# Action Research: A Compelling and Powerful Form of Professional Development

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While a variety of different methodologies and data collection methods are used in classroom research, action research has gained prominence amongst researchers (McAteer, 2013). Action research can be defined as "a purposeful, yet systematic and often collaborative inquiry, conducted by teachers and teacher-leaders for the intent of improving their practice and performance" (Llewellyn & van Zee, 2010, p. 12). As conventional approaches to classroom research have involved university faculty investigating classroom practices with minimal teacher input (Diana, 2011), action research situates teachers at the forefront of research by having them conduct studies in their own classrooms with their own students. Thus, the goal of action research is to not just to describe teaching practices, but to eventually transform what is taking place in classrooms (West, 2011).

Scholars have identified several notable characteristics associated with action research, which also serve to make it a popular and valuable method of professional development, particularly in contrast to traditional professional development approaches currently being used in school settings. These characteristics include an emphasis on authentic and meaningful inquiry (O'Connor, Greene, & Anderson, 2006), self-reflection (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002), and collaboration (Kapachtsi & Kakana, 2012). This paper will examine the characteristics of action research in greater detail, and argue that these characteristics have made action research an effective and compelling method for teachers' professional development and improvement.

## Authentic and Meaningful Inquiry

Action research is a powerful tool of professional development because it emphasizes authentic and meaningful inquiry. In action research, teachers examine topics which they are personally interested in, and issues which are occurring in their classes (O'Connor et al., 2006). For example, students' poor performances in reading may prompt a teacher to implement an action research study on strategies that could be utilized to improve reading skills. Prior to commencing their investigations, some teachers may choose to prepare a literature review, examining scholarly research that has been previously written on a topic (Taylor, 2006). Conducting a literature review enables teachers to gain familiarity with previous research as well as enhance their own knowledge on topics that they wish to learn more about. Therefore, teachers inquire into and begin studies on topics that are personally relevant for them.

This form of authentic inquiry contrasts with some of the traditional professional development practices that are often prevalent in schools. For example, conferences and workshops, which are common forms of professional development practices, have been strongly critiqued for their reinforcement of one-size-fits-all models, as well as their failure to differentiate instruction based on teachers' individual needs, grade levels, and the socio-political environments that they are working in (Guskey, 2000; Lieberman & Miller, 2002). Traditional professional development approaches may not be able to provide the unique

guidance that a teacher might need. Action research is a beneficial approach for teachers because they are able to examine issues that are authentic and meaningful to them, and can be based upon their specific classroom needs within their specific classroom contexts.

## Continuous Self-Reflection

Action research can foster teachers' improvements through its emphasis on self-reflection as teachers spiral through the various phases of the research project (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002). This dynamic spiral process involves data collection, analysis, reflection, and trying solutions (Creswell, 2008). When collecting data, teachers may observe students, conduct interviews and surveys, give questionnaires, as well as assess students' work (Creswell, 2008). Data analysis involves teachers in identifying patterns, themes, and factors from their data that may be contributing to the results they observe. It is at this point that teachers can begin to draw conclusions and make some changes to their practices. Throughout this process, teachers continuously engage in self-reflection, as they critically examine their own teaching, and carefully consider how they can modify their practices to reach the goals they set for their study. To facilitate reflection, Taylor (2006) recommends that teachers keep reflection journals to help them continually examine the impact of their changing practices on students. Thus, reflection in action research is a cyclical process and is both "reflection-on-action" and "reflection-in-action" (Schön, 1983, p. 59).

In action research, knowledge is not static or complete, but is constantly changing as new ideas and perspectives emerge from the research (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002). Intriguingly, knowledge resulting from successful action research projects can lead to further questions and provide new directions for research. This contrasts with traditional professional development that is typically offered by outside experts who present pieces of knowledge, but offer minimal follow-up after delivery or time for reflection (Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001). Teachers under these approaches are usually not active participants in their learning.

## Collaboration and Interaction

Action research involves collaboration and interaction and is therefore a valuable method for enhancing teachers' professional engagement and development. Collaboration is at the heart of action research, as teachers dialogue and seek advice from university faculty and/or school staff, which provides them with further opportunities for learning (Calhoun, 2002). The principle of collaboration recognizes that all individuals' ideas are valued, and the construction of new knowledge is a result of the ensuing interactions that individuals have with others (Lesha, 2014; O'Connor et al., 2006). For example, these conversations may enhance the knowledge of the researcher and those individuals with whom the researcher discusses his/her research. Collaboration may also happen between teachers and other integral stakeholders, including parents and students, whom teachers may discuss their research (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2000). In some occasions, action research may involve the entire school staff as they conduct research on improving school-wide student performance (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2000).

Such networks of collaboration stimulate collegiality and create positive professional cultures in the school (Kapachtsi & Kakana, 2012). In contrast, teachers are rarely able to collaborate with others during traditional professional development sessions, and the opportunities provided for interaction are highly structured (Fullan, 2007). Instead of collaborating, teachers often work in isolation, with limited chances to discuss classroom practices. Therefore, action research is beneficial for teachers because it offers chances to share ideas and understandings, leading to further opportunities to gain knowledge.

## Conclusion

Action research is an authentic, self-reflective, and collaborative process, which serves not only as a form of research methodology, but also as an effective and powerful model of professional development. Results from one study can lead to further inquiry, and often inspire teachers to pursue new projects. Thus, action research

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provides a vehicle for ongoing development for teachers. It is then not surprising that action research has the potential to become one of the most promising methods of professional development.

## Author Biography

Mobeen Uddin recently completed the Ph.D. program in the department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, at the University of Toronto.

## Acknowledgements

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