Action Research: Empowering School Change Through Dialogue and Collaboration

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Action research is a frequently misunderstood concept among many practitioners who errantly view it as another time-consuming form of data collection, the results of which will be locked forever in some university researcher's filing cabinet never to be utilized. This article recounts how action research was first used, albeit accidentally, in a middle school in Lansing, New York, and how it has grown and continues to grow as a vehicle for school change. It describes several distinct cycles of action research, with each growing out of the previous cycle. The information derived from the action research has provided invaluable direction for the school's character education initiative. More importantly, the experience of gathering and utilizing data through action research has drawn the entire school community—students, parents, faculty and staff— into the decision making process. In the end, through action research, stakeholders come to feel empowered and included, thereby increasing the likelihood of real change within the school.

Introduction

Character education has gone in and out of educational vogue over the span of my 30 years of teaching: from values clarification (e.g., Raths, Harmin, & Simon, 1966), to Kohlberg's moral dilemma discussions (e.g., Blatt & Kohlberg, 1975), to present day character education efforts (e.g., Lickona, 1991). During that time I have witnessed a nearly continuous debate between theoreticians and researchers over the proper approach to character development. What has not changed over those thirty years is my own commitment, and the commitment of many other educators, to devote attention to educating the whole child— intellectually, socially, and morally. Lickona (1991) argues, the goals of education have always been to "make young people smart and to make them good." This powerful statement is frequently misunderstood by critics such as Kohn (1997) who errantly attribute a fix-the-kid approach to character educators while failing to acknowledge the attention given to developing students' cognitive understanding as well as to transforming the school culture as a whole. Are there overly simplistic approaches to character development applied in schools today? Clearly, there are; however, there are also countless practitioners attempting on a daily basis to educate for character using the best theoretical and practical approaches available.

In his review of the character education history, Leming (1997) notes that despite the ongoing research regarding the efficacy of character education in its various forms, one thing has remained constant throughout: practitioner's unceasing efforts to educate for character. On the one hand, practitioners tend to have a cavalier, even defiant, attitude towards the findings of researchers. However, on the other hand, researchers have historically researched on schools and written down to or over the top of practitioners. Clearly in the ideal, practitioners and researchers would meet in the middle at some point where practice is informed by research, but where research is also informed by practice.

Becoming a "Researcher"

When the term "action research" first surfaced in my professional life five or six years ago, I shrugged it off as simply another piece of educational jargon. People whose knowledge and opinions I respected began to explain the concept and encourage me to involve myself in some small way with this type of research; however, my negativity prevented me from really hearing and understanding. After so many years in teaching (this fall begins my 30th year as a practitioner) I was convinced that action research was just another euphemism for assessment, another way to try to prove that my best efforts and practices were truly working. This time the assessment would be aimed at character education, the heart and soul of my classroom long before the name "character education" was attributed to my classroom practices. I wanted no part of what I viewed as yet another useless exercise in data collection; therefore, wrapped in my self-righteous senior teacher cloak, I listened with half an ear and waited for the phenomenon to peak and

disappear.

Then in September of 1997, my principal handed me a nasty problem to work on. Parent representatives from our middle school shared-decision-making-committee had expressed concern about the amount of bad language their children reported hearing in school and on the bus. I had become advisor to Student Council (a representative group of 5th through 8th graders) the previous year, and had declared at the outset my intention to more fully involve student leaders in school issues. My principal and I were in agreement that the issue of what to do about bad language should be handled by student council representatives as an opportunity for authentic involvement in moral leadership by our students.

Involving Students in Action Research

The task of confronting bad language was socially terrifying to the students, and totally overwhelming to me. It was easy to see by our reluctance to address the problem how this kind of language had become the norm. Questions like: "What kind of words do you mean by 'bad language'?", "What if kids don't care about swearing, only adults do?", "How can we change something that everyone does, even on TV?", felt like reasons to give up before we had even started. The previous year our Student Council had spent a very productive day in leadership training at Wells College in nearby Aurora, New York, so I decided to take our daunting task and our pressing questions back to Wells College in hopes of utilizing this as a practice topic for another round of leadership training.

Wells College helped us clarify what a group like Student Council could hope to accomplish. We could, for example, raise awareness, define the problem with greater clarity, and seek support from other members of the school community. We could not, however, punish misbehavior or police it. Following our trip to Wells College we developed reasonable goals for the months ahead. Most of all, we realized that we needed a great deal more information before we could plan any action that would have a chance of producing lasting change. The student representatives decided that we needed to know how students currently reacted to various kinds of bad language. How big was this problem? Were some words more universally considered "bad"? We decided to construct a survey to gather this information. Through a facilitated discussion the students decided what the contents of the survey would include. The first step was to define "bad language," which the students did using dictionaries and thesauruses. They were able to identify three categories: "inappropriate" was the label for given to insults, sexist, racist, and homophobic words; "obscene/vulgar" covered sexual words, street names for body parts, bathroom activities; and, "swearing/ profanity" described religious insults such as the use of the word God as part of an angry epithet.

After defining "bad language" the Student Council created the survey. However, it seemed quite clear that the rest of the school students would have to understand these categories before the survey was administered. The Student Council decided to educate their peers on their operational

Table 1
Student Responses to Language Survey by Grade level

	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8
Inappropriate Language is:				
Always wrong (Deserves consequences)	41	17	10	14
Wrong: (Deserves a reminder)	40	44	61	67
No Big Deal:	3	14	17	26
Obscene/Vulgar Language is:				
Always wrong (Deserves consequences)	66	35	37	28
Wrong: (Deserves a reminder)	17	36	49	49
No Big Deal:	2	4	2	28
Inappropriate Language is:				
Always wrong (Deserves consequences)	52	27	32	40
Wrong: (Deserves a reminder)	26	33	40	41
No Big Deal:	5	15	16	22
RESPONSE TOTALS:	85	75	87	107

definition of bad language. The student representatives practiced their presentations long and hard as a group in order to get past the inevitable giggles, blushes, and outright terror they experienced. Eventually, grade level representatives went to each Home-Base (our daily homeroom or morning advisory period) and explained our mission, our categories, and the survey that would follow. The survey asked students if they found each type of bad language "always wrong" and deserving of consequences, "wrong" but needing only a reminder or "no big deal". Table 1 presents the data gathered from the Student Council's language survey. Though our students used bad language freely, the results of the survey clearly indicated that the majority knew such language was wrong. The younger the student, the greater the feeling of remorse or guilt attached to using such words. We were somewhat relieved to see that, despite the existence of this type of language, there was somewhat of a consensus that the language was wrong.

Making a Plan

Our next step was to explain the survey results to the school community. Again, representatives went to each Home-Base with copies of the results and a request for ideas about how to reduce the use of this bad language. It was from these discussions we also learned that students perceived the adults in the building as part of the problem. Students complained that adults frequently walked by within hearing-range of offensive language and did nothing about it. Apparently there were a few faculty members and bus drivers who used inappropriate, if not profane language, with students. These new pieces of information shaped student council's next step: to ask for involvement from the adult population in our school to help with the problem of bad language.

I arranged a time at our next faculty meeting for two eighth-grade representatives to speak directly to staff; this was a first in our middle school. After reporting the survey results and outlining the actions that they, as a student council, would take to reduce the use of offensive language, the two eighth-graders read a carefully worded, poignant request that faculty be aware of their use of language in the classroom. The students pointed out that the modeling by adults was a very powerful factor in student behavior, and that change could only happen if the entire staff invested their energy along with the students. After a long silent minute, the staff applauded.

Student Council representatives carried out several other attempts to raise awareness during the year: They wrote a piece for the district bulletin, sent survey results to various other key people and asked our service club to make appropriate posters to hang in strategic locations. They crafted another survey at the end of the year that included questions about the frequency of apologies offered by student offenders and the frequency of teacher involvement

when bad language occurred. (The results of the posttest— using the same language survey—at the end of the year suggested an increased awareness, but not necessarily a decrease in the use of bad language). As important as these actions were, the most powerful experiences were those at the beginning of the process: identifying the problem, educating themselves and others about the problem, and collecting information through survey and discussion about our school's perceptions of the problem. Noted speaker and author Stephen Glenn (1989) uses the words "dialogue and collaboration" to describe two of the great needs of young people today. It was through such dialogue and collaboration that students in our school took the first big steps toward empowerment and responsibility. In essence, the action research process became a form of authentic character education for the students.

Needless to say, when I mentioned these efforts of student council to my character education colleagues who had encouraged me to get involved in action research, they pointed out with some amusement that in fact what we had done was action research. I finally understood. Action research is quite simply a process for creating a map and the accompanying directions necessary to get to the place you want to go—in your character education effort or any other school initiative. It is not being told where you have to go from an outsider, nor does it limit you to just one route to get there. Rather, action research is a process for defining areas of concern and potential steps for remedy. It invites the whole community into shared dialogue and action.

A Second Round of School-wide Reflection

The success of the language survey energized faculty as well as students. Suddenly as a staff we were all curious to know how each of us perceived the workings of our school, its climate, and sense of community. Our character education committee decided to administer the 30-item *School as a Caring Community Profile (SCCP)* (1996) to all staff, students and parents. Specifically this survey focuses on areas of respect that indicate the sense of community experienced by all members of the school community. This survey was chosen as a gross global measure of our school's evolving sense of itself as a moral community. Our school had been working on character education for a couple of years and while we did not have the time or resources to conduct a formal evaluation of every element of our efforts, we felt that this measure would provide us a thumbnail sketch of where we were. This simple survey provided our team with much to consider. We narrowed the material down by identifying areas where all the stakeholders clearly agreed there was a problem (e.g., the need for better sportsmanship), and areas where there was a clear divergence between stakeholders over whether a given area was in fact a problem area (e.g., teachers and parents thought the school provided a conducive learning environment, whereas, students were

not so clearly in agreement). We spent a year discussing the emergent areas of concern and the discrepancies between each group's perceptions. One specific action from out of the research was to broaden the membership on our character education team to include bus drivers, secretaries, and students. It also provided plenty of additional food-for-thought as the results were shared with the entire school community.

The data from the SCCP survey provided a great deal for the faculty and staff to consider; however, it became increasingly clear that we had not elicited student response or interpretation of the survey results. Therefore, five areas of concern from the ongoing discussion were identified and presented to Student Council for their discussion and consideration. The students investigated lack of respect and its effects on the school community in the following areas: (1) sportsmanship, (2) the right to learn, (3) put-downs, (4) teacher favoritism, and (5) the acceptance of differences. Again, Student Council used their leadership training at Wells College to clarify and set goals. Five committees were formed, with representation from each grade level. For the first few months, the committees simply discussed the data and described the problem as they saw it. Then each grade level representative informally interviewed ten students in their grade, asking for input. The questions they used included: "How can you tell this is a problem in our school?", "How does this problem effect you personally?", "What should be done about this?".

The committees eventually produced lists that showed the perceived words, behaviors, and circumstances that led students to conclude there was a problem; lists were also generated of suggest ways for improvement. The committee on sportsmanship invited the high school Athletic Director to come to the middle school to hear their concerns and to offer insight. The committee dealing with students' right to learn met with the principal to ask about our lack of homogenous classes and the inclusion of severely academically limited students. Each committee presented to the entire student council and a small group of faculty who were interested in this growing concept of student involvement. The lists of ideas for change were pared down to three; these initiatives will form next year's efforts.

Systematic Reflection on the School's Mission Statement

As part of their continuing reflection, the character education committee decided to dust off the school's mission statement to examine the consonance between the stated mission of the school and the lived experience of its community. Our mission statement was written before half of the present faculty worked in our building. The character education committee separated out each idea expressed in the mission and built a simple survey of agreement that asked how well our school community met the expressed goal, and with what degree of effectiveness and consistency. The survey asked respondents how well they thought the *school*

met one or another aspect of the mission; respondents were then asked how *well* they *personally* met the same item.

In general there were at least two critical findings from this survey: First, most of the teachers graded themselves lower in their own achievement than the overall school experience. That is, teachers felt that they were part of community committed to providing an environment that exemplified its stated mission; however, they felt that they could do better in their own effort to live out the school mission. This reflects a healthy sense of pride in the school as well as personal humility. The second key finding was the number of times that faculty and staff questioned the clarity of certain elements of the mission statement. In their attempts to say how well they exemplified a given aspect of the mission they then came to question what, exactly, certain elements of the mission statement actually meant. These items emerged as needing discussion and refinement so that it was clear to all what was expected. The results of this survey were very encouraging, as much for the problem areas they identified as anything else. The results of the survey suggest that our staff is finally beginning to recognize the purpose and value of certain initiatives like Honors Assemblies and various clubs. As a staff we are beginning to grasp the concept of *comprehensive* character education—that is, character development that is proactive and pervasive throughout all elements of the school. The survey provided significant additional data fueling our ongoing reflection.

Although school faculty and staff do not explicitly use the phrase "action research," the practice of action research has woven itself into much of what we do as evidenced by the mission statement survey. This survey indicated a positive evolution in our staff's interest and commitment to systematic reflection on our character development efforts. In our character education efforts the "Let's-find-out-where-we-are step" now precedes actions taken by any committee. We use surveys, but we also use informal dialogue, and interviews. Since each grade level has a team period each day, and all committees contain at least one member from each grade level, there is time to ask questions and gather information and ideas in an ongoing manner. We've learned to start with "What should we…?" and "How can we…?", not "We should…". This helps prevent the resistance to change endemic to most schools. We've learned that authentic and lasting growth is a slow process, and that a positive beginning can only happen when all voices are heard. Too often teachers are given a directive thought up by someone outside of the immediate school community. Such a directive may in fact be aimed at solving a real problem, but as long as the identification of the problem and the means of solution come from the outside, without dialogue and collaboration, faculty and students tend to rebel. In our school, we attempt to involve staff, students, and parents in an authentic process of change. In this way, we feel we are acknowledging our unique strengths and weaknesses then choosing together the direction in which we wish to travel. Is there one hundred percent agreement and support? Of

course not. But the interlocking involvement of the majority of stakeholders tends to mute the inevitable pockets of negativity and resistance.

Changing Directions with Action Research

This past year, as part of a grant from the Templeton Foundation, I extended my action research experience from the internal school-wide action research described above to collaborative action research where I partnered with University researchers on an intensive study within my own sixth-grade classroom. Our grant proposal carried the goal of using maxims to enhance character development. To plot our route we asked a group of sixth grade teachers, parents of former sixth graders (now eighth-grade students) to meet as a preliminary focus group. After a friendly, festive dinner at a local restaurant, we presented our grant proposal and asked for help in identifying four areas where sixth grade students in our school demonstrate character development weakness. We began by brainstorming problematic behaviors, in and out of school. We grouped these behaviors and labeled the overarching character trait missing from each group of behaviors. We discussed all the choices offered and settled on one that the group consensus indicated. We then asked the group to rate the list of traits for relative importance, given our belief that we could only realistically hope to address four traits in a year. We involved our focus group in action research to define the reality of our school and our students and their unique character development needs. In essence the group helped define where we needed to go. As practitioners we would devise *how* to get there.

As we began working with the first trait, tolerance, we established a continuous flow of assessment techniques for reflecting on our progress. The treatment and control groups had already completed pretesting. I was reluctant to give up precious teaching time to administer yet another assessment. I felt certain that my students were "getting it" as gauged by the quality of verbal responses in group discussions, the interconnection of ideas expressed by students, and the general enthusiasm shown by students. However, at the midpoint when students' knowledge of the concept tolerance was assessed using a structured essay on tolerance, a majority of the students were clearly confused on the difference between *tolerance* (allowing for difference in non-moral values) and *tolerate* (allowing and not making a big deal about everything, including bullying, cheating, stealing, etc). I was disturbed to find that my efforts led more toward students accepting unacceptable behavior from others, than developing acceptance of legitimate differences. Without the structured essay, I would have confidently moved to the next trait. Instead, we chose a different format and retaught the trait. Here was yet another application of action research: discovering the missed turn in our effort to reach the destination set forth by the focus group.

Summary

The development of character is a slow, subtle process of growth that requires moral knowledge, moral feeling, and moral action. Cognition is the foundation upon which the other two are built and demonstrated. Our work with traits and related maxims clearly indicated that teaching the meaning of a character trait is not the simple process that some "word of the month" initiatives suggest. Using regular assessment and reflection as part of our implementation prevented the frustration and disappointment of concluding a long project only to find that we had arrived at an unanticipated destination.

Action research has become the method driving character education change and growth in our middle school. By working together, through dialogue and collaboration among staff, students, and parents we have reduced the institutionalized reluctance to change. We have developed unique approaches to the specific problems that exist in our school, and have effectively increased buy-in and authentic commitment from our school community. It is through action research that we, as a school community, get to practice the character traits we hope to build in our students especially dialogue and collaboration. Students and staff are empowered to help define and solve problems as equal members of the school community. We apply the various forms of action research to determine our goals, outline our directions in reaching those goals, and establish ways to measure our progress. With the help of action research we have taken a big step toward our goal of establishing comprehensive character education—on the way we have also come to experience a real sense of community.

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