



# Teachers Finding Solutions through Action Research

*By Dr. Nancy Allen*

Teaching as part of the Education for a New Era reform offers extensive opportunity, allowing teachers a great deal of autonomy in how best to help their students learn. In the new system, teachers are asked to prepare their own lessons plans and find innovative ways to motivate children. To find answers to the many questions of how to best teach, teachers in Qatar are enthusiastically embracing Action Research inside their classrooms. Action Research, or research designed to lead directly to action, has become a standard course in most education degree programs, and numerous scholarly journals and meetings are currently devoted to its practice.

Have you ever wondered ...what action research really is and what it means to education in Qatar?

Wondering, and seeking answers, is the way humans learn best; and perhaps there is no other group that wonders more – or asks more questions – than teachers. As teachers, we constantly ask questions of our students. We ask questions to guide or assess their learning, to motivate them, to get them to think and problem-solve; but perhaps the deepest, most challenging questions are the ones we ask ourselves. Are my students learning? Who is falling behind and why? How can I be more effective? What strategies work best? How can I reach this particular student?

In the classroom, every student is unique, and every day presents new teaching challenges. Society's needs and expectations are also constantly changing, and teachers must find ways to meet these expectations. In Qatar, Education for a New Era is creating something original; something unique to this place and this time; to the land, its people, and its values. Research is a valid way to explore these new frontiers, and for educators, action research is often the "best fit" as a research methodology.

Action research is relatively new to most educators. In the past,



although teachers were active problem solvers, we did not consider the explorations we conducted in our classrooms as "real research." Real research, we thought, had to have an experimental design, with strictly separated test and control groups and quantitative data that could show statistical significance. In real research, the researcher had to carefully avoid personal interaction with the experimental groups, to avoid participation in any way in the focus of the research. This is impossible in the classroom, and so investigations by teachers tended to be informal and under-valued. Although teachers were often the

subjects of research, they rarely had the opportunity to bring their own knowledge, experience, and insights into the research design.

In the 1940s, a new research paradigm began to emerge. The procedures it included were specifically designed to change the organizations being studied. This was not research to establish theory; it was research that led directly to action, and thus it was called action research.

Action research has proven to be a powerful positive force for change. It differs from traditional research methods in several ways.



First, in action research it is clearly understood and accepted that the researcher is part of what is being studied. Often several people, perhaps the whole organization, participate in the study. These communities of inquiry bring together the benefits of multiple perspectives, diverse knowledge and experience, and shared ownership of the research problem. For this reason, action research is often called participant research or community-based research because of its inclusive and democratic structure.

Second, whereas traditional research has the goal of clarifying theory or fact, action research seeks to identify solutions to practical problems and to precipitate immediate change. This means that action research projects often do not have clear end points. Research often becomes a spiral, with the changes initiated as a result of the research becoming the next set of questions to explore.

Action research is not easy or simplistic. It requires rigorous methods and clear evidence, even if it may not follow traditional formats, and it adheres to strict ethical standards of research conduct. Although the method is flexible to fit the situation, the key steps are:

1. Pose questions or identify a problem.
2. Establish judgment criteria.
3. Make a plan.
4. Gather data.
5. Analyze data.
6. Interpret the results.

What constitutes data for action research? Anything that can provide evidence to answer the question or solve the problem can be used as data. Although often qualitative data is used – such as interviews, surveys, classroom observations, lesson plans, teacher-created documents, student work samples – quantitative data and experimental design is also often part of the process.

Perhaps the greatest value of action research to education is that it develops and recognizes reflective practice. Research in education consistently supports that teachers who approach education analytically are most effective. Teachers who spend time seriously thinking about the teaching/learning process – who approach teaching scientifically – continue to develop professionally and contribute to the improvement of their organizations. To develop reflective practitioners is a goal for every quality teacher education institute, which is a major reason why it is becoming ingrained in professional training and practice throughout Qatar. As Qatar increases its commitment to research and scientific study, educators are looking to action research as a powerful tool. In the SEC-sponsored Leadership Program for principals of Independent schools, each candidate is doing an action research project related to their leadership responsibilities, trying to identify best practices and policies that lead to highest student achievement. Each candidate in Qatar University's Master of Education

Degree Program is also completing a semester-long project in collaboration with mentors in partner schools. All over Doha questions are being asked; "What works best?" "How can we improve?" In addition, teachers and groups of teachers are voluntarily learning about action research and investigating practices in their classrooms. "What methods are most effective in teaching certain math skills?" "How can we improve our assessment instruments?" "Why do certain students resist communicating in class?" "How much time do students actually spend studying out of school?" The questions are as varied as the personalities and classrooms of the teachers.

Although it is still a new practice in Qatar, teachers are embracing action research throughout the country. As the new education system continues to evolve, teachers will be at the forefront of the innovations inside the classroom and will be leaders in finding the best way to educate Qatar's children.

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