In the name of Action Research

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Research is defined as ‘scholarly or scientific investigation or inquiry.’ Unfortunately, the term “research” creates anxiety for many teachers, in large part because of its inferred statistical analyses and all sorts of charts and graphs. They fear it; therefore, they avoid it! Other educators become quite cynical. “Research and statistics can prove anything you want it to!” they say. The stark reality is that experimental research designs have often created these fears as well as snide commentary. A theory is hypothesized, a design for study is created, data is collected and then analyzed (yes, most often with involved statistics!) and recommendations are made. Often, the design is sterile and far removed from the reality of classroom activities. Recommendations are made but never tried and then assessed. If practitioners do not fully understand the statistics and if the information is not applicable to their everyday teaching, it can be impossible to apply the research and make positive change.

On the other hand, action research is designed with the practitioner in mind. The setting is where the action is, in schools and in classrooms. A problem is identified, questions are posed, literature is reviewed and data is collected and analyzed. The analysis may or may not include involved statistics but it must be quantifiable in some way. Action, however, is key!

Although the label “action research” appears to have been newly created in education, it has been around for the last decade. It has been around for the last decade. It is a process that has proven to be quite dependable and very responsive to educational change, if done correctly. Schools have the responsibility of insuring progress that matches societal changes and subsequently, the learning needs of the students we teach. Unfortunately, many of us, either as individuals or as members of educational systems, are not reporting the right kind of data to be seen as accountable in the public eye. We might also be somewhat remiss in assessing our actions accurately and reliably. Systems often act as a result of certain pressures or because of what “appears” to be sound practice from another’s point of view. Any change instituted is ineffective or, at best, short-lived when this happens!

Action research, however, has been and continues to be a very effective conduit for insuring that any change made is based on reliable information. We must, however, understand what action research is not before we are able to comprehend what it can be:

**Action Research is not...**

- a School Board telling its administration and teachers that they will implement a national or state initiative that the “research” says is valid.

- a building principal mandating a basal text that is based on “current research” because there is a “back to basics” community group in the neighborhood putting pressure on the school.

- a university professor coming into a school to gather raw data about a “hot” topic in education and then writing about it.

**But it can be if...**

- a School Board asks its administration and teachers to examine the current national and state initiatives and determine which initiatives ‘match’ their district’s classroom’s own needs and priorities through action research techniques.

- a building principal works with teachers to assess (through action research techniques) the degree to which “basic skills” are being taught in classrooms. Subsequently, that data is shared with community members to then determine next steps as a collaborative school team.

- a university professor is invited in to facilitate the process of action research with teams of teachers and administrators specific to a need that exists in a particular school building.
TEACHING & LEARNING

Action Research Needed at a Grass Roots Level. Fight Child Poverty

The Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario is an active member of a coalition to fight child poverty in Ontario. It is reported that 15 to 16 percent or 443,000 children meet the poverty line standard. If the truth be known this may only be the tip of the iceberg. Teachers witness child poverty in many forms. This includes children who arrive at school without breakfast, are sleep deprived, lack appropriate accommodation, are frequently ill or absent from school. Teachers are not oblivious to the fact that every day children in their classes arrive at school improperly clothed and who cannot afford basic school supplies let alone extras. Any teacher who has looked into the eyes of a child living in poverty understands the emotional stress these children suffer. Correlations between poverty and school achievement are extensive. Huge economic disparities occur across ethnic and social groupings. Children of separation and divorce are particularly prone to lifestyle changes. The Elementary Teachers Federation is committed to ensure that child poverty interventions are mandated by the government of the day. The campaign 2000 coalition calls upon Ontario political parties to commit to a poverty reduction strategy for Ontario. Teachers interested in action research projects can start right in their own classrooms by raising awareness and improving the plight of youngsters caught in a predicament of which they have no control. Child poverty is a major issue for teachers and school boards. Healthy and happy children learn better. It’s that simple. Research that addresses opportunities to change social and educational problems is important. Take Action NOW, this piece was prompted by a letter printed in the Toronto Star July 21 2007 written by Emily Noble, President of the Elementary Teacher’s Federation of Ontario.