

# What Every PDS Partner Should Know About Action Research

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**ABSTRACT:** This article explores the process of an action research project undertaken by a PDS partnership. Participants in a one day professional development seminar shared their perspectives on action research within a PDS network, and findings indicate that participants valued the collaborative effort and opportunities to share their research efforts. Findings from this study also reflect the importance of sustained professional development and support for mentor teachers and teacher candidates

*NAPDS Essentials Addressed: #1/A comprehensive mission that is broader in its outreach and scope than the mission of any partner and that furthers the education profession and its responsibility to advance equity within schools and, by potential extension, the broader community; #4/A shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants #9/Dedicated and shared resources and formal rewards and recognition structures.*

In the Bowie State University Professional Development Schools (PDS) Network, action research is an integral aspect of our educational partnership and one of the network's "Signature Programs." In order to support teacher candidates and PDS teachers as they conduct their action research, we have developed a one-day action research seminar. This article reviews the aspects of action research that are emphasized during the one-day PDS Network action research seminar, as well as the perspectives of some its participants.

## Organizational Context

Within the Bowie State University PDS Network, both PDS teachers and teacher candidates participate in action research. Interns use action research during their student teaching semester to support a school improvement goal or their mentor teacher's Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs), and work with a small group of students to offer additional support. Teacher candidates present their action research to a panel of PDS stakeholders consisting of university and PDS faculty members who use a rubric to score and give feedback to each teacher candidate. This presentation occurs towards the end of the student teaching semester and is one of the graduation requirements and part of our assessment system. In addition, each year PDS sites are invited to apply for action research mini-grants, which are open to all teachers within the PDS, whether or not they serve as mentor teachers. To apply for an action research mini-grant, PDS teachers are invited to an information meeting on campus where the Request for Proposals (RFP) is presented and questions are answered (see Appendix A for a copy of the RFP).

## History

To ensure that all teacher candidates and PDS teachers have a solid understanding of the action research process, our PDS Network has experimented with different professional develop-

ment venues. In the past, a student teaching seminar and discussions in methods courses were utilized to support teacher candidates conducting action research. It became apparent that a disconnect existed between the teacher candidates and the mentor teachers in their understanding of action research and their formulation of viable action research questions. Furthermore, if teacher candidates were going to conduct action research in their mentor teachers' classrooms, collaboration between them was vital. Mya, a site-based PDS Coordinator and mentor teacher, recently expressed the importance of this collaboration:

As the PDS coordinator at my school, I wanted to better support and help our phase two interns. I wanted to be better informed. Mentor teachers didn't always feel comfortable with their teacher candidates conducting action research in their classrooms.

To improve action research in the PDS Network, a one-day professional development seminar was developed for mentor teachers and teacher candidates to attend together (see the agenda for this meeting in Appendix B). This opportunity was offered on two separate dates in order to make classroom coverage more manageable. During this session, mentor teachers and teacher candidates develop an action research question, data sources, and a plan for the semester. Due to the success of this collaborative format, it will be employed again during the next academic year. In the following, we present the topics that are included in the action research seminar.

## Action Research Seminar Topics

### The Past is Prologue: Extending the History of Action Research

As educators and consumers of research, it is possible that we view our classroom research as less important than the research

in large-scale, nation-wide studies, for example, or studies in the hard sciences or medicine. Nonetheless, action research has a long-standing and well-established place in the world of compelling research (Zeichner & Noffke, 2001). Action research uniquely values the impact of the research on the researcher, which ultimately influences the self-efficacy of its authors and empowers them to become key players in educational reform (Garin, 1996, 2005, 2013).

What makes action research especially noteworthy in our PDS Network is that it is not second-hand research; that is, it is not a process during which others enter PDS sites to evaluate the efficacy of our practices. Instead, action research in our PDS Network encourages self-reflective practices such as journaling, and supports NAPDS Essential #4: *A shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants*. Just as it was initially envisioned by social psychologist Kurt Lewin in 1934, action research in our PDS Network includes the active participation of those who have to carry out the work in a democratic research process (Adelman, 1993).

Stephen Corey, Dean of Teachers College at Columbia University and head of the Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute for School Experimentation, and his colleagues (1953) brought the term *action research* into educational work. Corey and his associates worked cooperatively with teachers, principals, and supervisors in school districts across the United States in the late 1940s and 1950s on various research efforts in what was referred to as the cooperative action research movement (Zeichner & Noffke, 2001). Corey (1953) believed passionately that teachers should have a seat at the table of educational research:

There is considerable justification for the belief that research methodology will not begin to have the influence that it might have on American education until thousands of teachers, administrators, and supervisors make more frequent use of the method of science in solving their own practical problems. (p. 18)

During the action research seminar, we introduce participants to the history of action research and begin to break down any fears they may have regarding research as something done to them. We begin this conversation in our action research seminar and explain to participants that it will continue at the PDS sites, including grade level meetings and at PDS site based meetings.

Participants reflect on the participatory nature of action research. Dawn, a Bowie State University graduate and current mentor teacher explains, “Action research brings more teachers to the table. We need to think more about sharing our action research at faculty meetings to expand our influence.” Her colleague, Mya, feels that, “having the interns present their action research at faculty meetings not only allows the staff to become aware of the interns’ research foci, but also enhances our teaching practices.”

## We Live in Our Language: Selecting an Action Research Definition and Cycle

Lewin saw action research as a cyclical process with each cycle of research affecting subsequent cycles (Adelman, 1993; Bradbury, Mirvis, Nielsen, & Pasmore, 2008; Elliott, 1993), as did Corey (1953). Bowie State University educators use a definition and cycle developed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988a, 1988b, 2000) that aligns with this conception. The cycle includes planning, acting, observing, and reflecting before spiraling to a revised plan, new action, continued observation, and reflection on the revised plan (p. 6). Bowie State University subscribes to this definition and cycle because it provides the opportunity to revise an action research question and to incorporate reflection throughout the process. Teachers and teacher candidates are encouraged to keep the definition and cycle accessible and visible throughout their studies so that their work is consistently guided by these research principles.

After exploring the historical basis of action research, teachers and teacher candidates receive a copy of a definition based on the work of Kemmis and McTaggart (1988a, 1988b, 2000) with a graphic organizer that includes the cycles of action research (see Appendix C). This definition is used throughout the seminar to ground participants in the process of action research.

## Love Conquers All: Support the Teacher/Teacher Candidate Selection of an Action Research Question and the Love of Their Research Agenda

Choosing and formulating the action research question is one of the most important and most challenging steps in the action research process. Our PDS Network encourages the use of open-ended questions so that the research findings can be richer and less anticipated (see Appendix D for sample questions). For example, rather than posing the question, “Does implementing literature circles in my mentor teacher’s classroom impact student comprehension?” a more open-ended version of the same inquiry would read, “What happens when I implement literature circles in my mentor teacher’s classroom?” Other question starters (Hubbard & Power, 1993) for composing a more open-ended action research question include:

- What is the role of...?
- How do...?
- What procedures...?

Furthermore, teachers and teacher candidates are encouraged to collaborate in developing research questions to produce questions of mutual interest as well as questions that support the PDS’s School Improvement Plan. Action research questions should not be selected *for* the teacher, but rather developed out of the teacher’s own natural curiosity about teaching and learning.

After reviewing the definition of and process for action research, teachers and teacher candidates review the teacher’s SLOs to determine potential content areas for action research. SLOs are areas in which the students of a particular teacher need improvement. They are based on data and serve as part of a

teacher's formal evaluation. At the seminar, we explore the value of aligning action research questions to SLOs, however, attention is paid to how action research differs from other research that participants may have conducted in the past, as well as school improvement initiatives and SLOs. Action research has unique qualities and requires a balance between content and process.

In the afternoon of the seminar, each pair is asked to create a graphic organizer that depicts the interface between the content of the SLO and the process of the action research. These are displayed on the walls for a gallery walk.

Dawn and Mya felt that developing the research questions together was vital. Maya claimed, "Action research can be intimidating. We thought of our action research questions together. Once the intimidation is gone, we can soar."

### Not Everything is Numbers: Balancing Quantitative and Qualitative Data

In our PDS Network action research seminar, we discuss both qualitative and quantitative sample data sources that support action research questions. These data sources include observations, interviews, reflective journals, focus groups, and questionnaires and surveys calling for open-ended qualitative responses, attendance logs, assessment scores, rubric scores, SLO data, number of books read, and questionnaires/surveys using Likert scales as quantitative data. Each teacher candidate/mentor teacher team writes its action research question on chart paper and then lists the potential data sources; the teams chart the data sources in two columns—one for quantitative and one for qualitative. Discussions then include the role of triangulation and the reality that some data sources can be both qualitative and quantitative, such as observations. Discussions are guided further by questions such as, "How can we use these data?" and "What do these data tell us?" The work performed through the one-day seminar format presents a wonderful opportunity for sharing between PDS schools (Brown, Garin, & Maher, 2000).

Mya found that the teacher candidates took the data collection phase quite seriously:

I was reluctant, afraid that interns would expect mentor teachers to do all of the work. One intern was so excited about her action research. She kept a huge notebook online, with her data collection on a behavioral system. Her mentor teacher was so excited about it.

Courtney, a teacher candidate, remarked that she left the day with three data sources to support her action research.

### Gathering Action Research Resources

At each PDS Network meeting and action research seminar, participants share interesting websites, articles, and books. We begin this sharing process by distributing a four-page pamphlet (Brown et al., 2000) that was developed to summarize action research and includes such topics as the definition of action

research, including what it is and is not; Emily Calhoun's Action Research Cycle (Calhoun, 1994, 2002), with elaboration of each phase (selecting an area of focus, creating action research questions, collecting data, analyzing and interpreting data); a strategic planning checklist; and suggested resources. Future plans for our PDS Network include developing a wiki site to synthesize these resources, and creating a Google site to centralize communications.

### The Change Process

We also provide a brief introduction to the change process during the action research seminar, although this topic is more fully developed in subsequent meetings. We find ourselves talking about the change process because in many cases the action research will change the interaction between stakeholders and the teaching approaches they research. As such, we must acknowledge and respect one another's expertise. Our PDS Network guides teachers through the change process by using the work of Jones and Pfeiffer (1979) on the emotional cycle of change, including the phases of uninformed optimism, informed pessimism, hopeful realism, informed optimism, and rewarding completion (p. 119). On occasion, research teams add an action research question that addresses the change process itself, such as, "How does conducting action research in my mentor teacher's classroom change our instructional conversations?"

This type of question guides our discussions at quarterly PDS Network meetings and our summer strategic planning sessions, as well as in meetings at the individual PDS sites as teachers and teacher candidates meet with the site based PDS coordinator throughout the action research process.

### Many Roads Lead to Rome

Exploring avenues for teachers and teacher candidates to share their research is paramount. At the PDS Network action research seminar, the dissemination of action research results is a topic of great importance. We review with participants the many avenues through which they can disseminate their research. For example, teacher candidates share their action research with a panel that includes university and PDS faculty members, and feedback is given via a rubric. Teacher candidates also present their research findings at Bowie State University's annual PDS research conference, and many also participate in the state PDS conference intern gallery walk. PDS teachers share their action research at their school sites and at our university PDS research conference. We are exploring other venues such as undergraduate research journals, e-journals, and teacher education journals.

Both Mya and Dawn emphasized the importance of having an opportunity to share the results of their action research. Mya was a big proponent of the university, state, and national opportunities, but felt that we overlooked the opportunity to share at the school level:

We need to do more sharing at the school level. I have had the opportunity to share my research at our Bowie State

University PDS Conference, at our state PDS conference, and at our National PDS Conference. I was amazed by the comments I received during our presentations and the follow-up emails I received from the audience.

## Conclusion

The one-day action research seminar has become an important part of our PDS Network offerings. Support for teacher candidate action research does not stop at the end of that day. Teacher candidates receive ongoing support on a daily basis from their mentor teachers, site-based PDS Coordinators, and during

their student teaching seminar. PDS teachers who have been awarded PDS mini-grants work collaboratively with their site-based PDS Coordinator and the University PDS coordinator throughout the grant cycle.

Indeed, teachers have much to say about their own profession, and that is one of the biggest take-aways our participants have after engaging in action research. For many teachers, becoming a teacher researcher fosters considerable change in their educational roles. Our PDS Network supports both teachers and teacher candidates in their collaborative roles as teacher educators as they conduct action research and contribute to the profession. <sup>SUP</sup>

## Appendix A – Action Research Request for Proposal

**Bowie State University  
College of Education  
Professional Development School Action Research Mini-Grants**

Fax Application and Letter from your Principal by the stated deadline.

Note that the letter is needed only if funds will be sent to your school. Most of you have indicated that you want the funds to remain at BSU and for the university to order the items that you need.

<b>Application</b>
<p><b>Deadline:</b></p>
<p>Your action research proposal can be an extension of the work that your inquiry group is pursuing or it can be a different topic. More than one proposal per site is welcome but the total funds available may not exceed \$720 per site. We will not accept proposals from one teacher. We are encouraging a minimum of two teachers to apply so that there is in-school collaboration. For example, two 4<sup>th</sup> grade teachers could formulate an action research question around reading comprehension strategies in science, or a small group of teachers could focus on mathematics instruction.</p> <p>Your proposal can also target the intern action research.</p> <p>The maximum grant amount is \$720.</p>
<p>Page 1 of your grant application will be the attached cover page completed and including all required signatures. Also attach the letter from your principal requesting the funds. For most of the schools, the grant funds will be housed at Bowie State and we will order items that you request. Please know that at BSU we cannot pay for refreshments at your school.</p>
<p>Page 2 of your grant application will consist of a short, concise 2-paragraph abstract of your action research that should focus on increasing student achievement in your school.</p>
<p>Page 3-4 should include the following information:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What school improvement goal(s) will your action research address? Which Common Core Standards will your action research address?</li> <li>2. What are your action research question(s)?</li> <li>3. What are your qualitative and quantitative data sources, and how and when will they be collected?</li> </ol>

4. How will you involve Bowie State University interns?
5. Who will participate in your action research? List teachers and children by grade level and content level.
6. Describe your intervention.
7. How exactly are you proposing to impact PREK to 12 student achievement at your school?
 

<u>PREK-12 students</u>	<u>Pre data</u>	<u>Post data</u>
Number and Grade level	List by child/group	List by child/group
8. Include a time line including your presentation at the Bowie State University PDS Conference.
9. List your budget items. They may include the following:
  - Educational and professional materials such as books, journals, teaching materials
  - Consultants
  - Office supplies
  - Equipment, limited to digital camera, video camera, etc.
  - Substitute funds and after school workshop pay will be through your local school districts
  - \$150 stipend for mini-grant coordinator

## Appendix B – Agenda, BSU Action Research Day

### Bowie State University Action Research Day for Teacher Candidates and Mentor Teachers: What Every PDS Partner Should Know About the Action Research Process

**Objectives:**

By the end of this seminar, mentor teachers and interns will:

- Identify the reasons for action research being an integral aspect of our PDS Partnership, state PDS standards and the 9 Essentials
- Understand the history and place of action research in education and other social sciences
- Study the action research definition and cycle provided by Kemmis and McTaggart
- Identify qualitative and quantitative data sources available to mentor teachers and teacher candidates
- Identify action research resources
- Develop an action research question(s) and data sources

- Review the opportunities for presenting action research on our campus and on the state level

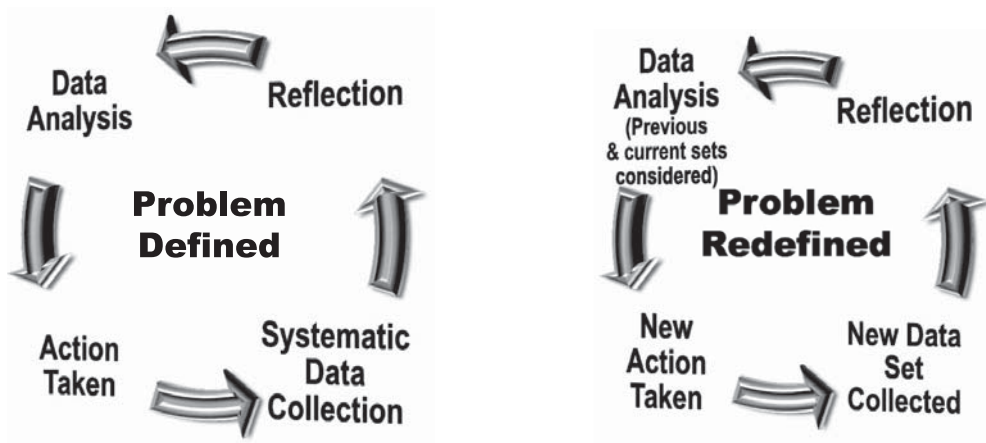
**AGENDA**

- Welcome and Introductions
  - What is action research and what are the roots of educational action research?
  - What is qualitative research and what are some examples of qualitative research?
  - What is quantitative research and what are some examples of quantitative research?
  - How can we develop an action research agenda and action research questions?
  - How can we get started?
  - Where can we share our action research with others?
- Closure and Next Steps

### Appendix C – Action Research Definition and Graphic Organizer

***“Action research is deliberate, solution-oriented investigation that is group or personally owned and conducted. It is characterized by spiraling cycles of problem identification, systematic data collection, reflection, analysis, data-driven action taken, and, finally, problem redefinition.”***

Kemmis & McTaggart, 1982



## Appendix D – A Sample of PDS Action Research Topics

School Level	Action Research Question(s)
High School	What mentoring strategies help to improve high school students' self-perceptions and academic performance? What are the personal and academic self-perceptions of high school students who are failing courses?
High School	What happens to student comprehension when differentiated instruction utilizing kinesthetic learning is implemented in the classroom?
High School	How does modeling reading techniques affect students' ability to connect content to assessment questions?
High School	How can I use student feedback and data to improve test scores through differentiated instruction?
Elementary	How does increased writing instruction increase writing and reading fluency? How does immediate teacher feedback increase writing and reading fluency? How does increased writing instruction and immediate teacher feedback influence students' attitudes toward writing?
Elementary	How does independent inquiry affect student test performance and content knowledge in science?
Elementary	How does arts integration deepen students' understanding and their expression of that understanding?
Elementary	How does repeated modeling of fluent reading while making the speech to text connection allow students to imitate the fluent reader's speed, inflection, tone and syntax?
Elementary	What happens when we offer choice in homework assignments?



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