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The Clark County School District Action Research Project

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The Action Research Project (ARP) is an initiative sponsored by the Clark County School District in Las Vegas, NV. For the past six years almost 500 in-service teachers have been guided in action research. Participants have included teachers, school nurses, school police, principals, and central administration directors.

The goal of the Action Research Project is to facilitate deeper understanding among educators of the educational contexts teachers face. Presenters encourage participants to collect various types of data to understand problems teachers are confronting. Support is also provided to assist participants to reflect on their personal practices and to think more critically.

The Project is led by an advisory committee whose members are comprised of district teachers, administrators, and professors from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas and Nevada State College. In addition to guiding the ARP, several members of the advisory committee have presented in one of the two action research workshops. Such presentations cover specific methodologies such as PhotoVoice (Wang & Burris, 1997, Zenkov, et. al., 2011) and ethnographic methodologies. All members of the advisory committee have assisted in the Data Fair as discussion moderators or co-chairs.

Action researchers are recruited through district-wide announcements which are made at the onset of each academic year. These announcements briefly introduce action research, including an explanation that action research includes an exploration of one's own classroom practice and an emphasis on collaboration with mentors, peers, and university professors. Teachers who are interested in participating in the ARP submit a proposal that includes the research question they would like to explore and the potential data they could collect. The ARP caps the number of projects to 50 a year.

As part of the recruitment, teachers were promised a monetary stipend. This stipend has kept the 50 project slots full every year. Two years ago budgetary constraints forced the reduction in the possible number of project team members from four to two. Additional financial constraints this year have forced a strategy change. This recent year participants were offered continued education credit for state licensure. Participation dropped considerably compared to previous years.

Instructional Support. Collaboration is a central component of the ARP. Working in teams has been promoted with many teams having up to four members. Because of budgetary constraints and concerns about social loafing, or equal work among teachers, teams have been reduced to two members for the last two years. In addition to working in teacher-teams, collaboration comes in meeting monthly with a teacher mentor. Each region in the district is assigned a teacher mentor. The teacher mentor has had experience with action research in their own classroom so they are prepared to provide support and guidance to their mentoring group. Each mentor is

assigned approximately five projects or between eight and twelve teachers. This group of teachers and mentors act as their own professional learning community. These monthly meetings provide opportunities to discuss progress, reflections, and concerns with the group. Both teachers and mentor provide support and ideas to assist each teacher within their mentoring group. In addition to the monthly meetings with a mentor and other teachers, participants attend full-day workshops twice a year. The first workshop is held in October. The morning session is spent assisting participants in refining their research questions to a feasible project. We have discovered that teachers become overwhelmed and discouraged from attempting to answer broad questions. The afternoon session focuses on introducing participants to different types of data tools and data collection designs. These two topics are paired to reinforce the idea of the type of question dictates what data you collect and how it is collected.

The second workshop occurs in January. The main focus of this workshop is to help the ARP participants learn how to analyze their data. The teacher action researchers are encouraged to bring in the data they have collected and share it with other teachers and their mentors. Every year several professors volunteer to assist teachers with data analysis during the workshop. One year three professors, all well-versed in action research, provided assistance.

Online Support. Online resources play an important role in supporting ARP participants. Information about participating including a call for proposals, the timeline and expectations are also available on the CCSD ARP website, <http://ccsd.net/departments/aarsi-research/action-research-project>. Initial ideas and an introduction to action research are available to prospective participants. The CCSD ARP website also holds a database of abstracts for all previous action research projects conducted within the ARP. The database provides a guide to what teachers within the district have researched previously as well as a means of contacting those teachers for discussions about research questions.

A second online resource is available for current and previous participants using the internal communication software. Teachers have access to discussion boards to discuss the progress and challenges they face while working on their action research projects. Resources from workshops and the Data Fair are available in depositories as part of the internal communication.

Data Fair. To receive the stipend, or continuing education credit, participants were required to submit a report of their action research project and present a data board in the annual Action Research Data Fair. Participants describe their journey through action research on a data board, including information on the relevant literature, research question, hypothesis, and results. This final session of the full-day workshop is open to the public. Teachers, parents, district administrators and community members view the data boards and engage the action research teachers in discussions regarding their projects.

The Data Fair provides an opportunity for participants to share their experiences with other participants. Over the last three years, the Data Fair has added more elements such as key note speakers, breakout sessions to the data board presentations. The most recent Data Fair resembled the San Diego Action Research Conference (Rowell, 2010).

Participating teachers have reported their favorite experience at the Data Fair is the action research breakout session. During the breakout session, participants are grouped by similar topics of research questions, such as science or writing content or school initiatives. Participants have opportunities to share their experiences and results. Some participants establish collaborations with one another for the following year.

The success of the Data Fair has extended interest in the ARP outside of Clark County. Teachers from across Nevada and Arizona, including other urban and small rural area schools, have attended. The Data Fair has been used as a model for similar initiatives in other parts of Nevada. It is hoped that the ARP and the Action Research Data Fair may be a model for other school districts who are interested in supporting action research.

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