

CHAPTER 1

Introduction to Action Research

Ann, a third-grade teacher, is frustrated. Several of her students fail to do their homework assignments on a regular basis and seem to view homework as an option, rather than a requirement. Being aware of the important contributions of homework to students' achievements, Ann experiments with different kinds of homework, but to no avail. Finally, she seeks the help of the district curriculum coordinator who directs her to a well-known research article about how to help students develop positive attitudes toward homework. Ann is impressed by the article, but realizes that the recommendations offered are not relevant to her particular setting. The situation in her class is more complex and the article does not address the unique challenges presented by her students. She understands that before implementing any new strategy in her classroom, she needs to gain a better understanding of the underlying causes for the homework problems in her class. Ann also concludes that she needs to educate herself by reading more about different approaches to homework.

Armed with the new information she has gathered, she can now design and implement appropriate strategies to improve her students' attitudes toward homework and increase their homework completion rate. She also decides to systematically analyze the results of her new teaching strategies and determine the effectiveness of her new approach. Based on the outcomes of her assessment, Ann will decide whether to continue, modify, or change the new strategies she has been using.

Ann's story illustrates a situation in which teachers face challenging pedagogical issues. Rather than trying to solve the problem haphazardly or blindly following strategies proposed by outside experts, Ann conceptualized a different approach

tailored to her unique situation and the needs of her students. She decided that to improve her students' performance, a systematic approach was needed. Ann designed a new approach to homework assignments and improved her students' learning by following several steps: (1) gaining a better understanding of the reasons for her students' reluctance to complete the homework assignments, (2) increasing her knowledge of the topic of homework, (3) implementing new instructional strategies, (4) collecting and interpreting data, and (5) assessing the effectiveness of her research-based actions. In fact, Ann was engaged in an action research study.

Action research is usually defined as an inquiry conducted by educators in their own settings in order to advance their practice and improve their students' learning (e.g., Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007; Burton & Bartlett, 2005; Menter, Eliot, Hulme, & Lewin, 2011; Mertler, 2017). In education, the terms *action research* and *practitioner research* are often used interchangeably because both types of research emphasize the role of practitioners in conducting investigations in their classrooms and schools. You probably have come across several other labels that describe this type of study, among them *teacher research*, *classroom research*, and *teacher as researcher*. In this book, when we describe action research done by practitioners, we do not refer to teachers only—rather, we include other school members, such as administrators, specialists, counselors, tutors, aides, and others who are involved in education. A growing number of these practitioners have embraced action research and view it as a viable model for modifying, changing, and improving the teaching–learning process. They feel that action research enhances their ability to grow professionally, become self-evaluative, and take responsibility for their own practice. Thus, action research provides educators with a powerful strategy for being active partners in leading school improvement (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Hopkins, 2008; Mertler, 2017; Sagor & Williams, 2017).

We start this chapter with a discussion of educational research and compare traditional and action research, highlighting the important role of educational practitioners as researchers in their own settings. Next, a brief historical perspective of action research is presented, followed by an explanation of the unique characteristics of action research. We end the chapter with a discussion about collaborative and participatory research.

WHAT IS EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH?

Before we explore action research, let's examine what we mean by research and specifically, educational research. Research is an intentional, systematic, and

purposeful inquiry. Using an organized process of collecting and analyzing information, the researcher seeks to answer a question, solve a problem, or understand a phenomenon (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2014; McMillan & Schumacher, 2014).

Educational research is usually focused on studying the process of teaching and learning. Traditional educational research is often conducted by university-based researchers who carry out an investigation of others in the school setting. The ultimate goal of this type of educational research is to develop universal theories and to discover generalized principles and best strategies that ultimately improve the quality of education.

To ensure that the results of traditional educational research extend beyond the local population and are applicable in a wide variety of settings, investigations are typically conducted on a carefully selected sample that represents the population of interest. The researcher is usually an outsider, external to the particular context being studied, and puts an emphasis on being uninvolved, objective, and unbiased (Mertler & Charles, 2011).

From this perspective, educational changes are mostly planned top-down in a hierarchical process. The teachers and other school practitioners are seen as recipients and consumers of knowledge produced by outside experts; their role is to effectively implement the research findings in their schools and classrooms. Thus, according to traditional educational research, there is a separation between theory and action and between research and practice (Mertler, 2017).

PRACTITIONERS AS RESEARCHERS

For many years, school practitioners have recognized the value of traditional educational research and the contributions it has made to the field of education. Much of our understanding of the process of teaching and learning draws on studies done by researchers in the field of education, psychology, and other social sciences. As practitioners, we long for scientifically proven solutions when we encounter the problems that school life presents. When we confront an unruly group of students or are frustrated by countless efforts to motivate an individual student, we wish we had a foolproof method that would allow us to solve our problems. As practitioners, we also realize the limitations of implementing generalized principles and the shortcomings of applying universal theories to our practice. We recognize that for strategies to be uniformly applicable, all students must be viewed as essentially similar. However, the uniqueness of each student and the particular historical, social, economic, and cultural context of each setting belie this viewpoint. As

educators, we know from our experience in the complex dynamics of classrooms, with their unpredictable interactions, that there is no single solution that will produce consistently successful results. What is effective in one situation may not be productive in a different situation, and what works with one student may fail with another (Elliott & Norris, 2012).

Practitioners have grown to recognize the distinctiveness and validity of their own knowledge and have realized that there is no substitute for their familiarity with a particular setting. Understanding students' social and historical circumstances and knowing their past and present successes and failures, fears, and dreams enable practitioners to gain insight into their students' worlds. This subjective insight provides practitioners with opportunities to explore systematically, and with care, multiple options for action, with sensitivity to the "here and now." Thus, action research offers a new relationship among the areas of practice, theory, and research that blurs the boundaries between each of them.

In action research, teachers and other school personnel take on the role of researcher and study their own practice within their classrooms and schools. The research questions arise from events, problems, or professional interests that the educators deem important. Practitioners carry out their investigations systematically, reflectively, and critically using strategies that are appropriate for their practice. Being insiders who are intimately involved and familiar with the context, practitioners are inherently subjective and directly engaged. They are not concerned with whether the knowledge gained through their studies is applicable and replicable in other settings. Their goal is to improve *their* practice and foster *their* professional growth by understanding *their* students, solving problems, or developing new skills. They put their newly emerging theories into practice and carefully examine the resulting changes. From this perspective, changes in education occur in a bottom-up, democratic process, led by practitioners who are self-directed, knowledge-generating professionals (McNiff, 2017). Table 1.1 presents a comparison of traditional research and action research.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

The idea of action research in education is not new. The theoretical roots can be traced to progressive educational leaders from the early part of the 20th century who lauded the role of practitioners as intellectual leaders, and encouraged them to conduct research in their own settings (Noffke, 1997). John Dewey (1929/1984) recognized the central position of teachers in reforming education. He was critical

TABLE 1.1. Comparison of Traditional and Action Research

Traditional research	Action research
The purpose of research is to develop theories and discover generalized principles.	The purpose of research is to improve practice.
Research is conducted by outside experts.	Research is conducted by insiders who are involved in the context.
Researchers are objective, detached, removed, and unbiased.	Researchers are subjective, involved, and engaged.
Educational researchers conduct research <i>on</i> others.	Action researchers study themselves and their practices.
The research questions are predetermined and reflect outsiders' research interests.	Research questions arise from local events, problems, and needs.
Research participants are carefully selected to represent a population of interest.	Participants are a natural part of the inquiry setting.
Generalized rules and practices are applicable in other educational settings.	Every child is unique and every setting is particular.
The researchers' findings are implemented by practitioners.	The action researchers' findings are directly applied to their practice.
Educational changes occur top-down in a hierarchical process.	Educational changes occur bottom-up in a democratic process.
There is a separation between theory and action, and between research and practice.	Boundaries among theory, research, and practice are blurred.

of the separation between knowledge and action and argued that educators need to test their ideas and put their emerging theories into action. He encouraged teachers to become reflective practitioners and to make autonomous pedagogical judgments based on interrogating and examining their practice.

John Collier coined the term *action research* (Holly, Arhar, & Kasten, 2009). Collier, a commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs from 1933 to 1945, initiated community education projects on Indian reservations in the United States (Noffke, 1997). Criticizing government policies that assumed that Native American tribes all have the same needs, he described a form of research that emphasized the specific local needs of each community (Hinchey, 2008). Kurt Lewin, a social psychologist, however, is most often credited as the founder of action research. An immigrant who fled from Nazi Germany, Lewin developed the methodology of

action research in the 1930s and 1940s as a means for democratic social change (Anderson et al., 2007; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009). He argued that action research should be conducted with the participation of the members of the social group who are part of the situation to be changed. The action research model he developed was based on a cyclical process of fact finding, planning, action, and evaluation of the results of the action (Lewin, 1946).

Stephen Corey introduced action research to the field of education in the 1950s. He was a dean and professor of education at Teachers College and worked with schools on studies that involved teachers, parents, and students. In his seminal book *Action Research to Improve School Practices* (1953), Corey contended that educational change will not take place unless practitioners are involved in developing curriculum and instructional practices, drawing on the experiential knowledge they gain through inquiry. However, in the decade that followed, when the emphasis was placed on top-down education, action research was pushed into the background and teachers were again seen as merely conduits of curriculum designed by outside experts (Hinchey, 2008; Noffke, 1997).

In the 1970s, Lawrence Stenhouse, a professor of education in the United Kingdom, coined the phrase *practitioner researcher* to describe teachers who were engaged in action research to improve their practice. Stenhouse (1975) rejected the way in which curriculum materials were typically created by experts and handed down to teachers who were then blamed for the failure of these curricula. He claimed that practitioners should be involved in examining the suitability of the new innovations to their specific students and in modifying materials as necessary. Stenhouse initiated the Humanities Curriculum Project, which encouraged teachers to be researchers who would be engaged in a systematic self-analysis of their school settings, their classrooms, and their teaching (Elliot, 1991/2002; Feldman, Altrichter, Posch, & Somekh, 2018).

Stenhouse's work inspired action research networks, and action research has been growing in popularity since the 1980s in the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Hendricks, 2017). In the United States, the movement has been aligned with the teacher-empowerment movement, and action researchers facilitated the redefinition of teachers as professionals. Practitioners challenged the underlying hierarchical assumptions attached to traditional educational research and insisted that inquiry validates their knowledge and empowers them to become leaders who are involved in the process of making decisions about their classrooms and schools (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

THE UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS OF ACTION RESEARCH

Action research is a distinct kind of research that is different from other traditional educational research. It is *constructivist, situational, practical, systematic, and cyclical*.

➤ **Constructivist.** Action researchers are perceived as generators of knowledge rather than receivers and enactors of knowledge produced by outside experts. From this perspective, practitioners are professionals who are capable of making informed decisions based on their own inquiries and able to assume responsibility for their own research-based actions (Atweh, Kemmis, & Weeks, 2002; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Hendricks, 2017; Pine, 2009).

➤ **Situational.** Action researchers aim to understand the unique context of their studies and the participants involved. The conclusions of these inquiries should be understood within the complexities, ambiguities, and nuances of the particular settings in which their studies were conducted (Anderson et al., 2007; Baumfield, Hall, & Wall, 2013; Holly et al., 2009; Mertler, 2017).

➤ **Practical.** Action researchers choose the questions that they plan to investigate based on their own concerns and professional areas of interests. The results of their studies are immediately relevant to the improvement of their practice (Bauer & Brazer, 2012; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014; Feldman et al., 2018; Marzano, 2003).

➤ **Systematic.** Action research is intentional, thoughtfully planned, systematic, and methodical. The research process has to be systematic in order to produce trustworthy and meaningful results (Burns, 2007; Burton, Brundrett, & Jones, 2014; McNiff & Whitehead, 2010; Stringer, 2014).

➤ **Cyclical.** Action research starts with a research question and ends with the application of the knowledge gained that leads to new questions and a new cycle of research (Johnson, 2011; Mertler, 2017; Mills, 2017; Sagor & Williams, 2017; Stringer, 2014). Following is a description of the six steps involved in carrying out a full cycle of action research and an illustration of the cyclical steps (see Figure 1.1).

- Step 1: Identify an issue or problem the practitioner wants to explore.
- Step 2: Gather background information through a review of appropriate literature and existing research on the topic.

- Step 3: Design the study and plan the methods of collecting data.
- Step 4: Collect data.
- Step 5: Analyze and interpret the data.
- Step 6: Write, share, and implement the findings.

In reality, action research is much more dynamic, fluid, and—at times—messier than is implied by the linear description of the process presented in Figure 1.1. Nevertheless, to clarify the research procedures and enable you to undertake an action research project, we divided this book into distinct and sequential steps. Additionally, the research-cycle process often does not end with the implementation of findings. When the study's results are put into action, you may need to

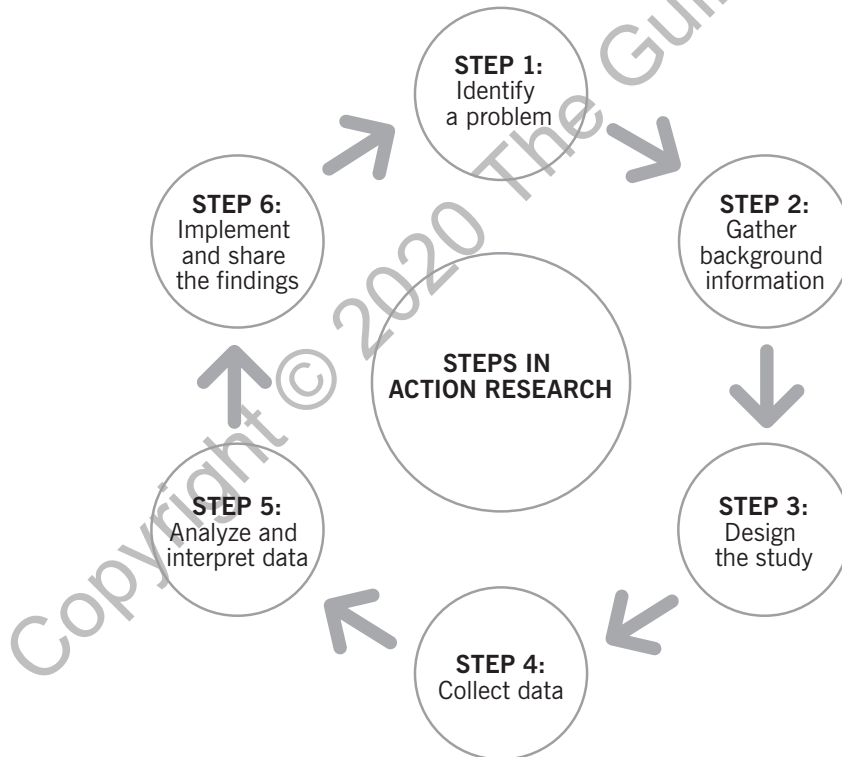


FIGURE 1.1. The six cyclical steps of action research.

assess the outcomes and determine whether the desired changes have occurred or other strategies are required. Thus, the cyclical process continues from one study to the next as your practice improves incrementally.

COLLABORATIVE AND PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

While the characteristics and steps described above are common to most action research processes, there are different subsets in what is referred to as the action research family (McNiff, 2017; Noffke & Somekh, 2009; Putman & Rock, 2018; Rowell, Riel, & Polush, 2017). Two of the most popular of these subsets among educators, besides individual teacher's action research, are *collaborative action research* and *participatory action research*. Like traditional action research, these two subsets also focus on the practitioner as researcher and on improvement of the educational practice. What distinguishes collaborative action research and participatory action research are their research goals and that they comprise a large group of educators who collaborate in achieving these goals. Following is a brief explanation of these two types of action research and a comparison of action research, collaborative action research, and participatory action research.

Collaborative Action Research

Collaborative action research is a systematic, collaborative, and self-initiated research process that is conducted *by* and *for* teams of practitioners (Sagor & Williams, 2017). This form of action research involves multiple members of a school community who come together to investigate a common issue for the primary purpose of improving their school (Pillsbury Pavlish & Pharris, 2012). Collaborative action research advocates claim that considering the complexity of school life, teachers may feel hesitant and unsure about conducting their own individual study. Collaborating with colleagues across the school—teachers, teacher assistants, administrators, counselors, and other school personnel—empowers practitioners to undertake a schoolwide action research project. These practitioner researchers operate as full collaborators in making decisions throughout all aspects of the research process.

The focus of a collaborative action research project is determined by the practitioner researcher's team whose members have an interest in the topic and will be affected by its findings. After choosing the focus of the study, the team members

design the research, and then collect, analyze, and interpret the data. Finally, they reflect on the findings' meanings and decide how to implement them in their own settings.

Having schoolwide practitioners jointly engage in research in their setting allows them to integrate ideas across disciplines and examine practice-driven problems from different perspectives and professional experiences. This fosters a deeper and more holistic understanding of the practical implications of action research for improving the teaching and learning experience in their school. The action research process also contributes to the educators' professional growth, deepens their knowledge and understanding, and expands their skills. Another advantageous outcome of this collaborative process is that it helps overcome the isolation commonly experienced by individual classroom teachers and turns the participants, teachers, administrators, and staff into an empowered and professional community of scholars (Mertler, 2018).

Participatory Action Research

Participatory action research is social justice-oriented action research where researchers and school practitioners conduct collaborative inquiries that address problematic issues in school systems with the goal of changing them for the better (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014).

The focus of participatory action research is on change, promotion of democracy, and equity. Its advocates take into account that teaching and learning are nested within political and social dimensions. They aim to raise an awareness of how political, social, economic, and cultural contexts influence daily school and classroom life. An integral part of the research process are critical reflections about the uneven distribution of power within schools and challenging injustices within educational contexts (McIntyre, 2008).

The researchers and practitioners operate as equal partners throughout the research process. While the researchers have the research expertise, they appreciate the local knowledge of the schoolteachers who are embedded within the school community, partake in its daily educational life, and have built relationships with all its constituencies (Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2016). The research approach is jointly designed by the researchers and teachers who take on active roles in defining the problem, choosing the methods used to gather the data, analyzing the data, and using the findings to plan actions (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013). Participatory action research findings are directly linked to specific actions that aim to solve a particular problem as well as leading to change in the overall educational system.

Through an experience of rigorous research, reflection, and action, participatory action research empowers teachers. They develop a deep and holistic context-oriented understanding, as well as critical awareness about the school system as a whole. They feel like agents of change: producers of knowledge and theory, as well as beneficiaries of practical solutions that contribute to major organizational changes.

Comparisons among Action Research, Collaborative Action Research, and Participatory Action Research

Action research, collaborative action research, and participatory action research share many common features. All three reject the traditional educational research approach where outside experts conduct top-down investigations of the local school setting and the people within it. Advocates of these three types of action research believe in the distinctiveness and validity of teacher knowledge, recognize the value of their familiarity with the local educational setting, and encourage practitioners to research their practice and make changes from within. Additionally, action research, collaborative action research, and participatory action research follow the five unique characteristics that distinguish the action research process—namely, they are constructivist, situational, practical, systematic, and cyclical. However, there are several aspects that are unique to each of the members of the action research family.

Action research is often conducted by individual educators who may or may not cooperate with other colleagues. Collaborative action research and participatory action research inquiries are collective efforts conducted by teams whose members join together to investigate common local problems. Action research and collaborative action research teams involve only members of a particular school setting, whereas participatory action research participants include both local practitioners and outside professional researchers.

Action research is conducted for the purpose of improving the practice of classroom teachers and their students' learning experiences, while collaborative action research extends the research focus to schoolwide issues that cross all grades and disciplines. From a participatory action research perspective, local issues are nested within a wider organizational system and are intertwined with the social and political dimensions of society.

Action research and collaborative action research focus on improving the daily practice of the local practitioners, rather than advancing the theoretical knowledge beyond the specific location. In contrast, participatory action research expects a

commitment to vigorous research for the purpose of solving specific local problems and at the same time advancing knowledge about research methodology and theoretical implications that may be disseminated to the field at large.

Action research, collaborative action research, and participatory action research emphasize the essential role of reflection in the research process. In action research, the emphasis is on awareness of the different aspects of classroom work and on giving a voice to the teacher-self. In collaborative action research, the emphasis is on self and on group reflections that, in addition to heightening self-awareness, give voice to different perspectives and make practitioners mindful of the diverse viewpoints within the school community. In participatory action research, in addition to increasing self-awareness, critical reflections aim to unmask injustice and inequities, and to enhance practitioners' commitment to becoming agents of change within the school and beyond.

In this book, we follow the process of action research with a focus on individual practitioners who conduct studies on their own or with peers. You may adapt the process to your own specific goals if you are carrying out participatory action research or collaborative action research studies. Similarly, you have a choice of method and approaches to your study, whether they are qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods.

THE USE OF QUALITATIVE, QUANTITATIVE, AND MIXED-METHODS APPROACHES IN THE BOOK

The field of action research grew out of various educational traditions and is marked by a heated debate about the nature of educational knowledge and the meaning of research in the context of education. Generally, the diverse approaches to action research tend to be classified under two competing perspectives: the *qualitative* and *quantitative* approaches. However, this book de-emphasizes these traditional dichotomies and moves beyond the theoretical "either/or" choices. Instead, we chose to focus on the practical ways that inquiry can be used to address the complexities of the issues educators face in their practice day in and day out.

The practical orientation of the book also led us to the decision not to align ourselves with qualitative research only, as is often done by many action researchers. Although we recognize that practitioners can never be objective observers, neutral data collectors, or detached interpreters of school practices, we also recognize the invaluable contributions of quantitative approaches to action research. While qualitative research methods, such as observations, interviews, and rich

narratives, enhance the sensitivity of action researchers to the nuanced world of students and others in the school setting, numerical data provide an effective tool to assess, describe, and analyze other aspects of school life. The decision about which methods to use—qualitative, quantitative, or mixed—should be made by practitioners based on the nature of their research questions, the focus of their studies, the particular settings in which the research occurs, and their interests and dispositions. Therefore, in this book, qualitative and quantitative approaches are balanced and are given equal weight.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

1. *Action research* is usually defined as an inquiry conducted by practitioners in their own educational settings in order to advance their practice and improve their students' learning.
2. Action research provides educators with a powerful strategy for being active partners in leading school improvement.
3. Traditional educational research is often conducted by university-based researchers who carry out an investigation on others at the school setting. The ultimate goal of this type of educational research is to develop universal theories and discover generalized principles and best strategies that ultimately improve the quality of education.
4. In action research, teachers and other school practitioners take on the role of researchers and study their own practice; their research questions arise from events, problems, or professional interests that the educators deem important.
5. The goal of action researchers is to engage in a systematic, reflective, and critical study to find out how to improve *their* practice and foster *their* professional growth by understanding their own students, solving problems, or developing new skills.
6. The idea of action research in education started in the early part of the 20th century, when educational leaders lauded the role of practitioners as intellectual leaders and encouraged them to conduct research in their own settings.
7. Action research is a distinct kind of research that is different from other traditional educational research: it is *constructivist, situational, practical, systematic, and cyclical*.
8. There are six steps involved in carrying out a full cycle of action research: (a) identifying an issue or a problem to explore, (b) gathering background information through a review of literature and research on the topic, (c) designing the study, (d) collecting data, (e) analyzing and interpreting the data, and (f) writing, sharing, and implementing the findings.

9. There are different subsets in what is referred to as the action research family. In addition to action research that is conducted by individual practitioners, the most popular subsets among educators are *collaborative action research* and *participatory action research*.
10. There are three major approaches to action research: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. The decision about which approach to use should be made by practitioners based on the nature of their research questions, the focus of their studies, their particular settings, and their interests and dispositions.

CHAPTER EXERCISES AND ACTIVITIES

1. What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of traditional educational research for teachers' daily practice?
 - a. List one or two examples in which traditional research can contribute to your practice or to your students' learning.
 - b. List one or two examples in which traditional research on an issue, although important to you, may have no immediate relevancy for your practice.
2. In your opinion, what are some advantages of conducting action research by school practitioners, and what are some of the barriers they may face?
 - a. List one or two examples of action research conducted in a classroom, school, or other educational setting.
 - b. List one or two examples in which a practitioner may encounter barriers to conducting action research in his or her own practice.
3. What are some of the ideas and themes that have underscored the history of action research from the early part of the 20th century? Do you see some of these themes still evident today?
4. This chapter highlights some of the distinct characteristics of action research. Consider these characteristics from the perspectives of a practitioner, an administrator, a parent, and a student.
5. Review the six steps involved in carrying out a full cycle of action research (see Figure 1.1). Reflect on the issues and concerns that may arise with the implementation of each of these steps.
6. Considering your own practice, situation, and perspective, which of the three types (action research, collaborative action research, or participatory action research) is most fitting and doable? Explain why.

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