An Action Research Journey

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VAPOUR
Amorphous, changing shape constantly, open to possibilities, flights of fancy, new directions, changes

SOLID
Rigid thinking, narrow ideas, trying to fit the research and the questions together, locked into formats

LIQUID
Unstable surface, changing every day, waves and storms, uncertainty, discouragement, staying afloat
Tara and baby

Abstract

Taking the Plunge
In my pursuit of a Masters degree in Education, I embarked on a research project that would address some of the concerns I had about my teaching practice. These concerns centered on a trend I witnessed over several years of teaching grade four in a low-income, urban, elementary school; that a growing number of students every year arrived in my classroom well below grade level expectations and lacking in motivation. My struggle to provide meaningful educational experiences for these students was a source of frustration and despair. I was losing faith in the processes that were in place, such as Individual Educational Plans (IEPs), which were, in many cases, not “worth the paper they were printed on.” I wanted to find a way to motivate my students—no matter what level they were at—to want to learn, and to provide them with tools and skills that would help them reach their educational goals.

With this in mind I began. This process of action research was not without its own frustrations. Things were constantly changing. As I look back on my experiences I find that the metaphor of the changing states of water is the best way to describe the stages I went through. Using my personal journal, with my post-study reflections, I would like to lead you through that process. I found that keeping a reflective journal allowed me to analyse my own growth, pinpoint significant events, and learn from my successes and mistakes. I hope this will be an encouragement to others who are involved in examining their own practice.

**SOLID—Breaking the Ice**

_A time for going beyond established thinking and formats, for breaking the mold, for fitting the research and the questions together._
August 31, 2005—excerpt from research proposal

I am interested in looking at how student attitudes and their involvement in planning their own learning goals will affect their academic growth. By the middle of the year there is a gap between those who are adjusting and ‘getting it’ and those who are falling farther and farther behind. I wonder about the efficacy of IEPs. Am I right in assuming that a lack of motivation, or self-determination, is part of the problem? What else might account for this lack of success? Is there something I, as the teacher, can do to encourage students to be more self-motivated? How can I intervene to keep the gap from widening between high achieving and low achieving students?

I believe that very little research has been done around
the topic of IEPs and how they affect the child they are written for. If the use of IEPs was originally meant to provide a plan for support, to help students reach specific learning goals, I do not see them being used effectively this way. I believe that we leave out the most important part of the equation when we do not include the student in the goal setting and planning of their program. This is what I want to explore.

This study can be undertaken with students on formal written IEP’s as well as students who will formulate their own informal goal-setting plan with my help. The curricular focus of the study will be in reading and writing.

This was my initial foray into forming a focus for my project. I had so many questions to sort out. I couldn’t decide whether to focus on just IEPs (Individual Education Plans) and their use or to focus in a more general way on goal setting. I had to start writing the ethics application so I had to narrow it down somehow.

September 12/05 — first day with final class list. Who are these kids? Have to establish some baseline data—math, reading, comprehension, and writing. I need a place to start. Which kids are on IEPs? I’ll have to analyze the plans to find commonalities. I have 26 students, 13 each in Grade 4 and 5, in a regular classroom.

As I recall that first day, I spent a significant amount of time just observing the students, trying to get a picture of them. I visited the Learning Assistance teacher after class to get a list of the students on IEPs. She said she would get back to me. Well, I wanted to get started somewhere so I decided to just add goal setting as a topic to anything I could.

September 16/05 — students are journaling today about Terry Fox. Many of them expressed admiration for his determination and attitude in the pre-writing discussion. I asked them to define and give examples of how they could use self-determination in school.

This activity went very well. The students were writing heartfelt reactions to Terry’s life and I was impressed with how many of them
wanted to be like him. They had a harder time expressing any personal connection between his example and their lives.

**September 17/05** — Best laid plans!! Wow, I have only two students in IEPs and one other who might need testing. I don’t think this is a big enough sample for what I want to do. Maybe change it to a case study? One of these kids was in my class last year though, so that wouldn’t really work. I wonder if I could get some students from other classes? I’ll have to rethink my research questions, too.

I spent time after school talking to the other intermediate teachers about helping me with my project, but no one was very enthusiastic. I don’t think they really understood what I wanted. I wasn’t sure myself.

**September 18/05** — No one seems keen on letting me bring their students into the study group, so I guess I’ll look at my stuff again. I don’t really want to start from scratch—maybe I can just adjust a bit.

Stayed up most of the night wrestling with this problem. Many scenarios came and went before I came up with something I thought would work, without having to redo all my preparatory work.

**September 19/05 [7:00 am]** — have decided to use the whole class work on just the aspect of goal-setting as a tool to engage kids in their own learning. Pulled out some of the things I looked at earlier and I’m going to use the BC Life Skills. Guess it’ll be a late night again.

**[4:30 pm]** — tried out an initial introductory lesson on goal-setting. Students discussed in pairs and then groups what the words meant and came up with a class definition. It’s pretty good. To work toward something you’ve planned that you want to accomplish. I think this was a good start. Students then wrote a goal for the week in their planners.

After reviewing their planners, I realized that I had a lot of work ahead of me. I, too, had a goal to reach and a plan to formulate. The responses were confusing, as many had not understood what I meant, even though we had worked on it together. Maybe one goal I’ll need to
establish is better listening! For me and the students, active listening will require clarity and time to gain understanding.

**September 24th—cohort class (M.Ed. cohort)**
Rewrote my research questions—explained why I felt I had to change focus—may now have to redo literature review. Have considered framing this as a self-study. New questions—What kinds of teacher practices support student goal-setting? I’ll have to look at some new avenues, like learning styles, multiple intelligences, project-based learning, etc. Wow, I’ve got a lot of work to do. Everyone seemed sympathetic, but I bet they are just glad there not in my position.

I was always very appreciative of my fellow classmates. Their perspectives and questions helped me think more clearly about what I wanted to accomplish. I think having colleagues who are in the same process is really important to any action research—you need someone to bounce ideas off of.

**September 26/05**—completed first draft of ethics review—it’s not where I want yet. I think I’ll have to rethink the place of assessment. What kinds of methodologies will work for my data collection—what should I be looking for as evidence? I need to choose a good curricular focus, too.

I spent this week looking at resources that were available in my District that had lessons on goal-setting. I chose to use a program called the BC Life Skills, which is from the Rick Hansen Foundation and supports the BC Personal Planning K–7 Integrated Resource Package. I chose to use qualitative data: journals, and student assignments as the major components, with my own journal being the third source.

**September 30/05**—have begun to plan the lessons I will use. I want to start the first term with the module “Understanding Oneself” as preparation for the Goal-setting module. I think this will help me become more familiar with the resource and allow the kids some time to become comfortable with the kinds of activities. Had a major issue with a student today about his behaviour and attitude. He is unmotivated and completes very little work and is exactly the kind of
student I want to help by doing this research. That was an unexpected boost, as I still feel all at sea on my project plans.

I came to a kind of epiphany this day. I realized that the reason it’s called action research is because you have to, at some point, just do it. I needed to stop thinking and planning and just get started on the teaching and see where it leads you. Kind of a leap of faith.

October 3/05 —began module today. These lessons are about learning about yourself and how you learn and how to overcome barriers. I spent most of the time explaining vocabulary and leading the class step-by-step through the activity. A half-hour plan became an hour and a half lesson. I probably could have continued but the bell rang. My concern is that I get so little accomplished—will I even have the time to really teach these lessons?

I had to remind myself that I was only getting started. I had as much to learn as the students about how things could work.

October 6/05 Teacher Strike! Very emotional day for everyone. Had a long discussion about what the strike was about. Lots of questions from kids—they really have a hard time understanding this. Tried to do some catching up but really got nowhere.

This was a blow I didn’t expect. I had thought the walkout would be a day or two and wouldn’t really affect my research, but as it kept on I began to get worried that I had lost ground and wouldn’t be able to recoup the time lost.

October 24/05 —I left my journal in the school so I have some writing to do. I had lots of time to rethink my project and my plans for Term two. In class, it was like being back to the first week of school. Spent today trying to figure out what I can catch up on and what I will have to abandon. I was intrigued by the number of students who aren’t really aware of how much time has passed. Only four did any of the homework their parents asked for and I suspect that is because the parents enforced it. If I had any doubts about the need to help
these kids become self-determined—well, this just reinforces what I want to do.

“Once more into the breach.” (was that Churchill?) I felt like it was war that day and I was discouraged and exhausted by the end of it.

October 29/05—cohort class

Looked at methodologies for data collection today and also at some criteria for literature reviews. I’ve decided to change my data collection to include an emphasis on formative assessment. I will use my own journal and field notes, student journals, and student work.

Again, I was encouraged by my colleagues and left class feeling much better about my progress.

November 1/05—I find I have yet again rewritten my questions. I am calling it a self-study, but I’m not sure it will stay there. I have reworded my questions again. What do I do, as a teacher, to encourage self-determination in my students? In what ways can I engage students in setting academic goals for themselves? Will engagement in goal-setting lead to greater academic success?

This was from my ethics application form. I feel that I have now entered a new stage in the process.

LIQUID—Treading Water

A time for negotiating changes and staying afloat despite discouragement and uncertainty.
November 4/05—I am beginning to see some results with students being more focused on tasks in class. Some are actively using goal-setting strategies to plan how they will complete work. Today we had to do DART testing (District Administered Reading Test) which takes about one and a half hours. I went over some of the skills we have covered and explained how they could use them to complete this test. The students were very focused and everyone, except for three students, completed the test within the time limit. Of the three, one is a student who continues to refuse to participate in anything, and the other two have a lot of difficulty reading and only finished part of the test. This is not a test where I could offer assistance with the reading.

I was beginning to see that teaching skills was having some effect on how my students approached their work. Some of the skills becoming evident were students setting time goals, breaking down a task into manageable parts, writing thinking questions to focus inquiry, and recording their progress and “yet to do” lists in their planners. This was very encouraging.

November 7/05—I have been working on expectations for group work and using planning tools to facilitate the
organization of the group. This is showing some signs of success as students are getting work done with a minimum of group conflict.

**November 9/05**—today was our School-wide Write (Every child in the school writes on a prepared topic). I chose not to use the prewriting plan that comes with the test and instead went through the planning and goal-setting procedures again with the class. We did a preplanning web on the board and then I gave the students 3 minutes to draw up a quick plan of their own. During the writing time I observed from the back of the class. There was an atmosphere of getting down to business in the class, and the half hour writing period was silent with no interruptions from anyone. This is the first time I have seen this kind of engagement this year.

I was so pleased with this day’s events. I was seeing a level of engagement I had not expected to see this early in the year, especially with the interruptions we had. I found that I was communicating my enthusiasm to the class, as well, and I felt that I had made some personal connections to individual students that were really important.

Here are some of the students’ comments after I asked how they thought they had done:

“This was fun today. Usually I can’t think of anything to write, but I think I have a really good story.”

“My brain hurts, but in a good way. I think you’ll like my story.”

“I’m glad we planned first—that really helped.”

“Was that really a test? ‘Cause it didn’t seem like a test.”

I was ready to take on some harder skill lessons.

**November 24/05**—I taught the Cornell note-taking method today, which in the past has been a bit of an ordeal. Today’s experience was very unlike anything I’ve witnessed before. Students were full of questions about how this method was going to help them, and when I pointed out how important it would be for them
to be able to gather information this way they were quite willing to try their best. I have been trying to speak individually with students about their own goals at least once every week and this seems to be paying off.

December 8/05—everything seems to be progressing well and I think the class will be ready to tackle the more intense goal-setting stuff coming in January. So far it's been quite general and I haven't really moved beyond short-term classroom stuff. I am looking forward to trying out the lessons and templates in the new year.

I am pleased with how things are going. I think I and my class are ready to begin the actual research project in January. I have had my ethics application approved. I had my administrator discuss it with the class and hand out the permission forms. I have chosen not to know who was participating until after second term marks are completed in March.

January 3/06—finally I can begin to work with the Goal-setting Module. I had to prepare the set of lessons I would use during the next three months and try to schedule them at regular intervals with the two assignments I was planning on using for the application. This proved to be a challenge as there were a lot of other things going on in the school.

January 9/06—today I introduced the first project we will be using to apply the goal-setting skills—I hope to teach the skills side by side with the curriculum so that the students can see the theory put into practice right away.

This will be a Science research project on a topic of their choice. I led the class through a criteria setting session for this project, indicating what I expected and then asking them to set the criteria for meeting those expectations. This took a lot of time and I'm sure I lost a few kids. Will have to revisit this with each student individually after they have chosen their topics.

January 11/06—today I introduced the other project the
students will be doing. This will be to write and illustrate a children’s book.

We looked at samples of books and talked about what makes them interesting and came up with a list of criteria for their books. We also chose a topic that everyone will use. It is “An Unusual Pet.” We established some timelines for the two projects and I indicated that these would be the two main things they would work on for the next six weeks. Working back from the due date, we set times for things like rough copies, completion of research, completion of typing, etc. Every student put this into their planner.

Reviewing each student’s topic and plan was a time-consuming process. I found that I was spending significantly more time than I usually had in the past talking to individual students. I discovered that I had also become more aware of how each child was progressing than I remember from past Science projects.

**January 21st—cohort class**

Questions: Is what I am collecting measuring what I intend it to measure? Is the measuring tool consistent? Could my research be duplicated? Is what I’m doing applicable to others? What are the threats to validity? Not sure I have all this nailed down yet.

I felt like I was in a sinking boat some days and others that I was in the middle of a storm that would not abate. This was the most difficult time for me, as I continued to reform questions and strategy. At this point I think my focus really changed from studying the student, to studying myself. Another “Aha!” I began to realize was that I was the key component in how engaged my students were. I felt a heavier responsibility.

**January 30/06—we have spent a lot of class time on the two projects this month:**

I am finding that there is not a very good transfer between the skill lesson and the application to their work. I find I am giving more and more time in class for going through the lessons and for students to have time to work. Some other things are affecting me as
well—there seems to be an inordinate amount of interruptions in class time—the intermediates are supposed to be doing platooning (levelled reading groups from Grades 4–6), for reading and this takes three mornings a week. As well, there are assemblies, guests and other events that are making it difficult to keep the momentum going on the projects I have assigned. I am also finding that it is difficult to choose what samples of student work will help me answer my research questions.

February 11th—cohort class
We are to write a proposal for the IOP conference in May. I am having a conflict with myself about what to focus on—do I want to talk about the actual project or about the doubts and struggles I’ve had with this whole process “To Teach or Not To Teach Goal-Setting.” I’ve spent more time the past week thinking about my own role and the changes I’ve made in class, so maybe I should focus on that.

I chose to talk about the fluidity of the action research cycle.

February 13/06—although I see some students really keeping up with their plans, many are not. I am frustrated by the materials I have chosen to use. There is an assumption that students know the terminology and have experience in certain types of activities, which they don’t. I have students who cannot read and comprehend the written parts of the lessons. I am spending time trying to get these students to a place where they can use the skills. There is a lot of policing to do during activities—as I coach one group another goofs off until I have time to work with them. I’m not seeing much problem solving within the groups. Both projects are due in a week’s time.

February 15/06—during a class observation of group work time I can see there is a clear division between students who are focussed and engaged with what the task is and those who either don’t get what it is they are
supposed to do or have chosen not to cooperate. The second group is small, but they are making it hard for the engaged group to continue. I finally remove four students from the class and have them work alone elsewhere. This helps those in the class to settle down.

I was not in the habit of removing students from class and this was a departure for me. I didn’t want the four I sent out to be in the hall, so I sent them to other classrooms, where they were required to complete their work before they could return. Two did complete everything and two did a small portion of the work and stayed in at lunch to finish.

February 22/06 — I was delighted to have every student complete both projects by the due date. We had a little in class celebration. The students were quite proud and excited that they had met the expectations. Does this mean that teaching the goal-setting was successful? I think I may have to get some feedback from the kids to see how they felt about it. I’ll work up a short survey for next week. Right now I feel like the biggest effort came from me. I was changing scheduling and booking lab time and rearranging other things so that I could have time to work with each student. I found these conversations valuable and I think it was important for the kids to have the personal connection. Is this an Aha?

March 2/06 — I am at the end of my data collection period and did a small survey with the class today. I wanted to know if they remembered the lessons from BC Life Skills and whether or not they felt that these had helped them with their work this term. I’ve read over the comments part and many of the kids seem to be quite positive about learning these skills. I’ll be looking at this more closely over the next few days.

The survey reinforced what I had already concluded about teaching goal-setting. This was a valuable set of skills and strategies, and teaching them in conjunction with an actual assignment where the skills could be applied, helped the students complete their work at a very successful level. I found that the students still had some difficulty expressing their thoughts but were generally positive about the
experience and recognized that it had helped them.

**March 4th—cohort class**

We brought data sources today to have some practice analyzing. In the process of doing this I began to see a way to re-form my questions yet again and refocus my project on the changing terrain of action research, rather than try to force my data to fit my original, or previous questions. This can now be my topic for the conference—I hope to do a round table and have a good discussion about the teacher experience. This is where I entered the third state in my journey.

**VAPOUR—Floating Free**

A time for letting the research attain its own shape and for moving into new directions.

March 21/06 — it’s time to get serious about what I’m going to do with this data. I now know which students agreed to participate. I am pleasantly surprised to have a really good sample—sixteen students, seven in Grade 4 and eight in Grade 5, with nine girls and 6 boys. They range from my weakest student academically to my highest. I’ve sorted out all the pieces I have for these kids
and am trying to find the common threads to follow. I want to also look at what I did—how do you observe yourself? Can this still be a self-study? I am finding myself lacking in motivation—how ironic is that?

Getting to the end of the project was a bit of a let down. I had masses of data, student assignments, projects, surveys, journals, and field notes and now I had to do something with all of it. The first thing was to find a place to start. Then to decide on a method of presenting my findings.

March 25th—cohort class

Poem from class:

Motivation
Self-determination
How do I get these kids to want to learn?
Want to do well?
Theories galore but no real answers.
Who is working with these young kids?
Goal-setting
Strategies
What’s the best lesson to use?
What will this activity teach them?
Planning
Responding
Is this working at all?
What are the kids doing differently? Better?
Planning
Preparing
What do I need to do?
What change do I need to make?
Worthwhile
Beneficial
What are the next steps?
Will this benefit anyone else?
—G. Jones

We had been talking about different ways of presenting our data and I thought that if I had to sum it up in a poem this would be it. When I
look back on where I was at the start of this journey and where I am now, I am most aware of how revitalized I feel about teaching. Throughout the data gathering process I had a growing conviction that what I was asking my students to learn was important and that they realized this, and were, therefore, willing to work hard. I believe the students understood what goal-setting was and why they should set goals, as evidenced in these remarks:

“...a goal is something that can happen, but a wish is not always going to happen, no matter what you plan.”

“...a wish is something that you can do in your imagination, but not in the real world...a goal is actually attainable.”

“...a goal is for something that you can actually try to achieve, like driving a car, not just something you want to do, like being able to fly.”

**Staying Afloat on a Sea of Change**

During this process, I changed focus from looking at student involvement in their own IEP writing, to personal goal-setting as a tool for increasing engagement, to looking at what role the teacher plays in encouraging engagement in students. My metaphor is water and its changing states—from ice to liquid to vapour. I went from a narrow, rigid idea that ended up not working, to a very fluid state where my questions were changing almost every day, to a place that is quite amorphous and open to possibility. I see many new ways to proceed with this research. I have made some significant changes in my personal teaching style and even in the way I schedule and format my classroom, all intended to build stronger relationships with students and encourage them to be engaged in the learning environment.

Action research did not turn out to be what I originally envisioned, but it led me through a personal journey to a place I feel good about as a teacher. For me, the important thing is not the data I collected, which, in the end, did show that teaching goal-setting to young learners is important and can help them be successful, but the benefits my students will reap from having a teacher who is also constantly learning and growing. For anyone who is embarking on an action research project be prepared for a life changing journey. After many years of practice, I am now becoming the teacher that I hoped to be when I started. This has been an experience that has set me on a path to greater understanding of myself and of my role and function as a teacher. I hope to continue researching my own practice and to continually question the things I do in my classroom, to make sure they are contributing to the success of my students.
About the Author

Grace Jones is an Acting Vice-Principal and Grade Six teacher in the Chilliwack School District. She has been teaching children from K-12 for the past 16 years. She is a mother of two girls and two cats, a rat and a fish, an artist, singer, and interior decorator. She is very interested in imagination education and fostering student engagement through innovative approaches to curriculum delivery, scheduling, and the structure of the classroom space. She is currently involved in a professional learning community with other teachers at her school to actively engage staff and students in collaboration. She has earned her B.Mus., B.Ed., and M.Ed., all at the University of British Columbia.