# Identifying Interventions and Data Sources

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# Identifying Interventions and Data Sources

## (Article #3 – Action Research in Deafblindness Series)

**L. Beth Brady, Saskia Damen, Alana Roy, and Susan M. Bruce**

**This is the third article in the action research in deafblindness series by members of the Action Research Work Group of the Deafblind International (DbI) Research Network. Action research starts with a problem that is translated into a question and looks beyond just proving a particular intervention effective. The goal is to develop new knowledge that will have a positive impact on participants (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). In action research, the intervention, data sources, and even the research question may change. This is not only accepted, but encouraged when moving through cycles of intervention, data collection, and data analysis (Herr & Anderson, 2005).**

### Identifying Interventions

Teachers and practitioners who work in school settings usually have a natural action research team within their educational teams that include various related service providers (i.e., speech teachers, physical and occupational therapists). Educators and other providers may draw upon principles of appreciative inquiry and World Café methodology to frame questions that matter, identify interventions, and generate data sources (Brown & Isaacs, 2005). When identifying potential interventions, a good place to start is to review existing team member data that are relevant to the research question. Teacher-friendly journals, such as *Teaching Exceptional Children* and *Deafblind International Review,* are rich sources of information on best practices. The *Journal of Deafblind Studies on Communication* is an open access journal from the University of Groningen in the Netherlands (http://jdbsc.rug.nl/) that is a good source for potential communication interventions. Social media, like Twitter, are a forum for sharing Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) ideas, especially the hashtag #ATchat. Facebook includes postings about interventions from interest groups such as Deafblind International, DBI Research Network, and Perkins School for the Blind. Websites such as Paths to Literacy (https://www.pathstoliteracy.org) and the National Center on Deaf-Blindness (https://nationaldb.org) are additional sources to support the development of interventions. For evidence-based practice guides review the CEEDAR Center (http://ceedar.education.ufl.edu/tools/innovation-configurations/) documents that address learners with sensory and severe disabilities.

### Identifying Data Sources

Special education and related service providers have so much individualized data; practitioners can look around their work environment and ask: *what data do I already have?* An Individualized Education Program (IEP) may be a wealthy, existing data source (Pine & Bruce, 2010), as are progress reports and other types of student performance data. We cannot stress enough to not overlook data that you collect regularly as a practitioner. Educational teams may have task analyses or checklists with notes about student performance. Practitioners need not fear using qualitative sources such as: teacher

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journals, observation notes, parent/ teacher communication, videotaped lessons, annotated student work product, and photographs. It is recommended that practitioners (and possibly participants) record their thinking and learning throughout the action and reflection cycles (Pine & Bruce, 2010). Surveys are a useful tool for collecting data from staff members and families. Other data sources include interviews and focus groups (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). Action researchers want to make sure questions are being answered from many angles by using multiple data sources. At this point, it may be helpful to consult a handbook on action research, such as Mills (2011) and Mertler (2006). Such sources provide examples of practitioner research that may be helpful to all phases of the research study.

### Examples of Action Research in Deafblindness

The following studies are examples of collaborative and participatory action research in deafblindness.

### Collaborative Action Research Studies

In collaborative action research, adult participants offer their expertise to the research study. In Bruce, Zatta, Gavin, and Stelzer (in press), two teachers, a teacher liaison, and a university researcher studied how interactions between elementary and adolescent students could be improved. Play dyads, involving an older and a younger student, interacted monthly in a structured interaction space. Between videotaped interaction sessions, the teachers and adolescent students met to review videotapes, discuss interaction strategies that did and did not work, and set goals for subsequent

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interaction sessions. In the end, the adolescents gained socialization and self-determination skills, including goal setting and self-evaluation.

Damen, Janssen, Ruijssenaars and Schuengel (2015) involved teachers, caregivers, and parents in defining researchable problems, determining the interventions, and evaluating the interventions. At the start of every intervention protocol, practitioner questions about social interactions with individuals with deafblindness were addressed. Damen, Janssen, Ruijssenaars, and Schuengel (in preparation) used a focus group of practitioners (teachers, caregivers, and one parent) to validate results in a study that focused on training partners to enhance the quality of communication for individuals with deafblindness. The focus group helped university researchers to evaluate the quality of communication in several video clips of participants and to better understand their findings.

### Participatory Action Research

The popular slogan, "nothing about us without us," was used by disability activists in the 1990's, and resulted in greater emphasis on participatory action research methodologies (Charlton, 1998) that respected the lived-experience and expertise of individuals with disabilities, including deafblindness. Bruce and Parker (2012) shaped a PAR study with six young deafblind adults to learn about their experiences becoming change agents. The intervention was a course on advocacy and civic engagement taught in Washington, D.C. that incorporated mentored visits to congressional offices. Data sources included interviews, prompted participant journals, and discussion notes from classroom preparation sessions. Certified American Sign Language Interpreters supported the participation of participant-researchers during interviews as

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well as the accuracy of videotape analysis. Participants-researchers shared that they had positive learning experiences and that the course inspired them to become involved in national and international policy issues.

In the field of deafblindness, we have a unique challenge in conducting participatory action research (PAR) given the variety of communication modalities used by participants/co-researchers. Bergold and Thomas (2012) propose that research involving participants as co-researchers may require new methods of data collection. There is a need for PAR studies that document efforts to ensure the full participation of individuals who are deafblind.

## Conclusion

Action research is distinguished from other forms of research by its cycles of action and reflection. In action research, the intervention may change within a single study. When collecting data, it is important to stay organized and to not take on more than can be handled in a set timeframe (Pine & Bruce, 2010). By always keeping the framing question in mind, data sources will be tightly connected and make for a more focused analysis. Action research conducted with practitioners, and individuals who are deafblind has the potential to expand the evidence-base and availability of high-quality interventions (Bruce, 2010).

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