# School Administrators and the Importance of Utilizing Action Research

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## Abstract

*Action research is an effective tool that school administrators can use to solve educational problems that do not have easy answers. Some of these problems include: student behavior, curriculum, school improvement plans, and other educational issues. Action research can also be used to evaluate program effectiveness to enhance student learning. Action research is a model that promotes inquiry, reflection of practice, and analysis of data. It is a process that allows school administrators to address their own professional practice and improve student learning and achievement. This article provides a review of what Action research is and the process that can be used to implement this kind of research. Two cases studies reinforce the value of utilizing action research and the impact it has on teaching and learning.*

**Keywords***: action research, school decision-making, school administrators, school effectiveness, leadership*

## *Introduction*

School administrators must be visible, student and teacher centered, and willing to tackle issues for which there are no easy answers. The shift in educational leadership has gone from instructional leader to the more appropriate term of "learning leader" (Schmoker, 2006). In the past, a principal or school administrator worked in isolation and was predominantly concerned with personal autonomy and the top down approach. This type of leadership practice will no longer work if schools are to create an effective environment for student learning and achievement. Schmoker (2006) asserts that schools will not improve until the building leader begins to work cooperatively with teachers. The role of the school administrator encompasses teamwork, exploration, creation, and the ability to "lead by doing the right things" (Lindley, 2009, p. 4). As a school administrator are you ready for the challenge?

One way a school administrator can address the challenges that education faces today is through the knowledge and application of Action Research. Sagor (2000) believes that leaders who engage in Action Research find the process to be an empowering experience. He states that relevance is guaranteed because the focus of the research is determined by the researcher, who utilizes the findings to enhance professional practice (2000). Carl Rogers' quote, with which this article opened, is significant because educators at all levels: teachers, principals and superintendents must embrace the necessity to be life long learners and not be in fear of change. Individuals get comfortable with what they are used to doing and put up roadblocks when change is necessary. The roadblocks are based out of fear of change and fear of failure; lack of understanding the need for change, uncertainty, and having to learn something new. Fullan (2001) points out that the school administrators' role has become more overwhelming, more multifaceted, and more fulfilling for those who learn to guide change.

In order to keep up with the needs of student learning and issues in a school building, school administrators must be the models for change. School administrators must be the driving force and role models that begin the movement for change or facilitate the movement within their schools. By using the process of Action Research the school administrator not only models the importance of learning and assessing personal practice, but as Ferrance (2000) states, they help their teachers by working collaboratively and it helps in their professional development. One way to begin modeling the realities of change within professional practice is to utilize Action Research. Action Research is an effective tool in solving problems that do not have easy answers, evaluating program effectiveness, improving professional practices, and enhancing student learning and achievement. Ferrance states, "it is not problem-solving in the sense of trying to find out what is wrong, but rather a quest for knowledge about how to improve" (2000, p. 2). She goes on to write "it involves people working to improve their skills, techniques, and strategies. It is not about learning why we do certain things, but rather how we can do things better" (Ferrance, 2000, p. 3).The first thought that may come to mind is the amount of time that Action Research may take.

There is so much to be done throughout the school day how can Action Research be added into the mix? The administrator is faced with challenges everyday and sometimes it is the same issue day in and day out. Utilizing Action Research can be a tool to address the issue or other issues that always seem to exist. Action Research does not have to be conducted alone and it can be a way to build stronger relationships with staff members. "Through discussions with colleagues educators develop stronger relationships. As the practice of action research becomes part of the school culture, there is an increase of sharing and collaboration across departments, disciplines, grade levels, and schools" (Ferrance, 2000, p. 14). "Action Research influences thinking skills, sense of efficacy, willingness to share and communicate, and attitudes toward the process of change" (Ferrance, 2000, p. 14).

## *What is Action Research?*

What is Action Research and why has it become a popular method of research for the school setting. Mills (2000) defines Action Research as a "systemic inquiry conducted by teacher researchers, principals, school counselors, and other stakeholders in the teaching/learning environment, to gather information about the ways that their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how well their students learn" (p. 6). Action Research is done to improve personal practice and is decided upon by the person conducting the research. Action Research allows school administrators to study their own schools or districts- for example student behavior, cafeteria issues, transportation concerns, specific curriculum, school improvement plans, assessments, and many other educational issues. Mertler (2009) states that when conducting Action Research "It focuses specifically on the unique characteristics of the population with whom a practice is employed or with whom some action must be taken" (p. 4). According to Mills (2000) there are four steps involved in the process of conducting Action Research and include the following: identifying an area of focus, collecting data, analyzing and interpreting the data, and developing an action plan.

Brighton and Moon (2007) include more steps in the action research process to provide a clear-cut picture of the research development for the individual conducting the investigation. Their steps include the following:

1. Identifying the area of focus
2. Writing the action plan to guide the inquiry process
3. Collect data to address the identified question
4. Organize the data
5. Analyze and interpret the data
6. Share the findings

**The Process of Action Research with Case Studies of Action Research in Practice**
**Step 1: Indentifying the focus**

The first step of Action Research is to decide what issue or topic in the school setting needs to be researched. Once that is determined the administrator can move forward seeking out more information on the topic that needs to be addressed. This can be accomplished by reviewing the literature that already exists on the topic or issue of concern. The administrator conducting the research can speak with colleagues about the topic and seek feedback on the issue. It is also important to develop questions around the issue because they become the guide that helps establish the plan of action.

Glanz wrote that during this step is "when you ask, 'what am I concerned about?' and 'why am I concerned?' Identify what is known and what needs to be know about this program or practice" (2009, p. 3). The issues can include but are not limited to the following:

- Instructional practices
- Parent involvement
- Transportation concerns
- Student/Teacher health and wellness
- Curriculum
- Behavioral issues
- Community/Business partnerships
- Professional Learning Communities
- Evaluation/Performance issues
- Building Morale/Relationships
- Professional development

- School Planning
- Assessment
- Technology
- School nutrition
- School schedules
- Mentoring
- School programs such as Bilingual, ESL, Gifted/Talented, Title One, Advanced Placement, Running Start, etc.

As a school administrator conducting Action Research it must be determined what issue is significant to your professional practice, and to your respective school and/ or district. Then move forward utilizing the process and seek your own solutions instead of relying on someone else determining the plan of action. "Successful school leaders create a focused mission to improve student achievement and a vision of the elements of school, curriculum, and instructional practices that make higher achievement possible" (Bottoms & O'Neill, 2001 p.8). Action Research is a tool that helps make the above statement possible.

Travis Schulhauser a middle school principal in Washington State decided that using Action Research would provide him and the teaching staff some answers to a significant reading problem that the school had been facing for quite some time. Schulhauser knew that the predesigned reading programs that the school had been using did not address their teaching or student needs. Schulhauser, with support from his teaching staff, looked at their current reading programs and then the needs of the students and realized that they had to address the problem head on by asking questions, outlining their concerns and determining what needed to be changed with their current professional practice.

The author often utilized the action research process as a primary school principal in Texas. The staff at the primary school faced the challenge of meeting the academic needs of more than 650 K-3 students in the area of mathematics. The current system of each teacher being able to address the needs of every student in his or her classroom was not the most effective practice. Therefore, the author along with the teaching staff looked at current practice, teaching issues, student data and achievement scores, and decided to incorporate a common teaching time in the area of mathematics within the daily schedule.

### Step 2: Writing the action plan to guide the inquiry process

At this stage of the Action Research process the school administrator develops the action plan to guide the research process. Gay and Airasian (2003) explain that the research plan is a detailed description of the procedures that the researcher will use to investigate the topic, problem or issue to be studied. Brighton and Moon (2007) state that the action plan creates a structure and a process for guiding the researcher through the process. They go on to say that the plan "may have a specific timeline for gathering data, sharing findings, and enacting action; in other instances the plan may be an informal document to help outline the steps in the process" (2007, p. 5). Schulhauser created his plan of action by looking at the student data in the area of reading. During the first year of his Action Research project he brought in a reading specialist that had a strong background with working with at-risk student populations. Together they developed a timeline for implementing the new reading program. They determined the students that would receive the new program developed assessments that would be administered every two months and created a professional development plan for the teaching staff.

The author with support from the primary school teaching staff created a plan of action by looking at student need and achievement data in mathematics, current teaching practice in the area of mathematics, and the needs of the teachers to provide the most effective teaching delivery. Together, they looked at the school schedule, common planning times, and student need per classroom. It was decided upon that the students would receive a pre-assessment prior to new content being delivered. This would provide each teacher a strong idea of where each child was academically in regards to the content that would be covered. Each week during common planning time the teachers in each grade level team would discuss where the kids were excelling and where they needed additional supports. Then, the teachers based on instructional and concept teaching strength would shift students around one day per week based on need. This was considered the accelerated student support process. Prior to each benchmark assessment the students were assessed in the content to determine if their academic needs were being addressed and met.

### Step 3: Collect data to address the identified question

Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2009) explain, "the type of data collected for an action research study is largely determined by the nature of the problem. A researcher must determine how the data will contribute to the understanding and resolution of a given problem" (p. 492). Mertler lays out the process of collecting data as both qualitative and quantitative. The "qualitative data collection techniques include: observations, interviews, journals, and existing documents. Quantitative data collection techniques include: surveys, questionnaires, checklists, and tests or other formal instruments" (p.105). Forrance (2000) states that there are many ways to collect data, which include: interviews, portfolios, diaries, field notes, audiotapes, photos, memos, focus groups, anecdotal records, journals, individual files, and samples of work. She goes on to mention that the researcher must select the data that is appropriate for the issue that is being researched. It is important that once the data are collected to organize it in a way that identifies trends and research themes.

Schulhauser had a focus group of students that received the individualized reading program. The teaching staff collected student achievement data throughout the process to determine student gains, along with strengths and weaknesses of the new program. They collected samples of student work, created anecdotal records, and used assessment measures to address their identified question and academic concerns. The author worked with each professional learning community team on a weekly basis to monitor student progress, student needs, academic growth, and additional areas of support. The staff collected student achievement scores, portfolio data, and used anecdotal records to monitor students throughout the accelerated student support process. The course of action allowed for consistency with the process and information that supported teaching changes throughout the school year.

## Step 4: Organize the data

This step in the Action Research process is an important stage and crucial not to skip or bypass. Brighton and Moon (2007) assert that data organization becomes critical. "If the researcher gathers more data than he or she can effectively manage, then it has the potential to affect the quality of the findings and actions that occur as a result" (Brighton & Moon, 2007, p. 25). Organizing and managing research data are important and can help the researcher determine missing data that may be crucial for the research findings. It will be imperative to develop a useful system or process for organizing the data that is collected. Utilize computer programs such as: Word, Excel, and other databases. For some researchers it may be as simple as creating note cards that have the important data and then breaking them into themes or specific findings.

Mr. Schulhauser's staff organized their data around each student. They created student files with work samples, assessments, and assignments. They also utilized computer programs to store, manage, and organize student data so that it was accessible and easy to document academic findings.

The author's staff collected data on each student in every classroom. Data collection came from daily lesson results, assessment scores, portfolio documents, and teacher notes. The teachers distinguished the lesson objectives that the students mastered and the objectives that still needed to be mastered. The author kept student academic data on each student to monitor and strategically watch progress or lack thereof. The school team utilized binders and computer programs such as excel to organize documents and data.

## Step 5: Analyze and interpret data

Once the data have been collected and organized it is now the important step of analyzing and interpreting the findings of the research conducted. This can be the daunting stage where the researcher looks for the patterns, themes, and other significant information from the data, but with good organization it does not have to be. Brighton and Moon (2006) assert that "other data analysis strategies include seeking antecedent actions (what happens before the phenomenon) and (what happens after the phenomenon). This strategy is particularly helpful when attempting to view a sequence of events" (2007, p. 26). Mills (2000) writes that it is important that the researcher moves beyond the description of what has been studied and make sense of what was learned from the process. Mills (2000) suggests eight data analysis techniques.

1. Identify themes
2. Code surveys, interviews, and questionnaires
3. Ask the 5 W's and the one H (who, what, where, when, why, and how)
4. Conduct an organizational review
5. Develop a concept map
6. Analyze antecedents and consequences

7. Display findings
8. State what is missing

It is important to remember that Action Research is an ongoing process and reflecting on the process and the research findings is part of the process. The practice of reflection is an essential aspect of being an administrator and should be done before action research is conducted, during the process, and once it has been completed. Mills (2000) states that it is important to avoid premature actions and not to make rash or impulsive decisions based the interpretation of the data. He goes on the say that "the Action Research process takes time" and administrators must stay away from quick fixes and "be patient enough to avoid the pitfalls of basing actions on premature analysis" (2000, p. 98).

Mr. Schulhauser along with the teaching staff had assessments that were given every two months to determine academic gains, strengths, and weaknesses. From the assessments given they acquired data that provided them specific information on each student. Based on the data they could refine their program by identifying themes, addressing the findings, and adding or deleting strategies based on effectiveness.

The author's staff frequently analyzed data from daily lessons, unit assessments, and six week benchmarks to establish academic needs, gains, and teaching strategies. From the data analyzed it would provide the essential information to make teaching changes, lesson delivery adjustments, and additional student supports. The data analyzed provided the mathematical trends, strengths and weaknesses of lesson delivery, and student understanding of content.

**Step 6: Share the findings**

Now that the research is complete, the data collected, analyzed, and interpreted what is next? According to Brighton and Moon (2007) the researcher may what to share the findings with indentified stakeholders. As instructional leaders and change agents it is important for school administrators to share their findings because it creates a collaborative environment and through conducting Action Research it helps establish the need and desire for teachers, and other school employees to conduct their own Action Research. As Hewitt and Little state "as with virtually all school improvement initiatives, active administrative support is the key to successful Action Research" (2005, p. 19). School administrators that conduct and understand the Action Research process display instructional leadership and the importance of specific professional development.

Once the findings have been shared Mertler asserts that the researcher needs to formulate a plan of action for the future. The plan should "consist of strategies for the future implementation of the treatments, interventions, and improvements that were incorporated into the study and it also may consist of designs and proposals for future Action Research cycles, or perhaps a combination of both" (Mertler, 2009, p. 179). According to Mertler (2009) there are three types of action plans: individual plans, team plans, and school level or district wide plans. "The determination of the appropriate level is based initially on the scope of the Action Research project" (Mertler, 2009, p. 182). Instead of sharing the findings and closing the door on the project, creating an action plan sets in motion the continuation of what the administrator deemed important enough to research. Conducting Action Research allows the administrator to solve their own problems and evaluate the effectiveness of their own professional practice.

Mr. Schulhauser found that implementing the new reading program was effective. The data reinforced the findings and it was communicated with all staff members and district officials. Based on the findings the goal was to not only sustain the new program, but to reach more students that were in need of remediation strategies and one to one support.

The author found that by utilizing the knowledge base of the teaching staff, common planning times for discussion and program adjustments, and looking at how the mathematical content was delivered that the school was able to develop a process that was more effective for both teachers and more importantly, students. The data proved both the need for change and the effectiveness of the change. Based on the new process and the Action Research findings the school was able to make the necessary teaching transformation for student success.

**The Benefits of Action Research for the School Administrator**

The benefit of conducting Action Research goes well beyond improving professional practice. Mertler (2009) explains, "Action Research deals with your problems, not someone else's. Second, Action Research is very timely; it can start now or whenever you are ready and it provides immediate results.

Third, it provides the researcher with opportunities to better understand, and therefore improve, professional practices. Fourth, as a process, Action Research can also promote the building of stronger relationships among colleagues. Finally, and possibly most importantly, Action Research provides alternative ways of viewing and approaching educational questions and problems and with new ways of examining your own educational practices" (p. 19).

Furthermore, Action Research allows school administrators to focus on both simple and complex school issues or concerns that are in real time and don't have a quick fix. When speaking with Travis Schulhauser he believes that addressing the school challenges on their own was the best thing that could be done for the students he serves. They continue to monitor student achievement data to determine the changes and adjustments that need to be addressed. The new reading program, which focuses on students that are three or more years behind in the area of reading, is currently in its second year. The program has gone from focusing on the most at risk students in regular education to expanding their program to eighty of the most at risk populations from both regular education and special education. The author felt that using the action research process allowed the school team to address specific needs with the ability to alter their program as deemed necessary. It didn't take money, a specific program, or a consultant to determine a solution, it took the desire, knowledge base, and the willingness of the staff to make the program adjustments that proved to be successful for all students.

**The Challenges of Action Research**

With any type of research there are always challenges to the process and the same is true with Action Research. If aware of the challenges the researcher can foresee potential issues that may surface as they move through the Action Research steps. Being prepared and having the ability to make predictions of possible issues will ensure that the challenges are minimized. Memorial University in Newfoundland and Labrador Canada state that they have found five challenges that some educators face in schools.

1. Time is the biggest concern because the researcher must find the time to develop a plan of action and then move through the Action Research steps. It is important to remember that an Action Research project should not be considered an add-on to what is already being done is schools. Instead, it should be an integral part of what takes place every day in schools.
2. Lack of resources can also be a challenge when planning action research. The researcher needs to be innovative, optimistic and dedicated to overcome this challenge. The school administrator needs to design the project that can be supported by the resources that are available. Grants can also be considered if the project is complex and additional resources are needed.
3. Difficulty formulating the research question is a challenge that researchers face in the early stages of Action Research. School administrators must remain focused, patient and take the time to select a research question that pertains to the research project.
4. Resistance to change can impact any Action Research project. Support from school and school district personnel is fundamental for the researcher. It may be important to emphasize how conducting action research will benefit the professional practice of the researcher, school, students, teachers, and the district.
5. Ethical considerations must be taken into account. Most Action Research projects involve human subjects therefore the district, parents, teachers, and students must be fully aware of the goals and the expectations of the research. If the school administrator chooses to present the findings in a public venue such as a staff meeting, board meeting, conference or publication then informed consent must be obtained. Be prepared to address questions and concerns that pertain to the research (www.educ.mun.ca/sac/inquirychal.html).

Along with the author, Schulhauser felt that the benefits of conducting Action Research were far greater than the challenges. The two most significant challenges that he faced were staff development and communication. The challenges that the author faced were scheduling and class changes due to the content need of students. Most administrators would agree that for any program to be effective staff development and staff involvement are essential and communication must not be forgotten or put on the backburner. As Briton and Moon (220& have noted, "Conducting research in schools is a complex and multifaceted challenge. However, the process of solving real problems of immediate concern makes the challenge well worth the effort" (p. 27).

*Conclusions and Recommendations for School Personnel*

Current accountability mandates, such as those through the No Child Left Behind legislation (ref) require the implementation of research-based instructional practices and strategies to ensure academic success for all students.

School administrators are encouraged to analyze student data to determine the academic needs of all students. In order to meet the challenges, school administrators can utilize the process of Action Research to address professional development, student programs, behavioral issues, parental involvement, instructional strategies and many other issues or school concerns. Action Research is a model that promotes inquiry, collaboration, reflection of practice, and analysis of data. It is a process that allows administrators to address their own professional practice and improve student learning and achievement. "The idea of Action Research is that educational problems and issues are best identified and investigated where the action is: at the classroom or school level. By integrating research into these settings and engaging those who work at this level in research activities, findings can be applied immediately and problems solved more quickly" (Guskey, 2000).

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