

## Ensuring Vital Schools through Action Research

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This article describes the process of developing an action research orientation among school leaders and administrators and reflects on how instilling such an orientation among our educational leaders might ensure the vitality of schools. Training and empowering leaders in the educational workforce through action research, we believe, will have a transformative impact on schools across the United States.

Perhaps one of the most debilitating threats that educational systems face is inertia. Inertia in schools commonly manifests as passively accepting the status quo, not questioning current power dynamics, failing to demand high academic achievement, and neglecting to develop youth to their full human potential. Equally debilitating is the paralysis that can occur when school leaders are aware of growth potential and need areas in their schools, but lack the requisite skills or systematic approach to adequately address them. Both passive acceptance of the status quo and ineffectual awareness of pressing education issues in the school can arrest innovation and threaten the effectiveness and vitality of our educational institutions.

So what is the answer to the threat of inertia in schools? We do not offer a panacea that will banish inertia from the educational landscape forever, but we are strong proponents of an approach that makes inertia—in classrooms, schools, districts and dioceses—most unwelcome: action research. While we are certainly not the first to recognize the value of action research (Corey, 1953; McNiff & Whitehead, 2006; Somekh, 2006; Stringer, 2007) or teacher research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Pine, 2009; Zeichner, 2001), there is a less pronounced tradition of administrator-led action research in schools.

The term ‘action research’ originated with the work of social psychologists at the turn of the century, and has been implemented increasingly in educational contexts since the 1950s (see Noffke, 1997, for a comprehensive review of the history of action research). Action research has also gone by many monikers: practitioner research, participatory action research, teacher research, and so on. We define action research as a three-part approach to inquiry that is: a) systematic, b) oriented to positive change, and c) practitioner driven (Frabutt, Holter, & Nuzzi, 2008; Holter & Frabutt, 2009). Our approach to the study and implementation of action research in Catholic education is broadly divided into two primary components: training school leaders to be a) critical consumers and b) systematic producers of educational research. As you will see in the following sections, the three components of action research are manifest in this larger framework.

## Professional Preparation of Academic Leaders

The Mary Ann Remick Leadership Program at the University of Notre Dame is a relatively new graduate program leading to a Master of Arts in Educational Administration degree. Similar to other preparation programs in educational leadership, candidates complete coursework in the principles of educational administration, instructional supervision, curriculum leadership, education law, human resources management, and financial management. However, as the Remick program expanded from a certificate to a three-year masters degree, we sought to add a unique dimension to the usual course of study. We designed and implemented a four-course, 10-credit hour action research sequence. While several pre-service teacher training programs include requirements in teacher research or action research, it is more unusual for principal preparation programs to do so.

The sequence challenges candidates to become both critical consumers and skilled producers of relevant and well-designed educational research. This intentional pairing of consumption and production of educational research bridges the traditional chasm between practice and research (Johnson, 2008) and places educational leaders at the nexus of cutting edge research and real, positive change in their schools. Rather than waiting for or blindly accepting answers from outside experts, school leaders are empowered to address head-on the most pressing issues in their schools.

To that end, each candidate completes coursework in educational research methodology and proposes, executes, and disseminates a site-based action research project within the span of one year (Frabutt et al., 2008). Like the task of learning a new language, the prospect of learning and applying the “language” of educational research can be daunting at first and frustrating at times. Candidates therefore study, design, and implement the components of educational research in a highly structured, collaborative, module-based system with multiple rounds of feedback and edits from professors and peers alike (Holter & Frabutt, 2009). This approach to action research is based on the major components of an educational research report and mirrors the collaborative and iterative process of designing, implementing, analyzing and disseminating educational research.

Action research, as an approach, is clearly geared toward data-informed, transformative social change—an orientation that befits all educational leaders and in all contexts. However, given our Catholic context, we are able to draw specific and explicit linkages between core beliefs of our faith, scripture, Catholic Church teaching, Church documents, and the tenets of action research (see Frabutt, Holter, & Nuzzi, 2008 for a detailed review). Thus, situated at a Catholic university and enrolling candidates in service to Catholic schools, our brand of action research draws intentionally on spirituality, noting that strong social science can indeed further social justice. In addition, action research is presented as systematic, rigorous inquiry conducted in a participatory, collegial manner—often with fellow teachers, administrators, or learning communities of professionals (Frabutt et al., 2008). In line with much educational action research, and deeply resonant with community psychology’s core beliefs, we stress an approach to

informed action based on local empowerment, democratization of knowledge, and an appreciation of the interrelated ecological systems in which schools are embedded (Angelique & Culley, 2007; Orford, 2008).

Given this graduate formation experience, the course products of the first graduates, and both formal and informal feedback from these principals and leaders, we can begin to speculate on the impact of this type of professional preparation. That is, what does this cadre of educational leaders—steeped in an orientation to action research—look like in practice? What might they do differently than those not so formed? What does a workforce of educational leaders trained thusly contribute to their individual school and the enterprise of Catholic education in the United States? We maintain that educational professionals emerging from the Remick Leadership Program embody the dual capabilities of critical consumers and systematic producers of educational research—and such an orientation uniquely positions them to effect transformative change.

### **Critical Consumers of Educational Research**

Leaders in all schools are often saturated with the newest, greatest, and most effective teaching and learning tools peddled by publishers, academics, and practitioners. By virtue of their position as educational leader of the school, these dedicated women and men are already consuming vast amounts of information—some of which are research based. However, they may not be adequately prepared with the knowledge, tools, and “research language” to fully understand or adequately critique the information and research that inundates their inbox.

***Becoming research savvy.*** In the marketplace, consumers must be savvy and knowledgeable in order to obtain high quality products and services. Similarly, in order for principals to distill the best and highest quality information from a vast and variable educational research literature, they must be properly prepared. Understanding research jargon; assessing the connectivity among research questions, data collection, and findings; deciding whether the overall claims outstrip the actual data—mastery of each of these skills makes for a research savvy principal. Once principals are conversant in the language of educational research, they are able to freely navigate the world of educational research. Like the shopper who consults *Consumer Reports* before making a significant purchase, these leaders can assess the strengths, weaknesses, claims, and conclusions of most educational research and then assess its applicability or relevance to their own context.

***Assessing the evidence base.*** Today’s principals lead in an educational environment that is steeped in an evidence-based approach to management and practice. Scientifically based research should guide decision making. Thus, leaders are often awash in claims touting “what works,” “best practices,” “highly effective strategies,” and “empirically supported programs.” Wading into that morass is infinitely easier when a principal possesses the professional autonomy and competence to objectively assess those claims on his or her own. Leaders that are familiar with the required components of effective research and whether they are present in the sources

they do locate bring a powerful lens for assessing and validating any educational claims that they encounter. Moreover, schools leaders can employ a common and standard metric to evaluate programs and pedagogy in their school—new and old alike.

***Learning from previous work.*** Embracing the skill set of a critical consumer of educational research has yet another upside for practicing principals: a firmer understanding that their endeavors are not entirely unique. That is, they come to realize, for example, when they want to address new teacher induction, that there is already a rich and varied literature on the topic. They can peruse that literature, ascertain the dominant trends and issues, and perhaps even identify already existing programs that are topically or contextually relevant to the needs and issues in their own school. Principals begin to realize that each new educational initiative, whatever it is—bullying prevention, technology integration, afterschool programming—need not be developed from scratch. Through critical consultation of the educational research literature, principals can glean the best of what is already known and perhaps push a new initiative forward in a novel way or in a heretofore unexamined context. Furthermore, a growing awareness of foundational and cutting edge educational research makes these leaders a valuable asset in their school, district, or diocese. They become knowledgeable of trends and broad movements in the field of education, conversant in the language that governs educational evaluation and research, and cognizant of effective and ineffective educational interventions.

The cumulative impact of these “critical consumer” skills is best summed up in the words of a recent graduate reflecting on the overall impact of action research on his leadership responsibilities:

The biggest upside of action research seems to be that no longer must I feel imprisoned by anecdotal evidence, which is far too often used to make important decisions regarding fundamental aspects of the life of the school. Now if there is a problem, I have a systematic approach to examining existing research on a topic, collecting data, and analyzing results that will allow me to be data-informed.

### **Systematic Producers of Educational Research**

***Conducting useful, relevant action research.*** It is not enough, however, to know what constitutes good research. Through their own site-based action research project, our candidates are challenged to implement it in their schools in a meaningful way. In so doing, principals experience—perhaps for this first time—that practitioners can indeed conduct rigorous, well-designed educational research. Research is encountered in a way that is context-bound, relevant, applicable, and engaging. Rather than maintaining the distinct hard line between research and practice, wherein pure research occurs in the academy and true practice unfolds on the front lines of classrooms and schools, the distinction is intentionally blurred. Thus, the research-practice gap is bridged when the roles of researcher, practitioner, and leader merge and overlap (Frabutt et al., 2008; Robinson & Lai, 2006). Our cadre of action research graduates has addressed issues as diverse as student bullying and block scheduling, English language acquisition and engineering programs. In every instance, these

practitioner-researchers employ rigorous educational research methods to locally relevant issues.

**Cultivating empowerment and voice.** Embracing action research is a concrete means to build empowerment and voice among principals. Too often school leaders are made to feel that outside “experts,” a distant review team, or the central office must be tapped in order to solve a specific school problem. While there are certainly cases when such outside involvement or support is warranted, action research provides a structure to handle more issues internally. Principals—and their own faculty—become an expert resource for issues in the school not because they have all the answers, but because they are equipped with the tools and research skills that will lead them to sound, reliable answers. As succinctly noted by Pine, “action research assumes that teachers are the agents and source of educational reform and not the objects of reform” (2009, p. 30).

**Contributing to a broader network.** Continued engagement of principals in relevant, solutions-focused scholarship via action research has great potential to make a contribution to the enterprise of education more broadly. Indeed, action research is an instantiation of what some have termed the “engineering approach” to educational research, which centers on understanding phenomena in order to develop solutions to practical problems (Burkhardt & Schoenfeld, 2003). Having graduated two cohorts from our program, we are starting to build and connect a network of action researchers. We have created an on-line resource (researchandaction.wordpress.com) that serves as a repository for completed action research projects, provides advice for novice action researchers, allows action researchers to post comments or reflections on their individual action research experience, and alerts principals to publication and presentation opportunities. Our hope is to develop a critical mass of action researchers in Catholic schools that contributes to a mutually informative national dialogue based on their own research-based practice. Administrator-led action research will continue to grow in scope and influence as the work these individuals do is shared, replicated, and modeled for others.

### **An Action Research Orientation to Leadership**

As we are fond of saying, research is not the answer, but a process, orientation, and set of tools that help us *discover* meaningful answers to our questions. For Catholic school administrators, critical consumption and production of educational research does not fully satisfy the conditions for effective leadership. These school leaders must also be models of this action research orientation for their faculty and staff thereby cultivating a culture of inquiry and evaluation that extends beyond any single research question or isolated evaluation. Conceived of in this way, action research is indeed resonant with and a tangible expression of the core tenets of community psychology: local empowerment, democratization of knowledge, and appreciation for the interrelation of ecological systems.

One can see then how action research is decidedly inhospitable to inertia in the education arena. Embraced fully, the action research sequence leads not just to a requirement-fulfilling paper or even

one fully answered research question, but a long-term leadership stance. That is, principals master a specific skill set that is important for educational leadership, but also a disposition or orientation to educational leadership that prizes systematic, data-driven evaluation of programs and policies. With this disposition and specific set of tools, inertia is supplanted by informed action that improves, strengthens, and indeed transforms our schools. This transformation does not happen all at once or overnight. Rather, sustained integration of the skills and dispositions of action research works gradually to change the momentum of the educational institutions in which these leaders work, teach, and serve. As one recent graduate remarked, “Your action research project can truly be a catalyst that will change the culture of the school.” 🌐

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