

Practical Use of Action Research for the Beginning or Busy Teacher

By Amanda Wright

Discovering a Problem

Jason

The kid was making me crazy!

In the middle of a discussion, there was Jason at the back of the room attempting to throw his freshly sharpened pencil into the ceiling foam. What next! Earlier, I caught him unscrewing the legs on the desk next to him and practicing origami with his record book pages.

Jason has ADHD and has trouble sitting still, let alone concentrating. At first, I thought he was just acting out to get attention, trying to upset me and disrupt the class. Now, after studying him a little more, I have noticed his eyes when I am talking. They wander all about the room as if he can't even focus his vision for more than a few seconds. His hands and feet are constantly tapping and moving and he bounces in this seat.

Sarah

"What the @!&%*# is your problem!"

The expletives were just beginning. Sarah stood straight up, knocking over her chair and scattering the students around her. Every eye in the room, including mine, was fixated on her. Someone had made the mistake of giving her a "look". Sarah had frequent outbursts like this, not only in class but nearly everywhere else. I had her

psychologist practically on speed dial and no one in class wanted to even sit next to her anymore.

Same Difference

Both of these students and their difficulties will come and go in my program. Each is from very different backgrounds and homes, ranging from loving and supportive to non-existent. They have a lot of similarities but nearly as many differences.

Jason and Sarah are both what I would call "good kids". They each really want to succeed at school and don't like to be singled out from the class. They think they are the same as their classmates and are uncertain as to what about them makes others look at them differently. They all just want to be left alone.

The root of the difficulties in each student is different. Jason has physiological problems that, for the most part, he cannot control. Sarah has behavioral problems that are difficult for her to master. Their parents have differing levels of involvement but are moderately interested in solutions for their kids at best.

So, what now? We all know that teaching is more about developing skills for life than about mastery of the subject matter. These students were my responsibility while in my class and I had two simple choices: make some changes or take a chance on losing them.

Two Steps Forward and One Step Back

Using action research has helped

me work wonders with students like Jason and Sarah. Not all have been successes but even little victories have been encouraging. Action research projects for me have been the most useful when I can adapt them to real problems that I face every day. Seeing these obstacles in my classroom and the hurdles that each student faces when trying to simply get by has consistently led me to develop my own little action research project for each student that can assist me in meeting their needs.

For each student, the counselor was not surprised to see me. Jason and Sarah are both students with 504 modifications. After discussing each with the counselor, talking with parents and the resource room, and some research on ADHD and anger problems, I decided to solicit some input from the kids, try a few things and attempt to improve the classroom environment.

While observing Jason, I noticed that he could concentrate and focus his mind more when his body is busy. He was increasingly articulate and alert when we were working outside on a project or he was completing hands-on tasks. He had considerable trouble when I asked the class to stay inside and listen during the term though. At first, I tried allowing him to walk around the room while he was reading or to move to a more secluded area of the room to concentrate. This worked well for a while but did not address his difficulties in every situation. As a result, I came up with a compromise that he agrees to. When we are inside, he is allowed to hold one of the class pets. I have a hedgehog, two hamsters, a cat and other random animals that he enjoys handling. When his hands are busy

petting and holding an animal, he can listen and focus on discussions and pay attention to speakers. I give him a copy of the notes or outlines that I use for the class and he reviews those at home and keeps them in his binder.

This system works for me because Jason is always considerate to other speakers and myself when he has the animals to occupy his hands, and it works for him because he can listen and participate in the class. Jason has found that he enjoys the class much more. When I had a mini conference with him after class, he mentioned how he enjoyed class so much more and is planning on taking an advanced class next term. He still acts out on occasion and continues to find creative ways to irritate me, as all youth should, but has come a long way from the kid I met in September.

Sarah was my biggest challenge. I sought the advice of the counselor, her parole officer, and her other teachers. After discussions with other teachers, I found that Sarah seemed to respond particularly poorly to open displays of authority and didn't like feeling controlled. I gave her the option of leaving class when she found that she was angry enough to explode but she usually couldn't tell when that was going to happen. In observing her, I finally discovered what would work in my class for Sarah. I happened to see her face as she was preparing to blow and quickly snatched the opportunity to ask her to step outside. That worked well as long as I could catch her before she got to the breaking point. Then, the term ended. Sarah had made marked improvements since the beginning of the year but got in another fight and it was the second "last chance" the administration had given her. She is currently expelled until the end of the year and will hopefully return in the fall. I am encouraged by the fact that she still comes to visit and

indicates she wants to return to school here next year.

Changing Strategies vs. Changing Standards

The one mistake I made, and I only made it once, regarding these students was to alter my expectations. As a beginning teacher, I don't have time to sleep, let alone offer individualized attention to every single student. I just do my best to fight the major fires and keep things running smoothly.

The first easy fix that occurred to me when becoming bombarded with students like Jason, Sarah, and Brian was to adapt to them by changing what I expected of them. Quickly, that idea proved its lack of forethought as I found the student's behavior to be worsening rather than improving. Slowly, I began to make clear that I expected the same from all students and held the same level of achievement and acceptability of behavior for all. The three had trouble adjusting to the new requirements at first but found that other students were more accepting of them if they were required to behave in class and also found they didn't stand out so much.

Experience

During my student teaching experience, action research to me was only interesting if I felt it would have a positive and lasting impact on my teaching NOW. I wasn't looking for abstract teaching and learning research or comprehensive plans for improvement that I would likely never have the time to read while teaching, let alone implement. I wanted experience working with and understanding students that I would come in contact with in any place I chose to teach. While student teaching I researched students with learning disabilities, common to hands-on elective classes like Agricultural

Science, and how to reach them successfully. Using this basic observation of students, brainstorming solutions, countless discussions and questioning sessions with counselors, solicitation of advice from other teachers, and advice from the students themselves, I found that the strategies to help these students were in front of me all along.

Keep it Simple

Action research for a beginning teacher, and likely all teachers, can rarely be truly productive if it takes away valuable and scarce time. No one can manage to pull off detailed and complicated research while teaching full time but I have found that my action research project and the techniques I used to understand students have worked wonders in my classroom. I never need to think too long or hard about a solution for these students, I simply try to observe them without their knowledge and bring them on board to help me help them. There will always be students who emphatically refuse to succeed in their school lives and in life in general but I find that if I truly try to help them and make an attempt on their behalf, they are nearly always willing to meet me halfway.



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