

MMSD Teachers Author a C.A.R. Book:

Creating Equitable Classrooms Through Action Research

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Who knew that publishing a book would be such a long and interesting adventure?

Back in 2004, when we invited Madison teachers to collaborate on an anthology of Classroom Action Research studies, we supposed it would take six to eight months from start to finish. The task didn't sound too difficult. After all, the studies had already been written and all that needed to be done was a bit of editing, right? Wrong!

Three years and a book proposal, multiple drafts, freshly written epilogues plus additional chapters later, *Creating Equitable Classrooms Through Action Research* has finally hit the bookstores.

Focusing on the Madison Metropolitan School District's Classroom Action Research program, this book highlights the work of teachers who have undertaken equity-based research projects in their classrooms and schools.

The editors, authors, and families celebrated the book publishing with a reception at the Doyle building, where they autographed copies for other action researchers, school board members and district administrative staff.

Creating Equitable Classrooms Through Action Research highlights studies ranging in topic from exploring why high school students drop out to the de-tracking of biology classes. In other studies, effective teaching methods for English Language Learners and examples of culturally relevant pedagogy are explored.

The book also includes chapters that describe the history and implementation of MMSD's Action Research program and its partnership with UW-Madison's School of Education, as well as a final chapter that looks across the studies to share what has been learned about equitable teaching practices.

Written for classroom teachers, school district leaders, staff developers, and educational policymakers, the book provides authentic accounts of teachers passionately engaged in narrowing the achievement gap and addressing issues of diversity and equity.

Ryan Flessner and Ken Zeichner from the UW-Madison joined us in serving as editors and authors, and the 10 chapter authors – who each participated in the district's Classroom Action Research program – include Diane Coccari, Jane Hammatt Kavaloski, Denise Hanson, Kate Lyman, Julie Melton, Quynh Nguyen, Shannon Richards, Erik Shager, Van Valaskey, and Barbara Williams.

For more information about the book, including chapter descriptions, see below.

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Creating Equitable Classrooms Through Action Research

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Description:

Despite the best intentions of reform efforts, educational inequity continues to exist in public schools. **Creating Equitable Classrooms Through Action Research** confronts this challenge and shows educators how they might use action research to raise student achievement and strengthen instructional leadership. Ideal for a first-time action research endeavor or one already in progress, this practical guidebook helps practitioners formulate specific research questions, collect and analyze data, and communicate their findings. Educators will discover:

- Ten action research studies on equity issues in classrooms and schools
- Guidelines for implementing an action research project that supports culturally relevant instruction
- Authentic examples for discussion and reflection

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Royalties

This is a non-profit endeavor for the authors, who have arranged for all royalties from the book to go directly into a Foundation for Madison's Public Schools passthrough fund to support future Classroom Action Research programming.

from the Preface . . .

Every school district in the nation is currently attempting to provide a more equitable and just education to everyone's children within our public schools. Differences among districts in the approaches taken to narrow educational inequalities include such things as narrowing the curriculum for students who have done poorly on standardized tests and focusing on better preparing them to take the tests, adopting curriculum programs that are closely aligned with state and local standards which in turn are aligned to the standardized tests, and providing various kinds of professional development to staff.

The Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD), like every school district throughout the U.S., is working to mitigate the various gaps that exist in education between students from different ethnic, racial and social class backgrounds. One way in which MMSD has attempted to address inequalities in educational outcomes is by investing in the professional development of its teachers and others who work with students on a daily basis so that they can create practices that more adequately address the learning needs of all of their students.

Since 1990, the MMSD has supported a classroom action research professional development program that has emphasized the closing of educational achievement gaps. Unlike dominant models of teacher professional development today in the U.S. which continue to treat teachers as passive recipients of expert knowledge from external or internal consultants despite the recommendations in the literature about the design of effective professional development for teachers, action research as it is practiced in the MMSD and in a number of other places across the country treats teachers as capable of playing active roles in their own professional development and of creating new knowledge about effective approaches to instruction.

The purpose of presenting these ten action research studies to a broader audience is not to suggest that the conditions in the MMSD are exactly like the conditions in other districts and that the learning experienced by these ten teachers is directly generalizable to teachers across the country. Although we think that there is much in these studies that can be fruitfully adapted to other settings in the service of providing pupils with more culturally responsive and powerful teaching, we present them as examples of how a district can design an action research professional development program that enables teachers to make concrete improvements with regard to equity in their classrooms and schools.

Unlike most other collections of teacher research studies which merely lay out a set of studies for readers to make sense of individually and on their own, in the final chapter of this book we look across the ten studies and situate them in relation to other research by academics and P-12 educators about equity issues.

The first and second chapters of the book set the context for the presentation of the studies. Chapter 1 situates the equity action research reported in the book within the various efforts of the MMSD to narrow educational inequalities across the district. Chapter 2 provides background information on the district classroom action research professional development program within which the ten studies were conducted. Chapters 3-12 report the individual action research studies of the 10 teachers. Each action research study includes an epilogue in which the researchers reflect about the impact of their studies on their practice over time. The final chapter looks across the ten studies and situates them in relation to what other P-12 and academic researchers have learned about narrowing educational inequalities.

We hope that both the individual studies presented in this book and the example of a school district investing in its teachers to create new solutions to enduring problems of schooling will provide the basis for dialogue and stimulate the creation of other opportunities for teachers to engage in action research in school districts across the country.

CHAPTER 1 excerpt

CLASSROOM ACTION RESEARCH WITH A FOCUS ON EQUITY

Introduction

With so many excellent resources available on action research, covering the range from theoretical frameworks to understanding the process to illustrative stories from classrooms and schools, why a book on *equity and action research*? The answer to that question goes deeper than simply understanding the principles driving action research or the complex questions around equity that face our schools. The answer lies in the interface of what happens when teachers use the action research process to better understand issues of social and educational equity, in ways that result in significant learning for teachers and students alike.

This book has as its centerpiece the work of teachers who, in the process of facing hard questions about their own instructional practices and the contexts in which they work, have influenced the thinking and instruction of other teachers, other classrooms, and whole schools. While covering a variety of different pedagogical topics, this collection of studies share a common focus on equity, race, and closing the achievement gap. Ranging in scope from a close study of one child and how his elementary teacher adapted instructional practices to ensure academic and social success, to a high school science department changing inclusive practices in an effort to eliminate tracking, these stories reveal the changes teachers made in their own thinking and pedagogy on behalf of their students.

The book is also an opportunity to learn how one district has sustained its action research program since 1990. From the first group of eight teachers to the many hundreds who have participated over the years, the commitment by the Madison (WI) Metropolitan School District to this professional development opportunity is a validation of the benefit to teachers and most importantly, students. The classroom action research process has provided a structure in which to pursue questions of immediate importance to teachers and their students, and we have found that authentic and immediate change can occur when teachers are able to delve deeply into their own practices, experiences, and values. When educators select meaningful questions to explore and generate data on their own work to help them improve what they do, they act as autonomous, responsible agents who actively direct their own pedagogical development.

The Madison Metropolitan School District, like a number of other highly successful school districts, has struggled to increase the academic achievement of both its students of color and those who are poor. Confronting issues of equity and race has been a district focus for many years, and action research is one of many professional development strategies that the district has supported over time as a method for making progress in this area.

In this first chapter, you will learn about the Madison District's focus on issues of equity and how action research fits into efforts to make our schools places where all children can be successful. The second chapter describes how action research fits into the larger discussion of professional development, as well as the District's action research story: how the program is organized, the principles that guide the work, the philosophy of facilitation, and the nitty gritty details of what has made this experience so successful. The ten studies that make up the heart of this book show the range of action research questions that teachers have pursued, how they conducted their research, and what they learned, while the last chapter looks across the studies to identify key equity learning and pedagogical implications for teachers, classrooms, and districts.

This book provides examples of the range of areas that teachers are drawn to study through classroom action research. It is set in the context of a particular community and tells the story of how all of us bring different filters and experiences to the important discussions about how equity and race impact children in schools. As you read through the studies, keep in mind that although we have come a long way in making our schools more humane and equitable for children and families, we still have a long way to go as individuals and as a district. While some of the results may have direct implications for your districts, we hope it will serve as a roadmap for doing your own work on the issues that are of significance to you. Enjoy the journey!

3. Been There Done That: Student Inquiry About High School Dropouts

Book Chapter Intro: A striking example of a teacher engaging students in the action research process, Shager's work highlights the power of a relevant curriculum. Working within an alternative high school setting, Shager draws on his students' experiences and expertise to explore the issue of high school dropouts. Through their research, Shager and his students collect a variety of data (student and teacher journals, survey results, discussion notes, and other classroom artifacts), analyze their findings, and present their research to an assortment of audiences. By encouraging students to capitalize on their own life experiences, Shager's study provides a unique example of how teachers can empower their students to take action.

MMSD Website Abstract: In this study, a high school teacher in an alternative program observes what happens when his 13 seniors inquire about the issue of high school dropouts in their community. This paper describes what happened when the students—all of whom are considered at-risk of dropping out of high school—created a survey, distributed it to student attending various alternative programs, tabulated and analyzed the results, and shared their findings. The teacher researcher also noticed that students were very engaged and viewed themselves as experts on the topic. He observed an increased understanding of the issue of high school dropouts and a desire by the students to take action on the issue in their school community. The student-developed survey, survey results, and student-developed list of findings and recommendations are included as appendices.

4. What Strategies Can I Incorporate So That the English Language Learners in My Classroom Will Better Understand Oral Directions?

Book Chapter Intro: Concerned that her English Language Learners are having difficulty understanding her oral directions, Richards sets out to uncover ways in which she can communicate more effectively with her second and third grade students. By reading relevant literature, observing classroom interactions, and interviewing her students – English Language Learners and native speakers alike – Richards finds that all children can benefit from small changes in classroom practices. Richards' study is unique in that it provides readers with an example of student empowerment, showcases teacher self-examination, and provides practical applications for others who work with English Language Learners.

MMSD Website Abstract: In an effort to increase understanding of oral language directions among English Language Learner (ELL) students in her 2/3 multiage classroom, this teacher set about researching the possible roots of misunderstanding as well as strategies that would aid in the success of all of her students. Because of the high number of ELLs in her class, she was able to gather a great deal of information through observing, interviewing, and reading about her students. After much personal reflections and a trial-and-error method of finding effective new strategies, this teacher's work resulted in a comprehensive list of simple, diverse, and helpful teaching strategies that can be used in classrooms of any age, grade, learning style, or background.

5. Understanding High School Black Male Students' Achievement and School Experience

Book Chapter Intro: Nguyen's study employs an interesting mixed-methods approach to teacher research. By mining the district data-base for information about the success rates of high school-aged Black males, Nguyen uncovers intriguing quantitative patterns in the area of minority student achievement that demand her attention. Utilizing a qualitative interview protocol with a sample of young Black men whose standardized test scores indicate a potential for academic success, Nguyen examines the differences in educational experiences that cause some of these students to be labeled "high achievers" while others struggle in school. Through her research, Nguyen is able to delineate ways in which schools and individual teachers can become more deliberate in their attempts to connect with their Black male students.

Erik J. Shager

Work & Learn Center-Brearly

Original MMSD study:
2004 Equity C.A.R.

Study Descriptors: At-Risk Students , Inquiry/Research , Race/Equity, Social Studies , Student Voice , Technology

Data Collection Methods:

Discussion , Evaluation/Feedback , Student Journal , Student Work , Survey , Teacher Research Journal

Shannon K. Richards

Muir Elementary

Original MMSD study:
2004 English Language Learners C.A.R.

Study Descriptors:

Communication , Diversity/Multicultural , ESL/ELL, Instructional Strategies , Learning Styles , Multi-Age/Looping

Data Collection

Methods: Interview , Literature Review , Observation/Field Notes, Teacher Research Journal

Quynh T. Nguyen

Hamilton Middle (at time of original study)

Original MMSD study:
2001 Franklin Elementary CSR Grant C.A.R.

Study Descriptors:

Diversity/Multicultural , Principal , Race/Equity,

MMSD Website Abstract: In order to gain a better understanding of high school black male students' achievement, this principal intern organized and analyzed existing relevant data and interviewed black male high school students. Data on enrollment, lunch status, EEN status, 10th grade WSAS and GPA were collected and analyzed. In addition, student interviews provided information on factors that support black male students' academic success, as well as factors that are barriers. Three key factors that support achievement include adult support, high expectations and connectedness to school. Copies of district data, interview questionnaire and the 40 assets are included.

6. What Teacher Behaviors Encourage One At-Risk African-American Boy to be a Productive Member of Our Classroom Community?

Book Chapter Intro: In her study, Williams examines the ways in which Davonte, an African-American boy new to the school, is affected by her efforts to incorporate him into the classroom community. In order to meet Davonte's educational and social needs, Williams uses a variety of teaching strategies including differentiated instruction, consistent routines, and "sacred time" in which Davonte receives her undivided attention. Employing a unique narrative style, Williams examines her own philosophies of teaching, acknowledges the importance of knowing every student as an individual, and offers readers a glimpse into the realities of classroom life.

MMSD Website Abstract Davonte had great difficulty in becoming a member of this teacher's second grade classroom community. His academic skills were well below that of other children and he was often angry. In this study, the classroom teacher decided to pay close attention to how she responded to Davonte, structured his lessons, and interacted with him so that she could learn how to shape his experience in Room 102 in a way that he could become academically successful and socially accepted by his classmates. This narrative case study is based on the researcher paying closer attention and being more deliberate and reflective as she perseveres in her quest to make Davonte's school year happy and successful. She points to her successes and failures as she tries to understand the dynamic between teacher and student, and student with other classmates, while trying to be mindful of meeting one child's needs.

7. But Then It Got Real

Book Chapter Intro: Hammatt-Kavaloski, a teacher at an alternative high school, attempts to increase students' engagement with schoolwork, improve students' perceptions of themselves, and positively impact academic achievement by implementing a service-learning project. Through interviews and observations, Hammatt-Kavaloski captures her students' impressions as they prepare and implement lessons to teach sixth graders in a traditional middle school about Malcolm X. This study, an examination of the ways in which the teacher researcher uses reflective practice to develop and improve a curricular unit, provides readers with an example of the ways in which classroom inquiry can lead to sustainable change.

MMSD Website Abstract: Frustrated by poor academic achievement among alternative high school students on a Malcolm X research assignment, this researcher explored what happens when the staff adds a service-learning component. As part of class expectations, students were now expected to: complete a research project about the life, work and influence of Malcolm X, to develop an educational project which demonstrated their knowledge, and to use their project to teach 6th grade students at Sherman Middle. Jane examines the steps that were taken to implement this project, as well as the results this type of teaching had on student attitude and achievement. Student quotes lead to a genuine sense of the impact of the experience on students who traditionally have poor academic achievement. The number of students passing the class increased over the same course-passing rate for prior semesters.

8. We Want to Work With Our Friends

Resiliency , Student Voice

Data Collection

Methods: Assessment Data , Documents , Interview

Barbara Williams

Thoreau Elementary (at time of original study)

Original MMSD study: 2004 Equity C.A.R.

Study Descriptors: At-Risk Students , Inquiry/Research , Race/Equity, Relationships

Data Collection

Methods: Discussion , Documents , Interview , Literature Review , Observation/Field Notes, Student Journal , Teacher Research Journal

Jane Hammatt Kavaloski

Shabazz City High (at time of original study)

Original MMSD study: 1997
Assessment/Learner Needs

Study Descriptors: At-Risk Students , Diversity/Multicultural , Race/Equity, Service Learning , Social Studies

Data Collection

Methods: Assessment Data , Interview , Observation/Field Notes, Survey

Diane Coccari

Blackhawk Middle

Book Chapter Intro: In her sixth grade classroom, Coccari notices several disturbing patterns. Students begin to sort themselves academically and socially, and classroom discussions and activities become dominated by a faction of the boys in the room. Wary of these tendencies, Coccari embarks on an action research project to create a more equitable classroom for all students – many of whom are English Language Learners. Through analyses of videotapes, student work, and her teacher research journal, Coccari provides an engaging account of her attempts to create an educational learning environment that capitalizes on the strengths of all members of the class and requires students to move beyond the comfort of working solely with their friends.

MMSD Website Abstract: With half of the students in the class speaking English as their second language, this teacher observed the diversity of her classroom reflected in how students sorted themselves for academic and social activities. Also of concern was blatant domination by certain boys in the classroom. This study looks at creating a classroom where all students feel free to participate equally and are able to work productively with diverse and changing groupings of classmates.

9. Ribbons, Racism, and a Placenta: The Challenges and Surprises of Culturally Relevant Teaching

Book Chapter Intro: Building on the work of scholars in the area of culturally relevant teaching, Lyman’s study captures the power of attending to knowledge students bring with them as they enter her second and third grade classroom. Capitalizing on conversations she overhears on the playground and in the classroom, Lyman builds a unique curriculum that attends to the needs and concerns of her students while meeting – and often exceeding – the standards those same students are expected to master. By examining recordings of classroom interactions, field notes, student work, and district measures, Lyman shows the power of a curriculum that has direct relevance to her students’ lives.

MMSD Website Abstract: Out of concerns about a particularly challenging group of students new to her school, rose this study of the way culturally relevant teaching looks in action. Each of the curricular units described served to illustrate to this teacher what works (or doesn’t) in the teaching of relevant issues to a diverse classroom. Several incidents emerged as key exemplars of the year’s struggle. The vivid accounts of the risks she took to connect the curriculum to student’s lives, whether on the playground or in their neighborhoods, parallel her assertion in the introduction to the paper that experience results in genuine learning. The classroom stories she tells evoke a wide array of emotions, from awe, to frustration, to concern; they also touch a reader with their attention to triumph amidst difficulty. Student writing samples form the appendix and are sprinkled throughout.

10. Conclusions on Using a Constructivist Approach in a Heterogeneous Classroom

Book Chapter Intro: Valaskey’s project provides a unique account of one high school’s efforts to de-track its Biology classes. Working in tandem with the Special Education department, Valaskey and his colleagues use assessment data, interviews, questionnaires, and student work to justify their efforts in providing equitable experiences for all students regardless of age, sex, cultural or ethnic background, or interest and motivation in science. By analyzing attendance rates, examining responses to attitudinal surveys, and interviewing all actors within the project, Valaskey recounts the successes he encountered while also identifying areas for future study.

MMSD Website Abstract: The biology staff at West High had a vision for all students, regardless of age, sex, cultural or ethnic background, or interest and motivation in science, working happily together in the same classroom while solving problems and pursuing scientific knowledge. At the same time the Special Education Department at West High School had a vision of mainstreaming as many students as possible, with various disabilities, into the regular Biology 1 program. Consequently, several special

Original MMSD study:
1998 Assessment/Health
& Wellness C.A.R.

Study Descriptors:
Community-Building ,
Diversity/Multicultural ,
ESL/ELL

Data Collection

Methods: Discussion ,
Observation/Field Notes,
Student Work , Task
Analysis , Teacher
Research Journal,
Videotape

Kate Lyman

Hawthorne Elementary

Original MMSD study:
1996 Race, Class,
Gender C.A.R.

Study Descriptors:
Diversity/Multicultural ,
Multi-Age/Looping

Data Collection

Methods: Assessment
Data , Observation/Field
Notes, Student Work ,
Teacher Research
Journal, Videotape

Van E. Valaskey

*West High (at time of
original study)*

Original MMSD study:
1999 Teaching &
Learning C.A.R.

Study Descriptors:
Collaboration/Teaming ,
Cooperative Learning ,
Inclusion , Motivation ,
Race/Equity, Science ,
Special Education

Data Collection

Methods: Assessment

education teachers were programmed into the regular Biology 1 classes and during the 1997-98 school year there were no more life science classes; all of those students were incorporated into the regular Biology 1 program. The biology curriculum was changed to a more constructivist and cooperative approach, and special modifications were made for students that need extra help. Attitudinal surveys were conducted, attendance records compared, and grades were monitored between the 1997-98 Life Science classes and students that would have been in Life Science during the 1998-99 school year. Attitudinal surveys were also administered to all students, regular biology teachers, and special education teachers regarding curriculum changes and heterogeneous grouping. Collected data helped provide insight into the effectiveness of the curriculum and grouping changes.

11. Using African American Students' Preference for Working in Self-Selected Partnerships to Promote Math Achievement

Book Chapter Intro: Researching in the area of mathematics, Melton focuses on her fourth graders' struggles in accessing the content and their desire to work in partnerships. Although appealing to her students, these partnerships cause further frustration for Melton, and spur her to further analyze classroom interactions.

Employing a "fishbone diagram" Melton is better able to determine the source of difficulties that continue to arise. Using the insights gained by employing this tool, Melton looks at her data (videotapes, observations and field notes, student work, and her teacher research journal) through a different lens in order to more appropriately address the issues with which the classroom community is struggling.

MMSD Website Abstract: In response to the preference of some of her students to work as partners, this researcher formed math groups for what she referred to in her class as "partner math." Frustrated with the results she was seeing, Julie employed a problem analysis strategy called the "Fishbone" to help determine the source of difficulties. The resulting insight helped her focus on key obstacles and overcome them. While there were some benefits to a more flexible classroom organization during math, new questions emerged from her reflection on the year.

12. Crossing Bridges of Culture, Color, and Language

Book Chapter Intro: Through her work as a teacher researcher, Hanson explores the status of Latino students in her high school Spanish classroom. Concerned that her native-Spanish speakers are disconnected from the school community and perceived as deficient, Hanson attempts to draw on these students' strengths. By "employing" native-speakers as teaching assistants in her Spanish classes, Hanson examines the traditional roles that students typically play in schools and suggests ways in which the knowledge of marginalized student populations can be validated. A powerful example of teaching for educational change, Hanson's study implores educators to reexamine the assumptions and biased practices prevalent in our schools.

MMSD Website Abstract: Increasing diversity in school communities creates opportunities to foster authentic multicultural learning opportunities for ESL and FL students alike. This researcher, a high school foreign language teacher, believes that these too-often untapped opportunities enhance cultural understanding and tolerance and have the enormous potential to aid in the development of Latino leaders. Examining the question, How can I, one Spanish Teacher at West High School, empower Latino students to rise up as leaders?, this paper describes the second year of an innovative action research project that uses Spanish classes to help move Latino high school students into leadership roles and counter the alienation many Latino students feel from their school communities and that is linked to poor grades and high dropout rates. The researcher finds that her program affords her Latino students a well-deserved edge-a sense of pride about what they already know and can do. Quantitative and qualitative research methods were employed, revealing that the program encourages global and cross-cultural connections, community building, and oral communication.

Data , Documents ,
Interview , Questionnaire
, Student Work

Julie A. Melton

*Lincoln Elementary (at
time of original study)*

Original MMSD study:
1995 Elementary C.A.R

Study Descriptors:

Grouping , Instructional
Strategies , Math ,
Race/Equity

Data Collection

Methods:

Observation/Field Notes,
Survey , Teacher
Research Journal,
Videotape

Denise Hanson

West High

Original MMSD study:
2004 Closing the
Achievement Gap C.A.R

Study Descriptors:

Community-Building ,
ESL/ELL, Foreign
Language , Motivation ,
Race/Equity

Data Collection

Methods: Documents ,
Interview, Questionnaire,
Survey , Videotape