

ERIC Identifier: ED463944
Publication Date: 2000-10-00
Author: Feldman, Allan - Capobianco, Brenda
Source: ERIC Clearinghouse for Science Mathematics and Environmental Education
Columbus OH.

Action Research in Science Education. ERIC Digest.

This introduction to action research in science education includes examples of how action research has been used to improve teaching and learning, as well as suggested resources for those seeking to incorporate action research into their own practice of teaching or research. Many have attempted to define action research or categorize its many variants. For example, Noffke (1997) has studied personal, professional and political purposes of action research, while McKernan (1988) has focused on the ways that ideology shapes its design. Rearick and Feldman (1999) have studied other dimensions of action research, including purpose, theoretical orientation, and type of reflection used. Here we draw upon these and other reviews to define action research as "systematic inquiry by practitioners to improve teaching and learning." Our definition assumes that the products of the inquiry are made public, adding to the knowledge bases of teaching and learning, and open to critique by peers.

ACTION RESEARCH IN SCIENCE EDUCATION

Action research has been utilized in three domains of science education: teacher education and professional development; research on science learning; and curriculum development and implementation. In all cases teachers are in the role of researcher, either studying their own methods of instruction and assessment; examining the cognitive processes of learning; or participating in the process of curriculum research and development.

ACTION RESEARCH IN SCIENCE TEACHER EDUCATION

Action research has been used in both preservice and inservice science teacher education, and as a way for teachers to collaborate with one another to improve practice. Hewson and colleagues (1999) use action research to help prospective teachers become reflective about what it means to teach for conceptual change. Prospective teachers designed, conducted, and presented research projects, used reflective journals as research notebooks, and participated in seminars. The process was found to help participants focus more on student conceptions and explanations, important aspects of teaching for conceptual change.

In a Science Inquiry Group (van Zee, 1998), beginning and experienced teachers meet monthly to share experiences and insights about science teaching. Teachers present their findings through research festivals, Web pages, presentations at local and national conferences, and submission of case studies for publication in practitioner-based journals.

Science FEAT was a three-year teacher enhancement project (Spiegel, 1995) funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF) in which middle school science teachers studied their own teaching. University faculty members provided a course on research methods and guided teachers through individualized action research studies. The teachers met regularly in groups to discuss the progress of their research, and in the third year they presented their research in a colloquium. The research projects have been published (Spiegel, 1995) and serve as examples of how action research can be a viable, effective method of change for classroom teachers. This and other professional development programs for inservice science teachers have resulted in increased teacher knowledge and improved instructional practice (Feldman, 1996; Madsen & Gallagher, 1992), as well as more inquiry-based, problem-based learning, and constructivist science teaching (Staten, 1998).

ACTION RESEARCH AND THE STUDY OF SCIENCE LEARNING

The Project for Enhancing Effective Learning (PEEL) was an action research program aimed at improving the teaching and learning of science by encouraging teachers to inquire into how their students learn (Baird & Mitchell, 1987). Teachers designed action plans that incorporated the use of innovative pedagogy in targeted classes. With support from school administrators, the teachers met as a group throughout the school year to share the progress of their research. Through reflection on their own practice in collaboration with other teachers and university researchers, the teacher researchers came to new understandings of how students learned science.

Solomon and colleagues (Solomon, Duveen, & Scot, 1992) used action research as a means of collaborating with middle school science teachers to gather data about classroom learning. The research focused on the effects of incorporating historical studies into the science curriculum on students' understanding of the nature of science and their learning of scientific concepts. Five classrooms located in three different schools were involved, and in each classroom a university researcher worked alongside a teacher on a regular basis both to observe and to assist the teachers in improving practice.

Minstrell has for more than 20 years researched in his classroom how students learn physics. By paying close attention to his students and his own teaching through the use of audiotape, videotape, and interviews, he has uncovered common misconceptions and devised methods for helping students develop deep conceptual understanding of physics concepts (Feldman & Minstrell, 2000; Minstrell, 1992). Minstrell's efforts demonstrate how a classroom teacher who is part of a community of researchers can add substantially to the knowledge base on science learning.

ACTION RESEARCH FOR SCIENCE CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

Scope, Sequence and Coordination (SS&C) was an NSTA project aimed at transforming the ways science is taught by making instruction more student-centered and inquiry based, and by changing the curriculum sequence so that all students study all domains of

science each year. During two years of the project in California, teachers engaged in action research on the local development of SS&C curriculum and the struggle to implement it in their schools (Feldman, Mason, & Goldberg, 1992; 1993; Feldman, 1995).

The transformation of science curriculum through a focus on issues of science, technology and society (STS) was the goal of several collaborative action research groups facilitated by Hodson and others (Pedretti & Hodson, 1995; Hodson & Bencze, 1998). Action research assisted participating teachers in knowing how to learn about educational issues, how to formulate their own views on curriculum, and how to critique and develop their own educational practice.

Teachers of writing and other literacy skills have been actively engaged in action research through local and National Writing Projects (Smith, 1996) and other efforts (e.g., Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Hollingsworth, 1994). Saul and Reardon (1996) directed an action research project in which elementary school teachers studied ways to integrate the teaching of reading and writing with science.

RESOURCES FOR ACTION RESEARCH

Resources for those who want to use action research in science education include "how-to-do" books (Altrichter, Posch, & Somekh, 1993; Calhoun, 1994; Mills, 2000; Sagor, 1992), a chapter in the "Handbook of Research Design in Mathematics and Science Education" (Feldman & Minstrell, 2000), and published examples of science teachers' action research (e.g., Feldman et al., 1992; 1993; Minstrell, 1992; Saul & Reardon, 1996; Saurino, 1994; Spiegel, 1995)

REFERENCES"

Altrichter, H., Posch, P., & Somekh, B. (1993). *Teachers investigate their own work: An introduction to the methods of action research.* New York: Routledge.

Baird, J., & Mitchell, I. (Eds.). (1987). *Improving the quality of teaching and learning: An Australian case study - The Peel Project.* Melbourne, Australia: Monash University Printery.

Calhoun, E. (1994). *How to use action research in the self-renewing school.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. (1993). *Inside/Outside: Teacher research and knowledge.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Erzberger, A., Fottrell, S., Hiebart, L., Merrill, T., Rappleyea, A., Weinmann, L., & Woosnam, T. (1996). A framework for physics projects. *The Physics Teacher*, 34(1), 26-28.

- Feldman, A. (1995). The Institutionalization of Action Research: The California "100 Schools". In S. Noffke & R. Stevenson (Eds.), "Educational action research: Becoming practically critical." New York: Teachers College Press.
- Feldman, A. (1996). Enhancing the practice of physics teachers: Mechanisms for the generation and sharing of knowledge and understanding in collaborative action research. "Journal of Research in Science Teaching," 33(5), 513-540.
- Feldman, A., Mason, C., & Goldberg, F. (Eds.). (1992). "Action research: Reports from the field, 1991-92." San Diego, CA: Center for Research in Mathematics and Science Education.
- Feldman, A., Mason, C., & Goldberg, F. (Eds.). (1993). "Action research: Reports from the field, 1992-93." San Diego, CA: Center for Research in Mathematics and Science Education.
- Feldman, A., & Minstrell, J. (2000). Action research as a research methodology for the study of the teaching and learning of science. In E. Kelly & R. Lesh (Eds.), "Handbook of research design in mathematics and science education." Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Hewson, P. W., Tabachnick, R. B., Zeichner, K. M., Blomerk, K. B., Meyer, H., Lemberger, J., Marion, R., Park, H., & Toolin, R. (1999). Educating prospective teachers of biology: Introduction and research methods. "Science Education," 83(3), 247-73.
- Hodson, D., & Bencze, L. (1998). Becoming critical about practical work: Changing views and changing practice through action research. International "Journal of Science Education," 20(6), 683-694.
- Hollingsworth, S. (1994). "Teacher research and urban literacy education: Lessons and conversations in a feminist key." New York: Teachers College Press.
- Madsen, A. L., & Gallagher, J. J. (1992). "Improving learning and instruction in junior high school science classes through the role of the support teacher." (Research Series No. 212). East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University, Institute of Research on Teaching.
- McKernan, J. (1988). The countenance of curriculum action research: Traditional, collaborative, and emancipator-critical conceptions. "Journal of Curriculum and Supervision," 3(3), 173-200.
- Mills, G. E. (2000). Action research : A guide for the teacher researcher. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill.
- Minstrell, J. (1992). "Facets of students' knowledge and relevant instruction." Paper presented at the International Workshop: Research in Physics Learning - Theoretical Issues and Empirical Studies, University of Kiel (IPN), Kiel, Germany.

- Noffke, S. (1997). Professional, personal, and political dimensions of action research. "Review of Research in Education," 22, 305-343.
- Pedretti, E., & Hodson, D. (1995). From rhetoric to action: Implementing STS education through action research. "Journal of Research in Science Teaching," 32(5), 463-485.
- Rearick, M., & Feldman, A. (1999). Orientations, product, reflections: A framework for understanding action research. "Teaching and Teacher Education," 15(4), 333-350.
- Sagor, R. (1992). "How to conduct action research." Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Saul, W., & Reardon, J. (Eds.). (1996). "Beyond the science kit." Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Saurino, D. R. (1994, April 4-8, 1994). "Evaluation formats: A teacher's action research look at tracking." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.
- Smith, M. A. (1996). The National Writing Project after 22 Years. "Phi Delta Kappan," 77(10), 688-692.
- Solomon, J., Duveen, J., & Scot, L. (1992). Teaching about the nature of science through inquiry: Action research in the classroom. "Journal of Research in Science Teaching," 29(4), 409-421.
- Spiegel, S. (Ed.). (1995). "Perspectives from teachers' classrooms. Action research. Science FEAT (Science for Early Adolescence Teachers)." Tallahassee, FL: SERVE, Math/Science Consortium,
- Staten, M. E. (1998). "Action research study: A framework to help move teachers toward an inquiry-based science teaching approach." Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee Public Schools.
- van Zee, E. H. (1998). Fostering elementary teachers' research on their science teaching practices. "Journal of Teacher Education," 49(4), 245-254.