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IDENTIFYING A FOCUS FOR YOUR ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

OBJECTIVES FOR THIS CHAPTER

- To explore the principles underpinning the identification of a suitable focus for an action research project
- To consider the range of evidence about personal professional priorities which might inform the process of identifying a suitable focus
- To consider how a broad focus can be narrowed to form the basis for a manageable project
- To explore some examples of foci which are 'action researchable' (and some which are not).

GETTING STARTED ON IDENTIFYING A FOCUS

In this chapter, we will consider how you might select an appropriate focus for your action research enquiry. As we established in Chapter 1, the key purpose of action research is to improve and develop your professional practice as a teacher, in order to enable the children and young people you work with to make good progress in their learning, and this should be the guiding principle for identifying a focus. As identified by Koshy (2010), this very early and important stage of your study can be challenging, so it is useful to review some key sources of evidence that might inform the process of identifying a suitable focus.

PREVIOUS FEEDBACK FROM OTHERS (RELATED TO THE TEACHERS' STANDARDS)

As you train to teach, and during the early stages of your teaching career, you will receive feedback on your practice from more experienced professionals, which should help you to identify your strengths and some areas for development, in relation to the *Teachers' Standards*. This feedback can sometimes seem overwhelming, as the process of becoming an outstanding teacher is complex and challenging, so it is worth reviewing, in a balanced way, to see whether there are any recurring themes or issues that might enable you to take steps towards becoming a great teacher. If so, it may be that one of these might usefully form the basis for your enquiry.

SELF-EVALUATION IN RELATION TO THE TEACHERS' STANDARDS

Self-evaluation is central to the development of great teachers and you have probably been engaging in some explicit self-evaluation throughout your training programme. In reviewing the *Teachers' Standards* on a weekly basis, you may have identified some that are your natural strengths and some that are more challenging, perhaps because of your previous experience or because some standards are multifaceted and some seem to become more complex the more you understand them. If, through self-evaluation, you can identify one or two aspects of your practice that you would like to improve or develop then you are well on your way towards identifying a suitable focus for your enquiry.

'GAPS ANALYSIS' IN RELATION TO THE TEACHERS' STANDARDS

Another approach to reflecting on your progress towards meeting the *Teachers' Standards* is through a 'gaps analysis'. Over the course of a school experience placement, you may

have the opportunity to gain experience in relation to many of the standards, and you are likely to keep some records of your progress. These can provide a useful point for reflection in identifying those areas of the standards that have proved difficult to gain experience in or in which you feel you have not had much opportunity to make progress. Again, if you can identify an aspect of your practice that is, for whatever reason, somewhat 'under-developed', this may well be useful in identifying a suitable focus for your enquiry.

HIGHER-ORDER TEACHING SKILLS. WITH REFERENCE TO THE TEACHERS' STANDARDS

In order to improve your teaching, you may wish to focus on those aspects of your practice that will help you progress from being a satisfactory teacher to being a good teacher, or from being a good teacher to being a very good teacher. Many teacher training courses make use of grade or level descriptors and these can help you to identify the 'next steps' you should take on your way to becoming the best teacher you can be and, as such, might also form the basis for a suitable enquiry focus.

HIGH-IMPACT TEACHING SKILLS. WITH REFERENCE TO APPROPRIATE RESEARCH RELATED TO THE TEACHERS' STANDARDS

Whether or not your programme uses level or grade descriptors, there is a wealth of research evidence that may be useful to inform your thinking about which aspects of your practice could be developed to have a significant impact on the outcomes for the children or young people you teach. For example, the Black Box reports, starting with *Inside the Black Box* by Black and Wiliam (1990), provide teachers with robust evidence that engaging children in a positive and developmental assessment process has a demonstrable impact on their progress. Similarly, the Education Endowment Foundation (www.educationendowment-foundation.org.uk) provides easily accessible research information about aspects of practice that research suggests are likely to have the greatest impacts on progress and learning. It may be very useful to inform your reflections about identifying a suitable focus for your enquiry by engaging with the available research, so that you can tailor your approach to achieve a great impact on the learning of the children or young people you teach.

A PROFESSIONAL ISSUE THAT HAS PIQUED YOUR INTEREST AND THAT RELATES DIRECTLY TO YOUR PRACTICE

Finally, it may be that there has been a professional issue related to teaching and learning which has piqued your interest and motivated you to find out more and may act as

a catalyst to develop your practice. It may be, for example, that an issue discussed in a training session has challenged your thinking about an area of practice that you had not considered before, such as whether teachers ask too many questions and whether children are given sufficient thinking time to respond to questions. In using an ‘interesting professional issue’ as the starting point for an enquiry focus, it is important that you keep it closely related to your own professional practice.

Remember that action research is not about ‘comparing’ approaches or finding the ‘best’ approach or even ‘proving’ that an approach works. It is about improving your practice through evidence-based analysis about the quality of your teaching and its impact on the learning of the children or young people you teach.

It is sometimes difficult to take action on your targets all at once and a great benefit of action research is that it allows you to focus on developing one aspect of your practice at a time and to evaluate your progress in an evidence-based way.

CRITICAL TASK 2.1

Jane is a School Direct PGCE primary student about to embark on the final school placement of her course. Her grades and feedback from her previous placements suggest that she is doing well with most aspects of her teaching and that she has very good potential as a teacher. However, she has a lower grade related to embedding differentiation into her teaching and the placement report suggests that this should be a target for her future development, to ensure that she maximises learning opportunities for every child.

Based on this feedback, how might Jane go about identifying a suitable focus for an action research project?

NARROWING YOUR FOCUS

Once you have identified an area of your practice that you wish to develop, it is important to narrow your focus to make it both manageable and meaningful (Brown, 2019). As we shall discuss further in Chapter 6, it is easy to gather lots of potential ‘evidence’ about your teaching and the children’s learning which may not be very useful. A narrow and well-defined focus and, as we shall discuss in Chapter 3, clear objectives will enable you to be very clear about what you are trying to achieve and the evidence you need to gather in order to do so, and will keep the project manageable.

Another reason to narrow your focus is because some aspects of teaching that are worthwhile and appropriate for an action research project are also very wide-ranging and potentially enormous in their scope. Take, for example, Assessment for Learning (AfL): this is a very worthwhile aspect of practice to develop as it is widely recognised as a set of

higher-order teaching skills which will have a very significant impact on pupil progress. However, AfL is also huge, incorporating written feedback (either within the lesson or after the lesson), verbal feedback, self-assessment, peer-assessment, use of success criteria, use of plenaries, use of individual or small group learning conferences and more.

It is also useful to consider other ways to limit the scope of your study. For example, you could aim to contextualise your study in a particular curriculum area, such as science or geography (primary), or with a particular year group (secondary). This can be a useful way to ensure that you are not overwhelmed by trying to gather evidence in every lesson you teach, and gives a greater sense of focus within your research. Limiting your study in this way has another important benefit: it may enable you to plan time between each teaching episode for evidence-based reflection on your practice and provide an opportunity for tracking children's progress within a specific context on a regular basis over time.

CRITICAL TASK 2.2

Geoff is an early years practitioner who wants to improve his practice in engaging children in sustained shared thinking. He realises that this is a broad area of practice. How could he narrow this down to make it more focused and manageable?

SOME FOCI FOR PROJECTS WHICH ARE 'ACTION RESEARCHABLE' . . . AND SOME WHICH ARE BEST AVOIDED

Action research, in the way in which we have defined it in this book, is all about the development of personal, professional practice. This means that a project that is tightly focused on the development of a specific aspect of your teaching repertoire is likely to be 'action researchable'. However, when offered an opportunity to undertake 'school-based' research, some new or aspiring teachers start their thinking with some project foci that are not action researchable or some that can become action researchable if given an 'action research (AR) tweak'. So, in the final section of this chapter, we will explore some examples of foci that are definitely action researchable, some that are best avoided and some that can be given an AR tweak to make them suitable foci.

SOME EXAMPLES OF ACTION RESEARCHABLE FOCI

‘ How can I develop my practice in AfL to enable children to make good progress? ’

Although this question still requires some work to tighten it in terms of the specific aspect of AfL and subject or year group context, the central question is definitely action researchable, as it is closely related to the development of an aspect of practice which is likely to have a positive impact on the learning of the children or young people.

‘ I’d like to get better at my questioning, within History, to develop children’s use of evidence as the basis for inferential thinking. ’

This focus is action researchable as it is closely bound to a specific aspect of practice and there is a clear expectation that the teacher’s development in this skill will have a positive impact on the children’s learning of historical skills. This focus might well have been influenced by a training experience that has inspired the new or aspiring teacher to develop their practice in a positive way and to master a higher-order teaching skill.

‘ I want to develop my skills in conversation with reception-age children to promote sustained shared thinking. ’

This example has a clear focus in relation to the practitioner’s professional skills and, again, a well-defined anticipated positive impact on the children’s learning. This focus may have been informed by reference to research about the role of the early years teacher in mastering the art of joining rather than dominating young children’s interactions.

‘ How can I gain a better insight into children’s scientific ideas and make more effective use of these in my lessons to promote scientific learning? ’

This focus is action researchable as it has a clear focus on improving an aspect of practice to have a positive impact on the learning. This teacher may have learnt from practice that drawing out the learners’ initial and developing ideas provides some valuable insights to inform planning and address misconceptions.

SOME EXAMPLES OF FOCI THAT ARE BEST AVOIDED

‘ What is the best way for children to improve their handwriting? ’

This is well beyond the scope of a small action research project. Any focus that starts with the words ‘What is the best way . . .’ is probably inappropriate for action research, as it

suggests the need for a research process that will ‘test’ or ‘compare’ approaches, which is not the purpose of action research.

Does playing Beethoven during independent work improve outcomes in mathematics?



This sounds like a ‘pet project’ and is, again, beyond the scope of a small-scale study. The bigger objection is that this project will not improve the teaching skill of the new or aspiring teacher (beyond knowing how to use the school sound system).

What is the optimum classroom temperature?

There is probably an important issue here that someone should research . . . but not you, not now. Again, while it might be part of good practice to ensure that learners are physically

and emotionally comfortable during lessons, the new or aspiring teacher will not develop any teaching skills through this project and it is therefore a wasted opportunity.

“ If I raise children’s self-esteem, will this have a positive impact on attainment in literacy? ”

This sounds like a very plausible and worthwhile focus for a study but is fraught with difficulty. There is clearly nothing wrong with positively supporting children’s self-confidence, but gathering meaningful evidence about this and finding genuine correlation to an impact on attainment in literacy is likely to prove impossible.

“ Should classroom displays be double or triple mounted? ”

This is just bonkers.

SOME EXAMPLES OF FOCI THAT COULD BE GIVEN AN AR TWEAK

“ Which is the best method for children to do self-assessment in mathematics? ”

In one sense, this is a very reasonable question but it is not, as it stands, appropriate for an action research project. However, with a little bit of refocusing and an AR tweak, this project could become a very worthwhile action research project. In general, in teaching, it’s not *what* you do but *the way that you do it* that gets results, so there is no ‘best method’ for children to do self-assessment. The big challenge for us as teachers, and the factor that is likely to have an impact on outcomes, is how we engage the learners in the process. So, to make this into a worthwhile action research project, you might ask: ‘How can I engage learners effectively in self-assessment to enable them to make good progress in mathematics?’

“ Can circle time impact positively on children’s behaviour in the playground? ”

Again, there is something worthwhile here, but it is not within the scope of a small-scale project. However, if you are keen to develop your practice in leading circle time sessions, this is a suitable focus and you could gather useful evidence about this aspect of your teaching and its impact on children’s social and emotional learning within the classroom.

“ How could I develop a whole-school policy on written feedback? ”

This is clearly an inappropriately over-ambitious project for a new or aspiring teacher. However, if you are keen to develop your own practice in providing meaningful written feedback that has a positive impact on learning then this can easily be given an AR tweak: ‘How can I develop the quality of my written feedback, and increase children’s engagement with it, to improve outcomes in science?’ As we will go on to discuss in Chapter 14, sharing your findings with your colleagues can be a very valuable part of the process and it is possible that this may inform practice, and even policy, in the school more widely.

CRITICAL TASK 2.3

Table 2.1 has some questions for you to consider. For each one, decide whether it is action researchable, is best avoided or could become action researchable if given a suitable tweak.

Table 2.1 Identifying action researchable questions

	Action researchable	Not suitable for action research	Could be given a tweak to make it action researchable
What is the impact of using first-hand resources in history?			
Does wait-time increase the quality of children’s verbal responses?			
Are open questions better than closed questions?			
Do children prefer stickers or stamps?			
Is ability-grouping effective?			
Is laminating resources a good use of tax-payers’ money?			

RESPONSE TO CRITICAL TASK 2.1

Jane would like to develop her approach to differentiation to ensure all children make good progress. As differentiation is such a large area of practice, she would like to focus on just one aspect, such as her use of questioning, resourcing, the matching of tasks to learning, peer-supported learning or the allocation of appropriate adult support. She decides to contextualise her enquiry in science, as this will enable her to gather evidence from one or two lessons a week, to allow time for reflection and development, and to focus on differentiating how children record their learning of science.

RESPONSE TO CRITICAL TASK 2.2

Geoff would like to develop his practice in supporting sustained shared thinking in an early years setting. He decides that the key aspect of his practice that he needs to develop is the way in which he joins in children's conversations: he would like to reduce the tendency he has of 'taking over' and asking too many questions. He decides that he should contextualise his enquiry in children's outdoor learning, as this will give good opportunities for the kind of skills he wants to develop.

RESPONSE TO CRITICAL TASK 2.3

In Critical task 2.3, we asked you to consider some questions and decide whether each one is action researchable, best avoided or action researchable if given a suitable tweak. In Table 2.2, we have presented our own responses to these questions.

Table 2.2 Identifying action researchable questions (revisited)

	Action researchable	Not suitable for action research	Could be given a tweak to make it action researchable
What is the impact of using first-hand resources in history?			Focus on how you can utilise resources effectively to support learning.
Does wait-time increase the quality of children's verbal responses?			This is already widely accepted, so the focus is on how you engage children through your questioning.
Are open questions better than closed questions?			Again, this is already widely accepted but it would be a great focus to develop the quality and impact of your questions.
Do children prefer stickers or stamps?		Best avoided. Answering this will not improve your teaching skills.	

	Action researchable	Not suitable for action research	Could be given a tweak to make it action researchable
Is ability-grouping effective?		Best avoided as this can't be answered in a small-scale project and it would be much better to focus on a key aspect of your teaching skills.	
Is laminating resources a good use of tax-payers' money?		Best avoided. For obvious reasons.	

SUMMARY FOR THIS CHAPTER

In this chapter, we have considered the importance of choosing a suitable focus for your action research project, one that relates very directly and purposefully to the development of a well-defined aspect of your teaching skills. Choose a focus that relates to your own teaching, does not involve conducting an experiment, and that is likely to have a good impact on the quality of teaching and learning in your classroom. Once you have identified a focus, refine it in terms of its scope and context so that it becomes tightly defined and manageable. In the next chapter, we will explore how to define clear objectives to guide the study.

Do:

- focus on an area of your practice you wish to develop
- use evidence about your own development targets to inform your thinking
- use evidence about high-impact teaching strategies to inform your thinking
- narrow down your study to make it focused and manageable.

Don't:

- pursue an area of 'interest' or focus on a 'problem' in the current education system which does not relate to developing your current practice
- set out to run an experiment or to compare approaches or 'prove' that one approach is best
- be too ambitious
- worry about your title . . . we'll sort that out in Part 3.

FURTHER READING

The following sources may also support you in the process of identifying a focus:

Baumfield, V., Hall, E. and Wall, K. (2013) *Action Research in Education*. 2nd edn. London: Sage.

Chapter 3 of this text offers useful guidance in relation to identifying and refining a focus for an action research enquiry.

Hulse, B. and Hulme, R. (2012) 'Engaging with research through practitioner enquiry: the perceptions of beginning teachers on a postgraduate initial teacher education programme', *Educational Action Research*, 20 (2): 313–29.

This helpful article explores the perceptions of student teachers in relation to small-scale professional enquiry projects while on a one-year postgraduate initial teacher education programme. One particularly relevant finding is the view of some student teachers that a study is likely to be more successful if it is very focused, rather than exploring policy constraints that are beyond the scope of a small study by a new teacher.

Macintyre, C. (2000) *The Art of Action Research in the Classroom*. Abingdon: David Fulton Publishers.

This very clear and concise book includes a very helpful chapter on 'formulating a research question' that supports the identification of a clear and tight focus for an action research project.