

## THE MOVEMENT OF ACTION RESEARCH IN EDUCATION (Sharing problems, goals, and respect for teachers and students)

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### Abstract

Action research is concerned with diagnosing a problem in a specific context and attempting to solve it in that context: it is usually (though not inevitably *collaborative* - team of researcher and practitioners of work together on a project; it is *participatory* team members themselves take part directly or indirectly in implementing the research and it is self *evaluative* – modifications are continuously evaluated within the ongoing situation, the ultimate objective being to improve practice in some way or others.

**Key words :** *Action research, Education*

### Introduction

Action research is from the word: *action* and *research* as separate activities in whatever context each have their own ideology. Conventional definition *action research is small - scale intervention in the functioning of the real world and a close examination of the effects of such intervention* By looking at a few examples of the use of the method in the research literature : other tangible features ; action research is *situational*. It is concerned with diagnosing a problem in a specific context and attempting to solve it in that context: it is usually (though not inevitably *collaborative* - team of researcher and practitioners of work together on a project; it is *participatory* team members themselves take part directly or indirectly in implementing the research and it is self *evaluative* – modifications are continuously evaluated within the ongoing situation, the ultimate objective being to improve practice in some way or others. According to **Blum** the use of action research in social science can be resolve into two stages; a *diagnostic stage* in which the problems are analyzed and the hypotheses developed; and a *therapeutic stage* in which the hypotheses are tested by consciously directed change experiment, preferably in social life situation. As far as educational context are concerned, however **Stenhouse** is careful to stress that action research should contribute not only to practice but to a theory of education and teaching which is accessible to other teacher.

### What Is Action Research?

Action Research (AR) has its academic roots in sociology, social psychology, psychology, organizational studies, and education. Action research can be described as a family of research methodologies which pursue action (or change) and research (or understanding) at the same time. In most of its forms it does this by using a cyclic or spiral process which alternates between action and critical reflection. In the later cycles, it alternates between data collection and interpretation in the light of the understanding developed in the earlier cycles. It is thus an emergent process, which takes shape as understanding increases; it is an iterative process, which converges towards a better understanding of what happens. In most of its forms it is also participative and qualitative.

Action Research is a methodology, which is intended to have both action outcomes and research outcomes. The action is primary. In distinction, there are some forms of action research where research is the main emphasis and the action is almost a fringe benefit. The responsiveness of action research allows it to be used to develop hypotheses from the data, "on the run" as it were. It can therefore also be used as a research tool for investigative or pilot research, and generally for diagnosis or evaluation, (B, Dick, Action Research Resources).

The scope of action research as a method is impressive. Its usage may range at one extreme from a teacher trying out of a novel

way of teaching social study with his class to, at another sophisticated study of organizational change in industry using a large research team and backed by government sponsored.

### **Action Research:**

1) Is educative, 2) Deals with individuals as members of social groups, 3) Is problem-focused, context-specific and future-orientated 4), Involves a change intervention 5) Involves a cyclic process in which research, action and evaluation are interlinked 6) Aims at improvement and involvement 7) Is founded on a research relationship in which those involved are participants in the change process (Hart E and Bond M 1995)

### **Defining Action Research**

The different conceptions of action research can be revealed in some typical definitions of action research, for example Hopkins (1985:32) and Ebbutt (1985:156) suggest that the combination of action and research renders that action a form of disciplined inquiry, in which a personal attempt is made to understand, improve and reform practice. Cohen and Manion (1994:186) define it as 'a small-scale intervention in the functioning of the real world and a close examination of the effects of such intervention

One of the founding figures of action research, Kurt Lewin (1948) remarked that research which produced nothing but books is inadequate. The task, as Marx suggests in his *Theses on Feuerbach*, is not merely to understand and interpret the world but to change it. Action research is a powerful tool for change and improvement at the local level. Indeed Lewin's own work was deliberately intended to change the life chances of disadvantaged groups in terms of housing, employment, prejudice, socialization, and training. Its combination of *action* and *research* has contributed to its attraction to researchers, teachers and the academic and educational community alike, demolishing Hodgkinson's (1957) corrosive criticism of action research as easy hobby games for little

engineers! The scope of action research as a method is impressive. Action research may be used in almost any setting where a problem involving people, tasks and procedures cries out for solution, or where some change of feature results in a more desirable outcome. It can be undertaken by the individual teacher, a group of teachers working co-operatively within one school, or a teacher or teachers working alongside a researcher or researchers in a sustained relationship, possibly with other interested parties like advisers, university departments and sponsors on the periphery (Holly and Whitehead, 1986). Action research can be used in a variety of areas, for example:

1. *Teaching methods* : replacing a traditional method by a discovery method;
2. *Learning strategies*: adopting an integrated approach to learning in preference to a single-subject style of teaching and learning
3. *Evaluative procedures*: improving one's methods of continuous assessment
4. *Continuing professional development of teachers*: improving teaching skills, developing new methods of learning, increasing powers of analysis, of heightening self-awareness
5. *Management and control*: the gradual introduction of the techniques of behavior modification
6. *Administration*: increasing the efficiency of some aspect of the administrative side of school life.

### **The differences between Applied Research and Action Research**

There are important differences between action research and applied research which need to be made explicit. **Applied research** is concerned mainly with establishing relationship and testing theories; it is quite rigorous in its application of the conditions of this method. To this end, therefore, it insists on: studying a large number of cases, establishing as much control as possible over variables; precise sampling techniques; and a serious concern to generalize its finding to comparable situation. It does not claim to contribute directly to the solution of problems.

**Action research**, by contrast, interprets the scientific method much more loosely, chiefly because its focus is a specific problem in a specific setting. The emphasis is not so much on obtaining the generalisable scientific knowledge as on precise knowledge for a particular situation and purpose. The conditions imposed on applied research, therefore, are normally relaxed with action research.

Having drawn this distinction between action research and applied research, we are now free to concentrate on the former and ask ourselves the question: What kinds of intervention program are featured in action research? The following give some idea of the context in which the method maybe used. They are not mutually exclusive so there may be considerable overlap between some of them. There is the kind:

1. Which act is a spur to action, its objective being to get something done more expeditiously than would be the case with alternative means
2. Which addresses itself to personal functioning, human relation and morale and is thus concern with people job efficiency, their motivation relationship and general well being?
3. Which focuses on job analysis and aim at improving and aims at improving professional functioning and efficiency
4. Which is concerned with organizational change in so far as it results in improved functioning in business and industry?
5. Which is concern with planning and policy making, general on the field of administration?
6. Which is concerned with innovation and change and the ways in which these may be implemented in ongoing systems?
7. Which concentrates on problem solving virtually in any context in which a specific problem needs solving?
8. Which provide the opportunity to develop theoretical knowledge? The emphasis here was being more on the research element of the method.

### **Action Research Movement In Education**

Action research movement in education was initiated in the United State in 1940s. One writer says action research is direct and logical outcome of the progressive position. After showing children how to work together to solve their problem, the next steps was to a teacher to adopt the method they have been teaching their children and learn to solve their own problems cooperatively.

These examples do not mean, however, that action research can be typified straightforwardly; that is to distort its complex and multifaceted nature. Indeed Kemmis (1997) suggests that there are several schools of action research.

Action research in Britain has enjoyed something of revival since the establishment in School council in 1964.under whose aegis it has been used to implement curriculum research and development fall broadly into five categories.

1. It is means of remedying problem diagnosed in specific situation or of improving in some way a given set of circumstances.
2. It is a means of in service training, there by equipping the teacher with new skills and methods, sharpening his analytical power and heightening his self awareness
3. It is a means of injecting additional or innovatory approaches to teaching and learning into an ongoing system which normally inhibits innovation and chance.ake
4. It is a means of improving the normally poor communication between the practicing teacher and the academic researcher, and of remedying the failure of the traditional research to give clear prescription.
5. Although lacking the rigor of the true scientific research, it is a means of providing a preferable alternative to the more subjective, impressionistic approach to problem solving in the classroom.

### **Action Research in Education**

It puts a theoretical concept, teaching practice, or totally new hypothesis to the test in a classroom or school. Action research is done by and for the people taking the action and relates to the action they are taking. Its purpose can be to improve the practice of an individual researcher, or of collaborative research; it can focus on school goals. Teachers raise questions about classroom practice, carefully document procedures and gather data on student performance, then reflect on that data and practical experience to determine what to do next. Action research cycles often start with a question (e.g., Can I accelerate student learning by using cooperative learning groups?). The steps that often follow problem formulation are theory development, design intervention, data collection, and data analysis. The process is not a lock-step regime. More often than not, data collection and analysis lead to new questions or further data collection for the same problem/hypothesis much like peeling away the layers of an onion. Perhaps the most important part of the process is the reflection on collected data. Having asked a question that begs an answer, and designed a plan for collecting that information, teachers reflect on their experiences and ask questions like: a) What were the anticipated effects? b) Were there some unanticipated effects? c) What have we learned from this? d) What might we have to relearn or unlearn in our work? e) What are our next steps? Should we stop doing this because it doesn't work? f) Continue doing this because it is getting results we find desirable? f) Start doing something else that may be more likely to succeed?

### **Who Actually Undertake Action Research in School?**

First, there is a single teacher operating on his own with his class. Second, action research may be pursued by a group of teacher working co-operatively within one school. Third, there is the occasion perhaps the most characteristics in recent year- where a teacher or teachers work a longside a researcher or researchers in

a sustained of relationship, possibly with other interested parties like adviser, university department and sponsors on the periphery. Carr and Kemmis say of this arrangement: 'in practical action research, participant monitor their own educational practices with the immediate aim of developing of their practical judgment as individual, Thus the facilitator's role is Socratic to provide a sounding board – against which practitioners may try out ideas and learn more about the reasons for their own action as well as learning more about the process of self reflection

### **Action Research in Classroom and School**

1. All teachers possess certain skills which can contribute to the research task. The important thing is to clarify and define one's own particular set of skills. Some teachers, for example, are able to collect and interpret statistical data; others to record in retrospective accounts the key moments of a lesson. One teacher may know something about questionnaire design; another have a natural flair for interviewing. It is essential that teachers work from their own particular strengths when developing the research.
2. The situations within which teachers work impose different kinds of constraints. Some schools, for example, are equipped with the most up-to-date audio-visual equipment, others cannot even boast a cassette tape-recorder. Some have spare rooms in which interviews could be carried out, others hardly have enough space to implement the existing time-table. Action research must be designed in such a way as to be easily implemented within the pattern of constraints existing within the school.
3. Any initial definition of the research problem will almost certainly be modified as the research proceeds. Nevertheless, this definition is important because it helps to set limits to the inquiry. If, for example, a teacher sets out to explore through action research the problem of how to start a lesson effectively, the research will tend to focus upon the first few minutes of the

lesson. The question of what data to collect is very largely answered by a clear definition of the research problem.

### **When to Use Action Research?**

In many field settings it is not possible to use more traditional research methods because they can't readily be adjusted to the demands of the situation. If you do alter them in midstream you may have to abandon the data collected up to that point. (This is because you have probably altered the odds under the null hypothesis.)

The major justification for action research methods is that they can be responsive to the situation in a way that many other research methods cannot, at least in the short term. On these grounds I think action research will usually, though perhaps not always, be cyclic in nature. In the interests of rigor, each cycle will include critical reflection. In most instances it will also be qualitative and participative to some extent. When we wish to find out about a few variables, and the causal relationships between them. Then, experimental or quasi-experimental research will serve you much better than action research. Alternatively, you may wish to explore some organization or group or culture in depth. For this, you may do better to use ethnographic methods.

Action research methods are most likely to be appropriate when you do not know where to start, and do not have a lot of time to invest in the study. It is useful for exploratory research, where you do not yet have a very precise research question. But it is most valuable when you have to be responsive to the changing demands of a situation, as when you wish to build a research component into some change program or the like. Good research, it can be argued is research, which uses a methodology, which fits the situation, and the goals you are pursuing. AR is most commonly used for research in Education and Community Development.

### **Strategies for Data Collection and Researching**

The intention of this part is to enable researchers to decide on the most appropriate instruments for data collection, and to design such instruments. The strengths and weaknesses of these instruments are set out, so that decisions on their suitability avoid being arbitrary and the criterion of fitness for purpose is held high. To that end, the intention is to introduce underlying issues of principle in instrumentation as well as to ensure that practical guidelines are provided for researchers. For each instrument the purpose is to ensure that researchers can devise appropriate data collection instruments for themselves, and are aware of the capabilities of such instruments to provide useful and usable data.

### **Principles and Characteristics of action research**

- a. Hult and Lennung (1980:241–50) and McKernan (1991:32–3) suggest that action research:
- b. makes for practical problem solving as well as expanding scientific knowledge;
- c. enhances the competencies of participants;
- d. is collaborative;
- e. is undertaken directly in situ;
- f. uses feedback from data in an ongoing cyclical process;
- g. seeks to understand particular complex social situations;
- h. seeks to understand the processes of change within social systems;
- i. is undertaken within an agreed framework of ethics;
- j. seeks to improve the quality of human actions;
- k. focuses on those problems that are of immediate concern to practitioners;
- l. is participatory;
- m. frequently uses case study;
- n. tends to avoid the paradigm of research that isolates and controls variables;
- o. is formative, such that the definition of the problem, the aims and methodology may alter during the process of action research;
- p. includes evaluation and reflection;
- q. is methodologically eclectic;

- r. contributes to a science of education;
- s. strives to render the research usable and shareable by participants;
- t. is dialogical and celebrates discourse;
- u. has a critical purpose in some forms;
- v. strives to be emancipator

### Six Key Principles of Action Research:

This latter view is echoed in Winter's (1996:13– 14):

1. *Reflexive critique*, which is the process of becoming aware of our own perceptual biases;
2. *Dialectical critique*, which is a way of understanding the relationships between the elements that make up various phenomena in our context;
3. *Collaboration*, which is intended to mean that everyone's view is taken as a contribution to understanding the situation;
4. *Risking disturbance*, which is an understanding of our own taken-for-granted processes and willingness to submit them to critique;
5. *Creating plural structures*, which involves developing various accounts and critiques, rather than a single authoritative interpretation;
6. *Theory and practice internalized*, which is seeing theory and practice as two interdependent yet complementary phases of the change process

### Conclusion

Action research is an expanding field which is commanding significant education attention and which has its own centres (e.g. at the Universities of Cambridge and East Anglia in the UK and Deakin University in Australia) and its own journals (e.g. Educational Action Research). It has been seen as a significant vehicle for empowering teachers, though this chapter has questioned the extent of this. As a research device it combines six notions: 1) A straightforward cycle of identifying a problem, planning an intervention, implementing the intervention, evaluating the outcome; 2) reflective practice; 3) political emancipation; 4) critical theory; 5) professional development;

and 6) participatory practitioner research. It is a flexible, situationally responsive methodology that offers rigour, authenticity and voice. That said, this chapter has tried to expose both the attractions and problematic areas of action research. In its thrust towards integrating action and research one has to question whether this is an optimistic way of ensuring that research impacts on practice for improvement, or whether it is a recessive hybrid. It was found that the teacher taking part were generally enthusiastic. They seemed to feel that the staff work more as a unit than before the research, that staff member were drawn closer together with the knowledge that they shared problems and goals, and that respect for individuals, both teachers and students had increased.

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