

The Role of Action Research in Effecting Educational Change

By Jamie Cano

Action research is any systematic inquiry conducted by teacher researchers, or other stakeholders in the teaching and learning environment to gather information about ways that their particular classroom or program operates, how they teach, and how well their students learn. This information is gathered with the goal of gaining insight, developing reflective practice, effecting positive changes in the classroom or program environment, on educational practices in general, and improving student outcomes and the lives of those involved.

Action research is research done *by teachers for themselves*; it is not imposed on them by someone else. Action research engages teachers in a four-step process, namely to:

- ◆ Identify an area of focus
- ◆ Collect data
- ◆ Analyze and interpret data
- ◆ Develop an action plan

Research done by teachers for teachers involves the collection of persuasive data. The data are persuasive because teachers are interested in the legitimacy of the data collection, that is, they have identified data sources that provide persuasive insights into the impact of an intervention on student outcomes. Similarly, the findings of action research and the actions recommended by the findings are authoritative for

teacher researchers. In doing action research, teacher researchers have developed solutions to their own problems. The teachers - - not outside "experts" - are the authorities on what works in their classrooms.

Action Research is NOT a Fad

When discussing the apparent failure of research to affect teachers' practices, it is the belief of many classroom teachers that researchers tend to investigate trendy fads and are interested only in the curricular approach or instructional method "du jour." Therefore, you may not be surprised to hear critics of action research say: "Why bother? This is just another fad that, like other fads in education, will eventually pass if I can wait it out." But, action research is decidedly not a fad for one simple reason: *Good teachers have always systematically looked at the effects of their teaching on student learning.* They may not have called this practice action research, and they may not have thought their reflection was formal enough to be labeled *research*, but action research it was!

Benefits of Action Research

Action research has the potential to be a powerful agent of educational change. Action research helps to develop teachers with professional attitudes that embrace action, progress, and reform, rather than stability and mediocrity. In addition, the action research process fosters a democratic approach to decision making, while at the same time, it empowers individual teachers through participation in a col-

laborative, socially responsive research activity.

Commitment to action research positions teachers and administrators as learners rather than experts. Those committed to action research will willingly undertake continued professional development because they believe that there is a gap between the real worlds of their daily teaching practices and their vision of an ideal agricultural education program.

Incorporating action research into pre-service teacher education programs and professional development programs for in-service teachers will help make action research an ongoing component of a professional teacher's practice. Such action will ultimately help teachers to incorporate action research alongside other critical components of teaching, such as curriculum development, authentic assessment strategies, classroom management strategies, teaching strategies, FFA activities, and SAE opportunities. Such actions will encourage teachers to embrace change!



Jamie Cano is an Associate Professor at The Ohio State University and is Editor of The Agricultural Education Magazine.