Mid-Atlantic Education Review

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A Call to Action Research:
Action Research as an
Effective Professional Development Model

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Abstract

Professional development is one of the most pressing and challenging issues in education today. Action research, which asks individual teachers to focus on a particular issue in their classrooms as means to improve instructional practice (James, Milenkiewicz & Bucknam, 2008), responds to the criticism of fragmented, decontextualized professional development because it provides a learning space in which teachers can learn about their students as well as their own teaching practices. Action research wields the power to bridge the gap between theory and practice, empower teachers, and impact student learning.

Keywords: professional development, action research
Introduction

How best to craft meaningful professional development has long been a matter of debate amongst leaders in education. The debate has many facets, but most people would agree on one aspect: professional development for teachers needs improvement. Sykes (1996) claims that professional development is “the most serious unsolved problem for policy and practice in American education today” (p. 465). Though No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requires that states “ensure the availability of ‘high-quality’ professional development for all teachers,” it fails to describe factors that would contribute to high quality, meaningful professional development (Borko, 2004). State legislation has also fallen short of answering the question of what constitutes effective professional development. Certainly, professional development is a particularly challenging entity to fix given its numerous, varying definitions (Telese, 2012) and models (e.g., after-school sessions, online training, continuing education, workshops, and summer institutes). Additionally, the nuanced needs and strengths of the teachers, facilitators and contexts involved in the professional development process make creating one-size-fits-all solutions difficult (Borko, 2004). Finally, referencing rhetoric that characterizes teachers as professionals capable of enacting change while simultaneously holding teachers collectively responsible for the failure of schools, Clark and Florio-Ruane (2001) observe that “universal uncertainty, rapidly changing circumstances, and locally disruptive challenges call for a fundamental redesign of approaches to teacher professional development and lifelong learning” (p. 4). To that end, the authors assert that action research should emerge as an integral component of such a redesign.

In this literature review, characteristics of ineffective and effective professional development are provided as a means to situate action research as a powerful, effective professional development opportunity that empowers teachers to think critically about their own practice, become leaders in local communities of practice, and have a positive impact on students’ learning. The authors hope that this literature review will inspire teachers who want to engage in meaningful professional development and inform administrators or other school personnel responsible for facilitating teacher development. Teacher educators will find this article relevant to their methods courses and may even consider planning for pre-service teachers to engage in action research alongside their cooperating teachers. Additionally, the authors believe that this literature review may encourage researchers to further examine the impact of action research on teacher efficacy.

Ineffective Professional Development

Researchers have identified key features of ineffective professional development: these include fragmentation, lack of implementation, and lack of teacher-centeredness. Telese (2012) finds that “a key component in teachers’ lifelong learning process is continual professional development. However, it is often viewed as being fragmented, on an as-needed basis, and relatively superficial” and there are claims that “professional development is rarely considered developmental because there are few programs that address teachers’ learning and the practices they are to enact” (p. 103). Superficial, fragmented professional development — characterized as “one-shot, fix-'em-up
experiences” (Fleischer & Fox, 2003, p. 259) — disallows a developmental approach to teachers’ learning (Clark & Florio-Ruane, 2001; Telese, 2012) and fails to address local contexts for teaching (Kent, 2004; Little, 1993). Additionally, professional development leaders contribute to the lack of implementation if they do not allow teachers to set goals and celebrate teachers’ efforts (Ferguson, 2006). It is unsurprising that many teachers report professional development either reinforces current practices or has no impact at all (Hill, 2009). Action research addresses both the fragmentation and lack of implementation.

Lack of teacher-centeredness (Friden, Hanegan, & Nelson, 2009; Kent, 2004) limits effectiveness especially if teachers do not design their professional development (Clark & Florio-Ruane, 2001). Abadiano and Turner (2004) summarize the work of the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, which characterized professional development as having a top-down approach in which teachers are passive participants to whom information is transferred by “experts” (p. 87). A “mini-industry of consultants” (Sykes, 1996, p. 465) has taken professional development out of the hands of teachers. “Talking heads” (Fleischer & Fox, 2003, p. 259) from outside of the building decontextualize professional development and do not transform teachers into active participants in their own professional growth. Professional development is more effective and authentic when its premise and foundation are directly connected to, and a natural outgrowth of, a teacher’s own practice (Friden et al., 2009). When teachers become central figures within their professional development, they become agents of change in their classrooms (Sykes, 1996). Action research allows teachers to become active participants in a more meaningful, contextual, and authentic professional development.

**Effective Professional Development**

Research indicates that effective professional development is sustained, content-based, contextually-situated, and teacher-centered. Blau, Cabe, and Whitney (2011) suggest that successful professional development— that is, development that prompts teachers to examine and alter their practices— should be school-based and continuous because an absence of sustained context, a lack of guidance, and follow-up sessions often result in a lack of implementation. The authors emphasize that “research on teachers’ professional development indicates the importance of intensive sustained, school-based programs if teachers are to adopt new practices and redefine existing ones in significant ways” (p. 1). The “intensive, sustained, school-based” professional development Blau, Cabe, and Whitney argue for is possible—and, perhaps more importantly, sustainable—with action research.

Supportive teacher-led communities, whether school-based teachers’ groups designed around student needs (Lieberman, 1995) or online professional communities (Swenson, 2003) have provided successful models of teacher-centered collaboration and reflection (Borko, 2004). A 2012 report from Scholastic and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation found that teacher retention and the perceived collegial environment of a school are directly correlated. Though the benefits of these teacher learning communities are well documented, certain challenges exist in their creation and sustainability. Grossman, Wineburg and Woolworth (2001) point out that many teacher learning communities exist outside of the hours of the school days and even outside the walls of
the school building. Thus, finding the time—and a common meeting space—can prove problematic for teachers seeking out the opportunity to engage in a teacher learning community. To that end, educators and administrators must consider carefully the allocation of teachers’ time in order for teachers to find time in their instructional days to participate in these learning communities. The administration might look to reducing the time teachers spend on tasks they say deplete their time: that is, disciplining students, supervising students outside of the classroom, completing paperwork, and analyzing standardized test scores and district-required assessments (Scholastic and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2012). If teachers’ time is preserved with greater fidelity, perhaps they will be more likely to create, engage, and actively participate in a teacher learning community.

Clark and Florio-Ruane (2001) find that effective professional development must be teacher-led. This leadership may take on any number of forms. For example, professional development that prepares teachers to analyze their own classroom data (such as student work and observations) has proven to inform effective instructional practices (Whitcomb, Borko, & Liston, 2009). Wood and Lieberman (2010) emphasize the National Writing Project’s philosophy of teachers teaching teachers through its three learning principles: authorship, authority, and authorization. When teachers are allowed to select their own action research projects, receive support from their colleagues in discourse communities, and share their findings with their colleagues, professional development is teacher-led and differentiated according to needs and interests (Hill, 2009). Action research, which is both teacher-led and differentiated, combats the oft-criticized one-size-fits-all, top-down quality of many professional development models.

**Action Research Defined**

Action research asks individual teachers to focus on a particular issue in their classrooms as a means to improve instructional practice (James, Milenkiewicz & Bucknam, 2008). As they engage in the action research process, teachers pose a question, collect and analyze data, and develop a plan to address the findings (Smeets & Ponte, 2009). By becoming action researchers, teachers assess the events, struggles, and successes in their classroom to make informed decisions about their instructional practices. In short, teachers function as researchers; their classroom becomes their laboratories, their students become their subjects. Babkie and Provost (2004) offer the following planning guide for conducting research and outline the steps of the action research process:

- Identify the problem/concern to be researched.
- Collect information from various sources and evaluate it.
- Develop a plan for intervention/change.
- Implement the intervention/change and collect data.
- Analyze the data/evaluate the results of the intervention or change.
- Plan for future action: keep, revise, or alter the intervention. (p. 262)
Teachers who engage in action research scrutinize their own practice. This constant examination often leads to teachers having a more developed sense of self-efficacy; additionally, they report increased content and pedagogical knowledge (Short & Rinehart, 1992). The action research process allows teachers to explore the relationship between theory and classroom practice (Kirkwood & Christie, 2006). Maclean & Mohr (1999) find that teacher-researchers raise questions about what they think and observe about their teaching and their students’ learning. They collect student work in order to evaluate performance, but they also see student work as data to analyze in order to examine the practices that produced it. Action researchers tend to be more reflective and deliberate in their teaching; simply put, “teachers who do action research improve their own teaching” (Smeets & Ponte, 2009, p. 178).

When teachers participate in action research, the benefits are not confined to their classrooms. Smeets and Ponte (2009) maintain that schools benefit when their teachers participate in action research because teacher-researchers tend to take responsibility for school-wide educational improvements. In 2012, The New Teacher Project (TNTP) published a report suggesting that teachers who are granted leadership opportunities are less likely to leave their school due to job dissatisfaction. Thus, by creating a space for teachers to grow as leaders, schools may very well benefit from school-wide improvements, increased job satisfaction, and lower attrition rates.

Action research is contextual, requires the teacher to be a reflective practitioner, and can be enacted independently by one teacher or a team (Furlong & Salisbury, 2005). MacLean and Mohr (1999) advocate for research groups. Groups may be organized in a variety of ways, either by content, grade, or an issue in need of assessment. Group research includes shared responsibilities. Members work to challenge and support each other in all aspects of the research process—from research methodology to draft writing to analysis and interpretations. Teachers must also have an organized system for collecting data, ideas, and plans. A research log, which may contain “dates and times, careful quoting, observations and reflections” (1999, p. 12), is an essential component of this system. The writing in the research log should be “think writing” (p. 13), or writing that reflects one’s thoughts in the research process. These logs provide teachers with a space to organize their work, note important occurrences, and plan for future steps. Periodically, teacher-researchers should meet with members of their groups to “support the process of analysis” (p. 21).

Once the research projects are complete, it is critical that teachers are granted opportunities to relate their experiences and findings to other members of the school community. This piece is vital as “professional discourse needs the participation of teacher-researchers” (MacLean & Mohr, 1999, p. 83). A research group may opt to disseminate their discoveries through common group findings (MacLean & Mohr, 1999) in which members of the research group discuss, evaluate, and synthesize commonalities in their findings in a professional learning community, at a faculty meeting, or in a report or article. Regardless of which format is chosen, it is imperative that teachers share their projects with others; doing so not only validates the teacher-researchers’ work, but also creates a space for educators and other stakeholders to have conversations that wield the power to improve students’ educational experiences.

Teachers have the greatest knowledge of the events of their classroom and the most immediate opportunity to effect change; they are the best candidates to research
questions of practice. Teachers’ exposure to their classroom, the students, and data make them the “experts” in the field (Jakar, 1993, p. 71). If teachers are to guide and instruct their students in a meaningful, informed fashion, teachers must be “reflective practitioners, using research-based pedagogy in and adapting it to their own particular classrooms” (Hanhs-Vaughn & Yanowitz, 2009, p. 422). Action research provides the vehicle for this reflective approach. Teachers who use data collected in their own classrooms to evaluate their students’ needs increase their confidence in their ability to address the objectives of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Ultimately, teacher-researchers are empowered to craft CCSS-focused lessons by the acquisition and assessment of this data. Given these findings, action research emerges as an exemplar of effective professional development.

Transitioning to Action Research as Professional Development

Professional development is one of the most pressing and challenging issues in education today (Sykes, 1996). Antoniou and Kyriakide (2013) argue that “the demand for improving the quality of teaching and learning and the demand for increasing accountability have put issues related to effective professional development high on the agenda of educators, researchers and policy makers” (p. 1). The joint report by Scholastic and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (2012) indicates that teachers receive only limited time to collaborate with colleagues and that teachers at all levels of their careers seek opportunities for professional development. Action research responds to the criticism of fragmented, decontextualized professional development because it provides time for teachers to learn about their students and their own teaching practices.

Research shows that training teachers to function as action researchers in their own classrooms has benefits for the teacher themselves, their students, and the entire school community (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990; Llewellyn & Van Zee, 2010; Mertler, 2009). Action research is sustained, content-based, contextually-situated, and teacher-centered: all qualities of effective professional development. Teachers become engaged in the professional development process when it involves action research as it allows for explicit discussion of the events, challenges, and successes in their own classroom. Professional development becomes more meaningful when it involves action research because it allows for the integration of a question directly related to the teacher’s content (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990).

Teachers, like students, want to be engaged in the material presented to them; action research functions as the catalyst for this meaningful professional development experience. Despite its reported benefits, critiques of action research do exist. Initially, teachers may be frustrated about embarking upon action research; the sentiment may be they now have yet another thing to do. Also, teachers may experience anxiety because they do not view themselves as researchers. However, Berger, Boles, and Troen (2005) reported that though teachers admitted being intimidated by the prospect of teacher research, they found the concepts learnable after undergoing meaningful training. By training teachers to function as researchers in their own classroom, they can better determine, evaluate, and assess the needs of their students. Ultimately, these findings demonstrate that action research allows for better-informed instructional decision-
making, helps teachers more confidently teach the CCSS, and has a positive impact on student learning.

Conclusion

In writing this article, the authors intend to inform stakeholders in the education community— professors, teachers, and administrators— of the power the action research model wields in transforming professional development. Teachers who are action researchers make better-informed decisions about their instructional practices and learn to be reflective and purposeful in their instructional choices. They evolve as collaborators and feel a deeper connection to their colleagues, administration, and school community. Action research wields the power to bridge the gap between theory and practice because it grants teachers an opportunity to thoughtfully examine their teaching practices. Additionally, when teachers make informed decisions about their instructional practice, they can better meet the needs of their students.

At all stages of their careers, teachers maintain that effective, meaningful professional development is a critical component of their practice (Scholastic and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2012). Those who choose to improve their practice through contextually-based and individually-selected action research projects, engage in meaningful discourse around their students’ and their own learning, and share their work with colleagues at the K-12 and higher education levels truly embody the qualities of empowered, change-making teachers. The current rhetoric around education names teachers as both professionals who are capable of change but who are also responsible for the failure of schools (Clark and Florio-Ruane, 2001). Action research as professional development may contribute to changing the rhetoric around teachers’ work because it foregrounds teachers' professional expertise and commitment.

A Call to Action Research

The authors advocate for action research as an effective professional development model, state and district resources to support action research, and further studies. The teacher-led nature of action research means that practices and instructional shifts are implemented locally in the microcosm of the classroom. Successful practices in one teacher’s classroom may not necessarily translate to another teacher’s classroom; teacher personality, student ability level, or an array of other factors may contribute to a project’s success. Valuing both teacher and student context is not only an asset of action research but a vital – and often overlooked – component in today’s classrooms.

In the current educational environment, it is difficult to receive support and funding for professional development that does not enhance student test scores. Whitcomb, Borko, and Liston (2009) believe that “the paucity of quality research reflects the labor-intensive nature of running effective professional development and the lack of resources to study its impact; second, too few studies demonstrate the value that quality professional development adds to student learning” (p. 211). States and local districts must provide resources and support for teachers to engage in action research. Once they do, they may find that action research – because of its focus on teacher-driven projects that support students’ learning – can indeed increase student achievement (Goddard, Goddard, & Tschannen-Moran, 2007; National Council for Literacy Learning, 2014).
Additional scholarly research around action research in K-12 classrooms is both warranted and needed. Moreover, the authors maintain that it is critical to create a community of K-12 teacher-researchers who present and publish their work in practitioner or scholarly journals. This requires commitment from universities, K-12 schools, and teachers if action research practices are to be implemented with fidelity. School administrators play an integral role in legitimizing this process: they must work in tandem with teachers to create a climate conducive to collaboration and provide the necessary time to participate in both research and reflection, which has been proven beneficial for teachers and students alike (Gebhard, 2005; Vogt & Au, 1995). Teacher educators should collaborate with teacher-researchers to support their projects. Educators involved in methods instruction may find rich data on the implications for future practice when pre-service teachers engage in research with their cooperating teachers. Methods students may benefit greatly from involvement in their cooperating teachers’ action research. Furthermore, investigating the impact of action research on teachers’ efficacy may prove to be productive for educational researchers. To that end, teachers, administrators, teacher educators, and researchers are challenged to answer the call to action research.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Dr. Jocelyn Glazier (UNC-Chapel Hill) for her role in the conceptualization of this piece.

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