

Action Research: Its Paradigms and Applications for Trainee Teachers

Dr. Dinesh Pandey*

Action research is acknowledged worldwide as a powerful tool for enhancing the capacity of teachers. It is also used in industry, trade and commerce and other workplaces. Perhaps, it is found to be the most resultant practice in education, where its popularity became prominent, particularly with reference to the professional learning of teachers. Today, it is recognised as a prominent research methodology which can greatly enhance the professional learning of teachers as well as it can enormously improve the quality of learning of students in classrooms.

As a tool, Action Research is used to help teachers and other educators uncover strategies to improve teaching practices (Sagor, 2004); it is a viable and realistic endeavor for all educators. Action research requires teachers to design a study in an area of interest that they would like to carry out in their classrooms or schools. Many times, action research is considered as a professional development opportunity because, frequently, teachers test a new instructional strategy, assess a new curriculum program, or evaluate an existing pedagogical method. In many research studies, participating in action research has been found to be the impetus for positive change exemplified by teacher improvement, self-reflection, and overall learning that enhances classroom practices (Ferrance, 2000; Johnson & Button, 2000; Ross, Rolheiser, & Hogoboom-Gray, 1999; Sax & Fisher, 2001). These forms of change may impact teacher quality.

As of teachers and enhancing their professional capacity, the principles of Action Research can immensely improve and build the capacity of teachers. The traditional research methodologies fail to ferret out the outcome especially in context of the day to day problems as well as the problems in which the researcher-teacher is one of the observers who is involved and aware of the dimensions of the problem. Action Research is of immense importance for trainee teachers. Many practicing classroom teachers are too busy to resolve the problems arising in classroom situations.. For many practitioners, research appears to be a complex set of steps too difficult and time-consuming for classroom teachers to participate in or lead.

* Associate Professor, - II, Institute of Education and Research, Mangalyatan University, Aligarh.

Teachers who are immersed in their own classrooms may find research irrelevant because there is little research written by practicing teachers, and many times it does not relate to the daily activities in classrooms (Ferrance, 2000; McBee, 2004). However, research is conducted in many educational settings and often has a positive impact. According to McBee (2004), “classrooms that become laboratories are better classrooms” because, as Johnson (2005) explains, research is not effective if it is perceived by teachers as an edict that is passed down from researchers to practicing educators, but is much more effective when it is constructed with personal relevance. Action research is a form of research that is authentic and meaningful to the teacher-researcher because it is conducted by the teacher in his/her own classroom space. Action research helps teachers to “pick up threads suggested in academic circles, and weave them in their own classroom” (Ferrance, 2000). Johnson and Button (2000) cited one teacher researcher who stated, “I never thought before that what was going on in my classroom could be considered research or thought of as research or respected as research”.

Action research allows teachers to take ownership over their teaching and occurs when teacher researchers contemplate a classroom or instructional issue, design a study, execute the study, track data and results, and reflect. The action research progression is interactive; it is not a passive process, as teacher-researchers are active constructors of knowledge (Abdul-Haqq, 1995; Williamson, 1992). As teachers construct new knowledge while linking prior knowledge, learning occurs.

Micro Teaching and Action Research :

The Action research is a phenomenal research which can be utilized in the training the skills of micro-teaching to the trainee teachers. The workplace experience in a micro teaching set up brings into action the base and practice of professional training wherein the observers can use the techniques and tools of action research so that the trainee-teachers find the lacunas in their skills at the source so that the desired professional improvements take its course immediately without much hassles.

Teacher education in real terms should be assessed in relation to how it influences student learning for benefit more specifically if the trainee-teachers are not skilled professionally, the entire exercise from learner's end become futile. The set of techniques of action research which relegates teachers to the status of skilled technicians and builds professional acumen in trainee- teachers is a value-laden practice.

Practice Teaching and Action Research :

This methodological approach can then be developed as an action plan, which can be utilised in micro-teaching, practice teaching and also in identifying the problems in schools during school attachment programmes wherein trainee-teachers as the first timers should observe the schools closely and discuss with their mentors about such problems who can guide them to initiate means of action research in school set up.

This practice will help the trainee-teachers to get aware of the school phenomena and its various components prior to the commencement of teaching in classrooms. The teachers can progress through the training and implementation cycle of action research in their classrooms and the subsequent effects on instructional practices and student learning experiences. Schlechty (1990) stated, “to improve [schooling], one must invest in people, support people, and develop people”. Educational practitioners can be liberated to improve their profession with opportunities that promote systemic, collaborative teacher research conducted in the authentic setting of the classroom. Educators can use teacher research to uncover explanations to their own questions about the best way to improve teaching and learning practices.

Johnson (1993) stated “teacher research will force the re-evaluation of current theories and will significantly influence what is known about teaching, learning, and schooling”. Likewise, Freeman (1998) stated it as an important step in transforming education from a practice of implementation to a practice devoted to understanding learning”. Johnson (1993) and Freeman (1998) agreed that teachers should be researchers in their own classrooms. Teaching and learning are malleable practices that occur in the complex ecologies of individual, social, cultural, and political settings and in the interactions of local and global contexts. Therefore, teacher quality and the evaluation of effective teaching are dependent upon student outcomes; gains demonstrated by a wide range of students who bring diverse experiences as well as other social factors found in classrooms.

Perspectives of New Action Research Paradigms in TE Programs :

The recent paradigm shift in the focus of educational research and the role of teachers and teacher educators addresses the challenge of how to appropriately measure teacher performance. It is possible that teachers themselves, through their own problems of the teaching and learning process within the contexts where they work, and their own research can be used to closely examine their role as change agents and decision-makers, particularly when supporting the literacy needs of struggling readers. From this perspective, comprehensive evaluation of

teaching and learning can include a close look at teacher quality by analyzing teachers' examination of their own practices and reflections about how their decision-making impacts student outcomes.

Teacher research plays an increasingly significant role in contemporary society as a basis for self-exploration and inquiry. For the last few decades there have been active scholarly efforts to formalize self-study research as an accepted form of inquiry and further the framework as a promising research paradigm in educational research. For instance, Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP) Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) has promoted theoretical discussions on self-study. Recently, the discussion has been expanded to include a comprehensive methodology of self-study as well as strategies and techniques useful to conduct a self-study (Lassonde, Galman, & Kosnik, 2009; Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009). Self-study that uses a systematic process for inquiry such as the action research process (Mertler & Charles, 2005)—particularly where researchers use processes to identify a problem and explore how to address the problem in authentic contexts—can provide valid, reliable, and systematic protocols for classroom inquiry

Self-Study and Action Research :

Reflection is a significant component of self-study and action research (Mills, 2003) as it is a powerful way to know about the self in research and practice as well as to unpack the very self in teaching practice. Reflective practice in teacher education allows teacher educators to explore how teachers learn by including “I” in an epistemology of reflective practice (Whitehead, 2000). Reflective pedagogy helps teachers closely examine current practice and spearhead changes as teacher leaders (Reason & Reason, 2007). In other words, self-study means studying one's own practice in its simple term, but its definition varies according to role, practice, and purpose (Smaras & Freese, 2006)—a process that lends itself to qualitative inquiry which uses narrative, descriptive approaches to data collection and analysis. While engaging in self-study, teachers examine and problematize their own teaching by reflecting on their practice (Schön, 1983). Fairbanks and LaGrone (2006) examined the ways in which the teachers constructed knowledge through the discourse of a teacher research group and found that teachers' learning and teaching is transformed through the talk about theory and practice to support their research efforts. Swinglehurst, Russell, and Greenhalgh (2008) assert that “action research is becoming a popular approach to studying complex social situations such as those found in educational settings, where the focus is on simultaneous [inquiry] into practice (generating knowledge) and action to

improve situations (e.g. designing new curricula or learning activities)". Through this self-directed inquiry, the teacher will (1) "ask essential questions, gather data and necessary information, and analyze and interpret the information to answer their questions" (McVicker, 2008/2009); and engage in critical and reflective thinking through self-directed (Elder & Paul, 2007) exploration to self-evaluate current practice.

Following are the examples of Topics explored by Classroom Teachers through Action Research resolutions to classroom problems—

- Enriching students' writing ability.
- Improving the quality of students' knowledge and comprehension.
- Providing comprehension strategies with think-aloud for struggling and disabled readers.
- Best practices to change a middle school writing and reading program.
- Instruction in the classroom for effective learning of mathematics.
- Incorporating multisensory phonics instruction.
- Absenteeism and behavioural problems.
- Literature circles in classrooms for effective learning.
- Using guided reading to differentiate instruction in various subjects.
- Comprehension strategies and sustained silent reading.
- Increasing student mastery of reading skills using multiple approaches.
- Fostering use of writing strategies and self-assessment in student writing.

Conclusion :

The principles of Action Research can immensely improve and build the capacity of teachers. The traditional research methodologies fail to ferret out the outcome especially in context of the day to day problems as well as the problems in which the researcher-teacher is one of the observers who is involved and aware of the dimensions of the problems. Action Research is of immense importance for trainee teachers. Many practicing classroom teachers fail to resolve their problems arising in classroom situations due to lack of training in Action Research Modular Programs.. For many practitioners, research appears to be a complex set of steps too difficult and time-consuming for classroom teachers whereas action research practices can simplify the complexities of classroom problems including both the scholastic as well the co-scholastic problems of the respective classrooms.

References :

- Abdul-Haqq, I. (1995). ERIC as a resource for the teacher researcher. ERIC Digest. EED 381530. Retrieved from <http://www.ericdigests.org/1996-1/teacher.htm>
- Allyn & Bacon. Miller, D. M., & Pine, G. J. (1990). Advancing professional inquiry for educational improvement through action research. *Journal of Staff Development*, 11(3), 56-61. EJ430617
- Auger, W., & Wideman, R. (2000). Using action research to open the door to life long professional learning. *Education*, 121, 120-127.
- Ferrance, E. (2000). Themes in education: Action research. Brown University: Educational Alliance, 1- 34.
- Gall, M., Borg, W., & Gall, J. (1996). *Educational Research, an Introduction*. New York: Longman Publishers Henson,
- Johnson, A. P. (2005). *A short guide to action research*. Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Johnson, M., & Button, K. (2000). Connecting graduate education in language arts with teaching contexts: The power of action research. *English Education*, 32, 107-126.
- K. T. (1996). Teachers as researchers. In J. Sikula (Ed.), *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education* (2 nd ed., pp.53-66). New York: Macmillan.
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. (1999). *Designing qualitative research* (3 rd edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- McBee, M. (2004). *The classroom as laboratory: An exploration of teacher research*. Roeper
- Mertler, C, A. (2006). *Action research: Teachers as researchers in the classroom*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Mertler, C. A., & Charles, C. M. (2005). *Introduction to educational research* (5 th ed.). Boston:

- Parsons, R. D., & Brown, K. S. (2002). Teacher as reflective practitioner and action researcher. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth /Thomson Learning.
- Ross, J., Rolheiser, C., & Hogoboom-Gray, A. (1999). Effects of collaborative action research on the knowledge of five Canadian teacher researchers. *The Elementary School Journal*, 99 (3), 255- 274.
- Sagor, R. (2004). *The action research guidebook: A four-step process for educators and school teams*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Sax, C., & Fisher, D. (2001) Using qualitative action research to effect change: Implications for professional education. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 28 (2), 71-80.
- Silverman, D. (2001). *Interpreting qualitative data: Methods for analyzing talk, text and interaction*. 2 nd ed. London: Sage.
- Williamson, K. M. (1992). Relevance or rigor--A case for teacher as researcher. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance*, 63(9), 17-21. EJ461928.