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 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.

In contrast to pressures or fads, action research operates on the premise that any suggested change is based on real and objective data, from a specific group of students or specific actions of a specific teacher or group of educators.

The terms “action” and “research” are paired together for obvious reasons: any “action” initiated is a result of situation-specific “research.” Data comes from sound assessment tools, making the researcher “accountable.” Determined teachers who take on a problem on behalf of the kids they teach are often the researchers. Their goal is to make instruction better either directly (through changes in methodologies and practices, for example) or indirectly (through curricular changes and/or restructuring processes). As a result, teachers are placed in true leadership roles to assist a school community in reaching its long-term goals. Most importantly, the assessment and consequent

changes match the environment where the data is collected.

These changes are the result of real information that is gathered or "researched" by those teachers themselves, with their own kids or within their own teams or schools, all with their own unique personalities and opinions. Unless there is that 'match,' any change initiated will be neither long-lasting nor effective.

As educators, we do not have the luxury of time to keep experimenting with change or to keep searching for new 'fads' without having a source that is reliable and valid. School Boards and those in leadership positions must support skilled teachers to be involved in their own action research - and then pay attention to those results and options for change. Those who do not know the process of action research must allow others to assist them to learn. Educators and systems will continue to spin wheels and react to opinion instead of fact until this occurs. If it does not, not only do we as a profession lose but our kids do as well.

References

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This manuscript was originally published in 1999 as a direct result of specific debate regarding the usefulness (or lack thereof) of different types of research requirements for working professionals in graduate programs.

All of this information remains the same and perhaps even more applicable today in 2007, although many other publications have since spoken to the process of action research as seen through a variety of different lenses. The Field-based Graduate Program in Education at Southern New Hampshire University has been proud of its program beliefs, oftentimes more radical than many more traditional graduate programs for educators. One of those is that teachers, too, are learners and facilitators who must collaborate with others to advocate for and respond to students' needs and interests to insure that learning occurs. The action research process, if used appropriately, most certainly works towards this end! It is also our belief that we in education, no matter what our setting, must model and 'walk the talk' in schools and other educational environments to continually promote a focus on accountability of students' learning, continual differentiation of instruction and subsequent systemic improvement in any and all local school communities.

Any comments or thoughts about this article can be made directly to Vanessa at v.zerillo@snhu.edu

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Among several publications throughout the years on action research, the author's most recent will be a chapter entitled Action Research and Learning Organizations, due to be published in the fall of 2007 in the book *Contemporary Applications of a Systems Approach to Education* (University Press of America).

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Vanessa has been professionally associated with supporting children and young people for 34 years in many different settings. As a former preschool and elementary teacher, speech-language pathologist, special services director, coordinator of instruction and university faculty member, her focus has always been on the whole child, either directly through her work with children or indirectly through alternative professional development supports and leadership models to maximize learning and teaching for all. Vanessa is the current academic program director for the Field-based Graduate Programs in Education at Southern New Hampshire University.

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 of 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.