Being a library media specialist is not for the fainthearted! The role is defined in *Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning* (AASL & AECT, 1998) as encompassing the areas of learning and teaching, information access, and program administration. The leadership role that is embedded in the job is often neglected. *Information Power* encourages library media specialists to be members of the leadership team, organize learning opportunities for members of the learning community, develop curriculum, and work for the advancement of the profession through holding offices in professional organizations. What a job! All of these tasks assume that the library media specialists are leaders and have leadership skills. But leadership is intangible. Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus (2003) indicate that leadership is like love . . . everyone knows it exists but people have trouble defining it. Our responsibility as library media specialists is to develop our leadership skills so the members of the learning community will recognize us as leaders. This recognition will assist us in developing our library media center program and the school program, which both enhance the achievement level of our students. There has never been a doubt; this is our job.

In today’s world of data-driven decision making, the library media specialist must develop the skills to work with his or her staff in using data for program improvement. Understanding the concept and process of action research will prepare the library media specialist to take a leadership role in improving both the library media center and the entire school program.

Action research is the process of reflective problem solving conducted at the school level. This process allows us to identify an issue we want to study to determine if we can change our process or procedures to improve our program. Action research leads to program improvement and increased academic achievement for our students. Daily we are faced with situations that need our attention. These situations can be “fixed” through action research. This research applies to each individual school setting for the improvement of the students in that learning community.

After reflecting on what improvements can be made to strengthen a program, a process is developed to collect data to determine what changes need to be implemented. This research is not like traditional state and national research; action research only applies to the site where the research is being conducted. The results of action research do not need to be adapted to your school; they are about your school.

The action research method of problem solving is a continuous process, a spiral that lets the library media specialist reflect on a problem, analyze the problem through the collection of data, implement an improvement to that problem, and then begin the process all over again—reflect, analyze, and implement (see Figure 1). Using these three processes, the library media specialist will be constantly improving his or her program. Action research can be used for improving the library media center program or analyzing a problem affecting any area of the school.

The process of action research can be accomplished in seven easy steps.

1. **Determine a topic and develop specific questions.**

   Having reflected on the effectiveness of a library media center program, the library media specialist probably already knows what area he or she needs to explore. Elementary school library media specialists may want to look at integration of information literacy and see how they can increase collaboration with classroom teachers or move toward a flexible library media center schedule instead of a fixed one. One possible problem in high school library media centers is the student use of the library media center during lunch periods. In some instances the library media center becomes more of a commons area, rather than an academic area.

   The topic you choose should be one where you have the authority to affect any changes if your research shows that changes are necessary. For example, if you look

   > The results of action research do not need to be adapted to your school; they are about your school.
The process of action research is very effective if conducted in a collaborative manner. The library media center program is the heart of the school; as the library media specialist looks at changes that will improve the program, he or she should work with students and other members of the staff who will be impacted by the changes. Working collaboratively with members of the learning community will enable the library media specialist to analyze the problem, narrow the issue, and develop a research question that can be used to conduct the research. Working collaboratively in this role will also help the other staff members see you, the library media specialist, in a leadership role.

2. Review the literature.
Once your research question is determined, it is a good idea to look at the professional literature to see if anyone else has conducted research on a similar problem. A review of the professional literature will assist in finding related research that gives some background on the topic and helps narrow the research question.

3. Look at the learning community environment.
Before beginning the actual data collection, the library media specialist and the action research team should review the makeup of the learning environment: the school community, the school structure, and the library media center program. Reflecting on these three components helps the team become aware of any background information needed as they begin the project. If the project is explaining how to best communicate with ESL students, then data on the number of students this impacts would be relevant. If the project is evaluating a school-wide program, it would be helpful to understand the dynamics of the staff and the effectiveness of the principal’s leadership. If the project is analyzing an aspect of the library media center program, then all members of the research team need to understand the current library media center program; this is a great way for others to understand more about what you actually do!

4. Collect the data.
The next step in the action research process is collecting the actual data. The most common data collection tools include questionnaires or surveys, interviews, observations, and archival information from the library media center or school records. Each of these tools has good and bad points. The library media specialist needs to determine which tools will be effective in collecting the necessary data.

Questionnaires and surveys provide a significant amount of information in a short time span since the survey can be distributed quickly to a large number of respondents. If the questionnaires are anonymous, then the respondents will be comfortable expressing their ideas. Unfortunately, using a questionnaire does not allow for any follow-up or clarification of the questions. Interviews, on the other hand, require a significant amount of time and coordination of schedules to be conducted. The element of anonymity is lost; the interviewees may not be as comfortable expressing their ideas in a face-to-face setting. Interviews allow the library media specialist to ask follow-up questions and clarify items mentioned during the interview. Observations provide a good assessment as to what is occurring at a definite time period, but the results may be subjective. Archival data, such as student test scores or statistics, can be used effectively if it will support your research question. If your timeline to collect data is limited, we suggest using surveys. Electronic surveys, such as Zoomerang® or SurveyMonkey.com, are effective and easy to use.

5. Check for validity and reliability.
When the library media specialist designs the research study, he or she must triangulate the data. Simply put, this means the researcher uses three different data collection methods to answer the research question. Triangulation of
data supports the research project’s validity (truthfulness of the data collected) and reliability (accuracy of the data). Educators are familiar with the concept of reliability through the standardized tests they have administered to their students. The testing conditions must be the same for all groups taking the test if the results are to be reliable. This concept is also true with the collection of action research data. If the researcher is using observation as a data collection tool, then he or she must account for the items being observed. The terms must be defined so that the researcher will know what “engaged in research” looks like and assure the reliability of the data collected.

6. Organize and interpret the data. After the library media specialist has collected the data, the fun begins! The researcher should organize the data that has been collected from all three data sources and see what conclusions can be made. If the researcher finds the same answer to the question in three different ways through the triangulation, then a clear direction for program improvement can be determined.

7. Implement the changes. Now the time has come for the library media specialist to determine what plan can be implemented to improve his or her program based on the data collected. The researcher should share this data with his or her staff to brainstorm the method of implementing the necessary changes. For example, let us revisit the circumstances of a high school library media center being used as a commons area instead of an academic location during the lunch periods. The library media specialist conducts his or her research through interviews with specific students and teachers, administers surveys to students in the library media center during the lunch periods, and conducts observations of the students using the library media center during the lunch periods. The data shows that the library media center is being misused during the lunch periods and both teachers and students are unhappy with this situation. The library media specialist shares the results with his or her advisory team and, through their brainstorming, they decide to implement a “pass” system to the library media center during the lunch periods. This system will allow the students to come to the library media center when they need to use it for their studies. The library media specialist and the research team will next approach the principal and the entire staff to share the timeline and procedures for implementing the needed changes.

This is action research. Isn’t it a simple process? The example of a library media center during lunch periods illustrates how action research can be used to solve a problem in the library media center. The same process may be used for analyzing a problem occurring in another area of the school community; the steps for conducting the research are the same. In learning how to conduct action research, the library media specialist will be equipped with the skills needed to conduct data-driven problem solving. Using this method of reflective problem solving will illustrate that the library media specialist is truly a leader. This library media specialist is able to conduct his or her own research for the improvement of the library media center and can lead others through the process of program improvement. Staff members may not be able to state what makes the library media specialist a leader, but using action research will enable the staff to see the library media specialist in a leadership role. As Bennis states, “Leadership is like beauty, it is hard to define, but you know it when you see it” (Popper & Lipshitz, 1993, 23.)

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