



This research-oriented approach promotes experimenting, learning, risk-taking, and a willingness to think differently in support of improved practice and student outcomes.

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FOCUS ON PRINCIPALS

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WITH ACTION RESEARCH, IMPROVEMENT IS IN OUR OWN HANDS

Fostering a culture of inquiry and supporting educators' continuous learning and growth is essential for improving student outcomes. Action research, in which educators investigate their own practice, reflect on their impact, and make informed decisions to enhance student learning, can be a valuable strategy for district leaders, principals, and teachers. Empowering educators to identify areas of need within their context, engage in professional learning, and experiment with and apply new practices and approaches can be a powerful way to promote an environment of curiosity, self-reflection, and continuous improvement in support of improved student outcomes.



Action research is a structured approach to engaging leaders and teachers in the study of their practice and its impact within the context of specific dilemmas or problems of practice. This process involves several key elements: identifying an area of focus, developing guiding questions, and engaging in iterative cycles of inquiry relative to the identified dilemma or problem of practice. This research-oriented approach promotes experimentation, learning, risk-taking, and a willingness to think differently in support of improved practice and student outcomes. Educators have a critical responsibility to assess and evaluate the impact of their decisions on student learning and take responsibility for ensuring the growth and well-being of all students (Hattie, 2023). Action research can be a powerful strategy for studying educators' own practice and understanding and demonstrating that impact.

EXAMPLES

In my roles as a principal and district leader, I've used an action research approach to improve my own knowledge and skills and supported teachers and school leaders to do so as well, typically as part of annual goal-setting processes.

For example, when I was a principal, 2nd-grade teachers designed inquiry cycles about how to support students to use comprehension strategies to deepen understanding of fictional and informational texts. They engaged in professional learning about the development of reading comprehension, learned how to collect and analyze data about essential elements of that developmental process, and used the data to plan and implement instruction. Their end-of-year reflections detailed the steps they took to learn and improve their instruction as well as analysis and insights about how student learning changed in response.

In my current role as a principal supervisor, I have been working with principals this year to conduct case study action research related to a key district goal: ensuring all students engage in grade-level work that is culturally relevant, real-world connected, interactive, and guided by high expectations. In response to data that demonstrates persistent disparities in academic and social and emotional outcomes for students from historically underserved populations in our district, principals' inquiry is structured around a guiding question focused on specific students:

How can I employ deliberate processes to learn more about this identified student to better understand their strengths and needs and support their teachers to provide culturally responsive instruction that results in improved learning outcomes?

The inquiry is grounded in the following theory of action:

IF I focus on the strengths, challenges, and learning needs of a specific student from a community typically underserved in our school district ...

THEN I will be able to use those insights to identify and coach for specific changes in practice ...

WHICH WILL help teachers of these students employ effective strategies for learning about and responding to their student's needs ...

THAT WILL support the student to meet their identified learning outcomes ...

AND provide me with insights and practices I can expand on in my work with teachers to build our capacity as culturally responsive educators able to support the needs of all learners.

As we approach the end of the school year, principals will reflect on their learning, insights, outcomes, and next steps. Some have already shared feedback about the power of this learning. For example, principal Mark Chitty of Franklin Elementary School in Newton, Massachusetts, said, "Focusing on a specific student is a meaningful way of studying the impact of my work as a principal and how I can facilitate shifts in practice that improve students' outcomes and experiences at school."

He went on to explain how this approach is a shift from typical practices: "Too often, we look at student achievement data in the aggregate without stopping to notice whom we are not yet serving well. We will become the school we are meant

to be when we look at who is not yet experiencing academic growth and social and emotional connectedness and create a culture of experimentation to find how to reach these students and their families."

He says that action research "supported our school team to think more deeply about our focus students' school experiences, consider which instructional practices would reach them and benefit everyone else in the class, and make shifts in practice that are responsive to their needs."

Angie Downing, a 4th-grade teacher at Franklin Elementary School, also believes this approach is beneficial. "I am on a journey to foster a sense of belonging within my classroom that will nurture the potential of all of my students. Through affirming conversations and the intentional creation of trust with one student and her family, a positive relationship is being cultivated. Although my focus is on one student, this process causes a mindset shift that is forging a path toward inclusivity and empowerment for every student ensuring all voices are honored and valued."

Explaining how action research makes that possible, she said, "Enacting an action plan and analyzing the data collected directly from my students' experiences has led to a broader perspective on student success beyond [skills] proficiency, embracing diverse forms of achievement and progress."

As principals examine their work and learning this year, I will be reflecting on my own inquiry cycle as well, which is focused on the support I provided to principals in enhancing their instructional leadership practices. Examining principals' insights, feedback, progress indicators, and other relevant data is essential for me to understand and build on what is effective and identify areas for

continued growth in my own work so I can provide support responsive to their needs.

SUPPORTING AN ACTION RESEARCH APPROACH

The following questions can be helpful for launching action research or other forms of inquiry:

- What's your dilemma? What do you want to know more about or study?
- What data, experiences, or observations have brought you to this focus?
- What do you expect to gain from this inquiry? Who stands to benefit? How will it improve your practice and impact your students?
- What action will you take to launch your inquiry?
- How will you build in periodic reflection and assessment of your inquiry and learning?
- How will you hold yourself accountable for maintaining your focus, evaluating your learning and progress, and identifying next steps?
- How and with whom will you share your insights, impact, and next steps?

These questions can help educators at all levels navigate a process of inquiry to address the complex challenges of our work in education. They can also foster educational environments that encourage the curiosity, experimentation, and positive risk-taking that facilitate continuous improvement (Saphier & King, 1985) and meet students' needs.

REFERENCES

Hattie, J. (2023). *Visible learning: The sequel*. Routledge.

Saphier, J. & King, M. (1985). Good seeds grow in strong cultures. *Educational Leadership*, 42(6), 67-74. ■