Is it Worth It? Reflecting on the Impact of Action Research

Action research is frequently posed as one important process to initiate instructional change; it is not new to the educational arena. Most researchers root it in the progressive movement generated by John Dewey. In the early 1900s, Dewey called for educational practices to become the data of research (Dewey, 1929). He went on to state that classroom teachers’ contributions were largely ignored, comparing their potential for practical data to an unworked mine. Dewey also urged teachers to reflect on their own teaching as a “holistic way of meeting and responding to problems, a way of being as a teacher” (Zeichner & Liston, 1996, p. 9).

Dewey’s work was in direct contrast to the dominant educational paradigm of his time—the scientific movement. This pattern of reaction against a dominant approach has continued for the last several decades. The perceived value of quantitative research as scientific was fully challenged in the 1960s, opening the way for case study and ethnographic research. The widespread use of “teacher-proof” curricula and other initiatives that undermined teacher creativity and worth led many educators to work towards the reprofessionalization of teaching. This resulted in an increased effort by educators to “reclaim teachers’ knowledge about practice as valid” (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 1994, p. 20). Writing teachers, such as Atwell (1982) and Graves (1981), pioneered the way by conducting research and writing about it from insiders’ perspectives, and universities began to incorporate action research into their teacher education programs (Liston & Zeichner, 1991). Today’s focus on high-stakes testing has once again resulted in a responsive movement of renewed interest in action research as a means to counteract top-down educational mandates.

But is action research working? Every few years, a journal devotes an issue to action or teacher research (Levin & Merritt, 2006; Hendricks, 2009) and another round of books are published on the topic (Lassonde & Israel, 2008; Shagoury & Power, 2012). The problem remains that in the journals and texts devoted to action research, the majority of the contributors are university educators singing
the praises of action research for teachers. Teachers, meanwhile, find it difficult to continue cycles of action research even though they may recognize the benefits and potential to bring change (Massey, Allred, Baber, Lowe, Ormond, & Weatherly, 2009), which makes us wonder, “Is action research a viable approach for promoting teacher decision-making, reflection, and learning?”

After serving on Rachel’s advising committee for her action research project (see “Sharing Ownership of Secondary Literacy Instruction,” this issue), I continued a conversation with her about her work—first prompting her to share her work with a larger audience beyond her school. Our conversations extended into the months that followed the conclusion of her research. Part of our ongoing conversations centered on the question previously posed—essentially, is action research worth it? I view this question as an ongoing evaluation of myself and what I try to do through teacher education. I valued Rachel’s opinion because she had completed an outstanding research project that had required extensive time and collaboration with her colleagues, so she was well aware of what the process required. I also believed she would be completely honest with her evaluation. I wanted her insights and opinions about the utility and sustainability of action research. From a series of conversations about her work and action research, three themes continued to surface: asking questions, starting change, and sustaining change.

**Asking Questions and Finding Answers**

From our ongoing conversations, Rachel’s descriptions of her work, her teaching, her interaction with students, and her thoughts about research highlight the importance of questions. She often began her sentences with, “I want to know…” or “I’m curious…..” Action research didn’t suddenly make her curious. Instead, it gave her a framework for finding a focus question and then systematically examining information to find answers. It helped her focus on collecting and examining information to answer her classroom- and school-specific questions. She wrote:

> Before I studied strategies for conducting my own classroom research, I would spend
studying the findings of others, whose context never seemed to match my own. And while I still
greatly value the research and recommendations of others, I’ve since learned that I too have the
means to find answers for my students.

Rachel credits this ownership of the questions as well as the answers to her experiences conducting
action research, noting that “what used to be a ‘sense’ of the answers to my questions has been replaced
with evidence I can share.”

As the gifted teacher she is, it also gave her a way to foster the same sense of curiosity in her
students and to recognize the importance of helping her students ask questions. Rachel said:

Ask them questions! Try a simple open-ended question and see where it leads. The problem, I
find is that they [the students] wait for permission to question and to act. Students are used to
coming to school and “doing” school. They aren't asked to conduct research. Why we don't
involve students more often in our action research cycles is a mystery to me.

She went on to describe the very cycle that action research has addressed for the last several decades
when curricula and content become so tightly controlled with little room for thoughtfully adaptive
teaching. Rachel wrote, “Could it be that in so carefully planning every step of our lessons, every item
to be assessed that we have lost sight of our goal to produce lifelong learners? And what do lifelong
learners do? They question.”

Starting Change

Rachel fully believed that action research was responsible for three levels of change—change in
her teaching, change in her students’ learning, and, in time, change in her colleagues’ teaching. First,
she saw her teaching as becoming responsive to the immediate needs of her students in ways that were
different from before she became familiar with action research and a cycle of inquiry, most notably as
she asked students to join with her in asking questions and in giving them more options to determine
their own learning:
I am continually collecting formative data. This data provides ongoing reports to me about students’ needs. Instead of relying on assumptions, I can ground my instruction in their own work and compare this to what I find in best-practice literature. I consider myself a learner along with my students, so my teaching is ever-evolving. I am never done learning, both from my students and from the professional literature, and because I’m in a constant state of inquiry, I’m much more responsive to students’ needs.

Second, Rachel saw change in the practices of her students as they moved from being passive recipients of content to more active participants who determined questions they had and worked to find answers. She gave a recent specific instance of work that she attributed to her understanding of inquiry and the change it created for her students’ learning:

This week, a group of students from my class were invited into the advisory classes of three other teachers to present a lesson they had created on bullying. My assignment had been this: “What upsets you when you see it in your school or community? Identify it, study it, and speak up.” Those two lines were the beginning and the end of my instruction. I provided one computer per group and access to the library. My students made it what they wanted. One group went online, found documentaries, court cases, and statistics. They perused the shelves of our library and found more resources than I could have provided. They spoke amongst themselves and found common concerns, and they designed a lesson that would be shared with an increasingly wider audience: first with a tutor, then with our class, other teachers, and soon, over a hundred students in our school. This was not an action research project. It didn’t have a recursive cycle of inquiry. However, it did shed light on the power students have to identify, study, and ultimately address the issues they see around them. And isn't that where action research finds its origin?

Finally Rachel described specific ways that she has watched change in her school based on her
original work of collaboration with three other teachers:

My teaching colleague has changed, too. She has taken steps toward new assessment and grading practices, steps that four years ago, she tearfully admitted she wasn't ready to take. Today, her dialogues with students have taken on a whole new language. What I see when I look around me is an original cycle of inquiry that has given life to a whole new way of teaching and learning in our classrooms.

This change was not evident by the end of her research but developed as the team of teachers continued their worked together.

**Sustaining Change: A Culture of Inquiry**

Rachel’s ongoing reflections paint an encouraging picture of the value of action research that was begun as part of teacher education course work. However, she offers a caveat that emphasizes what it takes for action research to be truly empowering. If action research is to be truly effective and sustainable, it needs to move beyond single teachers and even beyond groups of teachers. As beneficial as Rachel believed action research to be, she also notes it must become a part of the school culture to be truly sustainable, a point frequently made in the literature (York-Barr, Sommer, Ghere, & Montie, 2006). York-Barr et al. (2006) wrote, “Individual educators can choose to develop these capacities on their own. It is a great support, however, to have teachers coengaged in such development” (p. 35). In Rachel’s school, she recognized the principal as a leader in this area:

What I see when I walk into our principal's office is an intriguing pile of bar graphs. He has just asked the Instructional Technology team to run some numbers for him. While he celebrates that our students of color are performing in pace with our White students, he has noticed a trend that remains disconcerting. The percentages of students from low-income families enrolled in our most rigorous courses are not proportionate to those from middle and high income families. Our students from poverty are not performing as well on our state assessments or in our courses.
Most often, principals hand off the question to teacher leaders, giving them the opportunity to continue the line of questioning, to collect data for analysis. But sometimes, the principals themselves lead this work. Rachel described this as the principal’s office becoming the “inquiry incubator.” This leadership through research is both encouraging and cautionary. It speaks to the fact that teacher education and universities cannot be the only ones promoting action research. Without the culture of inquiry in the schools, teachers will be hard-pressed to continue their honest questioning.

**Recognizing the Risks**

Ongoing action research is not without risk. As part of a teacher education program, action research can be relegated to one more assignment to be completed. Results can be explained or excused as the fall-out from needing more data or more time. However, ongoing action research presents a significant risk for teachers and schools. Rachel expressed this concern:

In an era of Common Core Standards, new teacher evaluation tools, and increasing pressure on teachers to ‘get it right,’ opening ourselves up for scrutiny, even scrutiny under our own lenses, is a risk. What happens if our very own classroom data proves our ineffectiveness?

This was one of those difficult questions that Rachel asked so well. While she asked it of her own work, it was also a question for me as a teacher educator. When I ask teachers to conduct action research, do I truly recognize the risk I ask them to take? And of even greater importance, am I willing to take the same or greater risks and open up my own instruction and practices to consider my effectiveness or ineffectiveness? Rachel’s words encourage teachers at all levels:

We can model for our learners what it looks like to monitor and adjust, to use feedback to improve. If we get it wrong, good; maybe our students will see us as partners in learning and finally understand that it is not the answer that counts. It is the question.

Is action research worth the time we ask university students to spend conducting their own
research? Rachel’s responses indicated that for her action research was important as a way of focusing her questions, as well as starting and sustaining change. However, teacher educators must be willing to be part of the inquiry. Action research should be happening at the universities between colleagues, just as it is happening in the P-12 settings. We as teacher educators and researchers must not spend so much time observing and evaluating the P-12 system that we neglect asking the questions about our own instruction.
References


