

**ACTION RESEARCH: ENRICHING THE TEACHING
REPERTOIRE IN CLASS.**

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ABSTRACT

Educational research has been successfully assisting educators in solving enormous problems and difficulties in education especially in the teaching and learning activities in the classroom. Educators may benefit by taking a close and critical insight in their own practices. Developed and refined insights as to the nature of that practice, professional autonomy and competence, and authority to give a reasoned justification for their own educational practice may fruitfully result. The concept 'educational' involves the notion of 'improvement'. By being aware and critical of their practice, educators work more positively towards their own professional development. Improvements in the quality of education are dependent upon the professional competence and high morale of the educators. This paper tries to promote action research in improving teaching and learning activities in the classroom. Through its emphasis on critical evaluation of practice within a democratic framework, the action research movement has integrated researchers from different disciplines and curriculum areas who share a concern to improve practice and to understand the process of improving practice. The paper gives the background and explanations for action research and the implications for educators who embark on an action research project, the pitfalls as well as the satisfaction. The paper intends to be an organic instrument in bringing people together to adopt in-service strategies that deliberately and systematically set out to encourage educators to raise the level of their awareness, being open to new concepts and developing professional competence. Action research presents an opportunity for educators to become uniquely involved in their own practice, to professionalize themselves, and to give reasoned justification for what they are doing.

Keywords: Educational research, Teaching-learning, Organic instrument

INTRODUCTION

Action research is the name given to an increasingly popular movement in educational research. It encourages an educator to be reflective of his own practice in order to enhance the quality of education for himself and his pupils. It is a form of self-reflective enquiry that is now being used in school-based curriculum development, professional development, professional autonomous and continuous improvement on one's practices, and as such, it actively involves educators as participants in their own educational process.

The strength of the action research approach to professional development rests upon a creative and critical dialogue between members of a community, which includes educators, academicians, parents, students, industrialists, and politicians. We move ahead through creative leaps of imagination. We learn from our mistakes in detailed criticisms of our positions. It helps us in strengthening our profession through critical engagement in the concrete struggle to study practice from within. By focusing on the practical and theoretical questions of the kind, 'How do I improve the quality of my practice?' it is believed that the educators will create improvements in the quality of education in a way, which demonstrates the professional value of practical educational knowledge. Educators should be encouraged to build up the wisdom to judge their own practice in terms of its educational competence and are expected to implement identified criteria of excellence, to which they and their students are expected to conform. This paper attempts to put action research into perspective, socially, and educationally, with the hope that more and more educators will be encouraged to regard themselves as legitimate investigators in their attempts to make sense of their own practice.

The movement is growing in credibility and is now seen in educational communities as an alternative to the more traditional theory-based approach to educational research. Action research approaches education as a unified exercise, seeing an educator as the best judge of his total educational experience. It is a powerful method of bridging the gap between the theory and practice of education since educators are encouraged to develop their own personal theories of education from their own practice.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

According to Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), it is believed that an American social psychologist named Kurt Lewin started the action research movement in 1946. At that point in time, his major concern was the immediate solutions to existing communal problems and unrests. His concept of action research was strongly underpinned by two well-juxtaposed approaches which were group decision making and commitment to all levels of works. This has paved the way

to the two integral elements in the present action research movement which are collaborative efforts and continuous improvement.

Lewin's efforts were further expanded by Stephen Corey in 1953 at the Teacher's College Columbia University, New York, USA when he advocated action research in research projects done by teachers in schools. In United Kingdom, John Elliot and friends (1976) propagated action research as an approach to help teachers expand the concept of learning inquiries in class in the Ford Teaching Project. In tandem, action research movement gained rapid momentum in Europe as an effort for continuous improvement in education. Currently, more and more countries all over the world are practicing action research in schools to enhance the quality of teaching and learning. Leading exponents of action research such as Australia, USA and UK are actively encouraging action research among teachers for school-based curriculum review and development. These countries are also employing helps from their various Teaching and Teacher Training institutions to aid teachers in the implementation of action research projects.

Dr. Sadtono (1992) adopted action research in his course which he named as "Classroom-based Research" to Southeast Asian teachers under the SEAMEO project. In Malaysia, the action research movement was initiated by Educational Planning and Research Division of the Ministry of Education, Malaysia under the PIER project (Programmes for Innovation, Excellence and Research). Funds were made available to finance action research projects in schools, workshops and seminars. Consultants are employed from local university (Dr. Kim Phaik Lah of USM) and abroad (Prof. Dr. Nerida Ellerton and Prof. Dr. M.A. Clements from Australia) to provide guidance to teachers in conducting their action research projects. Even though the PIER project has ended, it has sparked a growing interest in action research among educators and practitioners throughout Malaysia at all levels. To date, Ministry of Education, Malaysia has been funding action research activities in primary and secondary schools, teacher-training colleges, polytechnics and universities. Findings are presented in the annual Research Seminar hosted by EPRD and occasionally by the State Educational Research Council hosted by State Education Departments. Currently, two scholars are pursuing their doctoral dissertation in the format of an action research.

WHAT IS ACTION RESEARCH?

The literature of action research is growing rapidly, so does the number of definitions and characterizations. Educational action research may be seen variously as an umbrella term for what goes on in class when a teacher or lecturer decides to change a taken-for-granted situation and opts to become the researcher of his own class practice

(Hustler, 1986); or it may be viewed as a recipe or blueprint for teacher action (Elliot, 1981).

The literature offers various definitions for this intervention such as 'classroom research' (Hopkins, 1985), 'self reflective enquiry' (Kemmis, 1982) and 'action research' (Hustler, 1986). Action research is seen as a way of characterising a loose set of activities that are designed to improve the quality of education aim at educational improvement. The most widely accepted working definition is that provided by Stephen Kemmis of Deakin University, together with Wilf Carr of University College of North Wales :

Action research is a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants (educators and students for example) in social (including educational) situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of (a) their own social or educational practices, (b) their understanding of these practices, and (c) the situations (and institutions) in which these practices are carried out.

(Carr, Kemmis, 1986)

Other definitions include:

..... aims to contribute both to practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework.

(Rapoport, 1970)

..... Is about the systematic study of attempts to improve educational practice by groups of participants by means of their practical actions and by means of their own reflection upon the effects of those actions.

(Dave Ebbut, 1983)

In the context of education, action research is a way of working in which the teacher/researcher imposes a discipline on the monitoring and evaluation of practices that are expected to lead to educationally worthwhile outcomes.

(Lomax, 1995)

The social basis of action research is involvement and the educational basis is improvement. Its operation demand changes. Action research means ACTION, both of the system under considerations , and people involve in that system. Within a system, one aspect of it might be identified as problem area; for example an educator could focus on one limited part of his teaching practice. His actions in solving the problem will have repercussions for wider aspects of the students and

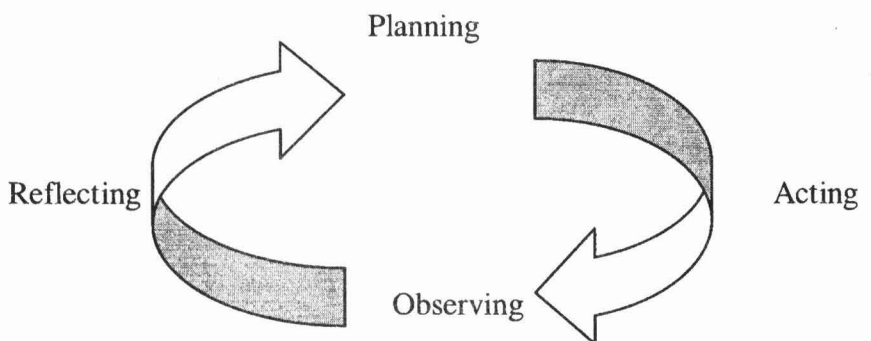
its personnel. For example a lecturer found that his students having difficulties understanding certain part of his course content. He then discovered that if he adopted an alternative style, he could overcome the problem. He was then encouraged to explore the possibilities and refinements of such style in his other classes, and to share his result with other colleagues. Some colleagues in turn saw the benefits of the new styles, and decided to try it out for themselves. The group of lecturers exchanged ideas continually, learning from each other in an environment of public support for their systematic enquiry.

At the same time, action research is not the only answer to any and every educational problem. There are some areas of concern where an alternative approach may be more appropriate, such as issues based on statistical analyses or comparative studies, where human unpredictability is not the issue, or where a straightforward comparison between introductory and control situations is required.

MODELS OF ACTION RESEARCH

MODEL 1 : Kurt Lewin (1946) as cited in Kemmis and MacTaggart (1988)

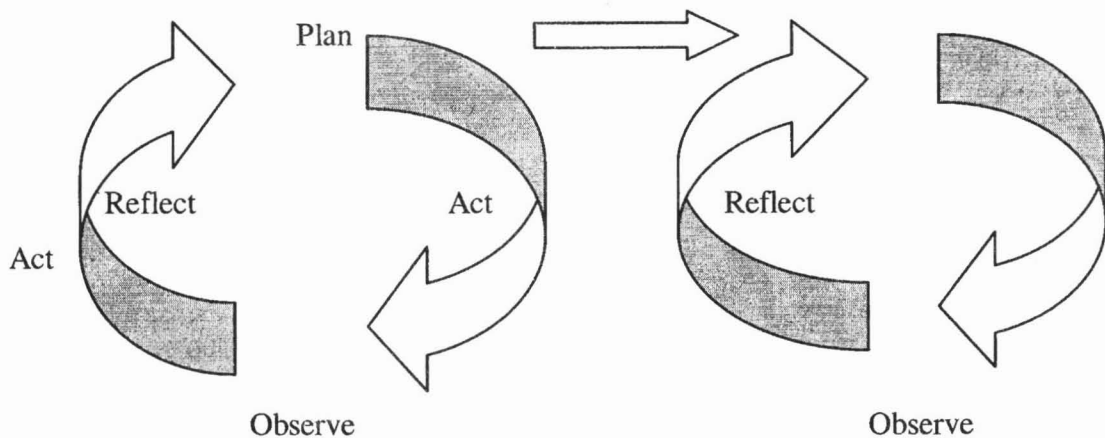
Lewin describes action research as a spiral of steps. Each step has four stages: planning, acting, observing and reflecting. The scheme in action is as follows:



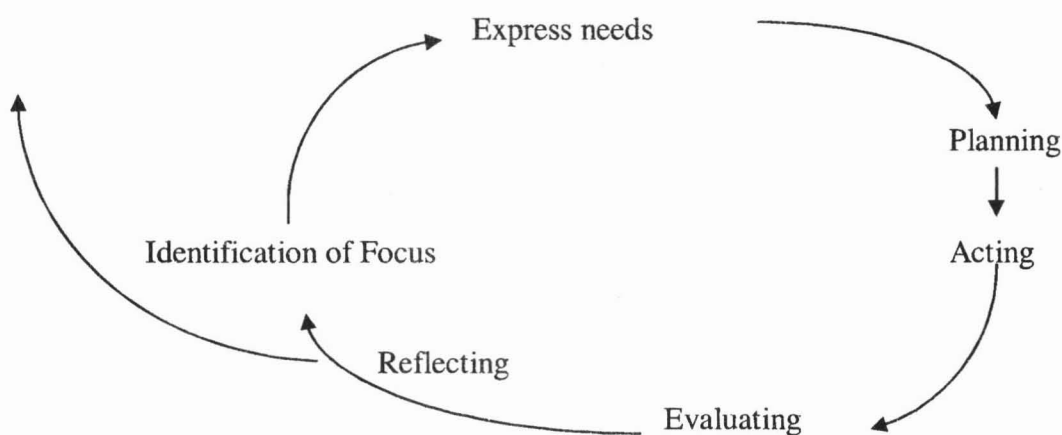
Example 1

- Problem: My students are very passive in the class. How to make them active?
- Planning: Perhaps I shall give them more group work
- Acting : I issue them group assignments and presentations
- Observing: They become more active and participative in the class
- Reflecting: Will their writing improve?

This step would then move on to the next step of re-planning, acting, observing, reflecting, and perhaps produce a whole series of steps



MODEL 2: Educational Planning and Research Division, Ministry of Education Malaysia (1996)



Generative action research enables educator–researcher to address many different problems at one time without losing sight of the main issue. Action research provides a method whereby they can themselves develop this research and knowledge, for testing and improving their own classroom practice, and for establishing a sound rationale for what they are doing. Commitments to clients have intense implications for the style and ethics of teaching. Being committed to something suggests a thinking awareness.

Action research implies adopting a deliberate openness to new experience and processes, therefore demands that the action of educational research is itself educational. By consciously engaging in their own educational development,

educators gain both professionally and personally. Without personal commitment, teaching is no more than what appears on the curriculum, and learning the product of an educational institution society. For if we are educators who are trying to fulfill our obligations as educators, and then we must accept the responsibility of first educating ourselves.

THEORITICAL ASPECTS OF ACTION RESEARCH

Educations reform begins with a sense of dissatisfaction with present practice. Six critical questions to give a head start to an educator are i) What is my concern? ii) Why do I concern? iii) What can I do about it ? iv) What kind of evidence could I collect to help me make some judgement about what is happening? v) How would I collect such evidence? vi) How would I check that my judgement about what has happened is reasonably fair and accurate? The answers to those questions will produce a practical assessment of the situation and a possible plan of attack. The action-reflection spiral is also brought into play. The steps are roughly as follows:

1. Identifying problems
2. Analyzing problems and determining some pertinent causal factors
3. Formulating tentative ideas about the crucial factors
4. Gathering and interpreting data to sharpen these ideas and to develop action hypothesis
5. Formulating action
6. Evaluating the results of action in the form of self reflection.

These steps are then categorized into four major stages namely Planning, Collecting Data, Action and Observation, and Reflection which are considered crucial elements in most models of action research. The following is a brief description of each stage:

STAGE 1 : PLANNING (PROBLEMS IDENTIFICATION)

Before planning of an action research is done, problems will be identified and categorized. As compared to the conventional research, problem statements in action research are normally focused and immediate, tailored to the short-term needs of the educators and students. However, as usual, the term *problem* can be misconstrued as practitioners will be trying to “see” problems around the class. Basically, problems can be further defined as events that need to be improved for the benefit of continuous improvement. Hence, attempts to identify problems not only cover the realm of arresting and rectifying problems but also enhancing the effectiveness of current practices. This additional perspective of an action research is propagated by a project in Australia which is named, PEEL or Project to Enhance Effective Learning. Later, this concept was adopted and adapted in

Malaysian education circle through collaborative efforts between the Ministry of Education, Malaysia and International Development Programme of Australia through the PIER project which was launched in 1993 and ended in 1996.

In addition, it is best to avoid issues that are not manageable, time-consuming and ambiguous. Normally, prospective implementers or practitioners are quite ambitious that they try to indulge in areas which they are powerless to invoke changes. Here are some examples of such cases for reflection.

What is the relationship between single-parent families and school attendance?

How does teaching style relate to pupil progress?

What is the link between children's socio-economic status and their enjoyment of literature?

It is highly recommended that intended implementers and practitioners investigate issues that they are able to intervene effectively such as

How do I improve the quality of writing in my English Writing classes?

Why the decline in the popularity of the Oratory and Debate activities in campus?

How do I make students understand the basic principles in ECO 162?

In retrospective, Kemmis (1985) reiterates that action research is about problem solving that should be relevant, manageable and important to the practitioners and their students. Hence, it is imperative that practitioners adhere to the following criteria before choosing the areas of study.

The importance of the issue to the practitioners and intended students

Opportunities to explore in the identified area of study

People who might be interested to help

The manageability of the task

STAGE 2: COLLECTING DATA

What sort of data should be collected? Whatever that the researcher can manage. Tape-recording, videoing, notes, journal-writing, interviews, 'students/colleagues' observations and comments. There's a wide spectrum, the most important is that the data is manageable. If data is to be collected over time, the researcher can start seeing a progression in the research, and then make claims about validity of what he is doing. Only collect materials that are entirely relevant to what the researcher is trying to look at, otherwise the researcher will suffer from that mysterious ailment, 'data overload' which can be fatal.

STAGE 3 IMPLEMENTATION – ACTING AND OBSERVATION

After the data have been collected, they will be analyzed and categorized. The researcher will try to establish evidence for his hypothesis/hypotheses or intuition. As compared to conventional research, the analysis of data will be followed by conclusions and recommendations which are the final chapter of the research report but for action research, the analysis of data is the beginning of the research whereby the researcher will begin designing plan of action as an intervention. At this stage, the researcher cum observer will analyze the impact of the intervention on the rectifying weaknesses or improving quality of teaching and learning in class. Both quantitative and qualitative approaches can be used to gauge the effectiveness of such intervention in achieving the objectives of the action research projects.

STAGE 4 REFLECTION

This is the most important element of any action research projects whereby the researcher begins to reflect not only the stages of his project but also his role in class. The common fallacy among practitioners is that they normally pin-point weaknesses of the project or identified problems to students. As mentioned earlier, action research is about changes and how to manage changes to one before advocating changes to others. At this juncture, researcher will gauge the effectiveness of his intervention in class. The classic beauty of action research is not about success or failure of the project but rather the most practical implication which is how it affects the researcher or researchers' awareness towards his/their roles in class. Another important aspect will be the researcher's decision whether to embark to another identified problem or to continue to resolve the existing problem. Spiral nature of action research is never ending as the quest for excellence is not a destination but rather a journey.

NARROWING THE GAP BETWEEN RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The idea of carrying out research for everyday survival suggests that research underpins almost everything that we do. During the official launching of Majlis Penyelidikan Pendidikan Malaysia (MAPPEMA) or the Malaysian Education Research Council by Dato Sri Mohd. Najib bin Tun Abdul Razak, then the Minister of Education at Dynasty Hotel in 1995 advocated the needs for research findings to aid top management to formulate policies based on informed decision-makings. Dato' Sri Mohd. Najib (1995) reiterated the importance of research findings to propagate academic excellence and probing into areas of darkness to further pursue innovations in education. Hence, there is a dire need to exploit the abundance of research findings and use them for pedagogical implications.

How, then, does the research that we publish and discuss at research conferences differ from the research that we carry out on an ongoing and daily basis? What evidence is required to convince readers and consumers of “formal” research that the implications of a particular piece of research should be adopted? What should be the relationship between research and current practice? Which should drive and which should be driven – research or practice?

Clearly, this is another “chicken and egg” dilemma. On the one hand, one cannot carry out research on practice if no practice exists, yet how can one be serious about continuing in a particular practice if no research has been carried out?

It is often thought that an important aim of action research is to bring together practitioners and academic researchers so that they can carry out research together on problems of mutual concern. Such a view, in fact, misses a key point. Not only do teachers need to become researchers in their own right, but teachers need to recognize that they are constantly incorporating research methods such as conjecturing, designing, trialing and evaluating in their daily practice. Often, all that is lacking is the systematic documentation of this research so that the practitioners involved can reflect on what they are doing, and so that they will be in a better position to communicate their insights to others (Schon, 1987).

The “gap” between research and practice can only be closed through the cooperation of all practitioners in the education process namely, educators, researchers and those administering education systems. They play the roles of partners in the research process having equal status and involvement at all stages of the research including those of policy development and research design. It would be dangerous to go along a path which advocates one type of research for practice and another for the tertiary sector. But that is the path which seems to have been chosen by many. Hence, prompting polemics between the two types of research which the former advocates the importance of research to enhance practice and the latter propagates the legitimacy of research process before findings can be acknowledged and documented as an addition to the wide spectrum of knowledge.

Traditionalists will constantly question the integrity of action research from the perspective of validity and reliability as they believe these elements are being ignored in the implementation of action research projects as compared to the conventional research. The concern is not entirely baseless as the earlier works were based on intuition and assumption without concentrating so much on validity and reliability. However, the quality of action projects done by teachers in Malaysian schools are fast improving as compared to earlier ones (BPPDP, 1997). The action research movement in Malaysia has conjured the involvement of a lot of educators and consequently, enhancing better understanding of the rigour of conventional research. It has been stated earlier that action research is meant for the practitioners and their intended students to improve teaching and learning situation in class. However, the growing knowledge of practitioners

pertaining to “formal” research has helped action research projects to gain credibility in the world of academic research.

The most important element in action research is the reflection. It advocates reflective thinking among its practitioners to create awareness in the improvement of their practices. As the term conotates, it is a type of research which is action-driven and focusing on immediate problem-solving rather than focusing on recommendations. Consequently, the implementation of research projects will inculcate reflective thinking among the practitioners who are action-driven and proactive in their careers. Reflective practitioners will be able to work together cooperatively and creatively, and communicate freely and meaningfully with each other, and are more likely to establish a research base which is valued by all. In toto, action research projects will not only create action-oriented educators but also educators who are wiling to take preemptive measures for continuous improvement which, hopefully, will rejuvenate their careers and preventing them from being manqué.

CONCLUSION

In reality, not all action research projects are successful but they hold the keys that open to doors of knowledge. The main issue of implementing action research is to create awareness among the practitioners pertaining to their strengths and weaknesses in their practices in class. In addition, action research projects are not only geared towards educators’ self-development but also, consequently, helping the academic performances of the students. However, certain features have been identified as crucial to the success implementation of action research projects. They are as follows:

- The long – term nature of the program;
- The willingness of group members to make clear and succinct written statements of the problem(s) they were facing and to develop agreed strategies for solving these problems;
- The timely implementation of action plans;
- The careful, reflective documentation leading to a continuation of the action research cycle;
- The practical nature of the program;
- The collegiality which has been endangered;
- The collaboration which has arisen
- the willingness of each member of the team to contribute her or his talents and time as appropriate;

If significant improvements in education are to be achieved over the next decade, then there will need to be a thorough, even radical, reconsideration of current practices and policies affecting education at all levels. The debate should not be

limited to politicians and senior education bureaucrats. It should involve all stakeholders, and should enable the voices of teachers and education researchers, in particular, to be heard. It is widely believed that improvement in education is most likely to be achieved if genuine action research processes are adopted, funded, and valued. It is imperative that universities should not only recognize but also facilitate the involvement of staff and students in action research projects.

Then, how does action research enrich the teaching repertoire in class? Action research focuses the collaborative efforts among educators who are sincerely concern in enhancing the effectiveness of their practices. The issue is about learning from each other and knowing one's strengths and weaknesses. A reflective educator will definitely be open to all options in improving the academic performances of his students. As such, action research advocates educators to adopt an eclectic approach in the teaching and learning environment in class. Obviously, this will prompt educators to be more proactive in their actions and they will not only be doing *the talk* but also aggressively doing *the walk*.

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