EXPLORING TEACHER ACTION RESEARCH

WHAT IS TEACHER ACTION RESEARCH?

Action research "is a disciplined process of inquiry conducted by and for those taking the action" with a primary goal of "improving and/or refining [their] actions."[1] Teacher action research (TAR)—also called "teacher research" or "teacher-as-researcher"—is when a teacher studies their own practice to drive self-improvement. [2] Essentially, TAR represents a process for teachers to self-assess their work, identify weaknesses, and adapt their instruction or seek out new learning to address problems of practice.[3] **Teachers simultaneously investigate problems and/or questions they have about their professional practice while implementing informed actions to address those problems or answer those questions.**[4]

TAR also acts as professional development for teachers.[6] In particular, TAR functions as professional development due to its inherent investigative nature and the opportunities it provides for teachers to "extend existing professional development experiences to meet [their] individual needs and the needs of [their] students."[7] Specifically, teachers participating in TAR can self-select an area of professional practice they would like to explore and then use a variety of methods (e.g., videotaping instruction, data recording sheets) to conduct a research plan around that area.[8]

Considerations for Action Research

CATEGORY	QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER
Think	What do you want to investigate? Why is the issue or topic important? What research questions will help you investigate the issue or topic?
Act	What is the plan for conducting research? What data is needed to answer the research questions? How much time does the plan require?
Reflect	How will you organize and review data? How will you share results?
Rethink	How will you rethink your teaching practice based on your data?

Source: Annenberg Learner[5]

Defining Action Research

> In schools, **action research refers to a wide variety of evaluative, investigative, and analytical research methods designed to diagnose problems or weaknesses—whether organizational, academic, or instructional—and help educators develop practical solutions to address them quickly and efficiently.** Action research may also be applied to programs or educational techniques that are not necessarily experiencing any problems, but that educators simply want to learn more about and improve. The general goal is to create a simple, practical, repeatable process of iterative learning, evaluation, and improvement that leads to increasingly better results for schools, teachers, or programs.

Source: Glossary of Education Reform | Great Schools Partnership[9]

Importantly, TAR differs from more traditional and formal educational research. Practitioners (e.g., teachers) conduct TAR as part of their day-to-day activities to benefit themselves and their students, whereas traditional researchers investigate educational practices in controlled settings through the lens of a non-invested observer.[10] Considered differently, teachers completing TAR seek to address practical issues that they experience within the context of their individual classroom or school. In contrast, independent, non-participating researchers conduct formal research to "produce independently validated and reproducible findings that others, outside of the context being studied, can use to guide their future actions or inform the design of their academic programs."[11]

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Sample Journal-Published Teacher Action Research Studies

JOURNAL OF TEACHER ACTION RESEARCH	NETWORKS: AN ONLINE JOURNAL FOR TEACHER RESEARCH
The icon below links to Issue #3 of the fifth volume of the *Journal of Teacher Action Research*, published in 2019. This peer-reviewed journal—which is indexed with EBSCO—publishes practical research for PK-12 and postsecondary contexts as a means of sharing classroom strategies and improving student outcomes.	The icon below links to Issue #2 of the 21st volume of *Networks: An Online Journal for Teacher Research*, published in 2019. This journal shares reports of action research in K-12 through postgraduate settings. It also promotes discussions on how inquiry about one's professional work can improve the work.

Source: Journal of Teacher Action Research and Networks: An Online Journal for Teacher Research[12]

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL IMPACTS OF ACTION RESEARCH?

Teachers often describe TAR as something that is "real" and extends beyond book learning.[13] Indeed, TAR benefits teachers by allowing them to direct their attention to one or more personal areas of development or interest that relate to their professional teaching practice. The TAR process of observation, experimentation, and reflection helps teachers "identify the skills and strategies [they] would like to add to [their] professional toolbox," as well as "the skills, management, and instructional training needed to make the changes they want to see" in their classrooms.[14] However, **teachers must recognize that the results of TAR may not be conclusive or applicable in contexts that differ from their classroom environment, so they will need to conduct follow-up TAR and revisit findings on an ongoing basis.**[15]

Potential Results of Teacher Action Research Projects

Increased collaboration across subjects and grades	Increased dialogue about problems of practice	Enhanced teacher-student communication	Improved performance of students
Revision of practice based on new knowledge	Teacher-designed and initiated staff development	Development of priorities for schoolwide planning	Accumulation of greater professional knowledge

Source: National Education Association[16]

Besides benefiting teachers' professional growth, TAR positively affects the curriculum and instruction students receive and their academic outcomes.[17] By using TAR to solve problems of practice, educators can improve the student experience and expose them to more innovative approaches and instruction.[18] Action research also deepens teachers' "understanding and appreciation of student needs" in an effort to better address those needs.[19]

Generally, districts, schools, and individual teachers can embrace TAR as a process to:[20]

- **Connect Theory to Practice**: TAR is conducted firsthand by practicing educators; it can very effectively help to bridge the gaps between theory and practice.

- **Improve Educational Practice**: A main focus of TAR is the improvement of classroom practice through professional reflection and critical examination of one's praxis.

- **Foster Broad School Improvement**: TAR can be facilitated so that it promotes widespread types of improvements at the school or district levels, in addition to the individual classroom level.

- **Empower Educators and Engage Them Intellectually**: TAR empowers educators, allowing them to use their unique sets of expertise, talents, and creativity to implement strategies that will best meet students' needs.

- **Cultivate Professional Growth**: TAR provides educators with opportunities to focus professional growth on specific areas of professional practice that an individual or group of educators would like to improve.

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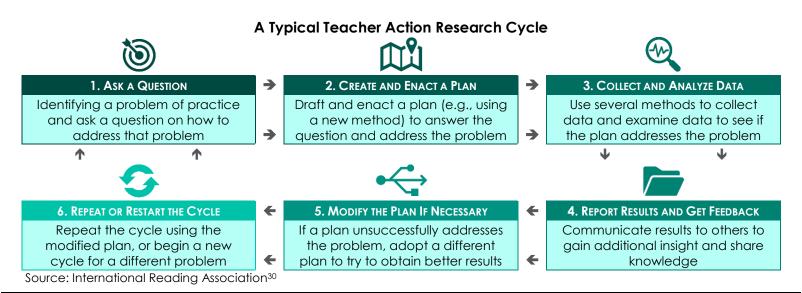
WHAT IS THE PROCESS FOR CONDUCTING ACTION RESEARCH?

Teachers should be intentional and systematic in their approach to TAR. Teachers need to "follow specific procedures and carefully document each step of the process—from formation of a question, through data collection and analysis, to conclusions and outcomes."[21] Fundamentally, **TAR is driven by questions that arise around an individual teacher's or a group of teachers' instructional practice**, typically to address a problem of practice or bolster existing skills.[22] Importantly, these questions should center on items upon which teachers can exert influence (e.g., instructional planning, assessment strategies), and teachers should limit the number of questions they seek to answer in a given study.[23] Common question types and motivations that may initiate a given iteration of TAR include:[24]

- Changes in classroom practice (e.g., What effect will daily writing have on my students?);
- Effects of program restructuring (e.g., How will project-based learning affect student work habits?);
- New understandings of students (e.g., What happens when at-risk students perceive they can succeed?)
- Understanding of self as teacher (e.g., What skills do I need to refine to be more effective in teaching arithmetic?)
- New professional relationships (e.g., How can regular and special education teachers effectively co-teach?)
- Teaching a new process to the students (e.g., How can I teach third graders to use reflection?)
- Seeking a quantifiable answer (e.g., To what extent are portfolios appropriate assessments for kindergartners?)

Once questions are clearly defined, teachers should design and implement an action plan to address those questions. For example, a teacher who finds that they are wasting five minutes at the beginning of each lesson trying to settle students may decide to implement a daily writing prompt or anticipatory task to see if that helps students get ready to learn and results in more time spent on instruction.[25] At the same time, teachers will need to collect data on the results of their action plan using multiple instruments (e.g., journals, student work samples) to assess whether the chosen approach has meaningful impact.[26]

If the collected evidence indicates progress, teachers may continue using the strategy, but if the data do not indicate progress, teachers will need to recalibrate their action plan and repeat the TAR cycle.[27] Once a specific set of questions is answered, teachers can outline follow-up questions to explore or move forward with a fresh problem of practice or topic of interest to explore via a new iteration of TAR.[28] Importantly, **teachers should always communicate the results of TAR to their colleagues and school leaders—and potentially in a public forum or research journal—to share their accumulated knowledge and build the capacity of other educators encountering similar questions.**[29]

A Typical Teacher Action Research Cycle

1. ASK A QUESTION	2. CREATE AND ENACT A PLAN	3. COLLECT AND ANALYZE DATA
Identifying a problem of practice and ask a question on how to address that problem	Draft and enact a plan (e.g., using a new method) to answer the question and address the problem	Use several methods to collect data and examine data to see if the plan addresses the problem

6. REPEAT OR RESTART THE CYCLE	5. MODIFY THE PLAN IF NECESSARY	4. REPORT RESULTS AND GET FEEDBACK
Repeat the cycle using the modified plan, or begin a new cycle for a different problem	If a plan unsuccessfully addresses the problem, adopt a different plan to try to obtain better results	Communicate results to others to gain additional insight and share knowledge

Source: International Reading Association[30]

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ADDITIONAL READING

The following reports and resources delve further into some of the topics discussed in this document and can provide additional context to support teachers, as well as district and school leaders, in better understanding TAR.

RESOURCE	PUBLISHING ORGANIZATION	SHORTENED URL (with embedded hyperlink)	QR CODE
"A Practical Guide to Action Research for Literacy Educators"[31]	International Reading Association	https://qrgo.page.link/AjXbY	
" Classroom-Based, Teacher-Led Action Research as a Process for Enhancing Teaching and Learning"[32]	*Lindenwood University Journal of Educational Leadership in Action*	https://qrgo.page.link/eKqQQ	
"How to Do Action Research in Your Classroom"[33]	Teachers Network Leadership Institute	https://qrgo.page.link/Ux1jF	
"Leading Action Research in Schools"[34]	Florida Department of Education	https://qrgo.page.link/rc8Ho	
"Student Voice, Teacher Action Research, and Classroom Improvement"[35]	Sense Publishers	https://qrgo.page.link/CeR5X	
"Themes in Education: Action Research"[36]	Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory, Brown University	https://qrgo.page.link/fvLc6	

Source: The QR Code Generator[37]

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