
Introduction

Action Research and School Libraries

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The appearance of this special issue of *School Libraries Worldwide* represents the fulfillment of a commitment made by the International Association of School Librarianship (IASL) four years ago to produce a publication about action research for school librarians. At a pre-conference seminar on School Libraries, held in Caldes de Montbui, Spain, before the 1993 annual conference of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), participants passed a resolution thanking UNESCO for supporting the publication of *Guidelines for Conducting National Surveys of School Libraries and their Needs* (Sigrún Klara Hannesdóttir, 1994), which was available in draft form at the seminar. This document addressed the issue of national surveys as a basis for planned development of school libraries. However,

recognizing that both large scale and localized research are essential to build a strong foundation for school libraries, [participants] recommend that the IFLA Section on School Libraries, in collaboration with IASL, produce a guide to action research with the aim of increasing local research by practicing school librarians.

The recommendation was an attempt to balance the national against the localized or school-level approach and to promote the idea of using research, at all levels, to improve school library services. It recognized that research does not have to be carried out on a giant scale and with large amounts of funding to be worthwhile. It also recognized that all professionals have a role in research as a basis for effective practice.

After discussions between the executives of the IFLA Section on School Libraries and IASL, the Caldes de Montbui resolution was passed to the IASL Research Committee and then to the author for action on behalf of both Associations. With the launching of IASL's professional and research journal *School Libraries Worldwide* in 1995, the original proposal for a "guide" or booklet on action research for school librarians became a proposal for a special issue of the journal to be devoted to this topic. What you are reading is the result.

To publicize the project, and to encourage members of IASL to become involved, a special research session on "Action Research" was organized as part of the 1995 IASL conference in Worcester (UK). In this session, chaired

and introduced by the author Tony Chaye, Reader in Education at Worcester College of Higher Education and editor of two books on action research in education, presented a paper about issues associated with carrying out action research. (That paper formed the basis for his article for this special issue of *School Libraries Worldwide*). Other speakers, including Dianne Oberg of the University of Alberta and Blanche Woolls of the University of Pittsburgh, described action research projects in which they had been involved or that they had supervised. The interest and discussion generated through this session led to the identification of further relevant projects, some of which are listed in the bibliography that forms part of this special issue. Other strategies used to publicize the project and to encourage involvement included the publication of short articles in the quarterly *IASL Newsletter*, and notices sent to IASL-LINK (the Internet listserv of the Association).

The aims developed for what was originally to be a guide to action research, and carried forward to this special issue of *School Libraries Worldwide*, are:

- to provide a rationale and justification for action research at the school and local levels;
- to encourage those involved in school library services to carry out action research projects as a basis for improved school library services;
- to provide information about methods of action research that might be used in school libraries, with an emphasis on methods that are relatively easy to apply or that do not need large amounts of funding;
- to provide basic guidelines for planning and carrying out small-scale action research projects;
- to provide examples of action research projects related to school libraries or library and information services in schools.

In addition, it is hoped that this publication will promote continuing discussion and exploration of the place of action research in school librarianship and encourage practitioners and others to submit reports of action research projects for publication in *School Libraries Worldwide* or the *IASL Newsletter*.

Although the resolution that came out of the 1993 meeting in Caldes de Montbui specified that the publication provide a guide to action research that would encourage participation in action research at the local level, no definition of action research was transmitted with the resolution; indeed, it seems to have been accepted that many definitions of action research exist and that most, if not all, might have value in the field of school librarianship. Consequently, the editors of this special issue of *School Libraries Worldwide* have attempted to take account of a wide range of possible definitions of action research, from action research as a means of solving small day-to-day problems in the workplace to action research as the basis of professional life for the "reflective practitioner," and encompassing action research as a teaching method.

The following published definitions of action research, culled from the literature of education, school librarianship, librarianship, and research methodology, give an idea of the broad range of possibilities.

Action research is a process through which educators work together to improve education by change through reflection on their daily teaching habits. (Loerke, 1992)

[Action research is] ... a form of collective self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in a social situation in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social and educational practices and the situation in which practices are carried out. (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988)

[Action research is] ... systematic enquiry that is collective, collaborative, self-reflective, critical, and undertaken by participants in the inquiry. (McCutcheon & Jung, 1990, cited in Masters, 1995)

Action research provides a way of working which links theory and practice. Two key concepts are group decision-making and commitment to improvement. A distinctive feature of action research is that those affected by planned changes have the primary responsibility for deciding on courses of action which seem likely to lead to improvement, and for evaluating the results of strategies tried out in practice. (Maynard, 1995)

Or, as Gabel (1995) notes, "action research represents a growing field of educational research whose chief identifying characteristic is the recognition of the pragmatic requirements of educational practitioners for organized reflective inquiry into classroom instruction." On the basis of all these definitions, the key words or concepts associated with action research can be identified as *active* (as in taking action for a purpose), *enquiry*, *participative*, *collaborative*, *reflective*, *purposive*, *systematic*, *improving*, and *leading to change*. In a discussion of the nature of action research, Masters (1995) says that "within all [the] definitions there are four basic themes: empowerment of participants; collaboration through participation; acquisition of knowledge; and social change." In his article for this special issue of *School Libraries Worldwide* titled "Some Reflections on the Nature of Educational Action Research," Tony Chaye suggests that "acting intentionally on the world leads to a better understanding of it, and a better understanding to wiser and more prudent educational action." He goes on to discuss four factors that give educational action research its particular character and style: a concern for educational values; action that is workplace oriented; the crucial place of reflection in action research; and a concern for the nature of the improvement that occurs.

In relation to this, there appears to be a substantive difference in the approaches taken to action research by educators and by people involved in management research, two fields in which action research has gained considerable acceptance. Basically, action research as a management research method has two aims: to improve the quality of practice, and to advance knowledge about management in general (J. Klobas, 1996, personal commu-

nication). It seems that educators are primarily interested in its use for the first of these purposes. Although the dual emphasis in management research has led to a recognition of the importance of designing a study so that the observations may be generalized to practice outside the immediate domain in which the study was conducted, the ability to generalize from the results has not been seen to be such an important issue in education, where the focus has rather tended to be on the development of the particular teacher, the particular group of students, and the school. Although this may help to explain why the results of relatively few action research projects are published in the field of education, it is nevertheless possible to cite definitions of action research from the literature of education that are exceptions to this observation. For example, Todd (1996), writing about action research in his Research Column in *Scan* (a journal published by the New South Wales Department of School Education), says:

Action research has dual goals of action and research. It investigates aspects of current practice in order to improve that practice. It is undertaken to investigate real concerns, to take action to solve problems and at the same time contribute to the knowledge base of the profession.

Taking this further, Dick (1993) says:

I regard action research as a methodology which is intended to have both action outcomes and research outcomes. I recognize, too, that in some action research the research component mostly takes the form of understanding on the part of those involved. The action is primary. In distinction, there are some forms of action research where research is the main emphasis and the action is almost a fringe benefit.

Although school librarians have an important curriculum role in the school, they also have a management role, perhaps more so than any other professionals in the school apart from the senior executive team. Thus a focus on action research as a management research tool as well as a tool for education or professional development may be particularly appropriate for school librarians. In this sense, it has much to offer as a technique for developing strategies for the improvement of school library services. Given the need for this kind of information in the field of school librarianship, it seems appropriate to bring to the attention of school librarians the possibilities that can emerge from an acceptance of the dual emphasis of the management research approach. It is an advantage that this can generally happen without compromising the educational and professional development value of a project or its potential relationship to the improvement of practice.

The selection of contributors, and the books and articles listed in the bibliography, reflect this diversity of approach. Tony Ghaye discusses issues associated with educational action research, specifically action research "to achieve educationally worthwhile improvements in curriculum and pedago-

gy," although the points that he makes have validity beyond this setting too. Jane Klobas, on the other hand, writes from a broader perspective, discussing the methods of action research as they are used across a range of workplace settings and relating them to school libraries. Four of the articles describe action research projects that have been undertaken in the field of school librarianship. Given current professional concerns, it is probably no accident that all four deal in some way with information skills development in schools.

In three of these four articles, action research is defined, and in all four the steps in the action research project are outlined. Among the many different data collection methodologies (quantitative and qualitative) described in the four articles are direct observation, questionnaire surveys (of various kinds), journals, process-folios, discussion groups and focus groups, interviews, videotapes of activities, formal achievement tests, standardized instruments such as attitude tests or tests to measure general academic ability, simulated tasks, logs of activities, thinking-aloud tasks, work flowcharts, student assignments (including essays and multimedia presentations), and formal evaluation forms. As Ross Todd notes, the data collection methods used should be "a function of the nature of the situation, time available, and of course the objectives of the research."

The people involved in the ongoing action research at Marist Sisters' College in Sydney, Australia, that is described in Ross Todd's article emphasize "the importance of a planned approach." Todd uses five basic phases of action research to structure the experience:

- identification of a problem associated with professional practice, where there is mutual commitment to improvement;
- planning—the development of a plan to investigate the problem or concern;
- action—the team implements actions or strategies designed to improve the situation;
- observation—the effects of the actions are observed and recorded;
- reflection—the team reflects on the outcomes as a basis for an ongoing cycle of planning, action, and evaluation.

However, there are other approaches to planning. Jane Klobas identifies three main stages of the action research process: planning, action, and evaluation, with each of these stages sometimes involving many steps, and with the whole process being cyclical. A different five-stage process is described by Violet Harada and Joan Yoshina, a process that nevertheless encompasses the same elements described by Ross Todd and Jane Klobas:

- problem formulation;
- data collection;
- data analysis;
- reporting of results;

- action planning ("incorporating what has been learned into current and future practices").

Karen Loerke and Dianne Oberg base their work on three basic stages of action research identified through the literature:

- recognizing a question of practice, or identifying a concern related to daily practice;
- "reconnaissance," or an assessment of the situation, identification of the people who will be involved, and an analysis of the resources needed;
- the action research cycles.

Each of the ongoing action research cycles involves four steps of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, with reflection leading to further planning, acting, observing, and evaluation. These four steps or "moments" of action research are set in the context of the educational literature by Tony Ghaye, who emphasizes reflection, not just as a "final stage" in the cycle, but as an integral part of the whole ongoing process.

Jane Klobas also highlights reflection as an important part of action research, citing authors who describe the whole action research process as "reflection-in-action." Because so much, including the development of theory, depends on the quality of the reflection, she identifies "reflection skills" as "among the most important skills in action research" and suggests ways in which these skills might be developed by the practitioner.

In preparing this special issue of *School Libraries Worldwide*, a major problem encountered by the editor was identifying appropriate published reports of action research. Searches of the major online databases, including ERIC, LISA (Library and Information Science Abstracts), Library Literature, British Education Index, and Dissertation Abstracts, provided only a small number of articles and reports. Although this may be explained in part by the general inadequacy of indexing by research methodology in these databases, it nevertheless illustrates a concern that has been expressed by other writers, a concern that was perhaps implicit in the Caldes de Montbui resolution that provided the impetus for this special issue. For example, Naudé (1992), a practicing school library manager in Australia, has commented that:

It is a great pity that so much incidental research related to the day-to-day running of the school library, and additional research undertaken for evaluative purposes or to solve problems, goes unreported, and is therefore repeated again and again throughout the world ... While results of all these investigations might not be applicable from school to school or from library to library, nevertheless, even a discussion of the methodology would help other people to undertake their own studies without going right back to the beginning, the design of the investigation.

It is, therefore, good to note that the action research team at Marist Sisters' College (whose work is described by Ross Todd in his article for this issue) have "a strong commitment to sharing our action research with the professional community," and that this commitment has brought benefits to mem-

bers of the team as well as to the professional community. Jane Klobas takes up this theme in her article "The Methods of Action Research" and encourages school librarians to report the results of their action research projects in local publications and in the publications of professional associations like the International Association of School Librarianship.

Why should school librarians be involved in action research? What are the advantages for them, for the school library program, and for the wider profession? The articles in this special issue of *School Libraries Worldwide* provide some answers to these questions.

As a result of the experience of ongoing action research at Marist Sisters' College, Ross Todd suggests that action research provides a basis for involving teachers and school administration in the program of the school library; once involved in and committed to the school library program, their support will help to ensure that goals are met. The leadership role of the school library personnel in information skills research and development at Marist Sisters' College has resulted in a higher profile for the library in the school and increased levels of funding for resources. In addition, for the individual school librarian, "participation in action research is both empowering and professionally rewarding." In terms of use of research for the improvement of teaching, the findings of school-based action research are easy for practitioners to understand because the context is local—and this means that teachers are more willing to implement them. Nevertheless, as an extension of this, with teachers' involvement in research at the local level has come a greater willingness to consider the implications of the formal published research of education and to apply it in the school.

Through carefully planned, systematic, and controlled action research, school librarians can become more professionally aware, more involved in educational programs, and more motivated to integrate the various aspects of their complex role in a holistic way. In turn, this can lead to greater job satisfaction, better school library programs, improvements in student learning, and contributions to the advancement of knowledge about school library programs and their place in education.

This, then, brings us back to the Caldes de Montbui resolution that was the catalyst for the preparation of this special issue of *School Libraries Worldwide*. "Both large scale and localized research are essential to build a strong foundation for school libraries," and action research is one means by which "the aim of increasing local research by practicing school librarians" can be achieved. In addition, through participation in the research process, a research climate is developed, bringing with it a willingness to use the formal research literature of the profession, as well as local research, to improve library and information services and programs in the school.

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