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Special Issue: Action Research

Introduction

Teaching is the school factor that has the most influence on student learning. It is for this reason that, continuing professional learning is so prominent in education globally. Professional learning improves the quality of instruction, particularly by developing a culture of reflective practice that challenges educators to ask themselves: what am I doing? why is it important? what impact is it having on the lives of my students and the community? what can I do to improve my practice? James & Augustin (2018) thus posit that action research is a signature pedagogy in teacher professional preparation programmes that enables professional learning of teachers.

Generally, within the literature, one may find a variety of terms describing action research; for example, classroom research, teacher inquiry, collaborative action research and practitioner research. Writers within the field promote practitioner-led action research, based on the philosophy that those who are at the chalk face of education are best positioned to initiate real improvement in such teaching and learning spaces (Elliott, 1996; Mc Lean, 1995; Somekh, 2006; Stoll, Fink & Earl, 2003). Notwithstanding its nomenclature, action research is described as a systematic process which can be done individually or collaboratively. Its intent is to improve practice, engender change in the work space, improve student outcomes and help practitioners better understand what they are doing and, more importantly, why they do it, as it relates to the communities and societies in which they live (Edwards-Groves & Kemmis, 2016; James & Augustin, 2018; Mertler, 2016; Mc Niff, Lomax & Whitehead, 1996; Mills, 2011, Stringer, 2014). Bassey (1999) most succinctly defines and describes what action research entails and what action researchers do:

...action researchers ... are teachers or managers who are trying to make beneficial change within their own workplace. In order to do this, it is first necessary to understand what is happening and to evaluate it, then introduce change and evaluate the new situation. Action researchers are using systematic and critical inquiry in attempts to improve their practical situation (p. 41).

Action research as a process allows teachers/educators to engage in reflection and reflexivity, which can improve their instructional practice, and, as a corollary, student achievement. In this vein, action research is emancipatory (Day, 2005; Hopkins, 2001; Zeichner & Noffke, 2001).

Engagement in action research forms an integral part of the Diploma in Education programme (Dip Ed) at the School of Education, The University of the West Indies, St Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago. The Dip Ed programme is offered to secondary school teachers and administrators. Every year, a team of staff members engages in conducting the Action Research module in the Dip Ed. programme. In addition, all members of staff involved in the programme serve as supervisors of students' action research projects. In 2015, Dr. Freddy James and Mrs. Desiree Augustin, two lecturers in the Dip Ed Programme and members of the action research team, began a research collaboration with a focus on action research. The main initiative was to ascertain how teachers in the Dip Ed programme viewed their experience of learning about action and conducting action research as an intervention for improving practice. Data were collected via a survey among the 2014 – 2015 cohort of teachers on the programme

for all the subject areas, which at the time included, Educational Administration, Teaching of English Language Arts, Teaching of Mathematics, Teaching of Modern Languages, Teaching of Science, Teaching of Information Technology and Teaching of Social Science. The findings of this study showed that the participants were interested in action research, and believed that it could lead to improvement in their practice and their students' learning. Nevertheless, they felt that doing it as part of their everyday school schedule presented challenges because of their workloads. They also felt that although they did a lot of work on their action research projects during the Dip Ed programme, nothing much resulted from it. In response to some of their concerns, Dr. James and Mrs. Augustin decided, in consultation with other Dip Ed members of staff, to find a way to disseminate the research which the students had done, so that others could see and be motivated to engage in action research at their schools. This was essentially the birth of the idea for this current Special Issue on Action Research in the *Caribbean Curriculum* Journal. It is fitting that the studies are being published in one of the Caribbean's most distinguished educational journals, as the work being done within this context on action research is still growing. This Special issue therefore showcases Caribbean-focused research within Caribbean contexts and classrooms, while highlighting the "transfer value" (Ulvik et al, 2017) of action research by providing useful lessons and ideas for school and classroom improvement for the global context.

Staff in the Dip Ed Programme is convinced of the value that action research brings to teachers' ability to reflect on and inquire into their practice, thus providing a basis for empowerment in their schools and classrooms, for improving practice, and intervening in a systematic and rigorous way to improve student learning and achieve the intended outcomes of secondary schooling. Generally, therefore, members of staff, as part of an academic community with a responsibility for producing knowledge, especially within our local and regional contexts, see the value in conducting research into our work practices and environment, and disseminating findings that will accrue to the benefit of our own community, as well as of other academic communities regionally and internationally.

Theme, Coverage and Content

The theme for this Special Issue of *Caribbean Curriculum* is "The use of action research in teacher education". The articles in this issue treat with teachers' experiences of conducting action research in selected areas, and explores teachers' responses to engagement in action research as they sought to improve their classroom practice. Staff and students worked collaboratively to produce the articles which shed light on the theme within their specific subject context, based on the empirical data from particular interventions that were implemented. Additionally, each article provides evidence-based recommendations for teachers/educators in their specific areas, to mitigate the challenges that conducting action research present, and to improve the practice of action research within their own contexts. The Special Issue provides an exciting range of topics, such as leadership in support of teachers' action research; effects of concrete mathematics manipulatives on student engagement and problem solving; empowering teachers to use student-centred approaches to improve student outcomes through clinical supervision; teacher learning in action research in information technology; improving literacy in a geography class; and the impact of literacy strategies on students' motivation and performance in integrated science. The articles are engaging as they use narratives that give voice to the teachers/educators involved in the action research. The Special Issue also enhances the collaborative approach to research and knowledge sharing in the School of Education.

Benefits of the publication

The following are just some of the benefits that will accrue from this publication:

1. The use of action research as a valid and viable pedagogy in teacher education programmes will add to the fund of indigenous knowledge in Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean, and will increase exposure to action research in the international literature.
2. Successive teachers in the Diploma in Education programme will have free access to the online journal as a means of engaging with the experiences of their peers.
3. Advice on the conduct of action research by teachers in classrooms will emerge.
4. A platform for further research into the use of action research will be provided, serving to inform the teaching of action research and the improvement of the newly designed and implemented course as required.
5. There will be an opportunity for staff to increase their publication profile as they develop their career paths.

It is hoped that from the publication of this Special Issue on Action Research, other initiatives can emerge, thus contributing to the expansion of the practice of action research in Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean region.

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