

### Action Research Advice

Abstract: In this exclusive website extra, the authors of the winter 2020 special issue of *School-University Partnerships*, themed “The Impact of Teacher Leadership on Student Learning in Professional Development Schools” offer their advice and insights on the topic of conducting action research in P-12 schools.

**KEYWORDS:** *professional development schools, action research, school-university collaboration, teacher inquiry, classroom-based research*

#### **NAPDS NINE ESSENTIALS ADDRESSED:**

1. A comprehensive mission that is broader in its outreach and scope than the mission of any partner and that furthers the education profession and its responsibility to advance equity within schools and, by potential extension, the broader community
2. A school–university culture committed to the preparation of future educators that embraces their active engagement in the school community
3. Ongoing and reciprocal professional development for all participants guided by need
4. A shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants
5. Engagement in and public sharing of the results of deliberate investigations of practice by respective participants
8. Work by college/university faculty and P–12 faculty in formal roles across institutional settings
9. Dedicated and shared resources and formal rewards and recognition structures.

For educators, action research is the most personalized and differentiated form of professional learning available. Teacher-researchers develop their own question(s), design their studies, analyze the data, draw conclusions, and share the results. Although teacher-researchers can complete this process individually, having a community of colleagues provides support and new perspectives on the research. Too often, educators think that action research needs to tackle huge issues or involve a complicated process. The best action research projects identify and work toward a solution to a problem the educator faces in their classroom. It is satisfying to complete the process and see progress with improving practice. ~ **Suzanne Porath**, Assistant Professor and PDS Coordinator, Kansas State University

Action Research is a great tool for educators because of the self-reflection involved. It is always much easier to increase your understanding of a topic when you can relate to it on a personal level. Action research is not simply reading about a research project someone else completed; it is putting yourself into your own research project. This shift in perspective allows you to dig deeper and take away insights that will help you throughout your career. ~ **Suzanna Nelson**, Seventh Grade Teacher, John C. Fremont PDMS

I always thought action research was something only seasoned professors at the college level did; not something that elementary teachers would ever have time to do. As I learned more about the process, I realized this is something teachers already do every day! Identifying areas of weakness, implementing new teaching strategies or classroom management techniques; great teachers are constantly reimagining their classrooms. My advice to future researchers is this: Give it a try! Don't be scared! Action research is a wonderful opportunity to look more closely at a problem you would like to solve in your classroom. ~ **Megan Mallon**, Fifth Grade Teacher, USD 383 Manhattan/Ogden

When conducting collaborative inquiry, include a variety of voices in your research and have a strong team that communicates and works well together to build on each other's strengths. ~ **Stacey Leon**, Fifth Grade Teacher, Governor Wolf Elementary School

Action research requires student researchers to write in a scholarly manner. It is essential that time is spent reviewing the writing skills needed. Many college students need direction or practice with such things as inadvertent plagiarism, citations, and mechanics. Spending time on these things at the beginning of the project will save a great deal of time at the end when it comes time for students to revise, edit, and complete their projects. It is a mistake to trust that by virtue of being in college, all students have mastered these skills. ~ **Kimberly Fletcher Nettleton**, Associate Professor, Morehead State University

I found being organized, being aware of due dates, and keeping an open mind helpful in conducting action research. ~ **Leslie Farrar**, kindergarten teacher, Litchfield CUSD 12

Going through the action research process was an incredibly powerful tool for my professional growth. It increased collaboration with my colleague and helped to empower my students. While it seemed daunting at first, I quickly learned that I had many topics I wanted to delve into more deeply. All it takes to start is a wonder. Teachers have wonderings every day: I wonder why? I wonder how? I wonder if? Just choose one and dive in! ~ **Nicole Meritt**, Instructor, Kansas State University

Partnership is a critical component in action research. Instead of the mindset of doing research *on* or *to* teachers and students, there is a need for a paradigm shift of doing research *with* teachers and students. That paradigm shift alone should spur on numerous questions related to who can provide support and feedback on your inquiry work, who the inquiry will impact, and who could benefit from participating in or hearing about the inquiry. Working with undergraduate teacher candidates adds another layer of benefit in that teacher candidates and classroom teachers often collaborate to design relevant, meaningful, and likely impactful ideas which often turn into inquiry projects. ~ **Drew Polly**, Professor, University of North Carolina Charlotte

When considering a topic for your action research, it is essential that you choose an area of focus that impacts you or your students directly and a topic about which you are passionate. Doing so will assuredly inspire personal and professional growth. Why rely solely on others' research as your guide when you can investigate the topic as it relates directly to you and your circumstances? ~ **Todd Spreer**, Fourth Grade Teacher, USD 383 Manhattan/Ogden

I like action research self-study for two reasons. First, systematically studying one's own practice is the most meaningful form of professional development. Second, when self-study action research is shared with others, it de-privatizes teaching so that we can all feel a little less self-conscious about our teaching. Think about how education could be transformed if every teacher conducted self-study action research. Teachers would become knowledgeable and skilled more quickly; teaching staffs would become more supportive and collaborative; and entire schools would be better equipped to intentionally and systematically assess and address student needs! ~ **Jana Hunzicker**, Associate Dean and Professor, Bradley University

When conducting action research, have realistic goals and timelines. Everything seems to take two or three weeks longer than you originally think. It is great to be ambitious, but it is often better to find a place that is "enough" to inform the question rather than the loftier, "it would be great to get *here*." ~ **Rene Roselle**, Associate Professor and Director of Teacher Preparation, Sacred Heart University

Not everything will work in the classroom, including action research. Be flexible, own your mistakes, and cherish them as learning experiences. Be honest with your students too. They will see you make mistakes and may be more willing to try new things as a result. Some of my best teaching has resulted from labs, projects, and lessons gone wrong! ~ **Julie LeMasters**, Sixth Grade Science Teacher, Dunlap Valley Middle School

When school and university-based educators conduct action research with teacher candidates, it creates a powerful synergy among all participants. When multi-generational stakeholders coalesce around a problem of practice, we are able to see it from various perspectives, which provides a rich and complex context that helps to elucidate collective understanding. ~ **Robin Hands**, Director of School-University Partnerships, University of Connecticut

Those stepping into action research must approach it with the mindset that it is a long process and not expect perfection on the first submission. Research takes time and patience as well as lots of planning; but be prepared for the unexpected, especially in a school setting. My first hurdle was guardian permission. I knew that it would take weeks to get all permission slips returned, so I made the permission slip digital and emailed the link to all parents. As a result, I had all the responses I needed in less than a week! ~ **Jason Carr**, Middle School Mathematics Teacher, Illini Bluffs Middle School

A simple quote regarding action research by Kurt Lewin says, "No research without action, no action without research." Action research within the classroom is a powerful tool for assessing the validity of instructional change. Instructional interventions applied directly with sound theoretical support increase validity of findings for future educational strategies. Therefore, if you have an idea to promote change in your classroom, align the ideas with action research frameworks for validity and support. ~ **Christina McDaniel**, Assistant Professor, Bradley University

Action research is a process of inquiry conducted by and for those taking the action: teachers, administrations, and university partners. ~ **Lucas Shivers**, Director of Elementary Education, USD 383 Manhattan/Ogden

When teachers engage in action research, they make the powerful transition from recipient of research to conceptualizer, conductor, and disseminator of research. Action research enables teachers to recognize the impactful analysis they routinely use to guide instructional decisions and compels them to formalize and deepen their impact on educational practice and innovation. ~ **Rhonda Baynes Jeffries**, Professor and Program Coordinator, University of South Carolina

Action research is a worthwhile investment because it connects real-life experiences to learning targets for actual students. I encourage other educators to bring meaningful action research practices into their pedagogy to deepen their understanding and effectiveness in meeting students' needs. ~ **Carol Benson-O'Connor**, Fourth and Fifth Grade Teacher, Hollis Grade School

PDS action research involves several factors that are key to a successful experience. You must be able to work together and set aside time to focus on the tasks of the research, analysis, implementation, and recording of your results. It is important to develop a timeline of actions and to outline who will be responsible for completing each task. Additionally, just understanding the action research process is a prerequisite; you must have an idea of the steps needed to produce something tangible. The process is rewarding; and working within a PDS partnership and seeing knowledge learned and put into action is completely worth it. ~ **Dustin D. Meritt**, Secondary Professor of Practice, Kansas State University

Conducting collaborative inquiry can be empowering! Remember that you are not alone in tackling problems and challenges that you face. Instead, see those problems and challenges as opportunities to harness the power of collaboration. Problems become our friends and they can be the impetus for innovation and change! ~ **Rebecca West Burns**, Associate Professor, University of South Florida; **Samantha Haraf**, Doctoral Student, University of South Florida; **LaTiecea Brown**, Principal, Hillsborough County Public Schools; **Amanda Bellas**, Teacher Leader, Hillsborough County Public Schools