ACTION RESEARCH

A GUIDE FOR THE TEACHER RESEARCHER

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ALWAYS LEARNING

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Action Research

This is an excellent and practical research guide for use by the practitioner-researcher or as a teaching guide for the supervision of undergraduate students undertaking their thesis.

The book is readily accessible at various levels, is easy to navigate and introduces the reader to the key concepts with relevant case studies. The book offers concrete advice on how to develop a line of enquiry and provides a good balance between theory and practice.

Cross-referencing of content between chapters is an additional and unique feature which enables readers to further their understanding of the discrete research components, and how these fit together in the action research cycle.

Audrey Beaumont, Educational Consultant & Academic Researcher, UK

This book is highly recommended reading for any student or teacher undertaking action research. It provides readers with helpful and comprehensive coverage of all aspects of the action research process and is both pragmatic and academically challenging. Its main strength is the way in which it guides and scaffolds the reader through the practical elements of the action research cycle whilst also engaging the reader with key methodological, conceptual and ethical issues related to action research. It does so by containing many innovative features which provoke the reader to enhance their critical insights into conducting action research. It also offers illustrative case studies which are used effectively to exemplify the action research process and raise some of the common dilemmas and challenges facing action researchers. This book is essential reading for any student or teacher wishing to improve educational practice through action research.

Dr Janet Rose, Award Leader, MA Education, Bath Spa University, UK

We must also describe the situation we want to change or improve by focusing on who, what, when, where and how. For example, we might answer these questions:

- What evidence does Sarah have that girls are underachieving in Maths? Sarah analysed recent SATS papers.
- Which girls are being prevented from achieving more, in what aspects of mathematics? Sarah's analysis reveals it is higher-ability girls in the area of knowledge of numbers and the number system.
- How is mathematics presently taught? Stimulus materials in Mathematics are aimed at stereotypical boys' interests: football and dinosaurs.

Early reading

Reading of literature based upon evidence takes us away from **assertion** and either confirms what we have experienced or takes us beyond our experience. If reading confirms our experience, it allows us to move forward with increased confidence. If it takes us beyond our experience, new possibilities are opened up to us. Stating what we have read demands that we clarify what we understand, both of the literature and of our own position. It makes us ask questions of our own understanding and action. This can be uncomfortable for us, but also exciting.

Developing aims

If Sarah believes that girls' achievement in Maths is down to issues of societal expectancy, how can she counter assumptions about such achievement? Addressing tensions or dilemmas like these can lead to specific **aims** for Sarah's research focus.

Aims are used to break down our focus into one, two or three specific goals that appear, from our action plan, to be achievable. For example, Sarah's aims became:

1. To increase the number of girls attaining an L3 in Maths by the end of KS1.
2. To raise the percentage of pupils attaining an L3 in Maths at the end of KS1 and thereby the overall APS (average point score) for the cohort.
3. To share findings with other teachers within the key stage in order to narrow the gap between the attainment of more able boys and girls in Maths at the end of KS1.

Sarah does not simply want to improve the achievements of her own higher-ability girls but also to *share* her findings with her colleagues, to narrow the gap between girls and boys in the school, and to counter unexplored assumptions about girls' and boys' achievement.

In conducting her action research Sarah may not achieve all her aims. The clue is in the word *aims*: she is *aiming* to achieve but, as we have said before, life is interesting and with good research it can be surprising!

Key concepts 16

Critical incident	An interesting incident or experience that reveals the underlying values of a situation.
Reconnaissance	Taking time for self-reflection on your own beliefs and to understand the nature and context of your general idea, through simple data collection and early reading.
Assertion	An observation unsupported by your own data or research-based reading.
Aim	A specific, detailed description of the focus. There could be one aim, but more often the focus is broken down into two or three aims that appear achievable from our action plan.

Finding literature

More literature is becoming available free at the point of access. Much of it is online. Some of this is from government agencies and is available through free subscription to email lists or through search engines. We must be careful to check that the work we find in this way is sourced by a reputable academic organisation and is not vanity publishing. We should be able to click through to the publisher to check their credentials. If we are not writing up our action research project academically, we may be able to source all the reading material we need free of any subscription, although we may consider that there are benefits to subscribing to an organisation, such as a college or school department or faculty.

If you are enrolled on a course, you should be able to access the provider's library as part of your course fees. If you do subscribe individually, check out the tax status of such subscriptions. You may be able to offset them against tax.

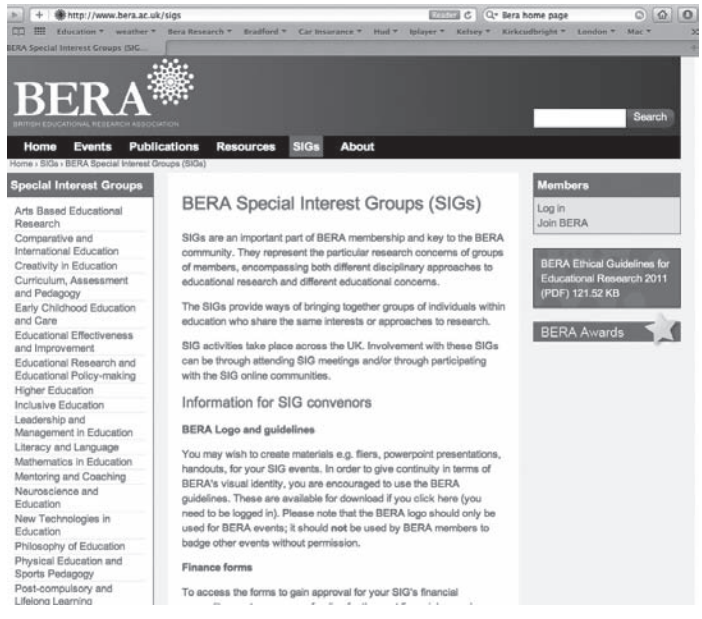
There are different sorts of literature, and their 'status' or 'validity' is considered in the subsection 'What sort of literature?' under the main heading 'Developing understanding of the focus' later in this chapter.

Subject associations

A good place to start is with the publications of subject associations. Subject associations normally produce their own journal. Often these have well-researched articles, some based on pedagogy and some on subject matter. These cover a full range of subjects taught in schools, colleges and higher education institutions. A good place to start is the Council for Subject Association's website, **www.subjectassociation.org.uk**, where you will find a list of links to individual associations.

British Educational Research Association (BERA)

BERA (**www.bera.ac.uk**) is the leading association for educational research. It covers all sectors and has special interest groups (SIGs), such as 'Arts Based Educational Research', 'Early Childhood Education and Care', 'Practitioner Research' (of particular interest to



action researchers), 'Sexualities', 'Teacher Education' and many more. Much of their material is only accessible through subscription, but if we want the latest thinking this is the place to start, particularly with access to back copies of the *British Educational Research Journal*.

On the home page there is a link to the British Curriculum Foundation (one of its founders was Lawrence Stenhouse) which publishes *The Curriculum Journal*, aimed at primary, secondary and FE curricula. There is also a link to 'Peer and Partner Associations' where you will find a list of other UK educational research associations, as well as world, European and American associations.

Other electronic sources

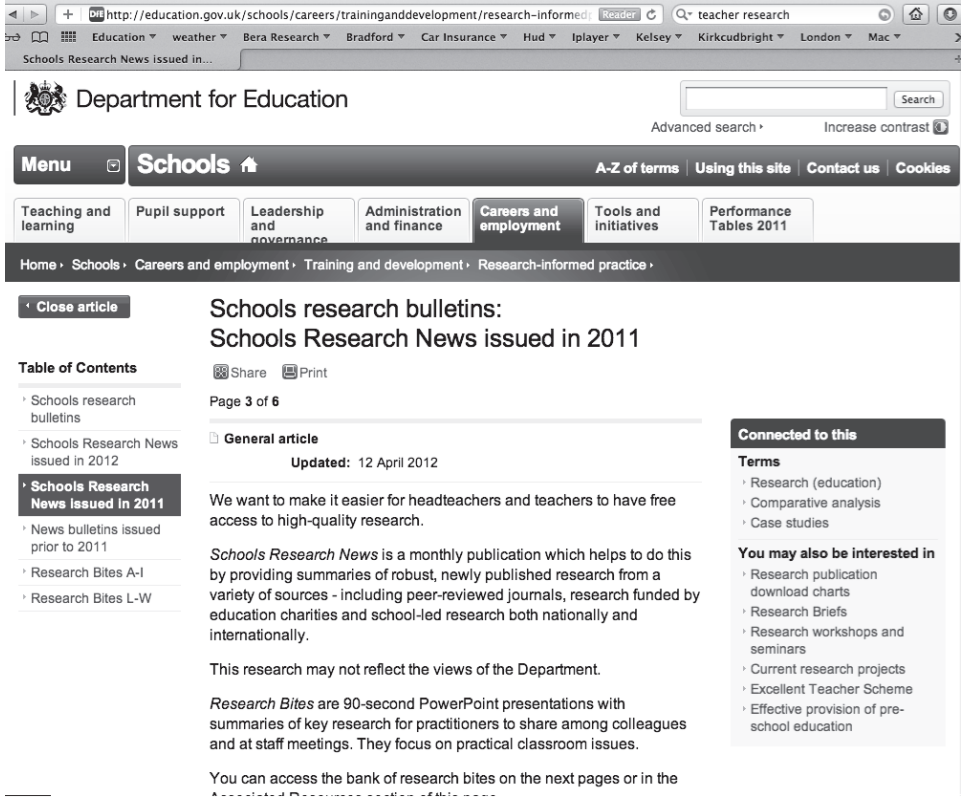
We need to be aware that organisations can change their names and home pages, and even cease operating – sometimes making their resources available to other hosts. The list below is indicative of sources that can be found.

Government departments and agencies

The Learning Skills and Improvement Service has a practitioner research link: **www.excellencegateway.org.uk/research**.

The Department for Education (DfE) is a good source of statistical information: **www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/index.shtml**.

The DfE also has a research bulletin published on this website: **www.education.gov.uk/schools/careers/traininganddevelopment/research-informedpractice/b0058454/schoolresearch12/schoolresearch11**.



The situation on the web and with government agencies is dynamic but always worth searching. The home pages may change with governments, and the emphasis may change with policy, but research materials can often be hunted down.

Professional associations

Membership of a professional association, such as the NUT, NAS, ATL or UCU, has the advantage of access to their journals – often online – and websites for reputable research.

Other online research that is free at the point of access

A number of online research journals are developing that provide free access to research. The major search engines offer older scholarly articles that have been released by journals, and other providers offer more current articles through journals that ask contributors to pay for publication online, making them free to the reader. Some of these journals do peer-review the articles before they are published. This approach to publication may well develop further in the future.

Respected researchers, including those who work as action research collaborators, and academics are increasingly making their work available on YouTube, Facebook, TED and similar platforms. These can be used, but we still need to be vigilant with regard to validity and bias. If we find something exciting on the web, we need to do a little research into the background of the individual and the organisation (if any) and ask:

- Do we know how they arrived at their findings?
- Has their work been peer-reviewed?
- Do they have contact details?
- Do they work for an organisation that is accountable? If so, who are they accountable to? Does anybody fund them? Who are they?
- Does the presenter have a track record of reputable work?

Visiting a library – in person

This is similar to the kind of activity we might undertake at a public library when looking for a new fiction book to read. The Dewey classification is used, which groups books of a similar category together under a classification number, making it more likely that if we browse the shelf around our selection we will find other books or journals that relate to our topic. We may also find leads to related materials, not necessarily uncovered in our electronic search, by looking at any given book's reference list.

Visiting a library – electronically

This is becoming more popular, as it prevents unnecessary visits in person. Higher education libraries, in particular, are becoming more sophisticated online, offering the ability to search the full library and, more importantly, libraries across the country and the world. Resources are not only text-based but also visual. Library catalogues are constantly being refined and developed to include searches of a range of educational databases and electronic books. We may never have to leave our desk to find research on topics similar to our own, from all over the world.

Developing an action research plan

At this stage of the action research process an action plan should be developed. This plan is not written in stone. We can change it at any time. It would be a surprise if it wasn't amended, adapted or even rewritten in the light of experience and reading. An action plan summarises our action research thoughts in a plan at a particular moment that will start us on our action research work, and often includes the steps adapted from Elliott (1991) and Kemmis and McTaggart (1988). Further perspectives on action planning can be found in McNiff and Whitehead (2006) and Menter *et al*. (2011). We also include an extra step: ethics (Chapter 2), although it is important to remember that ethics permeate the whole process of action research. Action plans should be working documents, route maps and progress indicators. They are better if they are brief, can be kept close at hand and can be altered easily. One or two pages in a tabular form can be most useful. An action plan for Sarah might look something like that shown in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 Sarah's action plan

Phase 1: Finding a focus	
Collaborators	Five children in Key Stage 1 Classroom teaching assistant (TA) Advanced skills teacher for Maths Other interested classroom teachers in KS 1
Variables	Resources Pedagogy
Aims	1 Increase the number of girls attaining an L3 in Maths by the end of KS1. 2 Raise the percentage of pupils attaining an L3 in Maths at the end of KS1 and thereby the overall APS (average point score) for the cohort. 3 Share my findings with other teachers within the key stage in order to narrow the gap between the attainment of more able boys and girls in Maths at the end of KS1.
Intervention	This intervention will take place during morning assembly times, for half an hour three times a week, over four weeks. In consideration of recommendations in the literature review (Curtis, 2009), the grouping will be girls-only. In addressing a specific area of Maths, I anticipate these girls will then be able to make the conceptual leap to level 3 Maths-type problems.
Negotiations	Negotiations with the school numeracy coordinator
Data collection	Analysis of **documentary evidence** – National Curriculum for Maths assessments Interview data from teachers/teaching assistant Pupil group interview TA observation data Baseline assessments of levels of attainment
Phases 2, 3 and 4 timeline	
Phase 2 January–February	Collect more data to clarify the issue. Identify further relevant literature and area of focus.
Phase 3 February–March	Negotiate and collaborate with other adults. Identify implementation strategy. Begin writing.