

Chapter 2: Beginning Action Research

The impact of action research in supporting the professionalism of teachers and the improvement of student learning is evident in the published projects.⁷ However, how does one begin to conduct action research?

This chapter introduces a process for action research that is described more fully in subsequent chapters. The action research process presented in this handbook is not prescriptive but emerges from and is changed by the individual teacher's data collection and analysis.

Professional development opportunities can help teachers learn the action research process, dialogue with a supportive group, and share the learning that results from the research.

While this model of action research is based on the individual teacher asking, "How can I improve my practice?" schools may want to focus action research on a particular area such as literacy learning or mathematics. Since learning is an individual activity, however, in a school-wide approach, it is important to remember that individual teachers must control and decide on their own question.

A Process for Action Research

1. Identify an area of concern

The initial step is one of having a passionate concern about something in the classroom. It is driven by a desire to improve the learning of students. It is a process by which a teacher observes the effect of actions, changes practice accordingly and observes the impact.

The area of concern identified by the teacher will be the basis of the research question. Chapter 3 includes more information about identifying and developing an area of concern.

2. Use data to assess teaching practice

A first step is to collect data related to an area of concern. Data are commonly thought of as numbers and statistics. Such quantitative data is useful. However, in studying actions in classrooms there is much more qualitative, non-statistical data that can inform improvement of teaching.

These include:

- teacher and parent observations
- student and teacher journals
- report cards
- photographs
- videotapes.

Parents and students often need to be involved in the research. Chapter 7 focuses on data collection and analysis and Chapter 10 deals with ethical issues.

3. Develop a research question

As data are collected and analyzed it is possible to focus the teacher concern into a research question. Usually the question begins with the words, "How can I..." For example, if the concern is about the level of mathematics learning in the classroom, the research question may be, "How can I improve my students' ability to explain their answers in problem solving?" The question comes from the concern that the teacher has about practice and the achievement of students.