2. Action Research as a Process for Professional Learning and Leadership

**ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS**

- What is the role of action research in professional learning and leadership?
- What are the educational contexts that action research takes place?
- What are the critiques of action research as a methodology?
- What are the basic stages of an action research project?

In the previous chapter, we were able to explore the idea of action research, the purpose of action research, and the theoretical underpinnings of action research. Hopefully, you now have a good understanding of the landscape of action research and the contours in which it can take shape in educational contexts. It is important to emphasize that the primary aim of conducting action research in an educational context is to study and improve upon an educator's, or group of educators', practice. This chapter will explore some of the practical aspects of action research, in particular, the forethought and planning required to engage in a successful action research experience.
As we begin to transition from the theoretical to the more practical aspects of action research, we want to provide a few questions to consider:

- How does the *epistemological*, *ontological*, and *theoretical* basis of action research fit with your pedagogical philosophy in the classroom? Will using action research require any paradigmatic shifts in how you approach your pedagogy?
- What are the pedagogical benefits of using action research in your educational context?
- What are the most significant affordances and challenges of using action research in your educational context?

After considering the questions above, we think it is important from a practical standpoint to consider and situate action research as part of an educator's responsibility to professional learning and leadership.

**Action Research as Professional Learning and Leadership**

Thus far, we have made the case that action research is a useful methodology for educators because it formalizes a process you already use to improve your pedagogy; but how does it benefit you as a professional and your professional identity? In *Becoming Critical* Carr and Kemmis (2003) list characteristics of action research that make it integral to critical professional learning for educators. We have summarized their five characteristics of action research as a methodology for educators:
Five Characteristics of Action Research as a Methodology for Educators

• action research rejects positivist notions of rationality, objectivity, and truth and instead has an openness to competing possibilities for effective pedagogical practice in educational contexts;
• action research employs educators’ reflective and interpretive categories, and uses the language of educators as a basis for educators to explore and develop their own pedagogical theorizing;
• action research allows educators' unrealized self-understandings to be discerned by analyzing their own practices and understandings;
• action research connects reflection to action, enabling educators to overcome barriers to pedagogical change through awareness of social and systemic factors influencing their educational context;
• action research involves deep consideration of theory and practice and to demonstrate this critically self-reflective action, researchers develop and organize knowledge in which truth is evidenced through its relation to practice.

To synthesize these five characteristics in terms of practical knowledge, we think it is important to now consider a “so what?” type of question. After learning these characteristics, why would an educator engage in action research for the purpose of professional learning and leadership?
learning or leadership? The following five principles correspond to the five characteristics above:

**Why an Educator would Engage in Action Research**

- the development of an educator’s pedagogy is not about developing a set of “surefire” technical competencies; it is concerned with finding the most effective practices for the students in their educational context;
- one way for educators to be consistently informed on pedagogy and increase their skills is through actively being involved in a culture of inquiry that dually relies on the latest educational research and their own classroom to spark new inquiry;
- by doing action research, educators are engaged in the process of hypothesizing, theorizing, and developing self-knowledge related specifically to their practice;
- when educators engage in action research, they develop agency and gain control of knowledge, and address questions for themselves, instead of being subservient to the knowledge enacted on their educational context;
- when educators are engaged in research, educators are naturally engaged in educational theorizing because they are reflecting on practice systematically and critically, to close the distance between educational theory practice, which many educators feel (Hopkins, 2003).
Professional learning in education takes many forms. Action research is unique in the realm of professional learning because it is tailored to the educator's real time pedagogical foci, issues, or needs. Professional learning opportunities often fail to meet the expectations of educators because they are meant for large groups of teachers, either based on a school, topic, subject, or course. Even at the course level of professional learning, while the content may be the same for each teacher, the students and educational context are different for each teacher – which creates unique challenges that educators want to address through their professional learning. One advantage of traditional professional learning sessions is the group aspect, or collaborative thinking that takes place. Action research is flexible enough that collaborative inquiry could be part of the process, and educators could include colleagues as part of their research. In many ways, action research not only contributes to professional learning, but also provides professional leadership to colleagues.

Professional leadership in education, or teacher leadership, also takes many forms. Danielson (2007) lists teacher leadership in her framework for teaching, as one of several professional responsibilities for educators. Educators who engage in action research and share their findings, are working to impact professional learning, and subsequently student learning, beyond their classrooms. Engaged educators who attain and continue to receive recognition in the teaching profession invest a lot of time and energy to stay informed and further develop their skills. Danielson (2007) notes that these educators are in a prime position to exercise leadership among their colleagues. Often times educators view conferences and professional learning sessions as the only opportunities to further develop their skills and become leaders among their colleagues. However, Danielson (2007) goes on to describe a distinguished educator as someone who engages in a combination of seeking “out opportunities for professional development and makes a systematic effort to conduct action research” (105). In this way, professional learning is a part of the
action research process that engages educators in reflection and conversations outside of their educational context, while also potentially providing an alternative lens to analyze their data.

Data-driven decision making by administrators, teachers, and teams of educators, often facilitated by teacher leaders, is a prevalent practice in schools that impacts educator performance and student learning. This sort of professional learning through collaborative inquiry provides vital contextual data to improve pedagogy in classrooms and throughout the school. Sagor (2010) defines collaborative action research as "the team inquiry process, when a group of individuals who are a part of a specific PLC, grade-level, or teacher learning team engage in inquiry and research." These teams can become a means for collaboratively engaging in action research and developing data that is relative to the school. Data is most valuable to an educational context when it is deeply relatable and relevant to the specific educational context. Data specifically related to the educational context can increase a school's capacity to focus on curricular and instructional strategies with the greatest potential to support student learning. In an effort to spark professional leadership, and as we discuss the process of action research in future chapters, please discuss with colleagues the potential action research projects in your own classroom and think about how to leverage those toward your school's PLC, professional learning, or school-wide improvement plans. Thinking about your action research in this way adds another layer of purpose and makes action research a truly valuable process for improvement throughout your educational context.

**What Will Action Look Like in My Classroom?**

Now that we have discussed the relevance of action research for professional learning and leadership, it may be a little easier to conceptualize an action research project, or perhaps you already have an idea ready to start. O'Leary (2004) provides a useful list of processes related to action research that could help you think about your initial plans. Here are some questions to think about related to the processes of an action research project:
• **Does it address a practical problems(s)?** Educators typically identify a practical problem in their educational context that has multiple possible ways to be addressed. The impetus to improve professional practice prioritizes change.

• **Does it generate knowledge?** Generating knowledge promotes change. By addressing this practical problem, you will generate knowledge.

• **Does it enact changes in your pedagogy/classroom/school?** The changes generated by the knowledge will be useful to enact change relatively close to the conclusion of the research project.

• **Is it participatory?** Action research is participatory, and the primary researcher is involved in the action, potentially along with other researchers and stakeholders.

• **Could it be a cyclical process?** Action research is a cyclical process that results from emerging knowledge. Once better situational understanding is gained through research, a change can be implemented and researched again, resulting in an evaluative practice that reciprocates between informed action and critical reflection.

I want to emphasize that this is one of interpretations of the processes involved in the action research process, and you should adapt these basic processes to fit your needs as an educator and researcher. These processes will also become clearer in purpose as we discuss the contexts for action research.

**The Contexts for Considering Action Research**
Action research can take place in many professional settings and contexts. As we think about some of those contexts we will focus on the most common in educational settings. I have also provided some examples for research in each context.

**Improving Classroom Practice**

These projects are conducted by educators in their classroom context and focus on pedagogical, curricular, or instructional aspects of their practice. Examples could include:

- How can Socratic questioning improve engagement in class discussions?
- Who participates more in my class?
- How can integrated social studies and ELA lessons improve students’ reading scores?
- Will learning diaries in mathematics lessons enhance students’ conceptual understanding?
- How can Flipgrid help connect student interests to content standards?

**Examining an Educational Theme**

These projects allow educators to examine new ideas or themes that they have encountered in professional learning opportunities. Examples could include:

- How can I implement personalized learning in my classroom?
- Can I integrate all subjects into a problem-based inquiry project?
- In what ways do Breakout Box activities prepare students for content-based learning?
- Do exercise balls help students focus longer while sitting at their seats?

**Educational Context Focus**
These projects focus on interaction between humans and the ecological space of the context. Examples could include:

- How can using non-letter grades improve communication with parents?
- How can we increase engagement at parent meetings?
- Does going outside and doing yoga improve student focus in the afternoon?
- What is the effect of eliminating homework?
- Does presenting to community members, outside the school community, improve engagement or motivation for group projects?
- What anti-bullying strategies reduce verbal teasing?

**Implementing a New Initiative Based on Policy or Research**

These projects are sparked by new policy or research data or are related to district or state-wide initiatives. These are often group or collaborative projects. Examples could include:

- What are the best methods to prepare teachers for a school-wide one-to-one device launch?
- Do weekly meetings help support first-year teachers?
- Adopting the new formative assessment framework for inquiry-based learning.

**Critiques of Action Research**

Action research is a fairly new form of acceptable educational research; therefore, educators should be aware of some of the common critiques you may hear when presenting or sharing your research. These critiques can also be easily dealt with in the planning and development of your action research project. The following are three of the most common critiques of action research.
Critique #1: Action research lacks rigor and trustworthiness in comparison to other methodologies...

The rigor of a research project is shaped by the manner in which data collection and analysis are conducted in the research process. For example, rigor can develop in data collection by using a variety of research methods to collect data (discussed further in Chapter 6). Sharing data with critical friends and colleagues, or triangulating the data, would demonstrate rigor in the data analysis process. Issues of trustworthiness are raised around the question: Can you be/maintain objectivity when you are conducting research on your own practice? Trustworthiness can be viewed as the strength of the inference made possible by the given research study. Trustworthiness can be achieved primarily through triangulation of data (multiple sources of data) and a clear description of context, participants, processes, and analysis which allows for transferability as a reader. Maintaining a rigorous data collection and analysis process will help with trustworthiness, but also being clear in your epistemological stance and positionality from the beginning of the project also contributes to trustworthiness. Rigor and trustworthiness can easily be addressed through developing a research plan and sticking to it. Adherence to ethical research (IRB) will also add to trustworthiness, we will discuss this in a later chapter.

Critique #2: Action research findings are not generalizable to other educational contexts...

Generalizability is often a concern for quantitative researchers who are trying to solve problems across large portions of the population. Simply put, the action researcher is not concerned with
generalizable data that can provide answers to other educators in different contexts (However, it is great if this happens!). The action researcher is primarily concerned with generating knowledge based on the actions within their own situated context. Action research findings are generalizable only within specific situations and within that specific educational context, which is described and considered as part of the research process. Sharing findings could be applicable to educators who are interested or who are in similar circumstances, either locally, nationally, or globally.

**Critique #3: Action research is based on a deficit model...**

The problem-solving nature of action research may give an appearance that it is based on a deficit model. This is not necessarily the case; however, if researchers are not conscious of deficit thinking or deficit models of thinking, it is possible to engage in action research based on perceived student deficits. From my perspective, developing strategies for solving a problem within a situation with the sole purpose of improving practice is not rooted in deficit thinking, especially if they really generate knowledge. Regardless, researchers need to be aware of deficit thinking and make sure their research questions do not rely on assumptions about students’ weaknesses based on demographic groupings.

**What’s Ahead? Thinking about the Stages of Action Research**

The models of action research presented in Chapter 1 all described action research as a cyclical process. It is exciting to think about a cyclical process of professional learning to improve your practice; however, it can also be overwhelming to think about the process. We think it is helpful to have some awareness of what may happen during the project, represented in distinct stages, to provide an overview of the whole process. This will help you plan
more efficiently, but we think it is also important to be flexible and understand that your project does not always need to follow that order. Here is what to expect:

- **Identifying a topic in the educational context**
- **Reviewing related literature**
- **Revising the topic**
- **Developing a research question**
- **Plan research activities**
- **Collect data**
- **Analyze data**
- **Action implementation**
- **Reflection on action**
- **Report, share, or document.**

Each of these steps has some brief considerations, yet I would like to discuss these steps in three broad areas of focus due to the overlap of these considerations.

- **Topic Development**
- **Researching in Action**
- **Action Implications**

**Topic Development**

Identifying and developing a topic that is important and relevant to your practice is vitally essential. Your topic not only shapes the area of educational knowledge you will contribute to, but it will also shape your research question. It is usually helpful to identify and write down three to five potential topics. In addition to writing the topic down, describe why each topic is important or relevant to you, your practice, your students, and/or your educational context. Then, if you are still having a hard time deciding on a topic, write down the intended benefits for you, your practice, your students, and/or your educational context. It may also be helpful to discuss your ideas with others, to help focus your thoughts and provide
another perspective on the feasibility of completing a study on a particular topic, its relevance and implications for practice.

Once you have identified a topic, it is important to conduct a literature review (discussed fully in Chapter 3) to find out what the field of education has researched in regards to your topic. This will help you understand what we know and don’t know about your topic. Once you have conducted a thorough literature review you will feel capable of potentially revising your topic to reflect the knowledge base, and possibly narrow the scope of your project for your own purposes.

Lastly, you will be able to develop a research question (discussed fully in Chapter 4) based on your topic, the reviewed literature, and your intended outcomes.

**Researching Action**

After you have thoroughly vetted a topic and developed a research question, you will be ready to begin the process of researching your topic in your educational context. In consideration of your research question, you can begin to plan your research activities—when and how you will conduct the research in your educational context (Chapter 4). This will include a timeline of activities. You will then begin planning your data collection (Chapter 5) methods and fit those into your timeline. You will also need to think about a proposed process, or order for analyzing your data. This may seem strange; however, it helps contribute to the rigor and validity of your study to have a plan that fits within your epistemological stance.

Once your plan is set, you can begin the data collection process. After data collection, you can begin the analysis of the data (Chapter 6).

**Action Implications**

After you have analyzed your data, you should have some indication as to implications for your research question. You will have the opportunity to reflect on the research, take action, and eventually share or report your findings. Many of you will have reason to change an action in your educational context, whether it
is the following week, the next semester, or next school year. This is where the cyclical process of action research can take shape.

**Action Research in Action: A Vignette**

As a classroom teacher, I was often engaged in action research without realizing it, and typically this process began from reflection. As a graduate student, weekly reflections on the required readings in my Teachers as Researchers course prompted me to identify issues in my classroom to address, either through pedagogical changes or adjustments to my curriculum. In a less formal way, action research naturally emerged as part of my yearly evaluations with administration. In one particular year, after reflecting on my own practice, I realized (rather, admitted) that my junior-level English students did not enjoy our classroom novel studies, resulting in a lack of engagement and poor performance for many of them. The ‘start and stop’ method—where students read a chapter, then stop to either discuss the chapter or take a quiz—did not replicate how people read books, and it is no wonder that it destroyed my students’ desire to engage with the novels they were assigned. This is where action research emerged—I established a driving question for my own classroom problem: *How can I adapt whole novel studies to reflect the natural reading process, take into account each students’ reading level, and improve overall reading performance and engagement?*

The next step in this process was to find research that already existed on whole novel studies in the classroom and
use that information as a catalyst for my own research. I read several examples of alternative methods to whole novel studies, but most of what I could find was based on a middle school classroom. This was good news! It meant, on a large scale, my action research would have a place in the broad educational context by filling an existing void in the information available to classroom teachers. On a small scale, this meant other teachers in my own department could benefit from what I design since a lack of resources exists in this area.

After reading several examples of alternative methods, I adapted the practices that seemed to fit best with my own students and created my own version of how to work with whole novels in the high school English classroom. I implemented this method in two different courses, one of which was considered an ‘advanced’ course, with students at all different reading levels. I tracked their progress in multiple ways and recorded the information on spreadsheets for future use. After a successful first attempt at changing my practice, I presented the findings to my colleagues at a department meeting, and many adapted my method to use in their own classrooms.

Though this example of action research does not reflect a formalized project, it speaks to how teachers naturally engage in the process of questioning and problem-solving to create change for their students. It also demonstrates the value in what teachers discover in their own classrooms. Researchers are often criticized for being too far removed from classroom practice to really understand what teachers need; but teacher researchers have the opportunity to be their own guide and to potentially influence teacher praxis in positive and practical ways.