

3-2017

## Classroom-Based, Teacher-Led Action Research as a Process for Enhancing Teaching and Learning

Craig Mertler

Adam Hartley

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/ela>



Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Educational Administration and Supervision Commons](#), and the [Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Mertler, Craig and Hartley, Adam (2017) "Classroom-Based, Teacher-Led Action Research as a Process for Enhancing Teaching and Learning," *Journal of Educational Leadership in Action*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 3. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/ela/vol4/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Educational Leadership in Action by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. For more information, please contact [phuffman@lindenwood.edu](mailto:phuffman@lindenwood.edu).

# CLASSROOM-BASED, TEACHER-LED ACTION RESEARCH AS A PROCESS FOR ENHANCING TEACHING AND LEARNING

Faculty Article by Dr. Craig Mertler and Dr. Adam Hartley

## Abstract

This paper examines the nature of classroom-based, teacher-led action research in schools. The process of action research is described, along with its potential applications and benefits—including, but not limited to, the empowerment of teachers and staff, and the support structure for a program of customizable professional development for educators. One school's venture into school wide action research is presented and discussed, largely from the perspective of the building administrator. Both challenges and the successes are openly discussed. Finally, the authors make a case for the widespread and large-scale benefits associated with the implementation of an action research initiative in schools and districts.

## Introduction

Schools across our country continuously find themselves at a crossroads. They struggle with ways to remain focused on continuous improvement, while also trying to equalize efforts to implement new curriculum, integrate updated standards, put into operation new professional performance evaluation systems, and foster professional growth and development for teachers and administrators, just to name a few. Building and district administrators constantly grapple to find the appropriate balances among the wide variety of initiatives that require time, resources, and commitment—and that must also be individualized to each particular setting (e.g., each school building, with its own unique culture and characteristic set of needs). There certainly is no one-size-fits-all solution to these challenges. In the past, these kinds of responsibilities typically fell on the shoulders of district- or building-level administrators (Mertler, 2016).

However, in today's educational climate, more and more teachers, mid-level administrators, and even support personnel have begun to take the lead when it comes to developing and implementing innovative solutions to local problems, for mentoring

and providing support to colleagues, and for envisioning and leading widespread improvement efforts in our schools (Mertler, 2016). A vast majority of schools and districts would likely benefit from a common process that would allow schools to concentrate on meeting these various challenges, while also taking into account each school's and/or district's unique contextual setting. Action research in educational settings is a concept and practice that can effectively and convincingly address many—if not all—of the challenges facing schools and districts today, and can also efficiently facilitate the leadership of these efforts by non-administrative educational personnel (i.e., teachers, support personnel, etc.). The overarching goals of this paper are twofold: to provide an overview of action research in schools, and to describe—from the perspective of the building-level administrator—one school's collective experiences associated with the implementation of school-wide action research.

## Overview of Action Research

Many educators tend to feel uncomfortable with the thought of research in educational settings. This often stems from their experiences in graduate courses in research methods and/or statistical analysis. However, we contend that educators should not be apprehensive about research, but rather should remain cognizant of the fact that research can provide us with a systematic mechanism for (1) collecting meaningful student data (as well as data from other educational sources), and then (2) using those data as the basis for better-informed educational decision making. Data-informed educational decision making has become a primary focal point for the work that we collectively do as professional educators, regardless of the level, role, or capacity with the field of education that each of us works.

## What is Action Research?

There are numerous similarities between traditional educational research and action research; nevertheless, there is one crucial difference. Action research *is* educational research; however, it is research that is conducted *by* educators *for* themselves (Mertler, 2017). Individuals who are removed from the situation and setting, to some degree, that they are investigating often conduct traditional educational research. University professors or graduate research assistants may conduct more traditional forms of research in our PK-12 schools. In contrast, action research is conducted by the individual or individuals who play an active role and who have a vested interest in the particular setting and with the particular problem of practice.

Action research is any form of systematic inquiry conducted by those with a direct, vested interest in the teaching and learning process in a particular setting. Johnson (2012) has described action research as being true systematic inquiry into one's *own* practice. It is a process that allows practicing educators to study their own classrooms, schools, or other educational settings, in order to understand them better and to be able to improve their quality or effectiveness (Mertler, 2017). Action research provides a structured process for customizing research findings, enabling educators to address specific questions, concerns, or problems within their own classrooms, schools,

or districts. The best way to know if something will work with *your* students or in *your* classroom is to try it out, collect and analyze data to assess its effectiveness, and then make a decision about your next steps based on your direct experience.

As a process, action research looks somewhat similar to traditional forms of research in education. However, there are some subtle differences. Essentially, it is a four-step cyclical process (Mertler, 2017; see Figure 1), consisting of the following steps: planning for your action research, acting on the plan, developing an action plan for future cycles, and reflecting on the process. Two specific aspects of the process are worthy of noting. First, action research is cyclical. It is a research process used to address problems or answer questions about educational processes in a particular setting. The results or outcomes from one cycle of action research often lead into and inform the direction of subsequent cycles. This is an important component of action research, as it fosters a substantive degree of “connectedness” and continuity between various cycles of action research. Traditional forms of educational research tend to be more isolated in their approaches to problem solving.

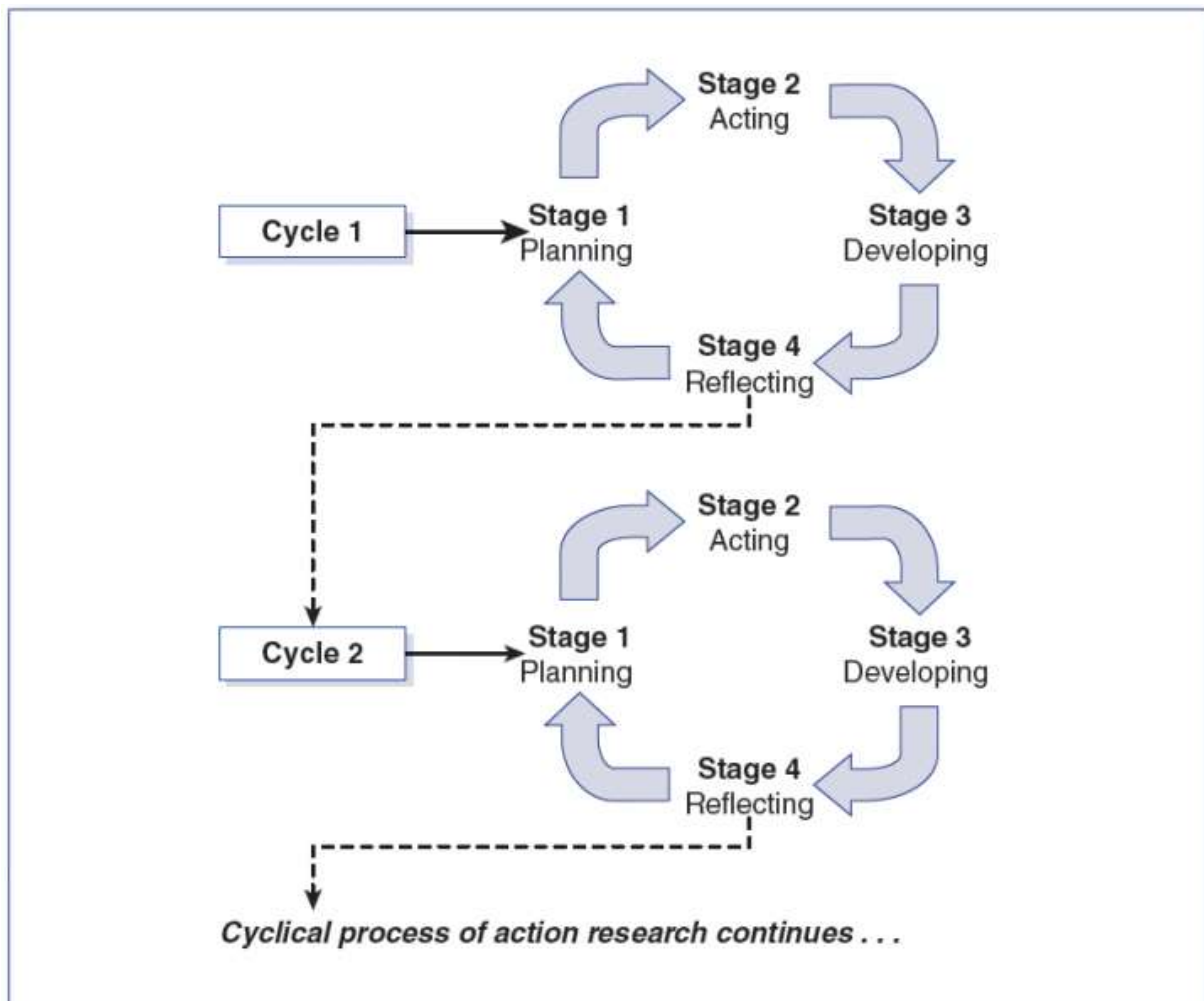


Figure 1. The ongoing, cyclical process of action research (from Mertler, 2017, p. 38).

Second, professional reflection is a central focus of action research. In order to truly be able to ascertain what is and is not working in our schools, professional educators must be able and willing to critically examine what they do and how they do it. It is this aspect of the process that promotes true systematic investigations into one's own practice. Reflection is largely about learning from critical examinations of your own practice, but also about taking the time to critically reexamine exactly *who* was involved in the process, *what* led you to want to examine this aspect of your practice, *why* you chose to do what you did, *where* is the appropriate place (time, sequence, location, etc.) to implement future changes, and *how* this has impacted your practice (Mertler, 2017). When professional educators take the time to answer these kinds of questions thoroughly for themselves, they develop an even deeper, more meaningful examination of practice, as well as a heightened level of empowerment.

There are five broad ways in which action research can be successfully incorporated into educational settings (Mertler, 2017). Action research can be used to...

1. *Connect theory to practice* — Action research is conducted firsthand by practicing educators; it can very effectively help to bridge the gaps between theory and practice.
2. *Improve educational practice* — A main focus of action research is the improvement of classroom practice, through professional reflection and critical examination of one's own praxis.
3. *Foster broad school improvement* — Action research can also be facilitated so that it promotes widespread types of improvements (e.g., at the building or district levels), in addition to improvements at the individual classroom level.
4. *Empower educators and engage them intellectually* — Action research is effective at advancing the notion of *educator empowerment*, allowing professional educators to utilize their own unique sets of expertise, talents, and creativity so that they can implement instructional programs that will best meet the needs of their students.
5. *Cultivate professional growth* — Action research provides educators with opportunities to focus professional growth on specific things that an individual—or, perhaps, a collaborative group of educators—identifies as being an area of professional practice that they would like to improve. It is the *epitome* of customizable and meaningful professional development for educators (Mertler, 2013).

## Benefits of Implementing Action Research in Schools

Numerous benefits can be received through engagement in classroom-based action research, and we will highlight two of the most important here. The concept behind the integration of classroom-based action research into the culture and mindset of a school or district is that educators can investigate *their* own practice as a systematic means of discovering what works—and might not work—for *their* students and in *their* classrooms. In our opinions, this adds a substantial degree of professionalism to the job of being an educator. The act of teaching is often referred to as the “art of teaching;” however, a distinct advantage of engaging in classroom- or school-based action research is the addition of the more systematic “science of teaching” into the teaching and learning process (Mertler, 2013). In today’s educational climate—where accountability takes on greater importance each year—the art of teaching is *essential*; the science of teaching is *critical* (Mertler, 2013).

Earlier in this paper, we referred to the connection between classroom-based action research and professional development. This is predominantly because an educator has the ability to focus her or his professional growth and development activities specifically on aspects of the job that an individual identifies as being an area in need of improvement. Since the early 1980s, action research has been promoted as a meaningful alternative to more “typical” in-service training and professional development for educators. Oliver (1980) argued that the major benefit of action research as in-service training is that it promotes a continuing process of professional development in a climate where teachers (and other school personnel) not only pose the research questions, but also test their own solutions, as well.

More “enlightened” forms of professional learning and development (McNiff, 2002) operate under the assumption that a vast majority of professional educators already possess a good deal of professional knowledge, and are highly capable of furthering their *own* [emphasis added] learning. These types of professional learning opportunities capitalize on a more appropriate form of support to help educators celebrate what they already know, but also encourage them to develop their own new knowledge. An action research approach lends itself nicely to this process, in that it requires educators to evaluate what they are doing and further to assess how effectively they are doing so.

One-size-fits-all-type professional development programs or activities simply do not accomplish this. Additionally, once an educator has results from the implementation of action research, he or she has the ability to take action immediately. This, in and of itself, will undoubtedly result in professional development that is much more meaningful for individual educators everywhere (Mertler, 2013).

## Considerations When Implementing Action Research in Schools

When beginning to consider the potential widespread implementation of classroom-based action research in schools, the key roles played by principals and assistant principals should not be overlooked. Initially, the building leadership team must focus on an overall commitment to fostering and promoting the necessary change in culture to

foster the implementation of action research processes (Mertler, 2016). Further, the leadership should focus on sustaining this commitment throughout the entire faculty and staff—it needs to be a school wide initiative. Focusing on the school’s mission and envisioning how an action research approach can assist in achieving short-term as well as long-term goals—all while leading by example—is paramount in supporting these types of efforts. Faculty and staff in the school must know and see—on a daily basis—that the principal and assistant principal(s) are equally committed to the overall success of the school and that they will be supportive of faculty and staff needs, in particular when it comes to supporting their action research endeavors. Knowing that teachers have logistical and emotional support from administrators and their colleagues can be a huge influential factor in the success of school improvement efforts throughout a building (Mertler, 2016).

Implementing an action research approach to enhancing teaching and learning in a school or district can be met with some challenges. We believe that a well thought out and designed infrastructure to support action research as professional development in our schools is critical. Four important features that are necessary requirements for this type of infrastructure (Mertler, 2013) include:

1. *Adequate training and support* — Professional educators should be trained in conducting and valuing action research as a professional growth and development activity. Many educators tend to be intimidated by the thought of conducting their own classroom research. They should receive formal training—as well as structured and supportive follow up activities—on the process of designing and conducting their own action research projects by someone knowledgeable of the process, as well as in the application of action research to classroom settings.
2. *Provision of time* — Educators must be provided with designated time to work on these sorts of professional development activities. This might be accomplished through common planning times, designated teacher work-days (or half-days), or perhaps periodic “professional retreats,” where collaborative work might take place off-campus, away from the distractions (so to speak) of our everyday work. Let us face it—time is a precious resource if we truly want to innovate in our schools and classrooms.
3. *Encouragement of collaboration* — Work of this type can become overwhelming, and even frustrating, at times. It is always beneficial to have multiple sets of eyes and ears to examine and process ideas that are being shared, interpretations of data being collected and analyzed, and alternative solutions to an identified problem. There is always strength in numbers!
4. *Inclusion of rewards or recognition* — We believe that there should be some sort of structure in place to incentivize this kind of professional development and work. Incentives could exist in the form of extrinsic rewards (for example, a grant-funded stipend, gift cards donated from local businesses, or prime

parking spots!), or in the form of recognition efforts (such as a recognition dinner, or a school- or district-wide “innovation conference,” where professional educators share the action research they have conducted).

## Fenton Area Public Schools’ Action Research: The Journey and the Outcomes

Benjamin Franklin said it best when it comes to research in education: “Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn.” Today’s classrooms provide us with amazing opportunities to conduct research, analyze real time data, and make decisions based on data that we ourselves have collected. Yet, there is little evidence in the K-12 setting that we take advantage of these opportunities. If Benjamin Franklin’s perspective were taken into consideration, our K-12 classrooms would be rich with teachers conducting action research in order to solve problems, create professional learning communities, and model the internal locus of control that our educational system desperately needs.

Fenton Area Public Schools—a school district of just over 3,400 K-12 students, located in Fenton, Michigan—has embraced the challenges and celebrations that come with conducting action research within the four walls of the classroom. More specifically, the Ellen Street Campus that houses pre-school, young five-year-olds, and other early childhood programs has adopted a collective mindset that conducting action research within their own classrooms, will help them become better teachers. This mindset has created a culture where action research is the *key* to moving forward and improving, each and every day.

### Getting Started

Action research in a school is not easy and is something that many teachers will, at the outset, see as something more on their plates. Ellen Street in Fenton, Michigan conducts classroom action research projects each year to help create a sense of ownership and to address problems of practice, in a “head-on” manner. Linda Mora, Director of Early Childhood and Ellen Street Campus principal would even go as far as saying,

*Your staff might think you are a little crazy at first...but just do it!*

Mrs. Mora stated that the best way to introduce action research is to first let the staff know that you believe in them and believe in them as researchers:

*[Having] confidence in them as researchers and letting them know you believe that their opinions and perceptions are valued is the key to starting an action research initiative.*

Mrs. Mora also pointed out that changing the mindset of teachers and allowing them to make mistakes—in fact, *celebrate* those mistakes—is essential. She said a true leader



takes risks and models the behavior of a researcher. She jumped in and started the action research initiative in her building without much knowledge of the process or how to approach the training.

*I wasn't sure how often we should meet in PLCs to share and collaborate and to share our research findings or for how long. I didn't know if the meetings should be in small groups or all of us together. I didn't know if we should meet in groups that worked together or in mixed groups.*

What Mrs. Mora did know is that reflection and collaboration would be crucial if this was going to be a success. After the first year of conducting school wide action research projects, she added the critical friend component. The critical friend addition to action research projects allowed for teachers to observe other teachers, discuss their action research projects, and share their findings with one another throughout the year. Mrs. Mora added this component to further the idea of learning from one another and to take advantage of the many competencies that are present at Ellen Street, as well as at other schools in the district.

Having a bank of resources is important as schools start an action research initiative. Ellen Street staff meetings started out with articles and videos about action research and the success it brought to a school community. Action research became the top agenda item at nearly every staff meeting and quickly became the vehicle for changes that were needed at Ellen Street. Mrs. Mora started slowly and introduced her staff to what action research is and why she thought it was important. She introduced three key foundational aspects to her teachers when thinking about potential action research projects:

1. Reflections on your own practice (self-assessment)
2. Knowledge of your children (strengths and problem areas)
3. Values and principles of the program or school (goals)

The best training for teachers is to set the stage where risks are encouraged and mistakes are shared and celebrated. Research is not clear cut when it comes to classroom action research. It can be messy and—as long as the teachers understand that right from the beginning—they will embrace the opportunity.

Time is not always on our side when it comes to starting action research projects in the school community. Prioritizing is important and tying action research into our daily routines and tasks helps immensely. Understanding that time is scarce and teachers' feelings of being overwhelmed is the norm in schools, Ellen Street staff started out with just a few small tasks related to action research. Mrs. Mora keyed in on a few small steps of action research and did not push it all on her staff at once:

*Choosing [an action research] project they are passionate about was important for me. Learning should be joyful, for kids and for adults.*

At the beginning of the year, she asked her staff to look at external research on aspects of classroom teaching and learning. She also asked them to consider a research question for which they could eventually gather evidence to show support or lack of support later in the year. In the first year, Mrs. Mora learned that action research could be just as powerful if teachers are trying to *disprove* a practice that they are expected to deliver in the classroom, but cautioned that the joy in learning may be lost unless teachers find a topic they in which they have interest:

*The first year a teacher chose to do a research project on an idea I supported that she did not agree with...She chose to disprove my idea instead of choosing a project that she was personally interested or passionate about. In the end, it was not very joyful for her or me.*

Introducing the concept slowly will help establish a sustainable action research process. Ellen Street continues to go slow; however, a few teachers are ready to move forward and have taken it upon themselves to build action research into their daily practices.

*That is what's great about the action research process. My staff can be at various steps [of the process], can move in and out of each step, and share their successes and failures along the way.*

## Action Research at Ellen Street Campus

Mrs. Mora pointed to the need to transform teaching and learning at the Ellen Street Campus as the motivation to adopt an action research process and approach for her teaching staff. As a leader, Mrs. Mora has prioritized the importance of developing creativity within her teaching staff, while instilling both competency and confidence. Action research has allowed her team not only to be creative—while gaining confidence and competency—but also to have fun and find the joy that teaching should bring each day. This joy is facilitated and enhanced by the ability for each teacher to have a voice in both the identification of classroom problems and potential solutions to those problems.

There are three components to the action research process at the Ellen Street Campus.

1. *Teachers begin by defining a problem of practice within their classrooms.*

Teachers are the captains of their respective ships; they know their students and understand their families. They come to know their students' strengths and what must be improved for their students to be successful. Teachers are in the trenches day in and day out, facing the many challenges of educating children and navigating through the various aspects of a school year. Action research allows for ownership of not only

the problems that occur in the classroom, but ownership of the possible solutions to those problems. At the same time, however, it is important to exhibit some degree of caution. For example, when choosing a problem of practice to study, one teacher from Ellen Street warns that teachers should take their time. She pointed out that,

*Choosing a research question too soon can be a mistake. We seem to always have so much going and it is important to enjoy the research [process].*

As teachers lay out a plan for an action research project, they will often pull from experiences and collaborate with peers to discuss the exact nature of the priorities related to researching a problem that is current and that might be creating barriers for student success. Another Ellen Street teacher agreed,

*Picking an action research project that doesn't work with the kids in your class will lead to getting disinterested in that [particular action research] topic. I suggest looking at new approaches, and collaborating and reflecting with other teachers in professional learning community meetings.*

Choosing a topic in which you are interested, that is relevant and meaningful in the contextual environment in which you teach, and has the potential to lead to positive change is the key to success in conducting successful action research in your school (Mertler, 2017).

2. *Teachers conduct a cycle of action research to investigate their identified problems of practice.*

During this year-long process, teachers discuss a problem of practice or questions they have about their own teaching and their own students' learning. From these discussions, they individually or collaboratively develop sets of research questions that they want to find answers to by designing and implementing action research within their own classrooms. The process of implementing the plan for conducting their action research follows, and is intertwined with professional conversations that take place during the research cycle in the form of frank and open conversations with *critical friends* and in whole staff meetings.

Keys in this process have been the four previously identified necessary features of a supportive infrastructure. These include training and support, time, encouragement of collaboration, and rewards or recognition as incentives.

- *Adequate training and support* — Mora knows a thing or two about needing the right amount of training:

*I have been in education for more than thirty years and I came to realize long ago that if teachers are not given time to practice and discuss changes, things will not get done. We owe it to our staff to train them in what we expect them to do if we want to see positive change.*

She clearly understands that action research is a shift in the teaching profession. Giving teachers the opportunity to assume ownership over what occurs in the classroom and the ability to change through research and design is not part of the traditional school day. Knowing this, Mrs. Mora provides time at the beginning of each year—as well as throughout the year—to sharpen the skills of her staff and to make sure they feel supported.

The training occurs in many ways and includes constant check-ins for her teachers. This training has not been an easy addition to her professional development plan, as she has met resistance along the way.

*I have found that it is best I start the year out with topics such as mindset and change. Before we jump into action research, my staff must feel as they can take risks and know I am here to support them as they are indeed changing their practice.*

- *Provision of time* — One important factor related to structuring adequate professional development training and the time involved to do so is that a school administrator must recognize that there are things outside of immediate control that may place barriers for teachers when it comes to truly implementing action research. For example, a school district's calendar and daily schedule may not allow for time to adequately train teachers and provide them with time to meet with peers. One Ellen Street teacher explained that time is not on their side,

*Lack of common planning time is a problem at our building due to having just one special's teacher (Art, P.E., Music). One solution is that we all meet on Friday's before school. I would prefer fewer Friday mornings and more PD days towards collaboration. I think the longer sessions would be more meaningful and useful.*

Each school district is different when it comes to time and training. Prioritizing time for professional development training is critical to the successful start of a school-wide action research initiative, such that teachers are aware of the process of conducting action research, and have ample opportunities to ask for and receive support, both from administrators and colleagues.

- *Encouragement of collaboration* — Mrs. Mora not only allows her staff to conduct action research in groups, but encourages them to collaborate.

*Change is tough, and we are more apt to change if we are supporting one another through that change.*

Staff meetings routinely include sharing and reflecting. Professional development sessions for action research training and reflection are scheduled for the beginning, middle, and end of the year. Structured communications (e.g., emails and newsletters), as well as informal hallway conversations include action research as a common

topic. An Ellen Street teacher explained that collaboration is the best reason to conduct action research:

*Collaborating with other staff, across grade levels, throughout our building was a source of new ideas, as well as extending thinking in other directions.*

Collaboration leads to creativity and creativity can lead to positive change. Other teachers at Ellen Street concurred and pointed out that collaborating with their peers and hearing others discuss the findings from their own research has caused them to see things in a different light and think of new approaches to their teaching. Teachers were asked to cite main reasons that they would recommend engaging in action research to other teachers, and one teacher in particular said,

*[action research] helps me learn and grow as a teacher.*

- *Inclusion of rewards or recognition* — Recognition of the hard work and creativity that each teacher puts into his or her action research project is paramount, not only to showcase the action research cycle, but to build upon a culture of collaboration and ownership at the building level. At the end of the year, Mrs. Mora gathers her staff in the media center and begins a process of professional sharing that, in her words is,

*By far, the most powerful PD I have experienced.*

During these sessions, teachers create and share posters that provide evidence of their findings, recommendations, and implications of future research. One teacher said it best,

*It is not the poster board that's important; it's the data collected throughout the year that is the true celebration.*

Action research provides teachers with data from their own experiences and their own students. This is the meaningful evidence they need to be able to tell their stories. Teachers strongly believed that there is no better way to communicate your story than to stand up in front of your peers and share the journey of action research.

*There is a sense of ownership, a sense of completion that we do not get from other professional development opportunities. No one can argue that this does not pertain to my classroom...this is my classroom.*

However, in addition, Mrs. Mora makes sure not to wait until the end of the year for recognition. She has weekly check-ins with her teachers, makes sure to communicate with central office on the progress of her staff, and ultimately shares the action research stories with her school community, including the families of her students:

*Recognizing the efforts of our staff helps teachers see how important their work is in creating a culture of true learning at Ellen Street.*

- 3. Finally, teachers share the results with colleagues to learn what worked and what did not work.*

At the end of each year, teachers report their findings and offer suggestions on further research and program changes based on the data they have collected and analyzed. Not only do the presentation and sharing sessions serve to recognize the effort of the entire staff, but they are also a critical component of the action research cycle. Within and following each cycle and every presentation of action research, teachers become better researchers, more effective communicators, and critical problem solvers. This three-pronged system employed by the administrators, teachers, and staff allows for a true *culture of learning* as teachers share both their failures and their successes with one another.

## Action Research and Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy plays an integral part in education and the primary factor in improving or increasing self-efficacy is experience (Bandura, 1977). Teachers at the Ellen Street Campus are faced with many challenges each day as they teach some of the youngest students within the Fenton Area Public School District. Believing that *they* have the power to create positive change, test new ways of teaching or managing classrooms, and have a voice in making tough decisions only enhances the collaborative environment needed to run a successful school. Mrs. Mora has observed first-hand how her teachers' self-efficacy has increased over the three years of conducting the action research projects. Coupled with this new-found confidence, she has repeatedly witnessed her teachers assuming roles as leaders and not relying on other people or outside resources to solve problematic issues within their own classrooms:

*There [are numerous] examples of staff members improving their self-efficacy. However, the one that was most evident was after we had spent a half-day in the spring reviewing the evidence that each staff member had gathered and presented in a poster-sized documentation panel. I had asked each staff person to present the ideas, pictures, and artifacts that best highlighted the staff research project that they had focused on that year. Each staff person also was asked to capture their research work with 1-3 photos that demonstrated the "competency of the children". After this day of sharing and reflection was over one of my staff members, (one of the least educated - high school grad-, but with more than 10 years of experience working at our center) shared with me that this was the "best professional development she had ever experienced". She also said she had gone home and shared with her husband that she had never felt more "empowered" in her life. Now that's "self-efficacy".*

Mrs. Mora has recognized that her teachers, like many of our educators across the nation, had not been trained to conduct research or make decisions based on data in their pre-service preparation or experiences. Practicing research and learning how to

analyze data and communicate to her colleagues about the data that she collected herself has empowered her to take control as a leader and take ownership of solving *her own* problems. Another teacher, who experienced an increase in self-efficacy noted,

*preparing for my end-of-the-year poster presentation helped me see the depth of student learning which took place and the concepts that were gained. I had not realized we touched so many concepts until I had to tell others about my research and outcomes.*

Ben Franklin was right—“involve me and I learn.” Fenton Area Public School teachers are involved and they are learning...and so are their students.

## Discussion

In an era of increasing accountability and a focus on data-informed decision making in public education, action research offers a viable and practical solution for districts to explore and initiate a positive change at the classroom and school levels. As a process, action research allows districts and individual schools to focus on meeting the challenges that are contextually unique to their individual settings. This could possibly be the single most effective strategy for identifying local-level problems of practice, implementing innovative solutions, and initiating positive change in our schools. There is no single, pre-packaged, commercially-available “solution” to widespread educational problems that can accomplish what the application of the action research process can do.

As a strategy for educational improvement, action research has so many potential applications and benefits. First, its cyclical nature allows for continual exploration and refinement of innovative solutions to educational problems practice. Second, professional reflection is the core of action research. It encourages professional educators to continue to examine what they do and how they do it, for the overarching purpose of seeking improvements in practice. Third, it can be used as the primary mechanism for teachers and other educational personnel to customize their own professional growth and development. Finally—as experienced by many of the teachers at the Ellen Street Campus in Fenton, Michigan—it is a process that truly empowers professional educators to take responsibility for innovating in classrooms and in schools. In our collective opinion, one-size-fits-all professional development programs simply cannot realize the potential accomplishments that can be achieved by a school or district that implements a program of broad-based, teacher-led action research.

Granted, the necessary infrastructure in the form of training and support, allotment of time, encouragement of collaboration, any inclusion of recognition for staff may create challenges for some schools and districts, but creative solutions are out there. We

believe that the potential benefits far outweigh these administrative challenges. The benefits of “creating” empowered, impassioned, and engaged teachers and staff can potentially pay a multitude of dividends for years to come. It is important to remember action research is a *process*, a “toolkit,” if you will—providing this toolkit to your staff enables them to engage in an ongoing process of continuous improvement at the classroom, school, and/or district levels. We implore you to consider the implementation of an action research initiative in your schools, or perhaps even in an entire district. As passionate as we are about the implementation of action research as an improvement mechanism in schools, we do not believe we could say it any better than Mrs. Mora:

*I believe [action research] has the power to transform teaching and learning while developing creativity, competency, and confidence. It also fosters great joy...something found too little in public education today.*

## References

- Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review*, 84(2), 191-215.
- Johnson, A. P. (2012). *A short guide to action research* (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.
- McNiff, J. (2002). *Action research for professional development: Concise advice for new action researchers* (3rd ed.). Dorset, England: Author. Retrieved on May 18, 2016, from <http://www.jeanmcniff.com/userfiles/file/Publications/AR%20Booklet.doc>
- Mertler, C. A. (2016). Leading and facilitating educational change through action research learning communities. *Journal of Ethical Educational Leadership*, 3(3), 1-11. Retrieved from <http://www.cojeel.org>
- Mertler, C. A. (2017). *Action research: Improving schools and empowering educators* (5th ed.). Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.
- Mertler, C. A. (2013). Classroom-based action research: Revisiting the process as customizable and meaningful professional development for educators. *Journal of Pedagogic Development*, 3(3), 39-43. Retrieved from <http://www.beds.ac.uk/jpd/volume-3-issue-3/classroom-based-action-research-revisiting-the-process-as-customizable-and-meaningful-professional-development-for-educators>
- Oliver, B. (1980). Action research for inservice training. *Educational Leadership*, 37(5), 394-395.