

# Professional development through action research

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“**S**eeking to understand and acting on the best we know” (Calhoun 2002). This is the desired state for all teachers at all levels - it is axiomatic, inarguable. How often do we consciously adopt this paradigm in the midst of the hustle and bustle of everyday teaching? I suggest that most busy teachers are just not able to afford the time needed to seek understanding beyond immediate issues. However, it may be possible to use the teachers’ daily work to gain a better understanding and improve practice at the same time. The improvement sought may be to directly impact on student learning or to act less directly by developing leadership facilities in the practitioners. This leads us to look at action research as a tool to improve practice - for professional development. The concept of action research has been in use in New Zealand for some time now (Robinson 1993). In the field of curriculum issues, action research has been used to improve educational outcomes in curriculum areas through collaborative activity (Apland, MacPherson et al. 1996).

The cyclical nature of action research (the cycle of investigate, plan, implement and evaluate) lends itself to issues where long-term, sustained change is sought (Piggot-Irvine 2002). In fact, action research has the aims of “staff development, improved school practice, and contribution to theories of teaching and learning” (Hosack 1997).

## Action Research for Professional Development

This professional development is one issue that action research lends itself to. Calhoun (2002) describes action

research as “continual disciplined inquiry conducted to inform and improve our practice as educators.” On this basis, action research is well positioned for use in the professional development process.

Action research can change the social system in schools and other education organisations so that continual formal learning is both expected and supported. *It can replace superficial coverage with depth of knowledge.* And it can generate data to measure the effects of various programmes and methods on student and staff learning (emphasis added) (Calhoun 2002).

At an individual level, action research lends itself to changed practice (Piggot-Irvine 2001). Beyond changes to teacher practice, it is claimed that a feature of practitioner control of the outcomes can lead to improved student outcomes (Blase and Blase 2002), particularly if they are “voluntary teacher-developed initiatives.” Action research is clearly situated as an avenue for effective professional development as it is centred entirely on the participants and their practice. Learner-centred professional development like this has been described as necessary (Lewis 2003). Guskey (2003) comments that, of the thirteen professional development programmes he investigated, only four were based on research evidence. The structure of the investigation (reconnaissance) phase ensures that any changes are based on research evidence.

## The Leadership Learning Programme

With our understanding of the potential for action research to produce sustained professional development, we at the New Zealand Principal and Leadership Centre (NZPLC) developed two similar programmes for use with clusters of schools. The principals of these >

# Professional Development Through Action Research In Educational Settings

**J Dewey**



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