

Scott Jones
ED REM 7781
Reflection 3

"Every teacher's greatest assets are the students, because without the students, there is no teaching."

In his fifth edition of *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, Bruce Berg discusses the practice of action research in chapter seven. The only critique have about this fact is that he waits until the second half of his book to address a research method that is critical to the education process. Throughout the book, Berg discusses several different methods for doing scientific research in the field of education, which is great, but unless the research can actually transform individual classrooms, the research does little to help teachers become better in the ability to teach children. Not only that, but just because a study, or an educational theory, tells us something about a general population of adolescence, it does not mean that the method studied will actually work in "real-life" classrooms. This is when action research can help transform teaching methods. Every teacher does it, some more than others, but the level of effectiveness depends on the willingness of the teacher to research formally their teaching methods.

An observer needs to look only to the life of a beginning teacher to understand that action research is necessary. The following list outlines the basic teaching method of a teacher just out of college (please note: this is from my own experience and informal discussion with fellow teachers.)

Teaching Year	Amount of effectiveness
Year 1	No effectiveness, just trying to survive
Year 2	5-10%
Year 3	10-20%
Years 4-6	20-40%
Years 7-25	25-75%
Years 26-Retirement	20-60%

While the previous chart might explain the high rate of teacher burnout in the first 3-5 years of teaching, we can learn also other things from the chart. First, action research does occur. Berg defines one aspect of action research as the attempt to merge “theory and book knowledge with real-world situations, issues and expectations.” This is where college training for education falls short. Most things taught in undergraduate education classes at universities comes from books and theories developed in the “ivory tower” and education majors get very little experience in actual classrooms until their student teaching semester, which is still a sheltered environment. It is not until the very first year of teaching does the new teacher learn that “real-life” looks very different from what the textbooks describe. The very fact that teachers who dedicate themselves long-term to the profession will become somewhat effective in teaching their students indicates they learn from their mistakes, develop ideas about what does or does not need fixed and then implement them for the next year is action research at its most basic level. No one can advance to the future and have success without first reflecting on the recent past.

The other thing we learn from the chart is that while no teacher reaches 100% effectiveness, there is a wide range of effectiveness in the veteran teacher categories. Parents can give us examples of a wide range of stories concerning the teachers of their children. These stories range from magnificent teachers and their high level of dedication the students to poor teachers that the only positive thing that can be said about them is that they did not physically beat the kids. Unfortunately, the presence of only one of these bad teachers is enough to undermine the overall effectiveness of the average to great teachers. So, what is the difference between these bad teachers and the great teachers? The answer is simply action research. The great teachers do it and use the

results to drive their own methods from year-to-year. The bad teachers continue to be ineffective because they don't bother to find out the results of their efforts in the classroom are because they have a "god-complex" about their methods, they believe they are great teachers but they have bad students, they are too lazy to bother with the extra effort needed for continued improvement or they just don't care because they paychecks keep coming.

This is so unfortunate because the path to improved teaching does not require much extra effort. In fact, it requires only a little mental effort and a discussion with the students. I am not advocating that every teacher develop action research methods that would stand up to the toughest scrutiny from the best educational scientists in the land. However, one simple strategy based on the ideas of action research would revolutionize teaching around the nation. *Ask the students.* Ask them about what the teaching methods employed by the teacher. By no means should the teacher defer the entire educational process to the students, the teacher should be the educational expert in the classroom, but the students are the customer of the methods. They are the ones that have to benefit from the teaching if they are to progress from being a kid to becoming a responsible, respectful and educated adult. The quote, adopted from a customer service manual, I used to introduce the paper makes perfect sense when the teacher approaches the classroom from this viewpoint. No business would ever survive if they never bothered to ask the consumer about the products sold and how the company could improve it. Therefore, it makes logical sense that no teacher can ever become more effective in the classroom without asking the students for ideas about what works and what could be done to make the class even better for them. Then, the effective action research based teacher adopts

the suggestions from these students and attempts to become even more effective within that school year and the following years as well.

Of course, there is a need for student willingness to participate in the education environment, but my experience leads me to believe that most kids want to learn at school. This is where the great teacher can have the most effect. However, our current structure does not motivate teacher to raise their level of effort in the classroom. Whether or not the teacher is 10% effective or 75% effective, they will still get a paycheck from the district because it is almost impossible to fire an ineffective teacher. However, what teacher wants to have written on their professional tombstone:

“Here was a teacher who, with a little more effort could have been really effective for their students. Instead, they chose the easy way out and are currently more effective in their retirement than they actually were for their students.”