

Schools2030 Global Research Partner Report

Action Research and Equity

Effects on Innovative School Environments

School of Education at the University of São Paulo (FEUSP)

Research dissemination brief

February 2025



RESEARCH DISSEMINATION BRIEF

PROJECT SUMMARY

This research aimed to present evidence-based solutions for promoting equity in education, specifically in the field of action research approaches. The project addressed the following problem: **do action research processes in innovative schools participating in the Schools2030 programme in Brazil generate more equitable effects concerning gender, ethnicity, and disabilities among students?** The specialised literature does not provide abundant information regarding the impact of action research in tackling inequalities within schools, an aspect to which this project intended to contribute. The research followed two complementary workstreams. The first included a systematic review of global studies on action research in schools to infer what the quantitative and qualitative evidence tells us about the impact of action research on educational equity. The second workstream produced primary data through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with students and professionals from 26 schools participating in Schools2030 in Brazil, covering different age groups and all regions from the country. For the production of primary data, we also conducted five case studies in schools, using the participant observation approach. These results shed light on the hypothesis that action research processes are associated with changes in the school environment in favour of equitable relations amongst students of different **genders, sexual orientations, ethnicities, and those with disabilities**. The knowledge produced is informative for educational leaders in the field of teacher training. The project aimed to answer some research questions, among which are the following :

- What does the best available evidence tell us about the relationship between action research and educational equity?
- How does the action research approach impact teacher training in favour of educational equity?
- Does action research help teachers to identify and support learner variability and learning differences?
- What are the implications for policymaking in terms of improving educational equity through data-driven, teacher-led action research?

RESEARCH TEAM

This project is led by researchers from [The School of Education at the University of São Paulo \(FEUSP\)](#) and five elementary schools¹. These organisations participate in the Schools2030 programme. Members of the

¹ Dr Elie Ghanem; Dr Douglas Ladislau; Fernando Tavares; Bruna Chung; Dr Taluana Torres, (Faculdade de Educação da Universidade de São Paulo); Leila Rocha (Dreams School), Anna Carolina Jardim (São Paulo Federal Institute), Juvencio Cardoso (Eeno Hiepole Baniwa Indigenous School), Mila Zeiger Pedroso (Antonio C. Ramalho School), Lucas Delfino (Cieja Campo Limpo).

RESEARCH DISSEMINATION BRIEF

university and schools worked together in research activities such as carrying out bibliographic studies, developing instruments for data collection, intermediating with members of central bodies of public school systems, collecting data, and disseminating results. The schools that made up the Research Team are:

- **Antonio Coelho Ramalho School:** in the urban periphery of Ibiúna (São Paulo), it has been breaking with old paradigms towards building a democratic school and offering quality education for all. *Age group: 6-10 years.*
- **Baniwa Eeno Hiepole School:** in an Amazonian indigenous community, it has been building a new understanding of its role, assuming in its formative role the cultural needs of the ethnic group and its belonging to the territory as well as the recognition and strengthening of local knowledge. *Age group: 6-14 years.*
- **Dream School (“Escola dos Sonhos”):** in the rural region of Bananeiras (Paraíba), it embraces libertarian education principles, aiming to integrate its physical space with the rural environment. It has eliminated grade levels, traditional classes, and exams, opting for a curriculum centered on research projects. *Age group: 6-14 years.*
- **São Paulo Federal Institute - São Roque campus:** in a small town in the interior of São Paulo, it promotes teaching, research, and extension activities in an integrated manner. Cooperative learning is the guiding principle of their work. *Age group: 15-17 years.*
- **CIEJA Campo Limpo:** It educates young people and adults from the periphery of São Paulo based on Paulo Freire's conceptions. *Age group: 18-80 years.*



The composition of the research team is diverse and interdisciplinary, including scholars from large urban centres, rural regions and indigenous Amazonian communities. There is gender balance and ethnic-racial diversity, with white, Afro-Brazilian, and indigenous team members.

In a school engaged in action research with a focus on racial/ethnic equity, a child embraces curiosity and a deep connection to their cultural roots

RESEARCH DISSEMINATION BRIEF

METHODS

Paulo Freire (1998) and Thiollent (1986) are great references in action research, an approach with an essential epistemological and methodological plurality, supported by participatory processes of design, data collection, and interpretation of results, and oriented towards social change. It provides a framework for those involved in problematic situations, in which professional researchers and participants learn together, subjecting the various points of view to triangulation of data and interpretations.

Schools2030 is carried out in Brazil as an action research effort, in which the university creates and strengthens opportunities for those involved to improve their knowledge, expanding their influence in the environments where they live. While requiring considerable improvisation (Beaulieu 2013), the proposal offers a way to strengthen the rigour and range of scientific activities.

In **Workstream 1**, the investigation mapped the global literature on the relationship between action research and educational equity. This production was analysed according to the types of evidence and its potential concerning this relationship in non-academic learning.

In **Workstream 2**, the production of primary data was carried out by the research team. The investigation involved 26 Brazilian schools that are part of Schools2030, coming from all regions of the country and working in different age groups. Contributions from the sociology of education and especially action research (Tripp 2005) guided the analysis. The activities included:

- A survey with teachers from schools participating in Schools2030 in Brazil on changes in perspectives regarding equity, and solutions to overcome inequalities;
- Selection of the teachers and students participating in Schools2030, for semi-structured interviews about changes in their know-how concerning educational equity;
- Mapping and analysis of teacher training policies developed to address educational inequalities by government agencies responsible for the five participating schools
- Participant observation in the five schools of the research team members;
- Collection and systematisation of opinions from teachers, administrators, students, and family members on learning expressed as equity in gender relations, inter-ethnic relations, and relations between students with and without disabilities; and occurrence of

RESEARCH DISSEMINATION BRIEF

significant change in the development of these learnings during and after their participation in the action research process.

KEY FINDINGS

The research team initially expressed reservations regarding the potential for action research to significantly impact educational equity. These concerns stemmed from several factors: the novelty of action research in these schools, the demanding working conditions that prioritised implementation over reflection and inquiry, and the inherently gradual nature of the approach, which limited the possibility of substantial progress within the two-year timeframe. Despite these concerns, the findings confirmed that action research contributes to greater equity in school relationships, although its effects are still subtle in the early stages. The projects helped raise awareness about equity, form equity committees, and create opportunities for reflection on daily practices. However, deeper changes in student relationships and more substantial progress are still needed.

Specific Aspects of Action Research and its Impact on Educational Equity

Action research is distinctive for involving participants within the studied environment as researchers, which increases student engagement and promotes a sense of belonging. In the Schools2030 programme in Brazil, equity is seen as a combination of behaviours and consciousness, such as self-awareness, creativity, collaboration, empathy, and leadership.

Typically, action research groups are made up of teachers who share knowledge and collaboratively develop strategies for achieving educational equity. These groups provide opportunities for critical examination of teaching practices, which are often lacking in traditional educational settings. Action research empowers local groups to investigate and address learning challenges, generating insights that enhance equity.

Another distinctive aspect of action research is its focus on a highly valued practice, which is investigated by the practitioners themselves. This could include practices related to learning collaboration, empathy, or leadership. The emphasis that action research places on these practices promotes their development and, at the same time, fosters educational equity by overcoming prejudice, reducing social asymmetries, increasing mutual respect, and enhancing unity among students.

Findings from Literature Review

A key component of this research was a systematic review of global studies on action research in schools. This review aimed to collect both quantitative and qualitative evidence of the impact of action research on educational

RESEARCH DISSEMINATION BRIEF

equity. However, the review revealed significant gaps in the literature: few studies provided concrete evidence of the impact of action research on equity, and many of those that addressed the topic had methodological weaknesses or inconclusive results. These findings underscore the need for further research to understand the potential of action research in diverse cultural settings and vulnerable social contexts.

Only two studies offer consistent evidence on the relationship between action research and educational equity.

One of these is by Arar and Taysum (2019), addressing the use of action research in the implementation of distributed leadership (which consists of developing participatory processes, decisions, and practices), and sharing a focus on improving school effectiveness and student outcomes. In turn, Gaias et al. (2020) addressed equity promotion in its interface with participatory methodologies. Teacher training was provided on “implicit biases,” also aiming at building collaborative processes and promoting positive relationships with students. As a result: 1) students’ motivation to learn improved; 2) their sense of belonging to the school was strengthened; 3) educational disparities for Black students were reduced.

Findings from Teacher Training and Educational Equity

The findings indicate a mixed landscape of teacher training for equity. In some school districts, no formal training is provided, while in others, the initiatives are sporadic and limited in scope, often reaching only a minority of teachers. In this context, action research emerges as a valuable tool that can complement externally designed training programmes, encouraging teachers to critically reflect on their practices and enhance pedagogical approaches aimed at promoting equity.

Action research is inherently a process of learning through the examination of one's practices. As such, it offers a unique form of professional development that is grounded in the specific contexts and challenges faced by teachers in their daily work. In interviews with teachers and school leaders, it was found that action research facilitated a re-examination of perspectives on learning and teaching. Teachers reported that it led to changes in current practices and a reinforcement of equity-driven approaches already in place, thereby boosting morale and encouraging greater collaboration among staff.

An important element of the action research process was the development of a “baseline” document, which encouraged schools to reflect on their institutional identity and the key characteristics of their educational mission. This process of reflection was particularly valuable in helping schools identify how certain activities or interventions might shape students' perceptions and experiences of equity. By focusing on specific learning domains, such as leadership and empathy, action research allowed

RESEARCH DISSEMINATION BRIEF

educators to better understand how these concepts could be developed in students and how they contributed to a more equitable school environment.

Findings from Primary Research (Observations, Interviews, Survey)

The primary research employed a mixed-methods approach, combining participant observation in five Schools2030 institutions, a survey assessing shifts in integrative/segregative and egalitarian/discriminatory perspectives, and semi-structured interviews with teachers, students, and administrators.

Participant observation took place in five schools, each representing diverse educational contexts and student populations. These schools ranged from 200 to 350 students and included four elementary institutions, one high school, and one adult education centre. Geographically, the schools were located in São Paulo (SP), Paraíba (PB), and Amazonas (AM), spanning urban, rural, and rainforest settings. The ethnic composition varied significantly: two São Paulo schools had predominantly Afro-Brazilian students, while in the third they were a minority. The Amazonas school exclusively served Indigenous students, and the Paraíba school included Afro-Brazilian students as a minority. Across all schools, the gender distribution was balanced, with approximately equal numbers of male and female students.

Interviews were conducted with teachers, school staff, and students to gather insights into their perceptions of equity and the impact of action research. These interviews allowed the research team to delve deeper into how participants experienced changes in relationships and behaviours within the schools.

Survey data complemented the observational and interview findings by categorising school environments into integrative/segregative and egalitarian/discriminatory perspectives. If, in general, in the schools where respondents work or study, at least a simple majority (more than 50%) disagreed with prejudiced statements, this was considered indicative of an integrative perspective within the school. Conversely, the opposite scenario was classified as a segregative perspective. If at least a simple majority agreed with inclusive statements, this was considered indicative of an egalitarian perspective. The opposite scenario was classified as a discriminatory perspective. Once the predominance of integrative/segregative and egalitarian/discriminatory perspectives was established, an effort was made to determine whether behaviours and attitudes remained unchanged, increased, or decreased following the initiation of action research projects.

RESEARCH DISSEMINATION BRIEF

If these behaviours and attitudes either persisted or changed, possible causes of such changes were investigated. These causes could include: extracurricular actions (families, local groups or associations, external organisations), among which action research projects were included due to their external origin through the Schools2030 programme; actions by school professionals (teachers, principals, staff) that were not part of the action research projects; actions by students themselves, also excluding those directly related to the action research projects; and other external influences.

Although it is not possible to identify commonalities across all school contexts observed, the following statements can be drawn from findings in the distinct cases:

- Action research heightened attention to conflicts among students.
- Action research facilitates addressing unequal relationships, but not all types of inequalities uniformly.
- Action research can also involve activities that provoke student resistance, such as interacting in groups or collaborating with peers with whom they lack affinity.
- In environments where empathy and non-discrimination already predominate, action research did not significantly enhance equity. However, it engaged teachers interested in investigating the effects of established educational practices presumed to be positive.
- By integrating reflection and knowledge-seeking, action research fosters greater equity by supporting student participation in shaping school life.

- **Ethnic-Racial Relations**

In certain schools, there has been an effort to promote racial equality and anti-racist education. These initiatives were generally successful, with little to no reports of explicit racial discrimination. However, the level of impact varied across different school contexts, and the observed effects were generally subtle.

A key outcome was the promotion of identity reflection and critical discussions on race and ethnicity. Teachers and students engaged in activities that challenged social constructs, while educators adapted complex topics into accessible language. An egalitarian perspective predominated, influenced by both extracurricular activities and teacher-led interventions. However, teachers tended to attribute positive changes to their direct efforts, overlooking the significance of external influences.

Some students perceived improved interethnic relations, reporting greater unity and understanding, while others questioned the depth of these changes. Interviews suggested that action research helped teachers

RESEARCH DISSEMINATION BRIEF

address diverse learning needs, and played a crucial role in redefining Black children's identities, strengthening their self-awareness, and enhancing understanding of immigrant families and Indigenous cultures.

- **Gender and Sexual Orientation Relations**

Action research played a key role in fostering discussions on gender equality, increasing girls' participation in sports, and challenging traditional gender roles. As a result, teachers reflected on their practices and adjusted their teaching methods to promote a more inclusive environment.

Both teachers and students observed a predominantly egalitarian view regarding sexual orientation, shaped by extracurricular activities and individual actions. However, while students considered these activities as equally significant as their own and their teachers' efforts, teachers placed more emphasis on their direct interventions.

The impact on gender relations varied: boys became more aware of the importance of respectful engagement with female peers, with some reconsidering play activities—such as playing with dolls—as a way to prepare for future parenting roles. Meanwhile, girls overcame shyness, asserted their rights, and became more active in school activities, including sports.

In terms of sexual orientation, some students noted an increase in acceptance and solidarity, while others felt that action research mainly reinforced pre-existing equitable environments. In a few cases, persistent prejudices were reported despite interventions.

Action research encouraged teachers to challenge social conditioning and stereotypes, fostering greater respect for diversity and better preparing them to support students who did not conform to heteronormative standards. Additionally, teachers found action research valuable in identifying and addressing power imbalances in gender roles, emphasising the importance of empowering female students through activities that promote equality.

- **Relationships Between Students With and Without Disabilities**

While empathy and respect between students generally increased, challenges persisted in some schools, particularly in accommodating students with "invisible" disabilities, such as autism and ADHD. These students often need customised teaching to ensure their full integration.

Quantitative data collected in this study revealed that both teachers and students perceived an increase in an egalitarian view concerning relationships between people with and without disabilities. Although action research had a positive influence on equity, it was viewed as secondary to other initiatives led by teachers and students. While many students

RESEARCH DISSEMINATION BRIEF

reported improvements in the way they related to peers with disabilities, this change was not universally attributed to the action research process.

Learning Differences

Action research helps teachers address diverse learning needs related to gender, interethnic relations, and sexual orientation but has not been explicitly applied to students with disabilities. This may be because participating teachers were already focused on identifying and supporting these students.

Additionally, action research has not been used to target learning disorders such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, or dysgraphia, nor has it addressed the educational experiences of students of different sexual orientations. However, its participatory nature strengthened student involvement in their own learning, improving communication, including among children with disabilities who previously exhibited aggressive behaviour.

Social Marker	Perceived Change in Equitable Relations	Attributed to Action Research (Students)	Attributed to Action Research (Teachers)
Disabilities	Increased egalitarian view	Positive influence, but secondary to teacher and student initiatives	Positive influence, but secondary to teacher and student initiatives
Race/Ethnicity	Stable or increased egalitarian view	Positive influence, but in the same proportion as the recurring actions of teachers and students	Positive influence, but teachers primarily credited their interventions
Gender	Stable or increased egalitarian view	Positive influence, but secondary to teacher and student initiatives	Positive influence, but secondary to teacher and student initiatives
Sexual Orientation	Stable or increased egalitarian view	Positive influence, but almost in the same proportion as the recurring actions of teachers and students	Positive influence, but secondary to teacher and student initiatives

The Influence of Action Research on Inclusive and Equitable Practices

Implications and recommendations

In schools, action research projects are primarily conducted by teachers, sometimes exclusively. These initiatives challenge the managerial tendencies of educational policies (Ball, 2005), which strip professional autonomy from the teaching category, prescribe and dictate educational goals and methods, reduce teachers to mere executors of external determinations, and seek to control teaching practices in minute detail. These tendencies undermine factors that are essential for adequately considering the diversity.

RESEARCH DISSEMINATION BRIEF

Although the action research projects are still in their initial phase, the results showed subtle signs that they favour learnings manifested in greater equity in social relations within the institutions investigated. Overall, the results obtained indicate that action research contributed to the promotion of more equitable environments. A heterogeneity of the positive impact of action research on equity in relationships was observed. In each school, this impact may manifest in interethnic relations or in relations between individuals with and without disabilities, but not necessarily in gender relations as well.

Empowering Teacher Autonomy through Action Research

Education policy should prioritise action research to strengthen teacher autonomy, enabling schools to address dynamic student needs through teacher-led inquiry. To achieve this, is essential to support teachers in systematically gathering data on their practices, enabling continuous improvement.

Professional development must go beyond one-size-fits-all models, encouraging educators to take an active role in experimenting with and refining their teaching practices based on classroom insights. However, for this approach to be effective, teachers need adequate time and resources. Education policy must ensure that teachers have dedicated time within their schedules for reflection, research, and collaboration. Additionally, access to technical support and research tools should be made available to teachers, enabling them to conduct meaningful investigations into their practices and enhance equity outcomes in their classrooms.

Empowering Teachers to Lead Context-Driven Action Research Assessment

Policies should prioritise teacher-led assessments as a complement to external assessments, which often fail to account for the distinct characteristics of each school. As key members of the school community, teachers are uniquely qualified to assess the outcomes of action research. These teacher-driven assessments provide a more nuanced understanding of the effectiveness of school-based strategies, particularly in terms of their impact on student equity and learning outcomes.

Fostering Collaborative Networks for Action Research

Education policy should support the creation of collaborative networks that allow teachers to share findings and best practices from action research. These platforms can promote peer learning, collaboration on equity initiatives, and collective problem-solving. Despite efforts by the Schools2030 programme in Brazil, action research projects remain poorly understood and lack external collaboration. To improve this, educational teams should partner with universities for case studies, integrate findings into teacher training, and offer advisory support for project design and execution.

RESEARCH DISSEMINATION BRIEF

Engaging the Broader School Community in Action Research

The study highlights the importance of involving the broader school community, including families and local organisations, in the action research process. Government authorities should engage families and local groups, providing them with opportunities and incentives to participate in school-based action research projects aimed at improving educational equity.

Engaging Students as Protagonists in Action Research

Policies should support teachers in encouraging greater student involvement in researching their own education, with a growing influence on decision-making. Action research shows that students play a key role in advancing equity in education. Promoting student leadership in addressing school inequalities can significantly enhance positive outcomes.

REFERENCES

Arar, K.; Taysum, A. 2019. From hierarchical leadership to a mark of distributed leadership by whole school inquiry in partnership with Higher Education Institutions: comparing the Arab education in Israel with the education system in England. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, v. 23, n. 6, p. 755-774.

Ball, S. J. 2005. *Education policy and social class: The selected works of Stephen J. Ball*. Routledge.

Beaulieu, R. J. 2013. "Action Research: Trends and Variations." *Canadian Journal of Action Research* 14, no. 3: 29-39.

Freire, Paulo. 1998. *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield.

Gaias, L.; Cook, C.; Nguyen, L.; Brewer, S.; Brown, E.; Kiche, S.; Shi, J.; Buntain-Ricklefs, J.; Duong, M.. 2020. A mixed methods pilot study of an equity-explicit student-teacher relationship intervention for the ninth-grade transition. *Journal of School Health*, v. 90, n. 12, p. 1004-1018.

Thiollent, M. 1986. *Metodologia da pesquisa-ação*. 2nd. ed. São Paulo: Cortez; Autores Associados. [Action Research Methodology.]

Tripp, D. 2005. "Pesquisa-ação: uma introdução metodológica." *Educação e Pesquisa* 31, no. 3: 443-66, Sept./Dec. ["Action Research: a Methodological Introduction."]