many (2010), characteristics of "high-performing PLCs" include "collective inquiry" and "action orientation of 'learning by doing.'" Although they do not specifically mention action research methodology, it seems that it is a natural fit for the work of PLCs.

Action research provides a structure for organizing the work of PLCs. This work is most often successful in schools and districts where teachers are provided

Vignette: Needs Assessment of Social Studies Professional Development

When a group of educators in a public school system set out to determine the current state of teaching American history and ways to improve the curriculum, they began by developing a list of priorities. To do this they conducted a needs assessment with the goal of developing, providing, and evaluating professional development for American history teachers in the district. The rationale was that, by better understanding the gap between the current and desired experiences in these areas, the district could design a professional development program that would be responsive to the specific needs of local teachers, students, and administrators.

This action research was initiated not only to help plan future professional development programming but also to evaluate the effectiveness of current teaching practices. It began with a working group meeting that included the curriculum directors for secondary and elementary social studies as well as a representative from the school district's office of assessment and evaluation. When this group met they followed the nominal group technique (Moore, 1987) to structure the meeting and to facilitate discussion about history instruction and professional development in the county. As a group they began by individually responding in writing on a "Gap Analysis Worksheet" to explore the differences between the desired and actual experiences of teaching history and conducting professional development in the county. Next, they shared their responses and created a master list. Finally, they evaluated assessment data from the previous years. Over the course of the discussion, one member of the group recorded key issues.

Data collected from the nominal group meeting provided the basis for the development of two surveys for American history teachers in the district. Following McKillip's advice (1987), "They [surveys] provide[d] a flexible means of assessing the expectations both of subgroups of the target population and of other audiences to the need analysis" (p. 60). The surveys included a series of closed and open-ended questions designed to gauge teacher experiences. The surveys were sent to middle and high school (Grades 6–12) social studies teachers and to elementary (Grades 3–5) teachers in the district using a free online survey tool. Both qualitative and quantitative data from the surveys were analyzed. Surveys were followed by focus group and individual interviews with 15 teachers from elementary, middle, and high schools in the county. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded using a constant comparative method.

Based on the data from the working group, teacher surveys, and follow-up interviews, the team of action researchers developed a tentative hypothesis and reconvened the working group to discuss findings, again using a nominal group technique. Based on the feedback from the group, they went on to revise their initial interpretations and developed a list of recommendations for the district. Based on these recommendations, a professional development plan was developed and initiated across the district.

"the conditions that support meaningful teamwork" (DuFour & Fullan, 2013, p. 67). These conditions include supporting the development of collaborative teams (either by grade level or subject area) and providing adequate time for curriculum development, planning, implementation, and analysis of student work. PLCs may provide the "space" within the school day to enable teachers and other school personnel to pursue action research projects.

Working With Critical Friends

Regardless of whether practitioners engage in action research as individuals or in collaborative groups, it is important to share with **critical friends** throughout the process. Critical friends provide the necessary support of probing for meaning and offering feedback about action research projects. As the name suggests, critical friends provide constructive criticism, meant in the best sense, to further the interests of the researcher. By engaging critical friends early in the process, action researchers can test out ideas and monitor their own understanding. As they move through each stage in the action research cycle, researchers can share initial findings and reflections. Critical friends can push for deeper reflection and meaning making. A critical friend can balance being a friend—"someone who will listen and is trusted enough by colleagues for them to take risks"—and being critical—"the relationship is sufficiently robust to cope with questions and differing viewpoints . . . confront[ing] issues that have the potential to be taken for granted or unnoticed by the school community" (Aubusson, Ewing, & Francis, 2009, p. 76). There is no doubt that action research can feel like a risky endeavor for those involved. By opening oneself to scrutiny and being willing to admit the need for change, action researchers acknowledge their fallibility. Critical friends can be there to support the action researcher throughout the process to ensure fidelity to the model as well as to provide an essential reality check.

Engaging With Web-Based Collaboratives

Web-based collaboratives can provide an additional source of support for action researchers as well as a venue for sharing research findings (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). These collaboratives are especially invaluable for action researchers that do not have access to co-researchers or critical friends. According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009), emerging technologies have "spawned innovative uses of technology for sharing inquiries and classroom practices with audiences" (p. 22). Web-based collaboratives may be subject-specific or open to action researchers from a variety of backgrounds. Examples include the Bread Loaf Network (see Lewis, Guerrero, Makikana, & Armstrong, 2002), the Carnegie Foundation's CASTL Program for K–12 teachers/teacher educators (see also Hatch, 2006; Hatch & Shulman, 2005), and the Collaborative Action Research Network (CARN). (See the list of web-based collaboratives at the end of the chapter.)

CARN is one of the oldest and most well-established collaborative networks for action researchers. Established in 1976 by John Elliott and a small group of teacher researchers with help from a grant from the Ford Foundation, it has grown over time to include members representing multiple disciplines and research interests. According to Somekh (2010), a long-time member and leader of CARN, the C stood for Classroom rather than Collaborative although "CARN has its roots specifically within the educative values inherent in the words 'teacher' and 'teaching'" (p. 104). In other words, the focus of the network from the beginning was to "provide a forum for making teachers' knowledge public as a sound basis for curriculum development" (p. 106) and, by extension, school reform. Over time, the CARN bulletins (1977–1991) and, beginning in 1993, the journal *Educational Action Research (EAR)* provided a forum for teachers and other practitioners to share their work.

"Today CARN is well established as an international network that supports action researchers in local contexts and strengthens the collaborative relations of the global action research community" (Somekh, 2010, p. 110). Perhaps most importantly, CARN encourages cross-cultural collaboration as well as collaboration among practitioners from a variety of backgrounds and experiences. Teachers and other educators can tap into the rich resources and opportunities to collaborate and share work through CARN's publications, conferences, and website.

Action Research Across the Educational System

As the work of CARN suggests, there is no reason for action research to be limited to practitioners with similar roles. Instead, much can be gained from action research projects that span multiple layers of the educational system. In such instances, each practitioner will bring important knowledge to bear on a pertinent educational issue. For example, teachers and administrators may work together to improve classroom management and discipline policies in a school. By also engaging members of the community including parents, church leaders, and community groups, they can begin to understand complex issues related to student behavior and collaboratively develop programs to bring about change within the school. It is recommended that collaborative teams establish common goals around issues related to practice. Team members will benefit from "shared responsibility for engaging in collective inquiry" (DuFour & Fullan, 2013) around issues of deep and immediate importance.

Action research also provides a strategy for rethinking the traditional "turnaround" models of school reform. Rather than initiate these models as top-down, outside-in approaches to "fixing" bad schools, action research can provide a systematic and intentional approach to empowering practitioners to improve schools from within. For schools that pursue this direction, a crucial first step is to collectively identify persistent and pressing issues.

After key issues are identified by the nominal group, members of the school community, with the help of its leadership team, can move on to break these issues down into smaller, more manageable projects. These projects can be assigned to various action research teams within a school or community, creating a distributed research environment that contributes to a common goal. As each smaller team of action researchers conducts their inquiry, it is essential to plan for periodic meetings in which teams share their interim case analysis, including data collection and findings, as well as to plan a final culminating end point for sharing findings and making plans for future work. A suggested timeline follows:

Summer I – Issue Framing

- Conduct needs assessment
- Initiate nominal group meetings to identify core issues
- Divide into smaller action research teams
- Clarify individual roles in the research endeavor, sort out logistical issues (time, access to data, etc.), and identify final work product (e.g., research report, presentation, policy brief)

Fall (October) – Midterm Interim Case Analysis

- Write up interim case analysis to share initial research findings
- Provide updates about current data collection efforts and (if necessary) refine research problems and reorganize teams
- Conduct an audit of resources (Do teams have the necessary time and support needed to carry out their work?)

January – Midyear Interim Case Analysis

- Provide update about data collection, analysis, and initial findings
- Plan for second half of action research study (if necessary), refine research problems, and reorganize teams
- Continue to audit resource and logistical issues

Spring (March or April) – Midterm Case Analysis

- Provide updates about data collection and analysis
- Share findings and initial directions for policy changes and future work
- Share drafts of final work product

Vignette: Community Group Approaches to Action Research

In Seattle, Mitchell and Elwood (2012) conducted a participatory action research project to engage seventh-grade girls in "*counter-mapping* to resist hegemonic ways of representing space" (italics in original, p. 158). The authors aimed toward "enhancing students' sense of their own knowledge and agency to impact their communities, and developing research outputs that foster sustainable benefits for their communities" (p. 143). More specifically, they sought to understand whether students investigating institutions associated with marginalized groups would guide the students toward greater understanding about long-term sociohistoric trends and strategies for becoming civically engaged. They were "interested in whether learning about these historical processes would seem more immediate and important to the students if they could visualize how and where these things occurred" (p. 158). During the project, the seventh graders mapped key historical sites in Seattle using the Google Maps API and created annotations (photos, comments, etc.). They also created think-alouds or "guided tours" of maps discussing what was included/excluded and why, as well as responded to a civic engagement worksheet. The adult participants (Mitchell and Elwood) kept field journals of their observations about youth participants as well as analyzed samples of students' work. As a result of their study, the authors concluded:

> Among the insights that the students derived, a key one was the growing understanding that both discriminatory actions such as redlining, and the creation of affirmative locales such as benevolent societies, are profoundly spatial processes critical in both scope and impact to historically subordinated groups. (p. 157)

This action research project was unique in engaging youth participants as co-researchers. The aim here was to study "a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it" (Elliott, 1991, p. 69). The collaborative action research followed a systematic approach or cycle that included problem posing, action, observation, reflection, and sharing. Through systematic and intentional inquiry and reflection, the participants in the project worked for change at various levels in the educational system.

Summer II – Summative Research Symposium

- Share final work products
- Initiate nominal groups to craft policy changes based on findings
- Develop action plans
- Initiate future action research and reform endeavors

The importance of professional development, collaboration, and trust cannot be overemphasized in such a model. It is essential for action researchers to feel their work connects with their day-to-day work and that they have the necessary time and support for these endeavors. By being very purposeful in the framing and organizing stages, school leaders can help guide individual action researchers through any apprehension that might exist and to help navigate the sticky points. Through careful planning, widespread commitment, and time, action research can provide a means to reframe educational institutions in a way that is more sustainable than having outside groups lead the work.

Educators and educational researchers can also develop action research projects that engage students as active participants in the meaning-making. Rarely given a voice in educational policy, students experience the day-to-day effects of educational and social policies. It seems desirable then to engage students in identifying issues of concern as well as in developing solutions. In the vignette below, university-based faculty engage youth as action researchers, mapping community-based resources and examining issues of social justice. It demonstrates the range of potential action research projects as well as the opportunities that exist for collaboration across the educational system.

Methodological Approaches

Although action research is viewed as a cycle or spiral, there are often differences in methods across projects. As mentioned previously, methodological decisions about research design (including data collection and analysis) will flow from the epistemology and conceptual framework of the researcher. Since worldview influences decisions about research topics and questions identified by the action researcher, research methods must also logically fit with the problems posed. At the same time, researchers must be realistic about what they might achieve over the course of a study and consider the logical organization of their studies—will the approaches to data collection provide the necessary data to answer the questions posed? Chapter 3 provides a more detailed discussion about research design.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Action research problems can develop from collaborative group or individual inquiry at any level within an educational system.
- There are many strategies individual action researchers and collaborative groups can follow to identify issues to study, including

conducting a gap analysis and needs assessment.

- The nominal group technique is useful for soliciting a wide variety of opinions about a topic.
- Critical friends provide action researchers with feedback and support throughout the research process.
- Action researchers can engage in individual research or collaborate with colleagues through structures that may already exist, including departmental structures, professional learning teams (PLTs) or professional learning communities (PLCs), and virtual research collaboratives.
- For a collaborative action research project to be successful, the group must come to consensus about the focus of study, develop a clear strategy for communicating among group members, and effectively engage stakeholders.

SUGGESTED WEB-BASED RESOURCES

Collaborative Action Research Network (CARN)

https://www.carn.org.uk

Center for Practitioner Research (CFPR)

http://nlu.nl.edu/cfpr

QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

Reflection Questions

1. What are problems related to your everyday practice that you might be able to address through an action research project?
2. Who are some people that may help you with your action research project and support your work?
3. When you think about the gap between the desired situation and what actually is, what issues come to mind?
4. Who might be a critical friend during your action research study?
5. Can you take advantage of organizational structures to support your individual or group action research projects?

Practice Activities

Activity 2A: Examining Your Worldview and Posing a Research Problem

Before embarking on a research project, it is essential that action researchers reflect on their worldview. It is by clarifying this position that research problems may logically flow. This chapter takes the position that the very nature of action research—engaging stakeholders actively in the research endeavor—translates into research that is interpretivist. As such, it is essential to clarify not only the worldview but also the positionality of the researcher in order to clarify how interpretations might be made. Respond to the prompts below in your action researcher journal:

1. When you consider your practice, what are some of the most pressing or significant issues you face? (Jot down as many as you can.)
2. Choose one of the issues you have the power, opportunity, or resources to address. Write this issue down on the center of your paper. Create a web-diagram to jot the stakeholders affected by this issue or contributing to this issue (e.g., students, teachers, administrators, community members, parents; see Figure 2.1, for example). Add your name as a stakeholder. After reflecting on the role you play in contributing to this issue, jot down ways you contribute to or are affected by this issue.

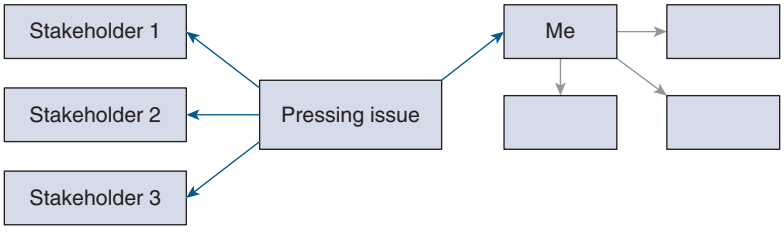
   After mapping out the issue, write about the issue. Why is it important to you? Why does it concern you? What is the history of this issue? What is important contextual information for understanding the issue? How might you make sense of this issue from the frame of your prior personal and professional experiences?
3. Next, write about your ideal situation. What would it look like? What would happen to solve the issue or to improve the situation? What would be the actions of the stakeholders? What would be the effects of these actions?
4. Consider your relationship (or position) relative to the stakeholders you listed. How would you describe each of these positions? For example, how do you engage with these stakeholders? What values do you emphasize as you communicate with the stakeholders? What power dynamics or differences of opinion might be at work?
5. Finally, reread what you wrote and realize that it summarizes your positions as well as your assumptions. How might you use the opportunity to engage in action research to interrogate your assumptions and, perhaps, shift your position? How might you use your action research to better frame the issue you have identified and seek change?

Activity 2B: Completing a Gap Analysis

In order to complete this activity, you need time and space to reflect quietly on your current experiences.

1. Begin by jotting down a list of issues that you confront in your daily work. If you find it difficult to develop this list, you might begin by keeping a journal for one full week, focused on recounting your experiences as a practitioner.

Figure 2.1 Visualizing Action Research Stakeholders



2. At the end of the week, read back over your entries. Does anything stand out as particularly pressing, persistent, or worrisome to you? Use the journal entries to help you create a list of issues.
3. Once you have identified your list, reflect on it carefully. Do you see any patterns? Are there any interconnections between issues listed? Identify one or two topics that you can distill from your list that you would be passionately interested in studying more deeply.
4. Next, divide a sheet of paper into two sections. At the top write "current situation" and on the bottom half write "desired or necessary situation." You can begin at either section to free write about what you see as the current situation or desired situation related to your topic. You can write in prose or create a bulleted list. There are very few rules here; the emphasis should be placed on brainstorming and reflection.
5. Once you have filled both sections of the paper, take a step back to reflect on the gap between the desired and the current situation that you have described. If you are working in a group, allow each member to share one thing they wrote in round-robin fashion. Do not comment on what was written; just use this stage to get ideas out in the open.
6. Finally, consider the implications of the gap you identified. What are factors that might be limiting the desired outcomes from occurring? What might be under your control to change or influence? What do you need more information about? Your answers to these questions could form the basis of a relevant and valuable action research study.

Example Gap Analysis Worksheet

A. Current situation

{Insert 1 or 2 topics of interest}

Use space below to describe the current situation relevant to the topic.

B. Desired or necessary situation

{Insert 1 or 2 topics of interest}

Use space below to describe the desired situation relevant to the topic.

Journals About Action Research, Teacher Research, Self-Study, and Practitioner Research

Journal Title	Journal URL
Action Learning: Research and Practice	https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/calr20
Action Research	http://arj.sagepub.com/
Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis	http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/jctp/
Journal of Teacher Action Research	http://www.practicalteacherresearch.com/

Open-Access Journals in Education

Journal Title	Journal URL
Educational Action Research	http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/reac
Educational Research for Social Change	http://ersc.nmmu.ac.za/
i.e.: Inquiry in Education	http://digitalcommons.nl.edu/ie/
Journal of Curriculum and Instruction	http://www.joci.ecu.edu/index.php/JoCI
Networks: An On-line Journal for Teacher Research	http://journals.library.wisc.edu/index.php/networks
Journal of Inquiry and Action in Education	http://digitalcommons.buffalostate.edu/jiae/

Websites About Action Research, Teacher Research, Self-Study, and Practitioner Research

Website Title	Website URL
Collaborative Action Research Network (CARN)	https://www.carn.org.uk
Center for Practitioner Research (CFPR)	http://nlu.nl.edu/cfpr
Self-Study Teacher Research: Improving Your Practice Through Collaborative Inquiry	http://www.sagepub.com/samaras/default.htm
Teacher Research (George Mason University)	https://gse.gmu.edu/research/tr