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Action Research, Program Evaluation, and Respecting the Problem *in Context*

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I've been studying program evaluation and action research for over a decade, and love the connections between the two—studying a problem in context, finding and applying solutions, and finding out “how things work” (Stake, 2010). Integral to this process is that the person working in that context is central to problem identification and solution identification. This is also a central concept to the philosophy of Collaborative Action Research.

I have been privileged to work with a number of educators in the classroom to help design and implement various action research projects over the years. None touched me as much as the one completed with two elementary teachers, one of whom remains a dear friend of mine. Together we wrote about this project for the edited volume which Mohan reviewed for us in this issue.

As we completed our collaborative action research, we noted that the original problem we identified, which was more in line with program evaluation, gave way to personally poignant issues of learning about ourselves as researchers, and about the students in the program—unintended findings. We discovered that learning achievements went beyond test scores, and included elements of the entire child's personality. The teachers applied this knowledge in context and shared this knowledge throughout the school and the district, with further unintended consequences.

In our action research project, we described outcomes that exemplified what I believe is the most important facet of action research—that of taking action, but, taking action that respects the context. How can we as action researchers/collaborators/evaluators help ourselves and others make data-driven decisions for the future and continue the cycle of asking the question, “What happens now?”

Stake (2010), in his work mentioned earlier, directly rejects the idea of mere decision making as the goal of research, but instead asserts that “the main goal is improving understanding of how things work in their particular setting” (p. 122). This idea is a framework for what we discovered in our collaborative action research project—that we can only fully understand the problem when we understand it as intertwined with a context.

In this issue, along with the book review mentioned above, McAteer showcases a new action research collaborative project in South Africa. We also include five action research studies, each of which takes us into the classrooms and practices of educators from a variety of contexts.

Joyner and Casey offer us a look at their practice of providing professional development to white teachers as they seek to reflect upon and refine their own practices and others “committed to combatting racism” in teaching.

Hurley and Henry discuss their action research about the teaching of physics and literacy using a disciplinary literacy framework, to show how they can improve students’ math assessment performance, and create student-driven classrooms.

Petrich created book clubs with his students in order to help students strengthen both learning and relationships, which he describes in this qualitative study.

Fullerton, McCrea-Andrews, and Robson investigated research-based interventions on the literacy improvement of second-grade English language learners. Their findings point to the need for further, longitudinal studies of their model.

Finally, Gleek examined the idea of making learning an engaging experience for students. Within the context of a unit on International Baccalaureate (IB) Global politics, the researcher used classroom simulations and mixed assessment to show both learning and student engagement in the topic.

We hope you enjoy this issue as you read about diverse studies in diverse contexts.

Linnea L. Rademaker, Ph.D, has been a co-editor of i.e.: inquiry in education since 2010. She currently directs dissertations at Northcentral University. She serves two organizations devoted to action research: The Action Research Network of the Americas (www.arnacconnect.org) and the Action Research Special Interest Group of the American Education Research Association.

References

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