



CREATING
EQUITABLE
CLASSROOMS

THROUGH
ACTION RESEARCH

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A Joint Publication



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Classroom Action Research With a Focus on Equity

Cathy Caro-Bruce and Mary Klehr

With so many excellent resources available on action research—covering the range from theoretical frameworks for understanding the process to illustrative stories from classrooms and schools—why a book on *equity and action research*? The answer goes deeper than simply understanding the principles driving action research or the complex questions about equity that face our schools. The answer lies in the interface of what happens when teachers use action research to better understand issues of social and educational equity from inside classrooms and schools, in a way that results in significant learning for teachers and students alike.

This book has as its centerpiece the work of teachers who, in the process of facing hard questions about their own instructional practices and the contexts in which they work, have influenced the thinking and instruction of other teachers, other classrooms, and entire schools. While covering a variety of pedagogical topics, the studies share a common focus on equity, race, and closing gaps in opportunity and academic achievement between groups of students. These stories, which range in scope from a close study of one child and how his elementary teacher adapted instructional practices to ensure school success to a study of how a high school science department changed inclusive practices in an effort to eliminate tracking, illustrate the kinds of changes teachers can make in their own thinking and pedagogy on behalf of their students.

This book also gives readers the opportunity to learn how one public school district has sustained its action research program since 1990, starting with a group of eight teachers and including several hundred participants over the years since. The commitment by the Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD) to this professional development opportunity is a validation of the benefit of self-reflective, inquiry-based research to classrooms and schools. When educators select meaningful questions to explore and then generate data about their own work to help them improve what they do, they act as autonomous, responsible agents who actively direct their own pedagogical development. The classroom action research process has provided a structure through which to pursue questions of immediate importance to teachers and their students, and the MMSD has found that authentic and immediate change can occur when teachers are able to delve deeply into their own values, experiences, and practices in this way.

The MMSD, like a number of other school districts that are highly successful in the areas of academic performance and teacher quality, has struggled to improve the academic achievement of students of color and students living in poverty. Confronting issues of equity and race has been a district focus for many years, and action research is one of many professional development strategies that the MMSD has supported over time as a method for making progress in understanding and improving achievement for all children.

In this chapter, you will learn about the district's focus on equity issues and how action research fits with other efforts to make schools places where all children can be successful. Chapter 2 describes how action research fits into broader professional development efforts and outlines the MMSD's action research story: how the program is organized, the principles that guide the work, the method of facilitation, and the nitty-gritty details that have helped to make this experience so successful. The 10 studies that make up the heart of this book illustrate the range of action research questions that teachers have pursued, how they conducted their research, and what they learned, while the final chapter analyzes the studies through the lens of academic literature on equity pedagogy, to identify key findings and their pedagogical implications for teachers, classrooms, and districts.

EQUITY ACTION RESEARCH

Madison, Wisconsin—not an unlikely place to start up action research as a professional development practice in the 1980s, but unusual in that the first group would focus on equity issues. Madison, the state capital and home of the University of Wisconsin–Madison, has a strong history of community support for and involvement in education. The MMSD serves approximately

25,000 students in 31 elementary schools, 11 middle schools, four large comprehensive high schools, and an alternative high school. For the most part, our schools have much to celebrate. Among statistics of note are that nearly half our teachers have at least one master's degree, and an unusually high number have doctorates. Our high school graduation rate is higher than the national average, and Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores for Madison students are 20 percent higher than the U.S. average. Each year Madison has more than 50 National Merit Scholar semifinalists, five times as many as the average for other districts of its size.

In the 1980s, MMSD staff throughout the district were starting to notice the effects of subtle but increasingly significant changes in the demographics of the student population. The minority population had risen to 22 percent, and the poverty rate hovered around 19 percent. Teachers who had felt successful working within the norms of a generally homogeneous student population were alternately excited, bewildered, and challenged by the growing diversity of their students, the broader range of learning styles, and different forms of parental support. Schools began to recognize the importance of understanding the contributions and needs of this changing population so that all students could be successful.

During the mid-1980s, a staff development specialist organized two different yearlong action research groups that focused on bringing teachers together to inquire and reflect on their evolving instructional practices. Participants were enthusiastic and felt that it was a powerful experience on an individual level. However, the experience had little noticeable impact at schoolwide or district levels. When the staff development specialist left the MMSD, these initiatives were not continued.

By the late 1980s, when the MMSD was looking at different strategies to support schools with higher numbers of minority and low-income students, another member of the staff development team, who had observed the early success and enthusiasm of the action research groups, formed a partnership with the MMSD coordinator of research and evaluation. With patience and persistence, these two individuals spent three years trying to find funding and support for action research in the MMSD. They presented their proposal to various groups—principals, administrative cabinets, and MMSD leadership groups—and were met with mild interest. The groups made several suggestions for how to fund release time for teachers to do this work, which the organizers believed was essential to attract teachers and sustain the initiative. One of the most challenging issues that repeatedly surfaced at that time was the lack of acceptance or understanding on the part of these leadership groups of the need to help teachers become more reflective about their teaching practices.

It became apparent that efforts by individual schools to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student body were not having the desired impact,

and that district resources needed to be organized more effectively to support specific schools. The MMSD directed funds to the schools with high poverty populations and also set up professional development activities to support teachers in these schools. In the late 1980s, understanding and improving minority student achievement emerged as an MMSD priority. One of the key initiatives was a project called "Cultural Differences and Classroom Strategies." For two years, teachers in high-need elementary schools participated in this effort to help them increase their repertoire of teaching strategies to meet the many needs of students from different ethnic groups and socioeconomic backgrounds. During the third year of the project, the expectation was that teachers would be able to implement some of the strategies that they had been learning and try to figure out what made a difference in the success of their students. Action research had the potential to provide the structure for teachers who had participated in the Cultural Differences and Classroom Strategies initiative to explore their topics more deeply.

In the spring of 1990, the two coordinators of the action research program sent a letter to all elementary teachers in the MMSD, inviting them to participate in an action research group called "Meeting the Needs of Diverse Learners." Funding tied to the district initiative to understand cultural differences had been found, and when eight people signed on, the organizers were ecstatic. Although they were on their way to bringing action research to the MMSD, at the time they had little idea what that meant. From month to month, they learned more about how to maintain the momentum of designing experiences that would promote ongoing reflection and how to consciously bring the action research process to the participants. They also began to see how quickly teachers embraced this kind of professional development activity and began to plan for sustaining action research in the district on a long-term basis.

This experience taught the program coordinators a lot about what it takes to implement a new way of providing staff development, and how to move toward institutionalizing it across the district by making it available to all staff and schools. In the second year, the project grew to two groups, with 12 teachers in one and 12 principals in the other. Since this beginning, the program has annually supported 30 to 75 participants in various themed groups, led by experienced action researchers who facilitate their colleagues during the yearlong action research process.

FAST-FORWARD TO THE PRESENT DAY

The changes in MMSD demographics that were subtle in the 1980s have since become dramatic. For example, the number of low-income students

as a proportion of all students enrolled in the MMSD has increased to 38 percent (doubling since 1988), while the proportion of students of color has doubled as well, to 44 percent of the student population. The number of English language learners (ELLs) enrolled in the district has risen by roughly 300 percent during that time span, and the percentage of Latino students in third grade receiving English as a second language and/or bilingual support has increased from 16 percent to 70 percent. The calls to improve how services are delivered throughout the district—and explore how to meet the varied needs of an increasingly diverse population—have now become top priorities.

Opportunities to join action research groups focusing on equity, race, and the achievement gap have been offered annually to all MMSD teachers, support staff (psychologists, social workers, nurses, and school counselors), and administrators. Groups have worked on themes including “Meeting the Needs of All Learners”; “Race, Class, Gender, Culture, Language and Learning”; “English Language Learners”; and “Closing the Achievement Gap.”

OTHER EQUITY INITIATIVES

Action research is only one part of a much larger initiative around equity that has had a significant impact on teacher effectiveness and student achievement across the district. Other key activities include:

- **Districtwide data collection and analysis.** Through the continual improvement of the district data systems, teachers and other staff can now easily access data about individuals and groups of students. Initially, the MMSD Research and Evaluation Department responded individually to the hundreds of yearly requests for data. A critical recent professional development effort has been to build the knowledge and skills of all staff to directly access data about students so that they can engage in thoughtful dialogue within their schools. Action researchers, who are comfortable with data collection, data analysis, and the inquiry process, help the district model positive attitudes to other staff about the importance and usefulness of data.

- **Leadership development.** During its annual summer Principals Institute in 2000, the MMSD brought in a national consultant on race and equity, who helped principals and administrators engage in self-reflection about race and identity and how each individual’s personal assumptions affect our schools and students. With strong leadership from the MMSD assistant superintendents, principals have continued to build competence in leading their schools and addressing issues of race and equity at their monthly professional development meetings. The MMSD also put

together a district equity team and has offered ongoing professional development to the MMSD superintendent's cabinet.

- **Districtwide professional development.** For many years, the MMSD has offered courses for teachers that are focused on strategies to help all students succeed. Once the principals experienced the equity-based summer training, the district management team decided to implement a systemwide professional development program for all staff. Under the direction of the superintendent's special assistant for parent and community relations, the MMSD offered workshops and supported both district- and school-based professional development. Each school and MMSD department has its own equity team, which designs continuing staff development opportunities, including ongoing reflective conversations, book groups, and workshops, and addresses equity issues in their schools or departments.

- **Minority Student Achievement Network.** The MMSD is a member of the Minority Student Achievement Network, a national coalition of multiracial, relatively successful school districts that have come together to study the disparity in achievement between White students and students of color through intensive research and professional development. The network was established to discover, develop, and implement the means to ensure high academic achievement of minority students. MMSD representatives attend regular conferences and are part of the research arm of the network, which has also promoted leadership among students from the MMSD's high schools.

All these key district activities focusing on equity and race have resulted in several important outcomes:

- Staff clearly understand the MMSD's mission and vision regarding the ability of all students to achieve at the highest level.
- Staff use a common language to communicate about expectations and anticipated outcomes.
- Increasingly, thoughtful and honest conversations occur about equity and race and their impact on student achievement.
- Schools examine systems, structures, and instructional practices that are barriers to student achievement.
- Leaders at all levels of the MMSD are committed to equity and race work.
- There is a climate and expectation of accountability, ensuring that schools achieve their school improvement goals.

While action research is just one cog in the wheel of the many efforts in which the MMSD is engaged to make schools equitable, the focus on teachers' capacity to understand how to make a difference in the lives of

students, and the in-depth, reflective dialogue that pushes teachers to understand equity and race issues in thoughtful ways give action research a unique place in the larger district work.

WHAT HAPPENS IN AN EQUITY-FOCUSED ACTION RESEARCH GROUP?

Themes of race and achievement thread themselves through the questions and conversations of action research groups that focus on educational equity, as action researchers strive to build both competence and confidence in this complex and challenging area facing the schools. While teachers in an action research group generally follow an inquiry process of developing questions, collecting and analyzing data, and writing about findings, the group's facilitators and members take responsibility for educating each other about equity and race in order to build common knowledge and talk more honestly about the issues they are facing.

Action research groups also incorporate various activities to build a foundation and knowledge base among practitioners for talking with others about equity beliefs and practices. Some of the specific activities that groups have done include:

- Constructing a working definition of *equity*.

Action researchers do not work from a textbook definition of equity. Instead, in the constructivist spirit of the action research process, researchers build a definition that is based on specific knowledge, context, and experience. The term "working definition" is used to reflect how the understanding of equity shifts and evolves throughout the action research experience.

- Writing about *equity* as it is observed in classrooms and schools.

In order to examine, critique, and change practices, group members spend time thinking and writing about equity issues in their own classrooms—assumptions, observations, concerns—and then they highlight two or three compelling ideas that stand out as important to develop further. A list of potential action research questions for further study is created from what has been written.

- Reading and discussing articles about *equity*.

Group members deepen their understanding of issues of equity, race, and closing the achievement gap through discussions of articles and the impact of the readings on them as teachers and administrators. Articles that challenge and verify their assumptions about equity issues, extend their knowledge, and help them become more interculturally competent are emphasized.

- Writing a story about *equity* in the teacher's classroom or school.
Sharing written narratives about interactions with students or colleagues provides a rich opportunity to describe and discuss a range of authentic experiences.

- Creating cause-and-effect/root cause (fishbone) diagrams.
Teachers use a cause-and-effect diagramming exercise to identify important questions and potential root causes of unequal achievement of students (see Chapter 11). This exercise also uncovers potential data sources and pedagogical strategies.

- Reading other action research studies focusing on equity.
Teachers read what other action researchers have studied, as another source of data for their own research, but also to deepen their own understanding of the issues that they are studying. They are especially curious to find out what their district colleagues have learned and what actions they have taken.

- Interviewing school staff about diverse experiences with and concerns about issues of equity.
An important source of data for action researchers is the perspectives and experiences of colleagues. Teachers are often pleasantly surprised by the willingness of their peers and administrators to help them with their research.

- Having each group member share his or her racial autobiography.
One of the most powerful activities in which groups engage is taking the time to listen to each group member's racial autobiography. This process helps everyone understand how personal experience influences who we are and what we believe, as well as learn about different life experiences and perspectives people bring to teaching and learning.

- Describing what it means to work for equity in one's school.
Action researchers typically come to the groups with a strong commitment to issues of equity and social justice. Time is spent in the group talking about specific leadership actions that members can take to affect classrooms and schools, and often how to find the courage to take action in some challenging environments.

As a result of questioning assumptions and articulating ideas in the safe environment of a research group, action researchers appear to be more inclined to take risks in discussions and practices that are necessary for engaging in equitable practices, eliminating the achievement gap, and acting on behalf of colleagues, students, and families in their school communities.

* * * *

The 10 studies that make up the core of this book lay out an array of areas that teachers were drawn to study through classroom action research. Each account is set in the context of a particular classroom in a particular community, and taken together they tell the story of how teachers bring different filters and experiences to the important discussions about how equity and race affect children in schools. As you read through the studies, keep in mind that although the district has come a long way in making the schools more humane and equitable for children and families, there is still a long way to go as individuals and as an educational community. While some of the results may have direct implications for other districts, this particular story can serve as a road map for doing the critical work that is essential to the future of the students. Enjoy the journey!

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