

# Action Research: The Clean Up Project

by Janice Coughlin

## Setting the scene

*I dim the lights in my classroom and sing, "Stop, look, and listen please. Kindergartners, five more minutes until clean up time." The lights are turned up, and children continue to chat, draw, and build. Five minutes pass, and I again dim the lights. I shake the tambourine and announce, "It is now time to clean up. Please clean up where you're working. Then go help a friend." After the room brightens, I watch as children remain engaged in their activities. As I scan the classroom, I hear myself saying, "You need to put those scissors away . . . It is not time to take out more blocks . . . Please go help a friend." I notice that some children are busy wiping tables, sweeping, and putting toys away while other children wander aimlessly, play tag with a friend, or simply find a seat in the meeting area as they wait for everyone to join them. And once again the same three kindergartners are the last ones cleaning.*

This scene does not describe an isolated incident, but, rather, it is a scene that happened several times daily in my kindergarten classroom. Clearly, clean up time had become a confusing, frustrating, disengaging ordeal. Some children took responsibility for the entire class and cleaned up everything. Others avoided or ignored the process entirely. I exhaustively patrolled the classroom like a police officer trying to get students involved while maintaining order.

Clean up time had definitely become a problem, and my goal was to try to view finding a solution as a positive, empowering experience rather than a negative, hopeless situation. I wanted the process of working on this problem to become more meaningful both to me and to my students. My goal was:

- for students to feel invested in maintaining a clean and organized classroom and for me to feel invested in helping them realize that being organized felt good
- to have the students recognize the impact that their actions could have on their environment and for me to recognize the effect my guidance could have on the children
- to have them feel empowered in a caring, cooperative community and for me to feel empowered by the results that my teaching techniques were producing.

## Action research to the rescue

One way that I decided to try to achieve these goals was to employ a technique I had been learning about in one of my graduate school classes, action research. Action research is "the process of studying a real school or classroom situation to understand and improve the quality of actions and instruction" (Johnson, 2005, p. 21), and that is exactly what I wanted to do. I hoped that by systematically observing the students, collecting data, recording my information, and analyzing the results, I would be able to see this problem through a more focused lens. I hoped action research would help me reach my goal of feeling more fulfilled and empowered when attempting to solve a problem in the classroom.

The first step in action research is to identify a research topic — clean up was definitely the problem! I moved immediately to the next step (Johnson, 2005, p. 49) of tracking down any essay, article, or book that had been written on my problem: clean up time in a classroom with young children. I was able to find some informative research that really inspired me to

I am a kindergarten teacher in a small town on the south shore of Massachusetts. As an undergraduate, I attended the University of Massachusetts and majored in Psychology and English. When I finished, I was uncertain what I wanted to do with my liberal arts degree,



but after some rewarding summers working in recreation programs, I knew I wanted to work with children. My first job was being the assistant director of a for-profit child care. I then decided to work with school-aged children and began teaching in afterschool programs. After five fulfilling years, I decided to go back to graduate school. I attended Wheelock College in Boston and majored in Early Childhood Education. I graduated just last summer. On a personal note, I enjoy beaches and blue skies, coffee, chocolate, movies, and books. And I just got married in December.

consider viewing this problem through a constructivist lens. Those who embrace the constructivist approach “reduce the exercise of adult authority and turn the authority over to the children themselves” (DeVries & Zan, 1994, p. 219). I wanted the children to be active participants in solving this problem. Now I had found a way to possibly reach my other goal of helping the children become more invested in clean up time, using the constructivist approach!

## The process

I needed to come up with a plan that addressed the next step in action research: data collection. What kind of information was important to collect? How would I collect that data? How frequently would I collect this data? (Johnson, 2005, p. 50). I began my action research by simply watching the classroom and taking notes to keep track of which students were participating in clean up, which areas were cleaned up first and last, and how long the whole process took. Once I had collected data for almost two weeks, I reviewed it, and then used it to help me create a timeline to assist the children in working on a clean up strategy.

During our morning meeting time, I decided to share with my students that I was noticing that clean up time was not running smoothly, and in order to learn more about why this was happening I would “act like a scientist” and collect some information. I then told them we would have a discussion about the problem the next day. In the meantime, I asked them to think about how clean up time worked in our classroom.

The following day after our usual morning meeting, I asked the question, “What do you think about clean up time in our classroom?” Instantly, hands shot up around the circle, and children looked eager to share. I began calling on children, and they began to generate a long list of problems. As they passionately spoke, I recorded their responses on chart paper. It was clear that I had struck a nerve. And it was clear that they were in complete agreement that clean up time was a big problem in our classroom.

## Children’s responses

The process of recording their answers took a good deal of time, so we carried our discussion over to the next day. During the next morning meeting, I told the

children I had studied their list of clean up problems and that most of their problems could be put into one of three categories: drawing and writing, block area, and not everyone cleans up. As I shared the categories, I wrote them on chart paper for the students to see. I asked if those three problems seemed to be our biggest challenges. I got a loud, “Yes!” We then decided as a group which problem we wanted to try to solve first. While one or two children had other ideas, the majority agreed we should start with the drawing and writing area. One child offered, “I think drawing because no one ever wants to clean it!” Another child reported that “there’s always a tall pile of paper with no names [left there at the end of clean up time].” I told them to begin thinking of possible solutions to the problem because we would continue our conversation the following day.

The next day, the children shared their solutions — most of which were extremely specific. For example, one girl said, “One rule should be to put the caps on markers” and another child suggested, “Always put your extra paper into recycling.” As the children spoke, I acted as facilitator and let them take the lead. After listening and summarizing what they had to say, the class agreed on three rules for the drawing and writing area:

- put your name on your work
- when you leave, take your work with you
- put materials away in the right place; one student suggested making a poster with the rules and putting that “shiny stuff” on it (laminated).

After laminating and hanging the poster, I began to collect more data to find out if this new solution was encouraging more children to clean up. I found that on average 70% of the children were now helping to clean; but even with our new poster, drawing and writing was still the last area to be cleaned.

These new findings led me to consider other ways to inspire the children to clean. I decided to write my own story about a kindergarten class that was also struggling with clean up time. As I read the story about a happy group of children who loved all aspects of school except tidying up, my class listened intently. One child even shouted, “That’s just like us!” As I got to the last page, I knew they were engaged; there was hardly any squirming or interrupting. My last page read, “The next day we worked hard to create a plan

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for cleaning up the drawing and writing table. We came up with a super idea. It was . . . .” Then I stopped. I told the children they would have to create an ending for the story. They began to giggle and chat, but seemed excited to get started. What they wrote was revealing. Most of their ideas reflected the rules we had already established.

### Students’ suggestions for story endings

After I shared each child’s work, I said that it sounded to me like children were repeating the same solution we had already created. One boy raised his hand and said, “Let’s just try harder!” I asked if everyone agreed, and they shouted, “Yes!”

I again collected more data after we agreed to “try harder” to determine if our solution was working, and this time, to my delight, I found it was. I learned that although the drawing area was still the last area cleaned, on average more than half of the children participated in cleaning up that area while the rest of the other children worked on the rest of the classroom. This meant that a majority of the classroom was working on the most challenging area!

### Conclusion

So did I achieve my goal and help the children feel invested in this clean up problem? Did using action research and the constructivist approach work to make clean up time a more meaningful experience? I believe it did. While my data did not reveal astound-

ing improvements, it did show that after we worked together to redesign our strategy, more than half of the children were cleaning up our biggest problem area: drawing and writing. The data also showed that more often than not, the children were following the rules that *they* created. The information I gathered suggests that the children did recognize the impact their actions could have and that they did want to help maintain a neat and organized learning environment.

And what about reaching my own personal goal of feeling empowered by addressing this problem in my classroom? Well, the students’ behavior during clean up time was not the only thing that became more effective after this project; my teaching did as well. Not only was I able to facilitate a group of students to solve a problem, but I also became a skilled researcher. I felt inspired!

I anticipate encountering lots of problems throughout my career as an early childhood educator. Now I have the tools to identify the problem, to collect and organize data, and to share my findings with the rest of the world.

### Bibliography

DeVries, R. & Zan, B. (1994). *Moral Classrooms, Moral Children: Creating a Constructivist Atmosphere in Early Education*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Johnson, A. (2005). *A Short Guide to Action Research*. Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.

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**Routines can make or break the day:** Coughlin faced the dilemma that teachers often address when they realize it is the transitions of the day that cause the most challenges. She used action research to involve the children in figuring out the solutions. Help teachers explore this powerful idea of including children in addressing classroom issues and helping find solutions.

**Teacher-made supports:** The books and poster written by the children turned into important teaching tools in this action research. Help teachers think about the kinds of supports they might make or construct with children as a part of action research. Then, try them out and see what happens.

### Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers

by Kay Albrecht