



Action Research in Education

Dr. (Mrs.) Surinder Kaur

Associate Professor, Khalsa College of Education
Ranjit Avenue, Amritsar

ABSTRACT

Action research is a practical approach to professional inquiry in any social situation. The examples in this component relate to education and are therefore of particular relevance to teachers or lecturers engaged in their daily contact with children or students. But professional practice need not be teaching; it may be management or administration in a school or college, or it may be in an unrelated area, such as medicine or the social services. The context for professional inquiry might change, but the principles and processes involved in action research are the same, regardless of the nature of the practice. Indeed, action research did not arise in education (see Lewin, 1948), but was applied to the development of teaching as its potential was identified. Of particular influence was the work of Lawrence Stenhouse, who famously advocated that 'curriculum research and development ought to belong to the teacher' (Stenhouse, 1975, p. 142). He was most adamant that 'it is not enough that teachers' work should be studied: they need to study it themselves. The aim of an action researcher is to bring about development in his or her practice by analyzing existing practice and identifying elements for change. The process is founded on the gathering of evidence on which to make informed rather than intuitive judgements and decisions. Perhaps the most important aspect of action research is that the process enhances teacher's professional development through the fostering of their capability as professional knowledge makers, rather than simply as professional knowledge users. In an age of centralization and the proliferation of national guidelines and strategies, action research can help teachers feel in control of their own professional situation. Action research therefore has two aspects. The starting point is to sort out a problem or issue in practice; to this extent an action researcher seeks a solution. But the process can also be used as a deliberate attempt to understand practice better—a traditional research attitude. What is most important in both approaches is that you are open, honest and rigorous. From the perspective of action research, the best way to think about practice is the way you carry out your professional actions. This, of course, what you do, but it is also why you think you should be doing things the way you do. You will hear of the 'theory-practice divide'; action research as an approach cuts this divide, encouraging a practitioner to consider both aspects as part of a single whole.

INTRODUCTION

Research is a process to study the basic problems which contribute to the edifice of human knowledge. The research process establishes new truth, finds out new facts, formulates new theories and suggests new applications. Random Morey has defined research as a systematized effort to gain new knowledge. Best and Kahn have defined research as a systematic and objective analysis and recording of controlled observations that may lead to the development of generalizations, principles or theories, resulting in prediction and possibly ultimate control of events. Action research is a form of research carried out by practitioners into their own practices. From the middle of last century, the movement of action research has become prominent in the fields of social psychology and education. Action research in education has had as its goal the involvement of both the research specialist and classroom teacher in the study and application of research to educational problems in a particular classroom setting. Action research is a method of solving the problem of teaching objectively and systematically. It helps in the improvement of teaching process.

Action research is a method for improving and modifying the working system of a classroom and a school. The teachers and the principal are able to study their problems of teaching scientifically. It is an objective-oriented method. The action research project does not contribute to the fund of knowledge but it improves and modifies the current practices. Action research is thus a type of research conducted by the concerned by the concerned practitioners to bring about an improvement in their practices. Teachers could do it to improve their own teaching or to bring about a modification in their students behaviour. A teacher educator could use it to bring about changes in his behaviour, that of student teachers and in training and transaction techniques. It also provides the teacher with basic understanding of educational research.

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THEORETICAL ASPECTS FOR ACTION RESEARCH IN EDUCATION

1. Understanding Practice

Action research cuts across the theory-practice divide, adopting a position which implies that both elements are part of each other. This understanding of reality exposes the reflexivity of our consciousness. When faced with the challenge of understanding a situation, we cannot do so without using our existing ideas and beliefs to help us interpret. Understanding thus becomes personal; there is no inevitability of meaning dictated by the facts themselves.

2. The requirements for a action approach

The theory-ladenness of action and the reflexivity of consciousness present difficulties when it comes to the understanding of professional practice. The first suggests that it can only be fully understood from the inside; the second that an outside interpretation will inevitably impose meanings on a situation which may or may not be there. Yet the world of education and other professional disciplines is full of outside solutions or recommendations for individuals' practice. Altricher et al. (1993) suggest that two differing 'rationalities' are in conflict here, the technical and the reflective. Technical rationality suggests that there are general solutions to practical problems. These solutions can be developed outside the practical situations, in research or administrative centers. The solutions can be translated into teachers' actions by means of publications, training, administrative orders, etc.

Reflective rationality suggests that:

Complex practical problems demand specific solutions;

These solutions can be developed only inside the context in which the problem arises and in which the practitioner is a crucial and determining element;

The solutions cannot be directly applied to other contexts, but can be made accessible to other practitioners as hypotheses to be tested.

The application of action research to education arose out of a dissatisfaction with the technical approach to curriculum development. Because education is a practical enterprise, the resolution of educational problems can only take place by adopting a course of action and this action cannot exist outside the practitioners' history, beliefs and values. To help practitioners understand what course of action to take, it was essential to have a research approach that would help illuminate the personal complexities of their own situation. The clear reflective rationality of action research enables it to do that.

3. Reaching a Definition of Action Research

Action research in education declined in the sixties, when a top-down, research, development and dissemination (RD&D) model pervaded the educational establishment. It reappeared in the seventies and became linked with the idea of 'teacher as researcher' advocated by Stenhouse (Stenhouse 1975). The aim of the research now moved from the 'technical', goal-oriented, end of achieving a practice that 'worked', to a more general 'practical' aim of understanding what made the practice what it was. But with this different perspective, a number of different conceptions of the purpose and nature of the process appeared, obscuring a clear definition.

Some writers, for example Carr and Kemmis (1986) and Elliott (1991) have chosen to represent action research as a number of clearly distinct processes, linked in some kind of hierarchy of effectiveness. Their justification for a hierarchy resides around either the level of collaborative activity or the mode of analysis used. Elliott distinguishes between 'isolated' and what he sees as the necessarily collaborative 'educational' action research, claiming that when teachers reflect in isolation from each other they are likely to 'reduce action research to a form of technical rationality aimed at improving their technical skills' (Elliott 1991, p.55). What he calls 'educational' action research is, he claims, concerned more with the process of inquiry than its products and is empowering, enabling teachers to 'critique the curriculum structures which shape their practices and the power to negotiate change within the system that maintains them' (p.55). The aim of action research for Elliott is to promote a teacher's 'practical wisdom' (Elliott, 1989) and can be thought of as a 'moral science' in which the aim is to realise moral values in practice.

4.A 'bottom line'

Although there are many characterisations of the process of action research, there can be seen to be certain common elements within them. These common elements can be thought of as constituting a 'bottom line' in any definition of action research:

Action research is about teachers striving to understand and to improve their practice. At the 'bottom line', this operates at a personal level. It may lead on to collaboration and a critique of the situation in which the practice is carried out, but this does not have to be a fundamental aim.

Action research proceeds through a process of planning, action and reflection upon action. This can be thought of as an action-reflection 'cycle'.

Action research involves the gathering of evidence about practice.

Action research involves teachers trying to see the effects of planned change in their practice.

Action research strives to be systematic and rigorous.

Analysis and knowledge formation in action research belong to the practitioner.



Doing Action Research

1. Starting

There are certain questions which should help you to start your inquiry. Action research can be used to investigate practical, everyday issues. It is important to choose an area that you can do something about. It is the 'strategic action' (Kemmis and McTaggart 1982) that you can employ to try to solve the problem that will give you the insights into the factors affecting your practice.

2. Focusing on a topic

Golden rules for selecting a topic

Topic should be manageable. It should be interesting to you – you may need some perseverance to see the inquiry through. It should be workable – you are not stumped for ideas, but can identify ways in which you might have a go at addressing your question. It is not too disruptive of normal routines. (Important here to think not just of your own, but others' that your actions might affect).

Once you have mapped out the general area of concern, you will need to focus specifically on something you can do something about. There may be many potential starting points within your inquiry; in a way, it doesn't matter where you start, as long as you consider that the action may be beneficial.

Writing is frequently the most powerful way and it allows you to work through ideas and explore possibilities.

3. Planning what you will do

The planning will also help you to refine what you're looking at. During planning you need to ask certain question like, What you need to access?, Is it feasible to get this access? And how much time do you have? Once you have answered all these questions, you will be in a position to decide on what action you are going to take. All that matters is that you try to do something that might help you in that situation.

4. Monitoring

For monitoring use more than one means of data gathering and be realistic. Again, as you start to explore different methods of data gathering, you will become more familiar with them and be able to use them more efficiently. Practice doesn't make perfect, but it certainly helps! Remember that some data can be gathered after the event, through, for example, interview or questionnaire; you don't have to gather everything as you are acting. Some important considerations to bear in mind for selecting methods for data gathering.

Does the method give a form of data which relates to my question?

Is it feasible in the available time?

Have I made myself aware of its strengths and limitations?

Will it be an acceptable method for the other people involved?

Will it disrupt normal routines?

Any research which involves other people in some way has ethical implications. Action research in education is deeply embedded in the social world of the school or college within which it takes place. Because education is a social action, data gathering and analysis within action research will inevitably impact on the lives of others in those institutions, be they pupils, students or colleagues.

5. Analysis

Analysis in action research is the spur to reflection and the planning of new action. Analysis within action research is about possibilities, not certainties. It is not about why things have to be as they are, but rather what possibilities for change lie within a situation. Action within a complex social world is not static; it is dynamic and forever evolving. In analysing your action research, you need to adopt an approach which can help uncover this dynamic nature. To understand his or her practice, an action researcher should strive to uncover the elements that constitute it; elements which may be in harmony or in contradiction. Action researchers need to look at their practice dialectically. The word dialectics comes from a Greek root meaning the art of discussion. To understand a phenomenon dialectically involves the exploration of these relationships. Progress in action research can be seen to depend on this kind of analysis. The analysis will feed into new (hopefully improved) teaching and it will also feed into an understanding of why the teaching is as it is. Ideas and action are not separate, they are both constitutive elements of the phenomenon of the teaching.

LIMITATIONS AND CRITICISMS OF ACTION RESEARCH

1. Lack of time

Action researchers work in the hurly burly of their own practice. Monitoring closely this practice as they are acting within it demands space and time which, almost by definition, the practice does not give easily. It is therefore difficult to maintain rigour in data gathering and critique.



2. Validity as research

Action research is carried out by individuals who are interested parties in the research. This fact has led to criticisms of the validity of the research process, with accusations of inevitable researcher bias in data gathering and analysis. The justification for action research counters this criticism by suggesting that it is impossible to access practice without involving the practitioner. Practice is action informed by values and aims which are not fully accessible from the outside. The practitioner may not even be wholly aware of the meaning of his or her values until he or she tries to embody them in her action.

3. Unfamiliarity with research methods

Action researchers frequently explore what may constitute adequate research methods at the same time as they are researching their practice.

Action researchers draw attention to the notion of commitment. An action researcher must be committed to rigorous examination and critique of his or her practice. This, however, is a difficult principle. Commitment cannot be measured easily and the process will continue to be criticized because of this.

4. Action research produces results which are not generalizable

This is true, but someone else's ideas or conclusions can always be tried out by other persons in their own practice.

CONCLUSION

Teachers are the largest mass of intellectuals who influence the social mind to a great extent. They create the destiny of the nation. By improving teaching, they can improve their own status as well. Apart from teaching, they have to perform other activities such as development of locally relevant curriculum, designing tests, evaluating student's progress, guiding the students, counseling the students to solve their problems, guiding the students, counseling the students to solve their problems, making bridge between the school and the community, etc. In order to make all these activities effective and efficient, the teacher has to make systematic and planned efforts to find solution to his problems. This puts him/her in the position of a researcher. It is a fact that teachers do tackle and handle problems in their own ways which may at times, be arbitrary or casual and may not be systematic or scientific in spirit. Hence, they are not able to determine the effectiveness of their own actions. Research can be an alternative in this direction. Sophisticated research may be beyond their competence. Hence, they should undertake action research on problems and issues to their work or experience.

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