

Classroom Action Research in Literacy: a Guide to Practice

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Chapter 1

Introduction: what is action research?

Teaching is very like problem-solving. It often means spending time mulling over ways to improve teaching and learning: how to engage a particular child; how to build on what children bring to the classroom; how to energise children's potential as learners. At the same time, new initiatives are introduced which bring their own demands and constraints. This book aims to support the process of investigating - and changing - practice in literacy teaching.

Change is endemic in teaching. However, the requirement for educational change often comes from government or the agencies responsible for the curriculum. Such centrally directed initiatives can often seem inflexible, unable to answer to the circumstances and needs of particular children, communities and schools. One of the advantages of action research is that it gives teachers and practitioners the opportunity to lead and manage change to suite their own professional concerns. Because it is a flexible and adaptable process it can also allow for specific experience, needs and contexts. As it is deeply socially situated, action research often arises from a desire for social justice (Somekh, 2006). Teachers and others involved in education do not just embark on action research projects lightly - often they want to make changes for reasons of equity for their pupils.

Over recent years there has been increasing emphasis on research projects where teachers and practitioners look carefully at their own practice in order to make changes. This is the 'action' part. The 'research' element describes the systematic gathering of evidence about the effects of any changes made. But the other key element is reflection. Action research is one way of implementing change and introducing new ideas into classrooms and schools. But it is based on evidence of what is currently happening in particular circumstances and evaluating and adjusting approaches in the light of reflection: 'the practical implications of critical thought' (Noffke, 1995:1).

The three elements - action, research and reflection - need to work together if change is to be significant and sustained. One strength of action research is that it allows teachers themselves to set the agenda for change – to identify their own questions and try to find answers to them. Another advantage is that it is often collaborative (Somekh, 2006): partners might be other colleagues, parents or community members and, inevitably, the children themselves. Action research gives time and space to reflect on, evaluate and to experiment with practice, to collaborate with fellow professionals and challenge existing ideas. At times the potential for change may involve other members of the school and wider community, making action research a key element in local and specific educational developments.

Any research project might start with the kinds of questions which often haunt a teacher's mind and are prompted by the hunches about how these might be tackled in the classroom, something like:

For some time now I've been concerned about....

closely followed by: *I'd like to try.....*

Action research gives a focus for investigating these professionally prompted instincts.

A process of change

Action research usually follows a sometimes repeating but flexible process of change:

- Finding a focus - identifying a 'problem' or question
- Planning and developing the action research project
- Deciding on research methods
- Carrying out the project - reflecting on the work and adjusting if necessary
- Gathering data as evidence of change
- Making sense of the data - analysing, reflecting and interpreting
- Planning for future practice - evaluating, disseminating and sustaining change

This process can become a healthy cycle of continuing development where new or established practices prompt further questions about how to improve teaching and learning.

The most fruitful action research projects are workable, manageable and important to you and your colleagues. But it's worth remembering that there are some things you can change and others that are outside your sphere of influence. For example, if you live in England, you may wish that children didn't have to do SATs. An action research project will not help you to abolish such tests but it may well give you a chance to look at how you can teach in a way that helps children succeed whilst sustaining their engagement and motivation.

Learning, time and risk

The basis of action research is an urge for new learning. This is why reflection is such an important part of the process of action research at every stage. Reflection means having a conversation with yourself about what you're doing – asking the kinds of questions that a critical friend might ask. Chapter 2 outlines how keeping a reflective research journal helps support action research projects.

There are three (at least) different outcomes of any action research project, all interlinked with each other:

- tangible outcomes – seen most typically in improvements in reading, speaking and listening and writing
- intangible outcomes – seen most typically in shifts of attitude, perception or motivation
- personal and professional outcomes – seen in changes of practice.

These changes in performance, attitudes and practices will not happen overnight, nor is the process likely to be smooth and straightforward. Change takes time - and is often a matter of trial and error, starting and re-starting, some difficulty, possible confusion but also occasional elation. You may already have been involved in some aspects of professional school-based research or classroom change. Whether you have previous experience or not, it is important to be aware that starting an action research project can sometimes bring some insecurity. Looking rigorously at your own practice in order to make changes can be uncomfortable. However, the discomfort can pay off, as this teacher commented:

I took risks and moved out of my comfort zone in implementing drama approaches. The children, too became risk-takers in the relative security of drama... (UKLA/PNS, 2004: 37).

In time, however, new ways of working become integrated with existing aspects of professional thinking and practice. The key word here is 'time'. Too often teachers are expected to make changes too quickly. An action research project, designed and directed by yourself, means that change can happen at a pace which makes sense for you. In some schools and classrooms change is seen as part of the usual culture. In others, it is more unfamiliar and may need some groundwork before being able to get going on making changes through action research.

Conclusion

Action research is a process of teacher-directed investigation aimed at making changes to classroom practice. It is not necessarily a straightforward process, but has the essential components of intervention, investigation and reflection. Whilst it can be a risky process, taking time for changes to embed themselves in regular practice, it is worth the journey. In the following chapters we offer guidance that can help along this journey and provide case studies of teachers' action projects in order to develop understanding of the processes involved.