

8

Action Planning for Educational Change

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- 8.1 Complete an action plan by working through a Steps to Action Chart.
- 8.2 Become aware of challenges that confront the action researcher in the action planning process.
- 8.3 Become aware of conditions that facilitate educational change in school environments.
- 8.4 Become aware of what teacher researchers gain by engaging in action research.

This chapter discusses different steps in action planning that help ensure that teacher researchers are able to implement positive educational change based on the insights they gain through action research. **Action planning** basically attempts to answer the question, "Based on what I have learned from my research, what should I do now?"

A Steps to Action Chart is presented to guide teacher researchers through the action planning process. The chart identifies the findings of the study, the recommended action that targets a given finding, who is responsible for specific actions, who needs to be consulted or informed about the findings of the study and the concomitant actions, how to monitor the effects of your actions through the collection of data, a time line for when the actions and monitoring will occur, and any resources that will be needed to carry out the action. A blank Steps to Action Chart is also included for your personal use.

Finally, this chapter will discuss action planning within the context of challenges that face the teacher researcher and the conditions under which action research and the educational change that follows it can occur.

Reflecting on an Absenteeism Policy

Jack Reston

This vignette is the story of an elementary school principal who modeled the process of action research for his teachers, many of whom were involved in their own action research projects at the same time. Jack's story is particularly

powerful because it illustrates the willingness of a school principal to investigate the effect of a policy he had developed. Further, Jack tackled difficult problems facing many teachers and principals: how to keep children in school and the importance of being in school. The result of the study was an action plan that required the change of a district-wide absenteeism policy.

I was selected to serve on a committee of administrators to review current policies concerning students' absenteeism. The task of the committee was to write a new student absenteeism policy, which led to the adoption of a new absenteeism policy and procedure. I recognized throughout this process a need to look into student absenteeism with more depth and understanding, and for this reason I selected the topic of student absenteeism for my action research project.

I initiated my research project with a review of our school's attendance rate profile for the last 5 years. The profile showed little or no change in the attendance rate. This was a concern because I cross-referenced the attendance rate with the funds allocated for various attendance incentives designed to motivate students and could easily see that the dollars spent on incentives were not affecting the attendance rate. I sat at my desk and thought about all my current and past efforts. It was clear that I was not truly passionate about student absenteeism. I had never taken time to clearly understand its causes or researched the best solutions to prevent it. I was passionate about my belief that a child's success in life depends on a solid educational foundation. I was passionate about my belief that students cannot afford to miss class at any time. I was passionate about my belief that absenteeism is a symptom or gauge of a student experiencing failure in school.

I began by asking three questions:

1. *What student characteristics are associated with student absenteeism?*
2. *What are some longitudinal effects of student absenteeism?*
3. *What are some effective strategies to prevent student absenteeism?*

I reviewed current studies, literature, local and national profiles, written surveys, and interviews. I found that absenteeism was highly associated with dropping out of school, academic failure, and delinquency. I learned what students and parents in our school believed about the relationship between school and absenteeism. I concluded that I really did not understand the belief systems of families at risk for poor attendance in school. I conducted a massive survey of students and parents within a four-day period of time. Surveys gathered data concerning such things as respectfulness of students, safety in school, conflict management, discipline, school rules, self-esteem, and academics. In addition, the survey gathered data on mobility rates, volunteerism, and levels of education in parents. The identity of the families surveyed was kept unknown. Instead, the surveys were coded as "at risk" or "not at risk" data.

I collected data from the surveys in three stages. First, each family in the school was mailed a survey. The surveys arrived at the homes of students on a Saturday. Completed surveys were returned to the school prior to 9:00 a.m. on the following

Monday. Second, each student in the entire school was surveyed in their classroom at 9:00 a.m. on Monday. Third, selected students and parents were interviewed between Monday and Tuesday to collect data similarly gathered on the surveys.

Student teachers from a nearby university and local educators with experience in action research interviewed selected students and parents. The interviews were conducted over the telephone or face-to-face. I compiled all of the data and began searching for a better understanding of at-risk students and parents at my school. I found that these people believed the following:

- Other students did not respect them.
- They did not use conflict management skills.
- Adults in the school did not handle discipline effectively.
- School rules are not fair.
- There are behavior problems associated with this group.
- At-risk students perform poorly in academic areas.
- At-risk students in this school are not motivated by rewards such as drawings for prizes and certificates.

This information led to major changes in our approach to improving attendance in school. First, we stopped spending large sums of money for rewards and drawings. Although these are nice things for students, they are ineffective in dealing with the problem of poor attendance. Second, we recognized that punitive measures were having little effect on attendance. This led us to the belief that students succeeding in school were more likely to attend school regularly.

We began a concentrated effort to improve the success of students at school both academically and emotionally. This included the use of student/parent/teacher/principal contracts, daily planners for students, individual conferences between the student and the principal every 14 days to review grades and behaviors, better assessments to locate students having academic problems, improved instructional techniques and alignment of curriculum, and more concentrated efforts to improve the self-esteem of students.

In conclusion, I found the following to be true in our effort to improve student absenteeism:

1. Students need to be successful in school.
2. Students need to be connected to the school.
3. Students need friendships with students and adults at school.
4. Students need to develop the skills to deal with life's daily anxieties.
5. The school needs to develop meaningful relationships with the family.

Based on these findings, I worked with teachers and parents to develop quick responses that unite the student, parent, educator, and community in a preventive effort to minimize absenteeism.

To support Kurt Lewin's prophetic statement, "No action without research; no research without action" (cited in Adelman, 1993, p. 8), this chapter discusses how teacher researchers can ensure that action is a natural outcome of their action research efforts. Without action, we have done nothing more than replicate what we set out to avoid—doing research on someone for our own benefit, whatever that may be. But the reward for us all in this process is taking action to improve the educational experiences of our children—action is at the very heart of the action research endeavor.

In Jack Reston's vignette, we see a principal and members of the school community (children, parents, teachers, and student teachers) who persevered in trying to solve an important problem that faces many schools—how to keep children in school. Reston's action plan identified a number of actions targeted to the findings of the study: developing students' skills to deal with the anxieties of life and school, developing strategies to ensure student success in school, developing meaningful relationships with families, improving instructional techniques and curriculum alignment, using strategies to develop meaningful relationships/partnerships with families, and so on. In the action planning process, Reston had reflected on the findings of the study and what he now understood about the problem of absenteeism. As a result of this reflection, he was better able to plan the next steps in the action research process.

Action planning is a natural next step in the action research process. Using the guidelines in this chapter, you will be able to ensure that the necessary steps are taken to bring your efforts to fruition.

Developing Action Plans

At this phase of the action research process, the teacher researcher is basically trying to answer the following question: "Based on what I have learned from this investigation, what should I do now?" At this point, teacher researchers should reflect on the taken-for-granted assumptions that guided them to the investigation in the first instance and determine what course of action to take next. This reflection allows time for both teachers and administrators to determine what they have learned from their investigations and the related professional literature and to decide on the necessary steps to action.

To facilitate this process, consider using a Steps to Action Chart similar to those shown in Table 8-1 and Table 8-2. (Table 8-1 shows a generic Steps to Action Chart; Table 8-2 shows the Steps to Action Chart created by Jack Reston for his study of student absenteeism.) By working through the steps included on the chart, teacher researchers will have a list of the following:

- What they learned (findings)
- The recommended actions that target a given finding
- Who is responsible for specific actions (responsibility)

table 8-1 ■ Steps to Action Chart

Summary of Findings and Research Questions	Recommended Action Targeted to Findings	Who Is Responsible for the Action?	Who Needs to Be Consulted or Informed?	Who will Monitor/Collect Data?	Time Line	Resources
1.0 Research question #1					When will action/monitoring occur?	What will you need in order to carry out your action?
1.1 Finding #1		■ Teacher	■ Teacher			
1.2 Finding #2		■ Team	■ Team			
2.0 Research question #2		■ Department head	■ Department head			
2.1 Finding #1		■ Principal	■ Principal			
2.2 Finding #2		■ Parents	■ Parents			
2.3 etc.		■ Students	■ Students			

- Who needs to be consulted or informed about the findings of the study and the associated actions
- Who will monitor or collect the effects of actions
- Dates when the actions and monitoring will occur
- Any resources that will be needed to carry out the action

Elements of this chart will look familiar to you. Monitoring and data collection efforts will once again involve you in the action research process. In each case, you will focus on a new problem—such as “What are the effects of this action on student performance?”—and develop specific data collection/monitoring techniques to answer the question. Although not included on the chart, the monitoring/data collection techniques (see Chapter 5) would lead to data analysis and interpretation (see Chapter 7) with findings and further steps to action. Hence, the cycle repeats itself again and again. It may be that you are entirely satisfied with an intervention and that the proposed action is to continue with its implementation.

table 8-2 ■ Jack Reston's Steps to Action Chart

Summary of Findings and Research Questions	Recommended Action Targeted to Findings	Who Is Responsible for the Action? T – Teacher S – Student P – Principal PA – Parent(s)	Who Needs to Be Consulted or Informed?	Who Will Monitor/Collect Data?	Time Line	Resources
1.0 What student characteristics are attributed to student absenteeism?				T, P: 1. Observations 2. Intentions 3. Surveys 4. Test data	Ongoing throughout school year.	None
1.1 Lack of respect	1.1 Model respect for others.	1.1 T, S, P				
1.2 Poor conflict management skills	1.2–1.4 Develop skills to deal with life's daily anxieties.	1.2–1.4 T, S, P, PA	1.2–1.4 PA			
1.3 Lack of self-discipline						
1.4 Behavior problems						
1.5 Poor academic performance	1.5 Improve strategies to develop success in school.	1.5 T, P				
2.0 What are some longitudinal effects of student absenteeism?				T, P: 1. Observations 2. Intentions 3. Surveys 4. Test data	Ongoing throughout school year.	None
2.1 Dropouts	2.1–2.3 Students need to be connected to school.	2.1–2.3 T, P, S				

(Continued)

table 8-2 ■ (Continued)

Summary of Findings and Research Questions	Recommended Action Targeted to Findings	Who Is Responsible for the Action? T - Teacher S - Student P - Principal PA - Parent(s)	Who Needs to Be Consulted or Informed?	Who Will Monitor/Collect Data?	Time Line	Resources
2.2 Academic failure						
2.3 Delinquency	Develop strategies to build a sense of "belonging" at school.					
3.0 What are some effective strategies to prevent student absenteeism?						
3.1 Student/Parent/Teacher/Principal contracts	3.1 Implement contracts.	3.1 S, PA, T, P	3.1 S, PA	T, P: 1. Observations 2. Intentions 3. Surveys 4. Test data	Ongoing throughout school year.	
3.2 Daily planners	3.2 Purchase and use planners.	3.2 P				3.2 \$\$ for planners
3.3 Diagnostic tools	3.3 Work with district office to administer diagnostic tests.	3.3 P	3.3 District office			
3.4 Self-esteem strategies	3.4 Implement self-esteem curriculum.	3.4 T				
3.5 Improved teaching and curriculum	3.5 Encourage ongoing professional development.	3.5 T, P				3.5 \$\$ for P.D.



RESEARCH IN ACTION CHECKLIST 8-1

Steps to Action

- _____ Findings of the research
- _____ Recommended action
- _____ Responsibilities
- _____ Sharing findings with colleagues
- _____ Ongoing monitoring (data collection)
- _____ Time line for action
- _____ Resources

This routinization of instruction still suggests that as a reflective teacher, you will continue to collect data—to monitor the effects of your instruction on your students' performance and attitude. At that point, as a self-renewing school faculty or as an individual teacher with a reflective professional disposition, you will continue your systematic inquiry into some other aspect of your practice. (See Research in Action Checklist 8-1 for a list of steps to action.)

Levels of Action Planning

Action planning can occur at a number of different levels within the school—*individual*, *team*, and *schoolwide*—depending on the scope of the action research effort. Action planning also may take place at a number of these different levels during a single investigation. For example, the problem under investigation may have had a schoolwide focus, such as to determine the effects of an innovative reading curriculum (with an emphasis on constructing meaning) on student performance (as measured by statewide assessment scores and monthly criterion-referenced tests). Participation in the schoolwide effort might also have necessitated that teachers meet in grade-level teams to plan appropriate reading interventions and to analyze regularly collected data. Finally, individual teachers would need to adapt the intervention as appropriate for their own students' needs. In this case, action planning should be undertaken at all levels within the school.

Individual

Typically, *individual action planning* will be characterized by teacher researchers who have worked through an action research cycle as part of a course, licensure, or

grant requirement or by teacher researchers who are undertaking action research as a regular component of their practice. Individual teachers can still work through the Steps to Action Chart (see Table 8-1) and in so doing remind themselves of the steps that need to be taken to implement action and monitor the effects of the action.

In all likelihood, individual teacher researchers will have focused their action research projects and interventions on an issue related to curriculum, instruction, assessment, classroom management, or community involvement. In these areas, the resulting action plan will focus on activities such as the following:

- **Curriculum development.** Findings of a study related to curriculum development (and implementation) would provide the teacher researcher with specific actions for the next cycle of curriculum development (e.g., the inclusion of new and/or revised lessons), additional learning artifacts (resources and materials), and so on. Following the Steps to Action Chart, the individual teacher researcher would be responsible not only for all actions but also for consulting with grade-level colleagues, department heads, district-level curriculum specialists, parents, and the school principal.
- **Instructional strategies.** Findings of a study related to the implementation of new instructional strategies (e.g., cooperative learning, high-level questioning strategies, increase in “wait time,” teaching reading across the curriculum, and so on) would provide the teacher researcher with specific actions for the next cycle of developing and implementing any new instructional strategies. Following the Steps to Action Chart, the individual teacher researcher would be responsible for all actions, including consulting with grade-level colleagues, department heads, district-level teaching specialists (e.g., a teacher on special assignment [TOSA]), parents, and the school principal. The teacher may identify specific additional professional development activities that need to be undertaken (and budgeted for) before the next action research cycle.
- **Assessment strategies.** Findings of a study related to the use of innovative assessment strategies (e.g., the Highland Park High School “Emphasizing Learning by Deemphasizing Grades” example in Chapter 7) would provide the teacher researcher with specific actions for the next cycle of implementing an innovative assessment strategy. Following the Steps to Action Chart, the individual teacher researcher would be responsible for all actions, including consulting with grade-level colleagues, department heads, district-level curriculum and instruction specialists, parents, and the school principal.
- **Classroom management strategies/plans.** A common area of focus for beginning teachers (preservice and in-service) is classroom management. Findings of a study related to implementation of a new classroom management plan would provide the teacher researcher with specific actions for the next cycle of teaching. Following the Steps to Action Chart, the individual teacher researcher would be responsible not only for all actions but also for consulting with grade-level colleagues, department heads, district-level curriculum and instruction specialists, parents, and the school principal.

- **Community involvement.** Findings of a study related to community involvement (e.g., Jack Reston’s vignette at the start of this chapter) would provide the teacher researcher with specific actions for the next cycle of how to improve community involvement in solving local school problems. Following the Steps to Action Chart, the individual teacher researcher would be responsible for all actions, including consulting with grade-level colleagues, department heads, district-level curriculum specialists, parents, the school principal, and probably the district superintendent.

Blank Steps to Action Chart

Summary of Findings and Recommended Research Questions		Who Is Responsible for the Action?	Who Needs to Be Consulted or Informed?	Who Will Monitor/Collect Data?	Time Line	Resources
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Although the primary audience for the findings from any of these studies is the individual teacher, it is important for teacher researchers to tap into the kind of support networks one will find at universities. As Elliott (1991) suggested,

A small band of isolated teacher researchers can tap into a reflective counter culture in the form of an action-research network which transcends school boundaries and is linked to a teacher education institution. Membership of such a network can provide the kind of cultural resources which strengthen the capacity of aspiring teacher researchers to resist the time pressures operating on them from inside schools. (pp. 66–67)

This networking transcends not only school boundaries but also global boundaries via participation in online action research listservs and chat rooms. This kind of cyberspace network can strengthen the resolve of teachers who must work in isolation to continue with the process through the action planning stage and into the next revolution of the cycle.

Team

In an era when schools have increasing authority to make decisions about curriculum and instruction, it is common to see teams of teachers, administrators, and sometimes parents working collaboratively on action research projects. Often these groups grow out of networks developed in an action research course among teachers

grant requirement or by teacher researchers who are undertaking action research as a regular component of their practice. Individual teachers can still work through the Steps to Action Chart (see Table 8-1) and in so doing remind themselves of the steps that need to be taken to implement action and monitor the effects of the action.

In all likelihood, individual teacher researchers will have focused their action research projects and interventions on an issue related to curriculum, instruction, assessment, classroom management, or community involvement. In these areas, the resulting action plan will focus on activities such as the following:

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Team

In an era when schools have increasing authority to make decisions about curriculum and instruction, it is common to see teams of teachers, administrators, and sometimes parents working collaboratively on action research projects. Often these groups grow out of networks developed in an action research course among teachers

with similar areas of interest and expertise. At other times, they grow out of grant requirements for grade-level or discipline-based teams to work collaboratively on a school improvement focus. Regardless of the catalyst for the network, these teams all share a common focus at this stage in the action research process—to mobilize their collective energies to move forward with action. This process can be facilitated by working through the Steps to Action Chart and collaboratively determining who has responsibility for what, when, and where. Resolution of any issues that emerge at this stage is critical to the continued success and longevity of the action research team. At this stage, the primary audience for the action plan consists of the team members. However, action research teams must seek appropriate ways to transcend the traditional boundaries that have historically seen small teams of teachers burn out without feedback and support from the environments in which they work.

Schoolwide

Schoolwide action research, as the name implies, is about all of the members of the school community working together with a single goal in mind. For example, a schoolwide emphasis on improving reading, writing, or math is a common area of focus in elementary schools. Similarly, and sadly, it is not uncommon to see a high school focus on the effects of a drug and alcohol curriculum on student attitude, understanding, and levels of use. However, the distinguishing feature in these examples is that they have been agreed on by the whole school faculty as the focus for a schoolwide improvement effort that will be driven by the findings of an action research effort. Cooperation, collaboration, and communication are no less important in the action planning phase than they were during the other steps of the process.

The challenge at the schoolwide level is how to actively engage all the participants in goal setting that is integral to the action planning process. There will always be finger-pointing and denial, and it will take a skilled facilitator to move a faculty through the Steps to Action Chart if progress is to be made. Do not underestimate the necessity of meaningfully engaging all of the school community in this action planning process, or you will risk perpetual isolation in the world of playground supervision—been there, done that, bought the umbrella!

Action Should Be Ongoing

This discussion about action planning is not meant to suggest that action occurs only at the end of the action research process. The very dynamic nature of teaching necessitates that teachers make many changes to instruction during the course of a day based on the formative feedback (data) collected as an integral part of the teaching process. For example, preservice teachers are often requested to include on lesson plans “Evaluation” statements to the effect of “How will you know if your students have achieved your instructional objectives?” In other words, what data will you collect that informs your postplanning at the end of

Voices from the Field Action Should Be Ongoing

In this vignette, the teacher researcher speaks passionately about how the findings of her study will lead to changes in her future instructional practices. Specifically, Rachelle plans to continue using formative assessments with her students as her study indicated that students performed better on their summative assessments, students better retain information, students do a better job of “keeping on track,” and it resulted in an improved classroom climate. These are powerful insights for a beginning teacher who will continue to make changes in her classroom practices as a result of her action research.



ENHANCED video example 8-1

Rachelle, the action researcher in this video, found that giving weekly quizzes in her classes had a number of positive effects for the students. Would you agree with her statement that she has “completed” her action research project?

the day? Often these data are collected intuitively and informally in noninvasive ways. It is such a normative aspect of teaching that we take it for granted. As teachers, we have been programmed to collect, analyze, and interpret data quickly and efficiently so that we can suggest “findings” and take necessary “actions” (remediation, reteaching, related material, extension activities) that enable learning to proceed in a connected fashion.

The Importance of Reflection

Action planning is also a time for reflection—reflection on where you have been, what you have learned, and where you are going. Action planning and reflection give you an opportunity to identify your individual or collective continuing professional development needs. This reflection is facilitated by the review of the related literature you collected early in the action research process in concert with your own findings. The following questions may also be helpful prompts for reflection:

- What were the intended and unintended effects of your actions?
- What educational issues arise from what you’ve learned about your practice?

Clearly, these are not questions that elicit quick and easy responses. They urge you to look back at your practice from the enlightened viewpoint of someone who has

Voices from the Field

The Importance of Reflection

In this vignette, Jureen speaks eloquently about the importance of reflection for teachers. As she states, "With all research, answers lead to more questions!" For Jureen, this translates to new questions about emerging technologies and how they can effectively be used with and by students in an increasingly digital world. Given her previous action research experience, Jureen will be able to continue to reflect on her use of technology and to replicate her research in another context with a focus on emerging technologies and how they can effectively be integrated into classroom instruction.



ENHANCEDtext video example 8-2

Jureen, the action researcher in this video, is very reflective about her project and about the important educational issue it addressed. It is clear that her action research project was very meaningful to her and that it changed the way she thinks about her own teaching.

systematically inquired into the effects of teaching on student outcomes. In undertaking such reflection, you will position yourself to act responsively to the findings of your study. The remaining sections of this chapter will help you to further identify challenges that you may face when attempting to implement change and will guide you in meeting those challenges and effecting positive educational change in your school.

Some Challenges Facing Teacher Researchers

As you reflect on the critical steps to action, consider the challenges that all teacher researchers face both when doing action research and when attempting to effect educational change based on the results of their inquiry. If indeed we are going to avoid living out Sarason's (1990) prophecy of "the more things change, the more they will remain the same" (p. 5), then we must be prepared to address these obstacles. These hurdles include a lack of resources, resistance to change, reluctance to interfere with others' professional practices, reluctance to admit difficult truths, the challenge of finding a forum to share what you have learned, and the difficulty of making time for action research endeavors.

Lack of Resources

The scarcity of resources is perhaps the greatest obstacle to action planning you will face. Many excellent action research and change efforts have been blocked by the lack of classroom resources and materials. But by being innovative and remaining energized by what you have learned about your practice, you will find ways to make change happen. This may mean using creativity to solve materials management issues. Don't wait for an administrator, central office person, or philanthropist to offer what you need to be successful. Go after the grants, however small, to fund the resources you identify as critical to the success of your intervention. (See Chapter 9 for further discussion of grant sources available for teacher researchers.) Use the data you have collected, analyzed, and interpreted as a way to build a case for resources that may be presented to Parent-Teacher Associations, district-wide committees, school boards, granting agencies, and so on to make a case for what you need.

Action researchers also need professional as well as material resources. If action research is to become a part of your professional disposition and be continued over time, it must benefit both your own continued professional development and student outcomes. Identification of promising practices will suggest the kinds of professional development you need to seek, either individually or collectively. If your local university or school district can't provide the professional development you seek, use the Internet to find out who does. Again, use your findings to make a compelling, persuasive case for the kind of professional development you need—not what someone else thinks you need.

Resistance to Change

Any type of change, however small, may be viewed as threatening by some. After all, the status quo is familiar and comfortable. But the era of schools that refuse to innovate is past. The ever-changing social and political environment in which we live necessitates that teachers become sophisticated instructional leaders and decision makers who have the skills to empower students and other individuals in their learning communities. Participation in and support of the action research process is critical if there is to be a shift in the culture of schools to the reflective practitioner culture of the self-renewing school. Living the commitment to a dynamic school culture as opposed to living the traditional "advocate of constraint" persona will go a long way toward revitalizing an individual school's culture and bringing about positive change.

For example, Jack Reston's investigation of the effect of the school/district policy on absenteeism showed that attendance rates had remained the same despite costly student incentives that were an integral part of the policy. Once he realized that the current intervention was having no impact, Jack knew he had to take responsibility for trying to change the system to make Eastview Elementary School an environment where all children (especially those at risk for absenteeism)

would want to come to school. That meant changing even fundamental things, such as the way administrators interacted with students and the amount of time he spent with them individually. In doing so, he overcame several factors, including the institutional resistance to change.

Reluctance to Interfere with Others' Professional Practices

Unfortunately, there seems to be a prevailing cultural value in schools of "Don't mess around in someone else's professional practice"—especially if you are not invited. The dilemma here for the teacher researcher arises from a conflict between the desire to persuade colleagues to experiment with or embrace new practices that have been shown via action research to have positive effects and a "respect for the professional expertise of colleagues and their right to exercise authority within the confines of their own classroom" (Elliott, 1991, p. 59).

Often teacher researchers faced with this dilemma back away from their investigations and change efforts to "keep the peace" with colleagues. However, if we are to learn from our own and others' professional practice, we must be willing to set aside the traditional protection of each other's classrooms and to embrace as a community of learners the proposed action plan that emerges from our research.

How you approach this professional collaboration with other teachers in your school is as important as trying it at all. It is critical to the success of your action research and change efforts, particularly at the schoolwide level, not to have alienated yourself from others by appearing to be a member of some "enlightened elite" who now knows all of the answers to the problems that affect students' inability to do well on statewide assessments! You will have gone a long way to revitalizing the professional disposition of teaching if you have been able to nurture your own and your colleagues' understanding of the problems you have investigated and built a teamwide commitment to implementing action based on your findings. Collaboration can help break down these stubborn professional barriers.

Reluctance to Admit Difficult Truths

If we view action research and action planning as one way to empower teachers, we should also be aware of the increased accountability that these efforts place on teacher researchers. We can't have it both ways: If we want the authority to make the changes we have recommended based on our action research findings, then we must be prepared to look into the mirror and face what we see. After all, if each of us has the power to make the most important decisions in our schools—that is, the ones that have the greatest impact on students—then we must also not abdicate responsibility when things don't go our way. If what we learn is that, despite our best efforts and intentions, our interventions have not succeeded, then we must be prepared to look objectively at the data and make new recommendations for change in our quest to provide the best education possible for our students.

Voices from the Field Reluctance to Interfere with Others' Professional Practices

In this vignette, our teacher researcher explains the challenges she faced conducting action research as a student teacher in her cooperating teacher's class. This is a common challenge for preservice teachers, as they try to collaborate with another teacher in all areas related to curriculum, instruction, assessment, and classroom management. This can be particularly problematic for a beginning teacher who is willing to systematically investigate the impact of his or her presence in a classroom on student outcomes and to share those outcomes. Further, the teacher researcher may need to decide what to share and what not to share with a colleague in order to sustain a collegial working relationship where action research and sharing of findings may not be the norm.



ENHANCED video example 8-3
As a "student" teacher, Rachelle had constraints on both the measures she could use in her action research and the kinds of action she could take. However, many teachers have similar experiences, especially when they are concerned about interfering with another teacher's professional practice.

For example, Deborah South (Chapter 1) had hoped to find in her action research project that the group of "unmotivated" students in her study skills class would respond positively to her instruction and guidance. Instead, she noticed an alarming and demoralizing trend: Students' grades were dropping. Deborah had to wrestle with this "difficult truth" and carefully consider her own responsibility for the students' performance before coming to a conclusion about the best way to effect change to benefit these "unmotivated" students.

Finding a Forum to Share What You Have Learned

The potential for an action plan to serve as the catalyst for reflective conversation between professionals is limitless. Elliott (1991) argued that such data sharing "promotes a reflective conversation and is at the heart of any transformation of the professional culture" (p. 60). However, an open conversation about what the data from the study suggest (analysis and interpretation) and how these findings have been transformed into a proposed action plan will not always be an easy one.

Voices from the Field

Finding a Forum to Share What You Have Learned

The teacher researchers in this vignette discuss how they plan to use a professional learning community (PLC) to collaboratively share the findings of their research. They also plan to use this forum as a way to develop future collaborative action research projects with a possible K–12 focus. Clearly, there are many face-to-face and virtual opportunities for teacher researchers to share their work. What is perhaps missing in schools is a culture of research and leaders who value classroom-based research. The research on professional learning communities is persuasive, and action research provides a process whereby individual, team-level, and school-level groups can and should work collaboratively to tackle important educational issues.



ENHANCEDtext video example 8–4

The three action researchers in this video plan to share their findings with their colleagues in their teaching program. How might they find an even broader audience?

What is needed is a forum (local, national, or global!) for teachers to share their accounts and a recognition by the profession that change-oriented action research is an important part of the professional competencies of being a teacher. For example, some preservice teacher preparation programs are incorporating action research into their requirements. Individual schools are providing teachers with opportunities to showcase their action research skills as part of an annual teacher evaluation cycle, state and federal grants incorporate action research as part of the instructional improvement cycle, school-based decision-making teams are embracing an action research model to guide their school improvement efforts, and state teacher-licensing agencies are incorporating action research into continuing license renewal requirements.

Although teacher researchers typically have not published their findings, the sharing of teacher researchers' stories has also been facilitated by Web-based action research sites. Teachers can now use a global forum to share their stories, the actions they have taken based on their research, and what they have learned in subsequent action research cycles. (These online journals include *Educational Action Research, Networks, Action Research International*, and *Action Research Electronic Reader*.) The sharing of action plans and what teacher researchers learn in the process is critical to the emerging teacher-as-researcher culture. (See Chapter 9 for practical guidelines for "getting the word out.")

Voices from the Field

Make Time for Action Research Endeavors

The teacher researcher in this vignette makes a strong case for making action research a part of who you are as a professional educator and includes it as a set of proficiencies along with curriculum, instruction, assessment, and classroom management. She also makes the point that there is a time demand at the start of the process when you need to clarify your area of focus, research questions, and data collection strategies but that the process itself (data collection, data analysis, data interpretation, and action planning) can occur as a normative part of your teaching practice.



ENHANCEDtext video example 8–5

In this video, Rachelle talks about some ways to make action research part of your daily life as a teacher. What other suggestions can you offer?

Making Time for Action Research Endeavors

We have already discussed the challenge of making time for action research in your busy daily schedule. Just when you thought the action research cycle was over and you are ready to return to "just teaching," you are thrust back into the process with further reflection about the actions suggested by the findings of your study and the who, what, and when of the next cycle.

"You mean I need to take more action and monitor its effects? But I don't have the time to do one more thing!" This exasperated call for putting the brakes on the process is not uncommon or unreasonable. By the time you have arrived at action planning, you may be all but spent and happy to claim that the status quo is working just fine. If you fall into this category of teacher, I would suggest that you follow your instincts. Allow yourself time to reflect and plan at a bearable pace. You are no good to the students in your care if you are burned out. (As the parent of a child in eleventh grade, the last thing I want is my child's teacher all worn out from a year of doing action research!) The goal is to evolve to the point where action and research become a part of your professional life but not at the expense of the energy that you need to be vital, creative, and exciting in your daily teaching. After all, if the action research process cannot be normative and undertaken without adversely affecting your primary focus of teaching children, then it *should not be done*.

On the other hand, if you have arrived at the action planning phase with renewed energy and enthusiasm for your work, if you are committed to implementing a locally contextualized innovation that you believe will contribute to the well-being

of the students in your care, and if you have maintained a clear sense of direction, mission, and purpose, then move forward in the process and share your stories by whatever medium you can! It will be your stories of success and being a lifelong learner that will change the culture of teaching. These are intimate changes that cannot be forced on any of us from outside—they must come from the passion within.

Regardless of international, national, state, and local trends and initiatives, the individual teacher researcher's ability to resolve the issue of time constraints will ultimately determine whether action research is routinized into the classroom. However, if we as professionals cannot find time to do the work associated with it, then action research will be discarded on the dustheap of other promising educational initiatives.

Facilitating Educational Change

The goal of action research is to enhance the lives of students and teachers through positive educational change. We have just discussed several common challenges that teachers face when attempting to effect educational change based on action research findings. In addition to being prepared to address those challenges, you can help create an environment that is conducive to change. The following are eight conditions that facilitate educational change (adapted from Fullan, 1993; Miller & Lieberman, 1988; Sarason, 1990).

Teachers and Administrators Need to Restructure Power and Authority Relationships

The first condition for fostering action research and encouraging educational change is that teachers and administrators need to restructure power and authority relationships. Power relationships in schools have the potential to empower or underpower action planning efforts. Power is not being used in a pejorative sense here—teacher researchers have the potential to harness the collective power of their colleagues, including administrators, to bring about meaningful change through a democratic, liberating, and life-enhancing process. For this to happen, participants in the action research process must be prepared to ask the hard questions related to implementing action based on the findings of the study: What is the recommended action? Who is responsible for doing what? Who needs to be consulted or informed? How will the effects of the implementation be monitored? When will tasks be completed? What resources are needed?

Asking these questions invariably leads to discussions about who has the final decision-making power in the school. In an era of school-based decision making, it is likely that a team of teachers, parents, students, and administrators will have the authority to answer action planning questions and to make decisions. However, whether your school has a professional or a bureaucratic model of school-based decision making in place will determine the amount of influence you will have individually or as a

team. According to Conley (1991), the bureaucratic model emphasizes the formal authority of administrators to delegate responsibilities to subordinates, to formulate rules to govern subordinate behavior, and to implement centralized control, planning, and decision making. In contrast, the professional model emphasizes the professional discretion and expertise of teachers in diagnosing and addressing student needs, with an aim to provide teachers the rights they expect as professionals.

Power should be seen as an investment, not as a means of controlling people. According to Miller and Lieberman (1988), "If we look at power this way, teachers and principals can hold leadership roles, and, working together, they can help the schools build a professional culture" (p. 653). This view emphasizes a reflective practitioner culture that empowers rather than underpowers teachers.

Deborah South was empowered, for example, to make changes to the study skills program for unmotivated students based on what she learned from her action research study. Jack Reston was empowered to change the absenteeism policy for his school and to recommend changes to the district's absenteeism policy based on his new understandings of what worked and didn't work for keeping children in school. Viewed in this way, power was an investment in the quality of the educational experiences of many children.

Both Top-Down and Bottom-Up Strategies of Change Can Work

In effecting educational change, both top-down and bottom-up strategies of change can work (Hord, Rutherford, Huling-Austin, & Hall, 1987). Top-down strategies can be thought of as changes that are mandated by school/district/state administrators without giving teachers an equal voice in the decision-making process (bureaucratic model). Alternatively, bottom-up strategies can be thought of as change that is driven by teachers when given the authority to make decisions (professional model). The debate over whether top-down or bottom-up efforts at change produce the greatest effects has flourished for many years. Fullan (1993) concluded, "What is required is a different two-way relationship of pressure, support and continuous negotiation" (p. 38), such as a continuous discourse between administrators and teachers involved in a collaborative action research project.

For example, the teachers at Highland Park High School worked collaboratively with the school's assistant principal and involved him in the team's action research activities. In this respect, there was obvious support from the school's administration for the action research effort. Alternatively, the teachers at Billabong Elementary School (Chapter 2) were quite resentful that the principal had mandated a math text for the school without consulting teachers in the process.

Teachers Must Be Provided with Support

Additionally, teachers involved in change efforts brought about by action research must be provided with support. Support for teachers in their endeavors ideally

would come from all quarters: students, other teachers, the school administration, students' families, government officials, and so on. For example, Jack Reston's investigation into absenteeism could not have occurred had it not been for the support of the parents, teachers, and student teachers (who helped with interviews). Deborah South relied heavily on the emotional support of her critical friends in the action research class when she shared the analysis and interpretation of her study of unmotivated students.

Every Person Is a Change Agent

Both individual and collective efforts are critical to successful change, and every person has the potential to be a change agent. The action research vignettes in this book illustrate the potential for change to happen at the individual, team, and schoolwide levels. But perhaps the key point of all these examples is that it took the desire of an individual teacher or principal to initiate the action research process and to effect positive educational change based on the findings. As Fullan (1993) reminds us, "Each and every teacher has the responsibility to help create an organization capable of individual and collective inquiry and continuous renewal, or [change] will not happen" (p. 39).

Change Tends Not to Be Neat, Linear, or Rational

Equally important, those involved in action research must recognize that change tends not to be neat, linear, or rational. Consider as an example the work of Cathy Mitchell and the Duct Tape Theater (Chapter 3). Although Cathy was able to confirm

Voices from the Field

Every Person Is a Change Agent

In this vignette, the teacher researcher provides a good example of how change in her classroom is possible (locus of control) in spite of not being able to directly impact district-wide policy about a basal reading textbook adoption. Based on the outcomes of her study focused on gender bias in basal reading texts, Jeanette clearly explains how she plans to implement critical thinking questions and supplementary reading materials with her students. Change starts with individual teachers, and Jeanette's work may lead to future collaborative action research efforts targeting a common perceived problem.



ENHANCED text
video example 8-6

Jeanette, the action researcher in this video, studied the basal readers her district requires. In what ways can she be an agent of change? What constraints and challenges might she face?

that her objective of making teen theater a more meaningful experience was sound, she also recognized that the approach of interactive improvisation did not have the desired effects. The audience did not respond to the "Violence Improv" scene as she expected, and as a result, her action research project did not provide her with the tidy solutions she hoped for. Although recommitted to her goal, Cathy is still faced with figuring out new ways to make teen theater a more meaningful experience. For Cathy, the processes of action research and change will be recursive and cyclical.

Teacher Researchers Must Pay Attention to the Culture of the School

A sixth condition is that teacher researchers must pay attention to the culture of the school. Change efforts should always be viewed in the context of the culture of the school and classroom in which the action research effort is being conducted. For example, until Jack Reston investigated the effectiveness of his school's absenteeism policies, it was assumed that the current reward system of drawings and certificates was effective. Instead, he found that the reward system made no difference for at-risk students. As a result, he tried to isolate what intervention would make a difference to these children. He used surveys and interviews to attempt to thoroughly understand the culture, values, and belief systems of the families of children at risk for absenteeism. Based on his findings, he was able to recommend meaningful changes to the school's policy on absenteeism that specifically responded to the needs of this group, especially their need to feel connected to the school.

The Outcome of Any Change Effort Must Benefit Students

A somewhat obvious condition for doing action research and effecting educational change is that the outcome of any change effort must benefit students if it is to be continued. Action research can provide a method for recording, measuring, and analyzing the results of an educational practice or intervention. For example, as discussed in Chapter 5, the data collected by James Rockford in his study of the effectiveness of keyboarding software on the class word processing rate provided conclusive evidence that the keyboarding software being tested was very effective and that time spent on computers at schools was critical. These persuasive data gave James confidence in the benefits of this educational intervention and supported his recommendation that teachers take students to the computer lab every day, monitor keyboarding habits, and see that each student received a minimum of 10 minutes of practice per day.

Being Hopeful Is a Critical Resource

Finally, being hopeful is a critical resource if teachers are to perform action research and stay the course of change. Recall the words of Cathy Mitchell, whose teen theater action research project was described in Chapter 3:

The most important part of this project is that I felt renewed energy for my work. Last year at this time I was busily seeking a replacement for myself and announcing to everyone that I wasn't going to direct teens anymore. I didn't even consider that there was a problem that could be addressed and remedied. It feels really good to expect something to happen in my working life as a result of the research and reflection that I myself have done.

As a result of her action research inquiry, Cathy has created a powerful resource for herself—the hope that she will discover new ways to make her work meaningful for teens. Even though she once felt like quitting, she writes that this new hope is powerful enough to sustain her through future change efforts.

For educational change to be successful, all those involved must be optimistic about the results of the transformation. (Of course, they also need to be realistic: Being hopeful is not the same as being naïve.) Reform efforts can sometimes generate negative emotions and a sense of hopelessness because the individuals involved may be on the defensive from external attack or part of small groups of reformers suffering burnout (Fullan, 1997). But if we are going to make progress with reform efforts, we have to weather the negative emotions to succeed.

At the action planning stage of the action research process, you may again have to confront negative emotions from other stakeholders in the process. This is a critical turning point in the action research process: You can easily adopt the position that this is a lost cause, or you can rely on the most critical resource any of us have—*hope*. Individually, we all must take a stand on whether our investigations have yielded findings that warrant taking action. If we have done a good job, we should have collected findings that are trustworthy and true. Reflect on the hope you felt when you first began your project, then use that hope to sustain you through the action planning process. “Being hopeful and taking action in the face of important lost causes may be less emotionally draining than being in a permanent state of despair” (Fullan, 1997, pp. 231–232).

Recognize that we can do little to really change how a colleague thinks, acts, and feels—we must all answer to ourselves and the search for self-efficacy that comes with being a professional educator. If any of us reach a point in our professional lives when we feel that we can no longer make a difference or no longer struggle in the face of adversity (e.g., limited time or resources), then it is probably time to try another professional calling. In education, whether it's a lack of chalk, paper, or RAM for the computer, none of us have ever had a blank check to finance the time and resources we think we need to be the best we can be. But what sets us apart from other professionals is the belief that we can make a difference in children's lives, with or without the resources.

Schools are complex social settings, and those of us who have taught at a number of different schools know how they can differ from community to community. You are in the best position to know what lessons you can apply from this broad discussion of educational change to your own situation, but we can all learn

from each other's experience by sharing our stories. Whenever possible, share your action research stories with others. In doing so, you will help revitalize the professional disposition of teachers.

What Do Teachers Gain Through All of This Work?

If you are now living this process, perhaps in a quiet, unassuming way, what follows will validate your work as a professional—contribute to your sense of self-efficacy—for it is within that we all find the rewards that teaching has to offer. Returning to our earlier discussion about critical/postmodern perspectives of action research, you will recall that what we believe as a professional community and what we as individual teacher researchers have gained through all of this work has systematically guided us to action.

Having invested a great deal of time and energy into investigating the taken-for-granted relationships and practices in your professional life, you have now arrived at the point where the “rubber meets the road.” Will you really initiate action and continue the process? If you answer in the affirmative, you have gone a long way toward embracing some of the tenets of a socially responsive approach to research: You have engaged in a democratic process that has encouraged the participation of your colleagues. The process has been equitable, with the participants all having one voice. The experience has been liberating and has freed you from accepting with blind faith something that may have been forced on you. Finally, the experience has been life enhancing for you as a professional and for the students who will benefit from your teaching.

Voices from the Field What Do Teachers Gain Through All of This Work?

As the teacher researcher in this vignette asserts, no matter where she teaches, she will be better prepared to tackle problems because of the skills she has learned through the action research process. This is an important takeaway for action researchers: No matter what challenges they confront in their teaching careers, action research provides a systematic, disciplined, step-by-step process for moving forward and contributing to our collective understandings about what works in schools.



ENHANCED **Detext**
video example 8-7
In this video, Jeannette reflects on what she gained from her research project.

For me, the ultimate payoff for teacher researchers who have stuck with the process, have learned and internalized the action research skills, and are now committed to action and self-renewal is the belief and knowledge that the real beneficiaries of your work are the students in your care. There can be no argument against this powerful and altruistic goal.

SUMMARY

Developing Action Plans

1. Action planning is an effort to answer the question, "Based on what I have learned from my research, what should I do now?" Without action, we have done nothing more than replicate what we set out to avoid—doing research on someone for our own benefit, whatever that may be. But the reward for all of us in this process is taking action to improve the educational experiences of our children—action is at the very heart of the action research endeavor.
2. To facilitate the action planning process, consider using a Steps to Action Chart that addresses issues related to what you as a teacher researcher have learned (findings), what recommended action targets a given finding, who is responsible for specific actions (responsibility), who needs to be consulted or informed about the findings of the study and the concomitant actions, how you will monitor the effect of your actions by collecting data, on what dates the actions and monitoring will occur, and what resources will be needed to carry out the action (see Tables 8-1 and 8-2).
3. Action planning can occur at a number of different levels within the school: individual, team, and schoolwide.
4. Individual action planning is done by teacher researchers who have worked through an action research cycle and can still work through a Steps to Action Chart and, in so doing, remind themselves of the steps that need to be taken to implement action and monitor the effects of the action.
5. Team action planning is most commonly done by teams of teachers, administrators, and sometimes parents working collaboratively on action research projects. An action research team shares a common focus at this stage in the action research process—to mobilize their collective energies to move forward with action.
6. Schoolwide action research is about all of the members of the school community working together with a single goal in mind. The challenge at the schoolwide level is how to actively engage all the participants in goal setting that is integral to the action planning process.
7. Action planning, at all levels, is also a time for reflection—reflection on where you have been, what you have learned, and where you are going. Action planning and reflection give you an opportunity to identify your individual or collective professional development needs.

Some Challenges Facing Teacher Researchers

8. Some of the challenges faced by action researchers who seek to implement positive educational change include lack of resources, resistance to change, reluctance to interfere with others' professional practices, reluctance to admit difficult truths, difficulty of finding a forum to share what you have learned, and lack of time for action research endeavors.

Facilitating Educational Change

9. Eight factors for facilitating educational change in a school environment are that (1) teachers and administrators need to restructure power relationships; (2) both top-down and bottom-up strategies for change can work; (3) teachers involved in change efforts brought about by action research must be provided with support; (4) every person is a change agent; (5) those involved must recognize that change tends not to be neat, linear, and rational; (6) teacher researchers must pay attention to the culture of the school; (7) the outcome of any change effort must benefit students to be continued; and (8) being hopeful is a powerful resource.

What Do Teacher Researchers Gain Through All of This Work?

10. The ultimate payoff for teacher researchers who have stuck with the action research process, have learned and internalized the action research skills, and are now committed to action and self-renewal is the belief and knowledge that the real beneficiaries of your work are the students in your care. There can be no argument against this powerful and altruistic goal.

TASKS

1. Develop an action plan based on your action research findings and present it using the Steps to Action Chart format.
2. How would you apply what you have learned about the challenges of implementing educational change to overcome potential obstacles that you may encounter in taking action?