Action Research:
What Is It? Why Is It Important?
by Diane E. Levin

You’re having a more and more stressful time with clean up in your classroom. As soon as you announce it, chaos seems to reign. Children are supposed to clean up what they were playing with, but it’s not working. Conflicts have begun arising that lead to tears and materials getting broken and lost. You decide to undertake an action research project to learn more about the nature of the problem so you can systematically work on making cleanup a more positive learning experience for all.

One child in your group is having an especially hard time with social skills. Whenever he plays with other children, conflicts seem to flare up almost immediately. Patterns of rejection have begun developing whereby other children try to avoid this “troublemaker.” It is beginning to affect the whole climate of the classroom. You decide to do an action research project to look at what is going on with this boy and the disruption that is developing around him, so that you are better prepared to develop strategies to help restore peace in your classroom.

This year, you are required to use an early literacy program that you are beginning to have a lot of questions about. You try to follow the “lessons.” You know you and your children will be judged based on how well they learn the skills covered in the lessons. But you are finding that several children, who are most in need of reading help, become less and less interested in the lessons you’re trying to teach. You decide to try to learn more about what does interest the children and use this information to develop literacy activities that will engage the children more in the process, while keeping the goals in the formal literacy curriculum in mind.

These are just a few of the many challenges that come up regularly in early childhood settings. Situations like these help to keep our work with young children endlessly challenging. They also contribute to the exhaustion we often feel at the end of the day. Some arrive completely out of the blue, like the case below with Hurricane Katrina. Others build up gradually as was the case with the problems the teachers above were having with clean up and using a formal “literacy” curriculum. And still others are issues that you have been dealing with for a long time — but have never figured out just what to do about them — as in the case with the children who are having trouble with social skills who affect the whole atmosphere in the classroom.

It is often hard to figure out what to do with the challenges that arise — we just don’t have time enough or we have tried things that have not worked. Sometimes, we feel inadequate and think that if we just knew more or were better or smarter, we would know what to do and it would “work.” And sometimes, we think, “This is just how it is and there isn’t really anything we can do to make it better; so, we’ll just ignore it or learn to live with it.”

While there is an essential basic training all early childhood professionals need to have to work effectively with children, that foundation cannot provide a one-size-fits-all template for all time. Effective teaching is a continual learning process, a process that requires endless accommodations, innovations, and problem solving. Rarely is there one “right answer” that will work in all situations or get us to a fully realized solution.
Action research to the rescue

Action research is a powerful tool for helping you work on the many challenges you confront in the teaching-learning process (Johnson, 2005). Don’t let the word “research” scare you away. Action research is not unlike what all good teachers do, sometimes without even realizing it. It goes on in the midst of all the other things we regularly do in a day. It is a fancy term for using the process of problem finding and problem solving in our work with young children. But with action research, we do it more consciously and purposefully than we otherwise might. It involves working systematically on a problem or issue that you have identified in your work with children that you would like to solve — to find a way to deal with better. Once you have identified a particular issue, you develop strategies that you think will help to solve the problem, try them out, and see how they work. And based on your assessment, you work out what to try next.

Action research is called “research” because it follows some of the same basic principles of more formal research. It involves:

■ Identifying the problem you want to work on. This is often stated as the “question.”

■ Developing an approach for answering the question. Approaches developed in more formal research can also be used in more informal settings — for instance, the case study, interview, and ethnographic approaches can all be used in action research projects (they are described more fully below).

■ Collecting information that will help you better understand the problem — for instance: writing descriptive notes, tape recording, counting specific occurrences of the issue in question (e.g., number of times conflicts occur during clean up) or specific aspects of a situation (where the conflicts occur).

■ Planning specific strategies for trying to influence the behavior or situation in question.

■ Evaluating how the strategies work in an ongoing way.

■ Using outside resources to find out about what others have said and learned about your topic or question and how to answer it.

But action research is also different from more formal research. It does not require that you proceed in any one specific way, and what you do generally changes and evolves as you try things out and learn more about the issue you are studying. Usually it is purely qualitative rather than quantitative, not involving a lot of numbers at all. It may not have a formal endpoint when you feel you have fully and forever answered the questions, but rather it ends when you feel that you have gotten far enough with the answer to not have it be a big challenge or problem anymore. Rarely is action research reported in a formal way, although what you learn can often be very helpful to colleagues who may be struggling with similar issues. And, more and more, professionals’ action research projects are getting published as in this Beginnings Workshop and in Young Children (for instance, see: Henderson et al., 2004).

Techniques of action research

For three years, I have been teaching a course in action research to graduate students at Wheelock College. It occurs during students’ final semester of study, which includes an in-depth practicum experience. My work with students in the course has convinced me what a powerful tool action research can be for teachers at all levels of their professional development. For the course, students identify and conduct an action research project at their placements. They have undertaken projects involving a wider range of questions than I would ever have imagined possible. They have also used a diverse set of techniques. While all involve many similar practices such as observing and recording information and changing one’s strategy as one proceeds, they generally fit into three broad, sometimes overlapping techniques:

The Ethnographic Approach. The ethnographic approach involves embedding your efforts to answer a question or solve a problem into the fabric of daily classroom life and making each new decision about what to do next based on what you have already learned. Perhaps it is Vivian Paley who brought this technique to the everyday practice of early childhood professionals of this generation. As a teacher in preschool and kindergarten classrooms she identified an issue of interest — for instance, what would happen if she told children, “You Can’t Say You Can’t Play” (1993) — and then she systematically went about exploring what it would mean to the children and her daily experience in the classroom. Her effort to share what she learned with us is both insightful and alluring. Paley did not know in advance where her initial question might lead. She used a variety of resources to answer her question, including the children; and each time she tried something new she observed and documented what happened. The following Beginnings Workshop articles by...
Janice Coughlin and Abby DeAngelis relied heavily, but not exclusively, on this approach.

The Case Study Approach. This approach involves focusing on one particular child’s behavior, learning, and/or skills in order to learn how to better meet his or her needs. Rena Arcaro-McPhee describes, in her Beginnings Workshop article, how she used this approach to better understand and meet the needs of one particular boy who was involved in frequent conflicts with other children. It included observing, interviewing, working closely with him when he was involved in conflicts and working with the whole group, thereby illustrating how far-reaching an impact the case study approach can have on the entire classroom, not just on the target children in the case study.

The Interview Approach. Perhaps no one has taught us more about the power of the interview approach with young children than Jean Piaget (Ginsburg, 1997). Through his use of open-ended questioning to find out how children at varying ages think about various issues, he showed us just how much good interviewing can teach us. While not an easy skill to master, careful planning of both the questions based on what you hope to learn, and careful listening once you begin the interview, can give you the kind of insight you need to devise strategies for working with the child or children on the issue of your study. This technique, while generally used with individual children, can also be used with larger groups, as is the case with Abby, who embeds interviewing into her action research with her reading group and Janice, who interviews the whole class about their ideas about clean up.

Action research: Now more than ever

There are many benefits to using action research in your work with children. It can help you get beyond the “cookbook” approach to solving problems, by helping you use your own knowledge and skills to systematically forge better practice. It can empower you to be an ongoing problem solver and experimenter in your work with children. It can help you use what you currently know more effectively and expand and deepen it in an ongoing and powerful way. At a time when so many challenges face our profession and our work with children, action research can help us get beyond accepting the status quo and enable us to resist the quick fixes that rarely work as promised.

References


Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers

by Kay Albrecht

More than Inadequate: Levin seems to see into the lives of teachers and sense their frustration, lack of time, and questions about what to do. Explore with teachers just how often they have feelings of inadequacy as a starting place for adding action research to their professional skills. Ask teachers to briefly describe situations that made them feel frustrated or inadequate and what they did about these feelings. Help teachers realize that they already have some preliminary experiences with action research.

Next steps: It all starts with problem identification. Ask teachers to reflect on their classrooms and identify a problem they are currently experiencing that might lead to an action research project.

Practice one of the three approaches: After teachers identify the problem, ask them to pick one of the three approaches to action research and try it out. If teachers need more information about the approach, consider adding A Short Guide to Action Research to your school’s professional library as a resource. Encourage teachers to ask questions, talk with each other about what they are learning, and share successes and failures.

Reconsidering management: This article leads directors to consider a whole new strategy to support teachers’ professional development. Instead of offering a solution or strategy to problems brought to you by teachers to solve, initiate an action research project to see what the teacher can find out on his own using action research. Invest in helping this activity be a success by helping the teacher ask the action research question and pick an approach to use to gather information.