Equity Today: The Region VIII EAC Podcast
Episode 103 – Action Research with Janelle

The Region VIII Equity Assistance Center at Metropolitan Statue University of Denver is guided by its vision to provide, upon request, technical assistance, training, and staff development for school boards, school districts, tribal education agencies, charter schools, and other responsible government agencies. We strive to promote equitable education opportunities and access for all students. We seek to improve equity, access, and participation and high quality, research-based opportunities for all students. We work to reduce disparities between and among groups where they may arise.

Tyler: Hello, and welcome to another installment of Equity Today, the Equity Assistance Center Region VIII Podcast. Today I’m here Janelle Johnson, the newest member of the EAC team, and we’re just going to talk about Action Research! So, welcome, thank you for joining us.

Janelle: Thank you.

T: Let’s just start out with, what is action research, and how does it apply to equity?

J: Action Research is also known as teacher research, and it means a kind of research that is done in a teacher’s own classroom. It’s generally a more qualitatively based kind of research but it also can use mixed methods. It’s a kind of research that was begun in the ‘30s by Kurt Louis and simultaneously with Progressive Education Movement and Dewey, so kind of looking at education and progress and what's going on in real classrooms rather than in laboratory kinds of situations.

T: And that was the Progressive Education Movement in general, using what’s happening rather than what should be happening?

J: That’s right. What it does is it is a way of systematically looking at your own teaching practice. When you’re in your own classroom, you're delivering curriculum, you’re evaluating your students, you’re gathering a lot of data for assessment purposes, but you're not necessarily analyzing that data for research purposes so it’s a way to focus a tighter lens on a particular issue in your classroom and then think about it on a more, a deeper level than you typically would in your daily teaching practice. The best thing to think about is self-reflection as a teacher. Like, you could be looking at issues with your students and in your classroom, but what you’re doing is looking at how you're teaching and how it impacts those issues in your classroom.
T: Oh, OK. So, I guess also, it’s, I feel like in a lot of older methods it was more looking at, “how can we change the students?” And so this is more looking at how we can change the teachers.

J: Yes, that’s true, and you know, as we know, every classroom you have is different. And so it’s not like you can learn something about a particular group of students and then automatically apply it the next year or even another period of the day, so the most helpful thing is to think about our own teaching practice.

T: OK, here in the EAC?

J: Well, I’m thinking about in the classrooms, and so this is just a really brief introduction to what Action Research is. Sometimes these terms can just kind of float around and we don’t really understand what they mean. And this is something that we if there was enough interest in this topic, that we could potentially offer as a web-based course –

T: Oh, like do some Webinars and stuff.

J: - Exactly. It’s been around for a while but for some reason we don’t hear too much about it. The thing is, the current emphasis in research, and especially in educational research, really leans heavily on the large scale and the quantitative statistical data, a very narrow definition of scientifically designed research.

T: Which has to do with standardized testing and things like that?

J: Yes, standardized testing, large-scale high stakes assessments, those kinds of things. So this is definitely alternative to those kinds of research and those ways of thinking about education. But at the same time, it’s still systematic and rigorous.

T: Yeah, it’s using scientific method and all of these things but it’s not purely quantitative data collected once a year.

J: That’s right.

T: Yeah, I always hated standardized testing when I was in school, and I think that’s a big issue with our system is how heavily it leans on all that information to determine success of teachers.

J: That’s right. And in our own classrooms, as teachers, we can, you know, there’s a heavy emphasis on that testing, but if we want to think about, for example ways that we can help our students do better on that testing, then we are getting back to equity issues, and Action Research can be a really excellent tool to help you discover what some of those issues are.
T: Oh, so you could even use Action Research and still stay within the system and still help your students improve within that system, but also explore outside those confines.

J: Yes. So, you look very specifically at an issue in your own classroom and in your own teaching practice. The difference between this and other kinds of research is that it is not generalizable. You’re not doing this study and then saying, “this is how education is.” You’re talking about a very particular setting in a certain time. You’re saying, “in my classroom with this group of students, this is what I’ve found.” And so it’s different than something, I mean, Action Research is published, but the main reason for using Action Research as a tool is to help teachers develop a more critical reflective lens about their teaching.

T: You want to be able to apply that information the next day theoretically if you want to –

J: Exactly.

T: - as opposed to waiting for numbers to be crunched.

J: Yes. It lets you think about things that are already going into your classroom but in different ways than you might have thought about before.

T: Awesome, that’s very necessary. I think critical thinking in general is underemphasized in the classrooms, and I think that if the teachers themselves are critically thinking, that should hopefully be transferred on to the students.

J: Yes, exactly. So when you’re thinking about designing an Action Research study, it’s not necessarily something that you would want to take on just on your own, because it is fairly rigorous, and you have to do a lot of writing. For some reason, then it’s different than just thinking about things. When you go through the process of writing and getting feedback from an instructor and your colleagues and then revising, that’s a really important part of the research process and especially for Action Research. So it’s important that you’re also familiar with the kinds of studies that have been written about the topic that you’re interested in researching, and once you start writing up what you’re seeing going on in your classroom it’s important to remember not to generalize. You’re talking very specifically about what you’re observing in your own classroom and you don’t want to generalize to other classes or to past or future classes, or things like that.

T: Yeah, this is really, um –

J: It’s a case study.
T: A case study, yes. It’s not a systemic solution, it is a solution for individual cases, and so, case study.

J: Yeah.

T: And so, in terms of accessing previous research, are books the main way to go, is there an online database?

J: There’s a combination, uh, you would definitely - there’s a lot of great Action Research books, we have some here in the office that are that we can use as tools. There are articles online. There are journals specifically dedicated to Action Research. Sometimes accessing those kinds of journals can be cost prohibitive, but you can find things. Some are open access. Because people who do this kind of work become believers in the process and they like getting the word out and sharing. So I think that this more so than other kinds of research would actually be pretty accessible to the public.

T: OK, yeah. I’m sure we can tag up some specific websites, but if somebody were to just google ‘Action Research’, that would definitely bring some good resources up for them.

J: Yeah, definitely.

T: And then I guess also, we are, ourselves just a good resource for it.

J: Yeah, and it ties in with some of the other kinds of equity tools that we use here and that we promote in the equity center that help teachers look at their own teaching practice rather than it coming from top down for assessment of the teachers from the administrators or something, these are tools that the teachers can use in their own classrooms.

T: So they can assess themselves before they have somebody else just looking at the numbers and start telling them what they need to do.

J: That’s right. And a lot of teachers that I have worked with in the past have chosen to use this kind of work as part of their in-district professional development plans; there are usually options about what kind of work is done, and sometimes Action Research is included on the list but a lot of people don’t know what it is and they wouldn’t know how to do it. But I can honestly say that, I would say 99% of the teachers I have worked with doing this process of Action Research loved it, wondered why they hadn’t heard of it before, and assured me that they want to continue using it in the future because they found it so helpful.

T: Awesome. Do you have a particular case study in mind we could kind of talk about to see what the issue was, how the teacher went through the process, and overcame some problems?
J: Sure. There was a teacher I was working with recently, she was teaching middle school science, and she wanted to look at the ways they were writing, that her students were writing in science class, and so she was interested in, it was interesting, she started looking at the students work, and ended up looking at her own teaching. And that’s typically an outcome is that you kind of develop these insights about, “oh, I didn’t know I was doing this.” And so she documented different kinds of writing activities she did in science class, and then systematically analyze. And one thing, you do, if you design your study well, you probably ended up with a lot more data than you ended up using. And that’s fine. As you go through the process you make adjustments. And so what she did was analyze several different projects that she had done in her science class, she was looking at student artifacts, posters the students had produced or different works the students had produced, and what she realized was that the way that she was designing her instruction was actually something that could shift or needed to shift if she wanted to see the outcomes from her students that she was hoping for.

T: Yeah, and so it’s not really, yeah it’s not that she needs to change the students, she needed to change something about her teaching. This whole thing sounds like a lot of fun, almost like a, you know, anthropology or archaeology where you go and dig up clues about the past and use them to create predictions about the future.

J: Yeah, it really is. Some other kinds of research, I mean there’s always these kinds of little battles or whatever between what kind of research is better, and there are some conceptions of Action Research being lesser than other kinds, because it’s not generalizable. But other kinds of research have different purposes, so. The other thing that’s great for teachers doing Action Research is, teachers are extremely busy people, and most teachers I know don’t have a lot of spare time to be conducting large-scale research projects, and why would they? So the thing that’s great about these kinds of studies that your teaching is supposed to guide your research. You don’t design a research project and then adjust your teaching; you do the best teaching practices you can in your classroom for the best outcomes for your students and you let your research follow your teaching.

T: And then use what you find out to maybe adjust for, whenever is applicable to start adjusting.

J: Yes, and it’s another thing that uh, the design of Action Research is supposed to flux and change as you go through, because you make your plan, start collecting data, you start doing analysis early on and seeing what you’re finding, you come up with some preliminary findings, and then you’re supposed to adjust the kinds and type of data you’re collecting. And when I’ve worked with some teachers who’ve had some background in other kinds of research, they’ve told they felt like they were cheating, because they were changing their study design. But that’s what Action Research is supposed to do. It’s supposed to follow your teaching. And we as
teachers are always constantly adjusting based on our students’ needs, and so that’s why the Action Research design should also flux and change.

T: It sounds like it’s almost just kind of another method of feedback, so you are not only hearing from the students and seeing from their work, but you’re kind of hearing from yourself, what you wouldn’t have looked at just doing your job.

J: That’s right, that’s definitely true. And so, the wording of your research questions is really key, and again, this is getting kind of technical, this is, would be something that you would have to do in a course, something that we could maybe collaborate with teachers who are interested in doing this, but you know it’s hard to even know where to start. Your research questions serve as your guide. So it’s important to think about research questions that are really going to be helpful to you as a teacher and guide your study so that you get the kinds of data and the findings that will actually be helpful for you.

T: Can you think of the type of questions with the science teacher you worked with was asking?

J: Yeah, she was, things that are, you know you definitely want to avoid yes or no questions; this isn’t like a hypothesis. You’re asking things like, in what ways does incorporating literacy practices into my science classroom impact student achievement?

T: OK, yeah.

J: So it’s very open-ended and descriptive.

T: Yes.

J: And then as you start doing your analysis, you’ll come to, themes become very apparent, and that’s how you start kind of sorting your analysis. And there’s, you know, you have so much data even as a regular classroom teacher you have so much data that you could go in a million directions, and so that’s another reason why you always go back to your research questions and you let them, you know, you design them to be helpful to you, and so you want to keep in mind that you’re answering those questions.

T: Yes.

J: So, you can use different kinds of data for this. I mean, you can certainly use test scores. But the thing is, I think we’ve seen, generally speaking, there’s such an emphasis on test scores now, when I’m working with teachers on this, I want to hear the story. What’s going on in your classroom? What’s going on, generally, with your group of kids? What’s going on with those outliers, those kids who, the kid that’s advanced and he’s bored, or the kid that’s an English Language Learner, or the
special needs student, or something. Where are you outliers? And so you can kind of look generally at your class, and also at the exceptional kids in one way or another and tell their story within the story of the larger classroom.

T: Yeah, I think the criticism you mentioned, that it’s not generalizable, sounds more like the strength of the whole thing, I think, that it’s not a catch-all solution, which has been failing to help a lot of students so far, and so we need a case-by-case basis, at least ideas, of how to start working with kids and stuff like that.

J: And a great way to do that is to get feedback from the students themselves. One of the most effective data collection methods that I’ve used both for teaching and for doing these kinds of research, are blank notecards. And when you, let’s say you are, to go back to the example of that teacher doing the literacy activities in her science classroom, and she puts a particular activity in place and wants to know how students reacted to that activity, pass out blank notecards, you have the students write anything that they liked or that they found positive on one side, anything that they didn’t like or didn’t understand they can put on the opposite side. It’s anonymous, you have honest great qualitative feedback from your students that you can analyze as you’re doing your research. And then you can also start to quantify those things, you kind of group them. So if I have 25 students, and 5 of them made generally positive comments, 20 of them made generally negative comments about that activity, that really tells you something.

T: Yeah, and you want to look at what those five students might have had in common that might have made them write that.

J: That’s right, you begin to look for patterns in the data. And there’s where it is helpful to have the pie charts or the tables or the graphs depending on what the questions are that you’re looking at.

T: Yeah, it sounds like it starts off qualitative and then you can make it quantitative if you need or want to but that’s not a necessity of the study.

J: Definitely. A lot of teachers also typically do a survey or questionnaire as part of their data collection. In qualitative research a lot of times you do classroom observation, but when you’re teaching your own class, it’s pretty tricky to do that because when do you have time to observe. Some people have mentioned the possibility of videotaping and then transcribing, and that honestly is super labor-intensive.

T: Transcribing takes time and sitting down and watching in real-time, takes time.

J: And so I try to steer people away from that as one of their options. Some people do with interviews, but you want to be practical with this because it is on top of your teaching. So you don’t want it to be a burden that really drags you or takes you –
T: Yeah, you don’t want to hurt your teaching or become bitter about the whole thing by the end of it.

J: That’s right, yeah.

T: So then, if someone were to contact us and they were interested in Action Research, what would be our follow up to that?

J: Well, what we could do is, to find out, is this an individual, is this a district wide interest or that kind of thing? And then we could tailor what we were offering to that teacher, that school, that district, but this is certainly something we could put in place as part of professional development plan, or some kind of data collection for the district, for example, or something like that. It would just kind of depend one what the needs of that client were, but we can certainly make this available as a resource, and like I said earlier, it’s really an excellent tool, and I’ve heard very few complaints about it. People end up being pleasantly surprised. It’s a lot of work to do it, but people end up being very pleased with the process and being very glad that they took part in doing this.

T: Yeah, it sounds like if you bit off more than you could chew and got too busy, that would be one situation where you wouldn’t enjoy it, but that’s not at all an issue of the program itself.

J: Right.

T: So, could we, do we offer like general trainings where we could go in and talk to teachers in a certain school and just offer them the information so that they are aware of it?

J: Yeah, well we could certainly provide an overview of what it is for a group of teachers so that they can decide if it was appropriate for them; to do this kind of work, it really does require facilitation by someone who knows Action Research pretty well. Otherwise, it can honestly be kind of daunting, because, how many of us have done research? I mean, it’s not something you do casually and it can feel kind of overwhelming, especially at the beginning. So if you have someone that can facilitate the process, and that needs to be in an ongoing fashion, then, it really can be an excellent tool.

T: Awesome. And, how much facilitation can we provide, do we offer access to resources for facilitation, where do we fall in this?

J: I think it would just depend on a case-by-case situation with the number of people and what their needs were, which is of course particular for each site.

T: Definitely.
J: So if this sounds interesting to anyone, please contact us and we’ll see what we can figure out!

T: Awesome. And of course, there’s parents who might be listening to this. How do you think a parent might go about suggesting to their child’s teacher that, you know, it seems like a sensitive topic to maybe tell a teacher how to teach, but it think it’s a legitimate request that a parent might maybe make, at least, you know, would it just be their job to see if the teacher is aware of it, or inform them about it? Because empowering parents is important, but like I said, sensitive topic, telling your teacher how you want them to teach.

J: Yeah, it would really depend on, I mean, again this isn’t something that you just do lightly. So the teachers would either be doing this as a course through the university for example, or within the structure of the district. A teacher probably isn’t going to start doing this research. So it would probably be something more systematic. Parents could certainly advocate for this, and like I said, a lot of districts do include this on their list of professional development options, but because there’s so little understanding of what it is and how you do it, people just sort of gloss over it.

T: Yeah, totally. So maybe for a parent, this might be something to bring into the PTA where they can then come together and decide if they want to just, get some literature for the teachers, or make a formal request to the school.

J: Sure. Yeah that would definitely be the best route for a parent, you’re right. To do some background research, so that the parent understood it, and then take it to the school or probably the district office.

T: Yeah, a formal organization who can kind of take it through the proper routes.

J: That’s right.

T: OK, cool. Anything else you want to talk about with it?

J: I just, this is something that I’ve been doing for a while now, and I’ve been on both sides of this coin, both receiving this guidance and for a while now providing it with teachers. And it’s been really enjoyable, and for me it’s been really satisfying, seeing the outcomes of the work and the level of writing that the teachers produce, and the level of analysis, and really most importantly, the outcomes at the classroom level are pretty impressive. And so this is something I definitely feel strongly about and am really happy to get to share this with anyone who is interested.

T: Yeah. And, we have a little stack of books here, are there any titles you would specifically recommend for someone wanting to check it out?
J: Unfortunately, my favorite one is no longer available!

T: Oh no!

J: I’ve tried to... it’s an IRA publication, International Reading Association, and it’s out of print and you can’t find it that I’ve found; the last few times I’ve looked I haven’t been able to find it. But it’s by Cynthia Lassonde and Susan Israel, and the title is “Teachers Taking Action” and it’s really a good book. The thing is, when you start looking for literature in Action Research, you’ll find different things. There are some collections of Action Research that’s been done and so you could look at that for ideas and examples, and then there’s other books that provide a guide of how to do it. So those are two different things, and it can be kind of frustrating if you are looking for one and you find the other. So that’s one suggestion I have would be are you looking for a guide or are you looking for actual examples? Because there are both.

T: So “Teachers Taking Action” is a guide.

J: It’s more of a guide.

T: Do you have any other research case studies?

J: This one is really highly regarded, it’s called “Inside/Outside: Teacher Research and Knowledge” by Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle, and this is kind of the go-to academic book about Action Research and used it university programs.

T: Oh, cool. So does it just kind of follow a few cases through the process?

J: Yeah. And there are different sections of the book on, a little bit about a general introduction to what it is and why you do it, and then examples of different kinds of action research that has been undertaken. Teacher research.

T: OK, cool. And that was “Inside/Outside”?

J: “Inside/Outside.”

T: Awesome. Well, great! So, if any of this interested any of you, of course contact us, we’ve got telephone, email, all of this will be at the end. Do you want to give out your direct email in case people want to talk to you about Action Research? Because you are the person in the office in the know about this, it seems.

J: Sure, my email is jjohn428@msudenver.edu.

T: Awesome, and I’ll put that in the show notes, so it’s at least in print. Cool, please don't hesitate to contact us if you have any questions, or if you’re interested in this in your own schools. Any other last thoughts?
J: No, but thanks Tyler, for your time and interest in this rather unknown topic.

T: Yeah, well that’s what we’re here for, is trying to get the word out, so until next time, stay equitable!

T: If you would like to contact the Region VIII Equity Assistance Center, you may do so at our website, metrostate-eac.org, phone 303-556-6065, or via email, at eac@msudenver.edu. Listeners are also invited to join the conversation by following us on twitter @EACRegion8, or by liking the Equity Assistance Center Region VIII facebook page. Special thanks to the band Northbound for the use of their song Forward in this podcast. Thank you.