

ACTION RESEARCH IN EDUCATION – AN OVERVIEW

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INTRODUCTION

As far as I am concerned, educational research plays an important role in enhancing the process of teaching and learning. According to Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun (2011), there are different research methodologies such as quantitative and qualitative research, experimental research, correlational research, causal – comparative research, survey research, ethnographic research, historical research, action research, evaluation research ... All have value for us in education and no single approach should be considered as superior to any of the others. However, when we take into account the matter of change and improvement, Action Research seems to be the most useful.

1. WHAT IS ACTION RESEARCH?

Action research is conducted by one or more individuals or groups for the purpose of solving a problem or obtaining information in order to inform local practice. Those involved in action research generally want to solve some kind of day to day immediate problem (Fraenkel et al., 2011). As for Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2006), action research in education is defined as any systematic inquiry conducted by teachers, principals, school counselors, or other stakeholders in the teaching-learning environment, to gather information about the ways in which their particular schools operate, the teachers teach, and the students learn. From the view of Mills (2000, as cited in Jenkins and Dix, 2004), action research is a valuable approach that facilitates improved teaching practices and promotes productive learning environments. It enables the teacher to understand what happens in the classroom and enhance the probability that a given curriculum, instructional strategy or technology will improve student outcomes. For Kemmis (1994, as cited in Creswell, 2008), when action researchers engage in a study, they are interested in examining their own practices rather than studying someone else's practices. In this sense, action researchers engage in participatory or self-reflective research in which they turn the lens on their own educational classroom, school, or practices.

2. WHAT ASSUMPTIONS UNDERPIN ACTION RESEARCH?

Here are some assumptions about action research presented by Fraenkel et al. (2011): teachers and other educational professionals have the authority to make the decision, they want to improve their practice, they are committed to continual professional development, and they will engage in systematic inquiry. According to Watts (1985, as cited in Ferrence, 2000), as action research is a process in which participants examine their own educational practice systematically and carefully, it is based on the following assumptions: teachers and principals work best on problems they have identified for themselves, teachers and principals become more effective when encouraged to examine and assess their own work and then consider ways of working differently, teachers and principals help each other by working collaboratively, and working with colleagues helps teachers and principals in their professional development.

3. WHAT TYPES OF ACTION RESEARCH ARE THERE?

One of the confusions we may find when mentioning “action research” is that there are many different kinds of it. Berg (2001, as cited in Newton and Burgess, 2008) thinks that there are three modes of action research: (a) technical (scientific/collaborative), (b) practical (mutual collaborative/deliberative), and (c) emancipating (enhancing/critical). Each mode has a distinct goal. The technical (scientific/collaborative) mode has as its goal “to test a particular intervention based on a pre-specified theoretical framework”. The practical (mutual collaborative/deliberative) mode “seeks to improve practice-and-service delivery”. The emancipating (enhancing/critical) mode can “assist practitioners in lifting their veil of clouded understandings, and help them to better understand fundamental problems by raising their collective consciousness”. Carr and Kemmis (1986,

as cited in Parker, 2006) also suggest that action research can be differentiated into three clearly distinct types: “technical”, “practical” and “emancipatory”. However, as for Mills (2000, as cited in Fraenkel et al., 2011), although variations and combinations of the two are possible, there are only two main types of action research: Practical Action Research and Participatory Action Research (Collaborative Research) with the basic differences as follows: practical action research addresses a specific local problem and the primary purpose is to improve practice and inform larger issues. Participatory action research, while also focused on addressing a specific local problem, attempts to empower participants or bring about social change. The stakeholders are involved and active in all processes (collaborative participation). Gay et al. (2006) also suggests two main types of action research: critical action research and practical action research. Critical action research is action research in which the goal is liberating individuals through knowledge gathering; for this reason, it is also known as emancipatory action research. Practical action research emphasizes the “how-to” approach to the process of action research.

4. WHAT ARE THE STEPS TAKEN IN THE PROCESS OF ACTION RESEARCH?

Fraenkel et al. (2011) points out four basic stages. The 1st stage is identifying the research problem or question. This is the very first stage in action research. An individual or groups need to carefully examine the situation and identify the problem. An important thing to remember is that for an action research project to be successful, it must be manageable. The 2nd stage is obtaining the necessary information to answer the question(s). The role of this step is to decide what sorts of data are needed and how to collect them. We can use a wide range of methodologies such as: experiments, surveys, causal-comparative studies, observations, interviews ... The 3rd stage is analyzing and interpreting the information that has been gathered. This step focuses on analyzing and interpreting the data gathered in the previous step so that the participants can decide what the data reveals. At this stage, it is important for the data to be examined in relation to resolving the research question or problem for which the research was conducted. And the 4th stage is developing a plan of action. This step is to make determination about improvement based on a new standard emerging from the action research findings. Basing on the findings, this step creates plans to implement changes. What is essential is that the study indicates clear directions for further work on the original problem or concern. In some other studies, people add the 5th stage. That is making assessment and evaluation. Creswell (2008) even suggests 8 steps in conducting an action research study. They are : (1) determine if action research is the best design to use, (2) identify a problem to study, (3) locate resources to help address the problem, (4) identify information you will need, (5) implement the data collection, (6) analyze the data, (7) develop a plan for action, and (8) implement the plan and reflect.

5. WHAT IS THE ROLE (ACTION) OF THE TEACHER RESEARCHER?

Talking about the role of teacher researcher, I quite agree with what O’Brien (1998) has presented: in order to complete the action research, it is essential that the teacher researcher adopt many different roles at various stages of the process, including planner, leader, catalyzer, facilitator, teacher, designer, listener, observer, synthesizer, and reporter. Beside he always emphasized that the main role is to nurture local leaders to the point where they can take responsibility for the process. This point is reached when they understand the methods and are able to carry on when the initiating researcher leaves.

WHAT ARE THE OUTCOME BENEFITS?

We can not but agree that action research when being carried out appropriately will provide many benefits. Depending on specific situations, these benefits may be different. However, as Fraenkel et al. (2011) has pointed out, there are at least five advantages to action research. First of all, the research is easy to be done. Anyone, any professional, any school can carry out the research to investigate any kind of problem of any grade level. Second, it plays an important part in enhancing the quality of teaching and learning process. Third, action research can help education and other professionals to improve their craft. In other words, it provides them with necessary source of ideas to modify and enrich their strategies and techniques. Fourth, it can help teachers learn to identify problems and issues systematically. Finally, it can build up a small community of research-oriented individuals at the local level. This will help teachers, counselors and administrators have a chance to show what they have learned and as a result, promote mutual helping.

CONCLUSION

As teachers, we know that teaching is definitely not an easy task. This process demands much effort from both teachers and students. More important to say, no small set of teaching techniques or strategies can possibly work for all students, then problems can happen anytime. When we know that things do not go as we wish and we want to find practical solutions, what we need is to carry out an educational research. In other words, these researches play a vital role in fixing the problems and enhancing the teaching and learning process. Before ending this research paper, once again, I would like to emphasize that all teachers should be self equipped with enough knowledge and experience to carry out researches in general and action research in particular to help the students in their study.

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