

Action Research

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Action research can inform teachers about their practice and empower them to take leadership roles in their local teaching contexts. Mills (2003) provides the following definition of action research:

Action research is any systematic inquiry conducted by teacher researchers to gather information about the ways that their particular school operates, how they teach, and how well their students learn. The information is gathered with the goals of gaining insight, developing reflective practice, effecting positive changes in the school environment and on educational practices in general, and improving student outcomes. (p. 4)

Action research is conducted by teachers and for teachers. It is small scale, contextualized, localized, and aimed at discovering, developing, or monitoring changes to practice (Wallace, 2000). The defining features of action research also reflect the qualities of leaders in collaborative cultures of change. These qualities include a deep understanding of the organization, vision and insight, a quest for new knowledge, a desire for improved performance, self-reflective activity, and a willingness to effect change (Fullan, 2000a, 2000b). This Digest discusses a framework for conducting action research and describes an action research study carried out in an elementary school Spanish program.

A Framework for Action Research

A review of action research frameworks reveals several common features. An action research project seeks to create knowledge, propose and implement change, and improve practice and performance (Stringer, 1996). Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) suggest that the fundamental components of action research include the following: (1) developing a plan for improvement, (2) implementing the plan, (3) observing and documenting the effects of the plan, and (4) reflecting on the effects of the plan for further planning and informed action. New knowledge gained results in changes in practice (see also, Fullan, 2000a). Action research is often conducted to discover a plan for innovation or intervention and is collaborative. Based on Kemmis and McTaggart's (1998) original formulation of action research and subsequent modifications, Mills (2003) developed the following framework for action research:

- Describe the problem and area of focus.
- Define the factors involved in your area of focus (e.g., the curriculum, school setting, student outcomes, instructional strategies).
- Develop research questions.
- Describe the intervention or innovation to be implemented.
- Develop a timeline for implementation.
- Describe the membership of the action research group.
- Develop a list of resources to implement the plan.
- Describe the data to be collected.
- Develop a data collection and analysis plan.
- Select appropriate tools of inquiry.

- Carry out the plan (implementation, data collection, data analysis).
- Report the results.

This deductive approach implements a planned intervention, monitors its implementation, and evaluates the results. A more inductive approach, formulated by Burns (1999), is to carry out action research to explore what changes need to be made or what actions need to be taken in a specific instructional setting. Burns suggests the following interrelated activities:

- Explore an issue in teaching or learning.
- Identify areas of concern.
- Observe how those areas play out in the setting of the study.
- Discuss how the issue might be addressed.
- Collect data to determine the action to be taken (e.g., student questionnaires, observation reports, journal entries).
- Plan strategic actions based on the data to address the issue.

Kemmis and McTaggart's approach focuses on implementing an action plan, whereas Burns' focuses on planning for action.

Commonly used data collection tools in action research projects include existing archival sources in schools (e.g., attendance reports, standardized test scores, lesson plans, curriculum documents,), questionnaires, interviews, observation notes and protocols, videotapes, photographs, journals and diaries, and narratives (e.g., stories told by teachers, see Hartman, 1998).

An Action Research Project in Pittsburgh: Elementary School Spanish

The following project illustrates how teachers can assume leadership roles to support their programs, contribute to the knowledge base on the teaching and learning of foreign languages in their school and school district, and promote well-informed changes in practice.

In 1996, a school district in suburban Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, decided to implement a foreign language in the elementary school (FLES) program. After considerable discussion of issues such as scheduling, teacher availability, and the necessity of developing long-term articulation from one grade to the next, the decision was made to form a program steering committee and propose to the school board the implementation of a Spanish FLES program that would begin in September 1996 for all district kindergartners. The proposal recommended extending the program one grade level each year. That is, all kindergartners and first graders would participate in the program in the 1997-1998 school year, all kindergartners and first and second graders in the 1998-1999 school year, and so on. The Board of School Directors formally approved the plan and authorized a 5-year pilot project.

Teachers as researchers. After 5 years of implementation, the program steering committee had to prepare a presentation for the school board that would demonstrate that the program was working, that the children were progressing, and that the approval of 5 more years of funding was warranted. Responding to this challenge

called for both leadership and research. To achieve the research goal, it was decided that the five Spanish teachers needed to add a new role to their work—they would become researchers. As researchers, they would reflect on their practice, collect information, make decisions, and develop action plans.

The program steering committee needed solid information to present to the school board. They wanted to present the current state of student progress, a list of recommendations, and a plan for informed and responsible future action. The steering committee hoped the presentation would convince the board that the investment over the past 5 years had resulted in adequate growth in student language proficiency and cultural knowledge. The five FLES teachers became involved in a small-scale action research project that focused on student proficiency at each grade level in the program. The teachers felt that they were succeeding with their early foreign language instruction, but they had no clear data to support their intuition.

Measuring student progress. The teachers attempted to document student progress in relation to the ACTFL Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 1998). Based on descriptions in the ACTFL guidelines, a *can do/can't do* assessment was devised. This “Teacher Assessment of Student Progress” asked the teachers to rate how well and how accurately their students understood and spoke Spanish, and to rate the students’ vocabulary knowledge, communication strategies, and cultural understanding by checking *can do* or *can't do* on the assessment. Teachers were also asked to document the quantity of language each child produced during class. Teachers completed the questionnaires individually and without consultation with their colleagues.

Results. The teachers' ratings were tallied and compared across classes and grade levels. Results showed that the majority of children, regardless of grade level, had developed the ability to do the following in Spanish:

- Use memorized material
- Imitate pronunciation well
- Speak with accuracy when presenting practical material
- Understand key words and phrases in Spanish
- Comprehend and say everyday vocabulary
- Pick up Spanish vocabulary from other sources
- Recite cultural facts about Spanish-speaking countries
- Say words, phrases, and full sentences

Additionally, it was found that items for which systematic grade-level differences did appear were those that involved complex language tasks requiring discourse-level ability, the negotiation of meaning, linguistic creativity, and literacy skills. That is, the kindergarten children were reported not to perform any of these advanced tasks, whereas the students in Grade 4 were reported to control all of them. Systematic growth in ability was observed at intervals in Grades 1 to 3.

The conclusion from this study is clear. The students demonstrated progress each year in specific language skills and cultural knowledge and developed more advanced language functions throughout their language study. Analysis indicated quite dramatically that these students advanced in their proficiency, that the curriculum was well articulated, and that with each passing year, the children could say and do more with their new language.

The results of this action research led the teachers to realize the need for child language learners to have extensive opportunities to

hear and produce the target language and the need for teachers to include more discourse-level tasks (e.g., story telling) in the fifth-grade curriculum. The results also indicated the need to prepare students for content-based Spanish study beginning in sixth grade and to address literacy skills even more vigorously in fifth grade. It also alerted teachers in the lower grades to include more storytelling in their classes as a means of preparing the children to understand and produce Spanish in discourse-level contexts.

Features of Action Research

This project illustrated several features of action research identified by Burns (1998) and Mills (2003). It was highly contextualized and localized in its attempt to investigate a situation in a specific school. The project converted tacit knowledge of student progress to explicit knowledge that could be communicated clearly to other constituents, such as board members and parents. The project results led to confirmation of individual opinions, observations, and intuitions based on investigation and data. The impetus for changes in practice and curriculum was based on information that was systematically collected and synthesized. This information led to the goal of expanding the language capacity of the children through a revised curriculum that involved storytelling, sentence-level production of the language, and the use of content-based discourse-level speaking tasks. The research was participatory and collaborative, involving all of the Spanish teachers, the steering committee, a university researcher, and—indirectly—the school board members who reacted to the information presented. Finally, the teachers collaborated to create knowledge of their program and took leadership positions in helping the program receive an additional 5 years of funding. The instructional roles that the teachers played were enriched with leadership opportunities that directly affected their program and their professional practice. In Fullan's (2000a) terms, these teachers became participants in a collaborative culture of change.

Conclusion

Leaders for change can become learners as well when they engage in research. As a result, they become less vulnerable to and less dependent on external answers to the challenges they face (Fullan, 2000b). To respond to the challenges in their Spanish program, the teachers in the study described here took on new leadership roles and moved beyond their traditional roles. Their leadership emanated from their collaboration to understand their local situation and to bring about change that would improve their teaching and the lives of the students in their program.

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