ACTION RESEARCH IN EDUCATION

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Abstract

Action Research is a formative study of progress commonly practiced by teachers in schools. Basically an action research is a spiral process that includes problem investigation, taking action & fact-finding about the result of action. It enables a teacher to adopt/craft most appropriate strategy within its own teaching environment.

Action research is actually suitable for any person who wishes to improve his or her performance; or any group or organization who hopes for doing the same. As a matter of fact, action research is widely used in education, especially by teachers who use it to improve their teaching. Teachers from all over the world have employed action research as a part of their teaching and research. Obviously, action research well matches with education and benefits both teachers and students in their teaching and learning since it meets the need of education and enables continuity in research with its cyclic process. The suitability of action research to education reveals in its nature, characteristics, "circle within circle" process, etc. This article will look at all aspects concerning action research including definitions, advantages, steps, etc to see the importance and the benefits of action research to education.

Keywords: Action research, education, benefits, teachers

Introduction

Throughout the nation, teachers and administrators are being challenged to collaboratively investigate the effectiveness of research-based instructional practices currently used in classrooms to improve student learning.

Teachers are encouraged to reflect on and analyze student data on a consistent and collaborative basis to ensure success for all students. In order to meet the challenges being faced, schools are encouraged to restructure their professional development system providing faculty members with opportunities for collaborative inquiry, reflection, and dialogue what is driven by student data.

Action research is a model of professional development that promotes collaborative inquiry, reflection, and dialogue. "Within the action research process, educators study student learning related to their own teaching.

The origins of Action Research (AR) are unclear in the literature but generally Kurt Lewin is considered the 'father' of AR (Kemmis & McTaggert, 1990; Zuber-Skerrit, 1992 & Holter & Schwartz-Barcott, 1993), who first coined the term, in his paper about Minority Problems (Kurt, 1946) . Its function in educational system began with the Science in Education Movement of late nineteenth century in which scientific method was applied to education (Masters, 1995) followed by the UK originated Teacher-Researcher Movement advocating that all teaching should be based upon research (McKernan, 1991).

By the mid 1970s, it was discussed as a separate field of research and four major types were reported including: 1) Traditional: that was applied within organizations in the areas of Organization Development, Quality of Working Life (QWL), Socio-technical systems (e.g., Information Systems), and Organizational Democracy. This traditional approach tends toward the conservative, generally maintaining the status quo with regards to organizational power structures. 2) Contextual: that encompasses relations between organizations. It stresses that participants act as project designers and co-researchers. The concept of organizational ecology and the use of search conferences come out of contextual action research. 3) Radical: it has a strong focus on emancipation and the overcoming of power imbalances. 4) Educational Traditional Action Research: A fourth stream, that of Educational Action Research, has its foundations in the writings of John Dewey, the great American educational philosopher of the 1920s and 30s, who believed that professional educators should become involved in community problem-solving. "Educational action research is founded after John Dewey, an American educational philosopher, who held that professional educators should become involved in community problem-solving". Naturally, it concentrates on development of curriculum, professional improvement, and applying learning in a social context. From a different point of view, Creswell [16] argues that there are two main types of action research as follows:

Practical action research
Participatory action research

Practical action research is used in situations in which teacher researchers "seek to enhance the practice of education through the systematic study of a local problem." It usually involves a small-case research project, narrowly directs at a specific problem or issue and is undertaken by

individual teachers or teams within a particular education setting.

Participatory action research is usually implemented in larger scale to improve "the quality of people's organisation, communities and family lives". Namely, it has a "social and community orientation" and it focuses on research that "contributes to emancipation or change in our society".

Its practitioners, not surprisingly, operate mainly out of educational institutions, and focus on development of curriculum, professional development, and applying learning in a social context. It is often the case that university- based action researchers work with primary and secondary school teachers and students on community projects (O'Brien, 2001). Initially AR was limited to school settings and practiced by teachers to observe the effect of any teaching strategy modification on focused students or to incorporate progressive changes in the syllabus taking all stakeholders but owing to its flexibility and more practical approach, now it has been experimented at all levels of professional & formal education.

Action research is a model of professional development that promotes collaborative inquiry, reflection, and dialogue. "Within the action research process, educators study student learning related to their own teaching. It is a process that allows educators to learn about their own instructional practices and to continue to monitor improved student learning" (Rawlinson & Little, 2004). "The idea of action research is that educational problems and issues are best identified and investigated where the action is: at the classroom and school level. By integrating research into these settings and engaging those who work at this level in research activities, findings can be applied immediately and problems solved more quickly" (Guskey, 2000).

What gives action research its unique position is the set of principles that guide the research. Richard (1989) provides a comprehensive general overview of six key principles. These can be considered in any of the educational settings.

1) *Reflexive critique:* An account of a situation, such as notes, transcripts or official documents, will make implicit claims to be authoritative, i.e., it implies that it is factual and true. The principle of reflective critique ensures people reflect on issues and processes and make explicit the interpretations, biases, assumptions and concerns upon which judgments are made. In this way, practical accounts can give rise to theoretical considerations.

2) *Dialectical critique:* Reality is consensually validated, which is to say it is shared through language. Phenomena are conceptualized in dialogue; therefore a dialectical critique is required to understand the set of relationships both between the phenomenon and its context, and between the elements constituting the phenomenon. The key elements to focus attention on are those constituent elements that are unstable, or in opposition to one

another. These are the ones that are most likely to create changes.

3) *Collaborative Resource:* Participants in an action research project are co-researchers. The principle of collaborative resource presupposes that each person's ideas are equally significant as potential resources for creating interpretive categories of analysis, negotiated among the participants.

4) *Risk:* The change process potentially threatens all previously established ways of doing things, thus creating fears among the practitioners. One of the more prominent fears comes from the risk to ego stemming from open discussion of one's interpretations, ideas, and judgments. Initiators of action research will use this principle to allay others' fears and invite participation by pointing out that they, too, will be subject to the same process, and that whatever the outcome, learning will take place.

5) *Plural Structure:* The nature of the research embodies a multiplicity of views, commentaries and critiques, leading to multiple possible actions and interpretations. This means that there will be many accounts made explicit, with commentaries on their contradictions, and a range of options for action presented. A report, therefore, acts as a support for ongoing discussion among collaborators, rather than a final conclusion of fact.

6) *Theory, Practice, and Transformation:* For action researchers, theory informs practice, practice refines theory, in a continuous transformation. In any setting, people's actions are based on implicitly held assumptions, theories and hypotheses, and with every observed result, theoretical knowledge is enhanced. The ensuing practical applications that follow are subjected to further analysis, in a transformative cycle that continuously alternates emphasis between theory and practice.

Also action research can be organized in many ways, such as:

Individual teacher research focuses on studying a problem or issue within a single classroom. The teacher who engages in individual teacher research may or may not have support from colleagues and administration to share, brainstorm, and discuss the topic of action research. Although just one teacher may become directly involved in action research, support from knowledgeable educators at the school or district site is still important for successful teacher research to occur. Also, universities, educational agencies, and districts may encourage teacher action research by providing ongoing professional development related to the needs of the individual teacher researcher. These resources may also provide different venues for sharing the successes of the action research.

Collaborative action research focuses on studying a problem or issue within one or more classrooms. Teachers may collaborate and work together to study a particular problem in many different ways.

- co-teachers in one classroom studying a specific group of students

- a team of teachers focusing on a grade level issue
- a teacher and district, educational agency, or university personnel learning and studying a particular instructional practice
- a group of teachers in the same school studying the same instructional concern.

This collaborative action research approach fosters a joint effort because more than one teacher is involved in a specific area of study. Opportunities for sharing and dialogue are more likely to occur.

School-wide action research is a school reform initiative. Every faculty member of the school is involved in studying a specific issue identified from school data. This approach requires a great deal of support from the administrators and lead teachers/personnel, but the results can lead to school-wide change. Successful school-wide action research is directly related to initiatives contained within the school improvement plan.

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Benefits of action research to education

Action research is a teaching, learning, and decision-making process that can be used in a myriad of ways to assist the learning process of students and teachers.

- Action research is a means of improving student achievement through more effective teaching and administration of schools (Cohen & Manion, 1980; Elliot, 1991; Kemmis, 1981; Stenhouse, 1975).
- Educators involved in action research became more flexible in their thinking, more open to new ideas, and more able to solve new problems (Pine, 1981).
- Engaging in action research influenced teachers' thinking skills, sense of efficacy, willingness to communicate with colleagues, and attitudes toward professional development and the process of change (Simmons, 1985).
- Teachers engaged in action research depended more on themselves as decision makers and gained more confidence in what they believed about curriculum and instruction (Strickland, 1988).
- Action researchers were reading, discussing, thinking, and assessing ideas from related research with expanded analytical skills (Simmons, 1985).

Positive changes occur in the school environment through the action

research process. Teachers become lifelong learners, and students experience success in learning.

Conclusion

In summary, although some people may critique that action research is an informal research since teachers are not academic researchers, it is widely believed that action research is extremely suitable for education as its main purpose is to help teachers as researchers solve their teaching problems "in action". It allows teachers to learn about their teaching at the same time that they improve their teaching. They are able to do this because action research has a cyclic process.

AR is an excellent approach to use in educational system. AR conducted in a classroom provides an accurate insight into pattern of student response and teaching strategies over the entire teaching session, not just a matter of days or two. It seeks to answer questions and solve problems that arise from the daily life of the classroom and to put findings into immediate practice (McKay, 1992 & Twine & Martinek, 1992). It is suitable because of its characteristics: systematic inquiry, reflexivity & focus on the practical as identified by McCutcheon & Jurg (1990). Usually it is driven by the practitioner's desire to improve its own practice with respect to a specific set of students, thus students reap immediate benefits (Williamson, 1992).

Several terms with a little variations on theme are encountered in education literature including: teacher research, teacher-as-scholar, interactive research, practical inquiry, classroom inquiry and practice-centered inquiry (Downhower et al, 1990 & Williamson, 1992). Similarly various modes with the variation in the situations have been discussed.

Among all of its modes, PAR is most appropriate for classroom as it involves the mutual collaboration to understand problem and its immediate solution (Holter et al, 1993). Its three primary features: collaboration, mutual education and acting on results developed from basic questions which are relevant to situation, as reported by (Macaulay et al, 1999) make it more reliable. It fosters the development of knowledge by emphasizing the part played by personal judgments in decisions to act for good. PAR is also based on mutually respectful partnership between researcher and students. Ideally, everyone is a co-researcher and should produce input at all levels of research (Mash, 2001).

The PAR is a different approach from conventional research methodologies as it is more flexible. Here the supervisor is only facilitator not the governor. It involves every student in the process of progress. So, every modification in the plan of study is mutually accepted and acknowledged. The various assessment approaches like formative assessment, group discussions, mini projects, counseling and feed back

proforma are the tools that help AR. All these approaches only guide to recognize the problematic area but do not offer any remedy for it. On the other side PAR is a sequential plan that not only highlights the bottom line error but also provide a chance to assess the effectiveness of the modification. It can be repeated as many time as possible.

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