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Action Research Playbook

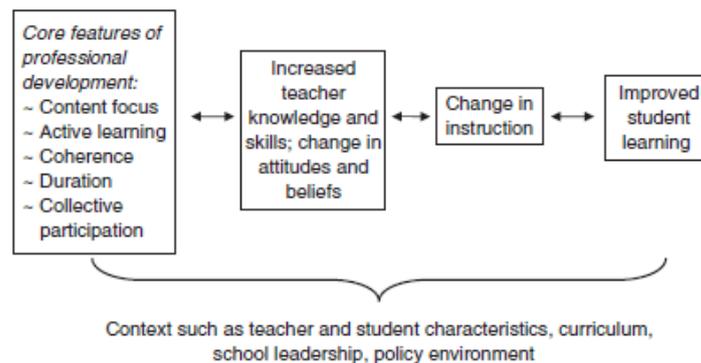
BACKGROUND

Why do we want good teachers? It seems a silly question, but good teachers are at the core of good schools. If we want our students learning effectively, one action we take is to invest in our teachers.

Teachers make the difference to students' learning. It's unequivocal. Teaching is too important to leave to chance. (SA TfEL Framework Guide, 2010)

"Educational change depends on what **teachers do** and think. It's as simple and complex as that" (Fullan, M. 1991)

So how do we support our teachers to be the best they can be? We invest in our staff through professional learning. Desimone's model of professional learning below (Desimone, 2009) shows the flow from professional learning, to change in teacher knowledge and skills, to change in teacher practice and resulting improved student learning.



If we are going to invest in professional learning, we want to make sure it is high quality and worth our while.

High quality professional learning is:

Collaborative.

- It promotes active (not passive) learning by the participants.
- It provides opportunity for interaction, feedback and discussion of practice.
- It places colleagues as critical friends who create a professional community of practice.
- Rather than focus on one-on-one with individual teachers, shift to "leading **collaborative work** that improves quality throughout the faculty" (Fullan, M., 2014)

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Relevant.

- It has consistent alignment with school and system wide goals and priorities.
- It is cohesive, connected and relevant to everyday practice and student learning rather than fragmented pieces of professional learning.
- It is driven by teacher agency in an area that is relevant to their context, experience, and interest.

Ongoing.

- At least 20 hours, ongoing, is recommended as the optimum duration for professional learning to actually have an impact and change teacher behaviour.
- Ongoing time is also required for deep reflective practice, and for iterative cycles of learning.

WHAT

What professional learning model is collaborative, ongoing and relevant? Action Research fits the bill!

Action Research is a process where teachers use inquiry to investigate one aspect of their teaching impact.

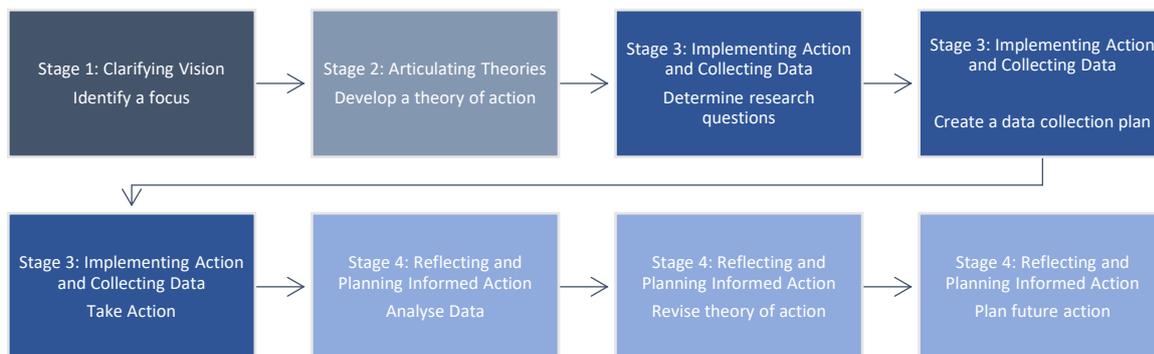
It is:

- a teacher action (doing something)
- focused on a possible improvement (making it better)
- a small and focused action (it's achievable, not overwhelmingly impossible to have an impact)
- focused on the student and their learning

Effective action research is:

- collaborative in small groups (2-6 people)
- based on data, which could be qualitative and/or quantitative.
- carried out over a period of time (from 50 day sprints to year long projects)
- supported through time given to teachers (such as through meeting times)

The cycle of Action Research may look like:



Or more simply,

1. Selecting a focus
2. Clarifying theories
3. Identifying research questions
4. Collecting data
5. Taking informed action
6. Analysing data
7. Reporting results

Adapted from the Action Research Guidebook by Richard Sagor (2005)



HOW – processes to support Action Research

How do you come up with an inquiry question?

Drawing on *The Action Research Guide* and the *Spiral Inquiry Playbook*, we have four ways for coming up with questions. These processes could be done as a whole staff with teachers coming up with questions, or as a leadership team who set the broad inquiry questions for the whole staff so the inquiry aligns with school goals.

Option 1: Creative writing prompt - "Imagine walking out of the best session of teaching ever. What happened with the students? What were you doing? What was the impact?"

From this writing, identify what students were doing and what your actions were. Identify an area of improved performance/action for you and shape it into an inquiry question.

Option 2: Team reflection – sit with a group and record answers to the questions below.

1. What are the priorities we should be working collaboratively on? What do students need to know/do/be?
2. Which priority is the most important to you and why? Rank them.
3. If you could improve on this priority, what would the results look like, sound like, feel like?
4. What's gotten in the way of achieving this in the past?

From this reflection, create an inquiry question looking at one action for this priority.

Option 3: Scanning & Focus – think about your classes. What's going on for learners? When you observe, what's going on with their learning? Ask students 'do you know what it means to be a successful reader/writer/numerate/learner'? Do you know what to do next to improve your learning?

What one action might have the biggest impact?

From these observational reflections, create an inquiry question that focuses on one action that could have an impact.

Option 4: Goal oriented – as a school, identify the areas that you are focusing on. These might be from strategic plans, school improvement plans, leadership areas or in response to student needs.

From these focus areas, create inquiry questions that respond to the goals that whole school is working on.

Inquiry questions often follow a similar written format, with a teacher action impacting on a student outcome.

e.g. Using the 4 procedures above, the following questions were created:



Creative writing prompt: How can teachers emulate the progression based approach of a videogame in order to increase student resilience and engagement?

Aligning with priorities: What comprehension strategies of non-fictional texts are most effective for our year 10-12 cohort?

Observing and scanning: What strategies can I use to ensure student draft submission following a draft non-submission in Stage 2 English?

Goal oriented: How does use of retrieval strategies impact on student success in this subject?

Inquiry questions should be:

- Manageable
- Within your sphere of influence
- Consonant with your work
- Addressed within the confines of your classroom
- Focused and not so ambitious, big, or complex that it requires extraordinary resources, time, and energy.
- Beneficial to your students by informing teaching and learning

How do you sort teachers into groups?

Agency is important for teachers to feel empowered in their own professional learning. This could be done by allowing teachers to select their own inquiry question, or to select the question they want to explore from a list of options provided.

Sometimes having a broad mix of teachers from different backgrounds, subject areas, and levels of experience can help avoid 'group speak' and allow for a critical lens on collective decision making.

No matter how the groups are arranged, what's important is that people are in groups. "Shared practice and collective inquiry is perhaps the most essential aspect" (McRel, 2003), with collaboration stimulating discussion, encouraging critical thinking, and facilitating the sharing of professional experience and expertise.

How do you support collaboration in teams?

The success of an Action Research group often depends on the relationships between teachers, making sure there is room for honest discussion, trusting relationships and a sense of safety.

Trust in teams can be built through a range of social and professional activities, from professional reading discussions and shared planning meetings through to after school social activities and team building activities (McREL, 2003). Building up skills in "trust talk" through the use of [trust behaviour cards](#) when structuring difficult conversations can build trusting professional relationships across a whole staff.



Having an agreed set of team values can set the tone for group norms. Dewey (1993) talks about [three attitudes of reflective teachers](#): open-mindedness, wholeheartedness, and responsibility. These attitudes may be adopted by the school as a whole, or each group may come up with their own group norms through a brainstorm process and agree to follow them throughout the meetings.

How do you support the research, observations, data collection etc?

Use templates to support the documentation of the action research process. There might be a templated agenda/minutes for each time the Action Research groups meets, or a template to help document the entire process. Some examples are provided below.

Observations can form the basis of Action Research data collection and reflection. These observations will often be short (15-20 mins) but targeted e.g. a heat map for where a teacher moved in the room, a verbatim record of all questions asked; a record of who said what and the interactions in class. To support teachers in the same Action Research group to observe each other, leaders may use “time out” cards. A teacher can call a leader in to look after their class for 20 minutes to give them “time out” to go observe a colleague.

Data collection can take many forms. Victoria Bernhardt’s *Multiple Measures of Data* encourages us to look beyond A-E grades and think about other sources of data and how these can be triangulated to get a broader understanding of our students and their learning. Data sources could include:

- Observations
- Curriculum materials
- Lesson plans
- Newsletters
- Classroom formative quizzes/tests/exit slips
- Student feedback on teaching
- Pre and post testing of students
- Student work samples
- Shadowing of students
- Student attendance/suspension/drop out/behaviour data
- Teacher journals
- Surveys, focus groups or interviews of parents, teachers and students
- Video recordings
- Tally sheets to record specific behaviours
- Student self-assessment
- Collaborative dialogue sessions
- Rubric criteria achievement over time

Advice from *Conducting Teacher Action Research* suggests:

To have at least three separate pieces of data and three points of view to enable triangulation of the data, with a mix of qualitative and quantitative data

To examine the data as it’s collected, comparing new data to baselines to see how the data changes over time.



To try out different hunches about what the data might mean. Don't stick rigidly to an assumption that was originally held but allow your ideas to be tested and evolve.

To create a visual representation for what you have collected. Look for patterns over time, draw out grids, charts or visual metaphors to make sense of the data. What story do you see emerging from the data?

To consult with students – what do they think about the data? They may offer new insights or validate.

How do you share the results and spread the best ideas?

Come along to the Action Research Conference held Monday Week 8 Term 4 each year and hosted by the Australian Science and Mathematics School!

Teachers may present their Action Research as

- A poster presentation, with background, inquiry process, data and conclusions.
- A round table, with a facilitated discussion over selected artefacts from their research.
- A presentation, with slides providing the inquiry, background research, baseline data, the action, data, conclusions and next steps.
- A 'critical collaboration' protocol where a presenter spends 10 mins sharing their action research, the audience has 5 mins to ask clarifying questions, then the presenter listens while the audience discusses and provides warm and cool feedback (15 mins) followed by the presenter reflecting (5 mins). See [Tuning Protocol Guidelines](#) for further details.

Further Reading:

Bernhardt, V. L., (1998, March). Invited Monograph No. 4. California Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (CASCD). https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2007/curriculum/pdf/multiple_measures.pdf

Desimone, L.M. (2009). Improving impact studies of teachers' professional development: Toward better conceptualizations and measures. *Educational Researcher*, 38(3), 181-199.

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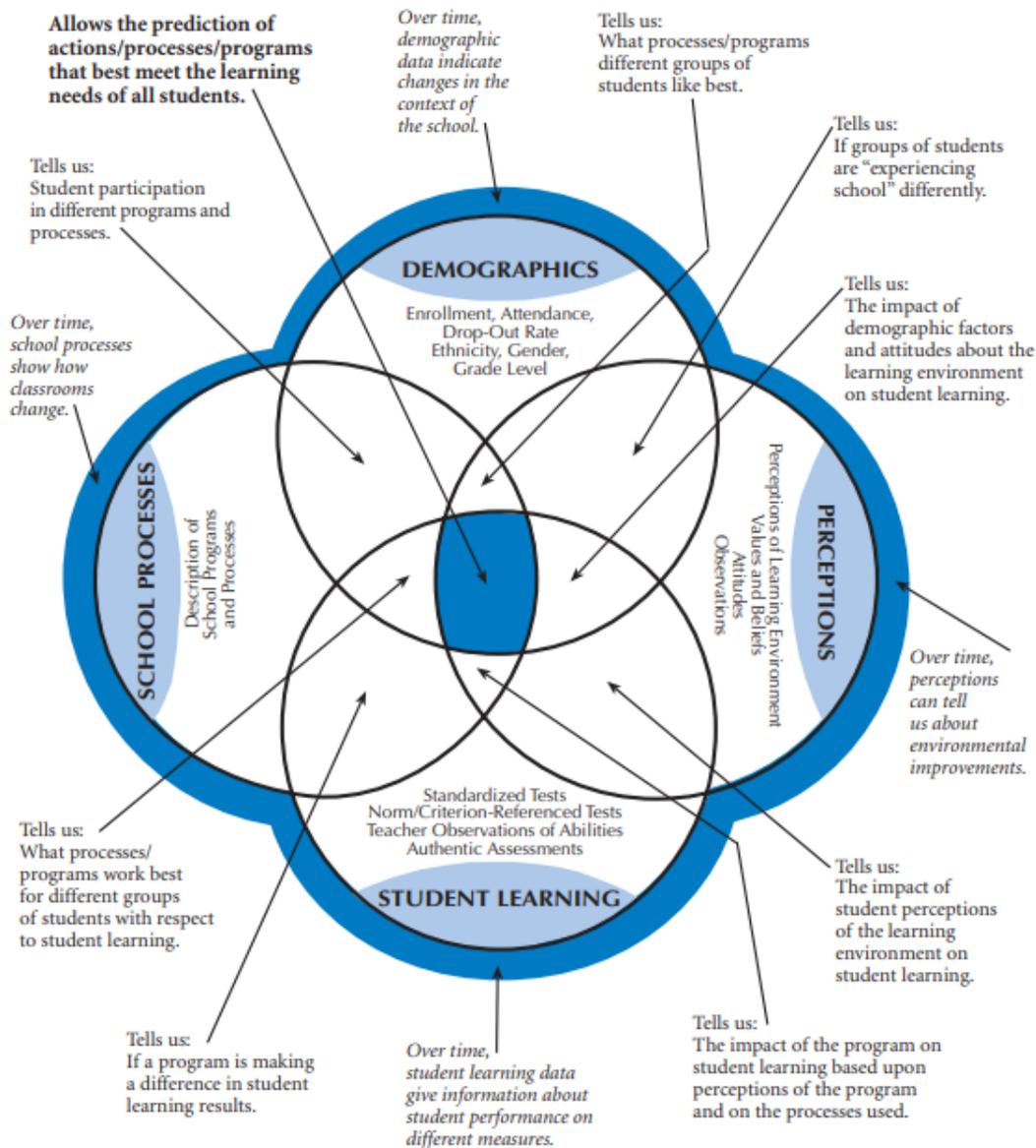
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Pine, G.J., (2008). *Teacher action research: Building knowledge democracies*. Sage. https://www.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/27031_11.pdf

Sagor, R. (2005). *The Action Research Guidebook. A Four-Step Process for Educators and School Teams*. Corwin Press, Thousand Oaks: USA.

Timperley, H., Kaser, L., and Halbert, J. (2014, April). Centre for Strategic Education, Seminar Series Paper No. 234. *A framework for transforming learning in schools: Innovation and the spiral of inquiry*.

MULTIPLE MEASURES OF DATA



Note. Adapted from *Data Analysis for Comprehensive Schoolwide Improvement* (p.15), by Victoria L. Bernhardt, 1998, Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education. Copyright © 1998 Eye on Education, Inc. Reprinted with permission.



Action Research Template

1. Principal Question
2. How will your AR relate to school goals?
3. Sub questions (<i>what are the key aspects you will look at as part of your AR?</i>)
4. Initial data (& ideas on how you will collect) (<i>information gathered before you begin your AR to assist in determining the effectiveness of your action/intervention</i>)
5. Action Plan (<i>steps involved in your AR process</i>). Please include suggested timelines Selecting a focus Clarifying theories Identifying research questions Collecting data Analysing data Reporting results Taking informed action
6. Proposal for Sharing. What might be the best format for sharing your Action Research? (e.g. Digital Poster, presentation, round table discussion, paper/findings discussion etc.)