

A Systematic Review of the Outcomes of Using Action Research in Education

Djihed Messikh

Faculty of Letter and Foreign Languages
University of 20th August 1955_ Skikda
Algeria

Abstract

Teaching, as a profession, is becoming more and more challenging every day, not only because the teacher has to deal with unpredictable difficulties in constantly changing uncontrollable cultural and social contexts in the classrooms, but also for the need, nowadays, to be a curious explorer, a systematic investigator, and a creative innovation to solve his/her problems while teaching, using a flexible, self-reflective, critical, and production-oriented approach. Educational Action Research can provide a chance for the teacher to develop his/her critical thinking skills to become effective self-reliant problem-solver to the actual unique challenges that no one, but him/her, can better understand and administer in the classroom. Thus, s/he becomes enthusiastically involved in structuring and sharing a more comprehensive view of education. This paper investigates the possible outcomes of using action research in education, with an emphasis on teachers, after highlighting main critiques. It starts by discussing first the early evolution of Action Research both as a notion and a structure. Then, it reviews primary literature and research findings on the benefits of using Educational Action Research for teachers. The paper suggests that taking the role of teacher-research may help in achieving sustainable development at the level of the classroom and contributes in promoting the professional careers of teachers.

Keywords: Educational Action Research, Professional Development, sustainable development, teacher-researcher role

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Introduction

More than any time, Action Research, as a notion, is so often used in education nowadays to suggest solutions to real classroom problems that are faced daily by teachers, though the term is by no means new. This paper studies the early formulation of the Action Research theory as suggested by Lewin in 1946. It covers its echo around the world, including main critiques against it, especially during the second half of the twentieth century. The paper also stresses the importance of using Action Research in education through studying the promising effects for teachers.

1. Action Research: a Nutshell about its Early Evolution as a Concept and a Process

The term Action Research was coined in 1946 by Lewin, a social psychologist, and educator, in the United States who tried to enhance intergroup relations in some American communities (Bargal, 2006). He was particularly interested in developing social relationships to promote communication and cooperation to raise the self-esteem of some minority groups, using action research and other ways (Adelman, 1993). Lewin argues that democratic communities should publicly enquire about different social problems _that were, at that time, mainly repercussions brought about by the devastating World War II (Dickens & Watkins, 1999). Nevertheless, there were some close notions to Action Research that were developed independently and sometimes simultaneously by other theorists as John Collier, a US anthropologist and social worker who emphasized principles of cooperation and collaboration, and John Dewey who stressed the importance of human interaction with his natural environment (Maksimović, 2010). But still, Lewin is the first to formulate the theory of Action Research that grew out of the Harwood Experiments conducted at Virginia-based Textiles Company. The experiments suggested an influential approach to organizational change through stressing the importance of encouraging principles of cooperation and communication among different participants (Burns 2007). Lewin concludes that respecting these simple principles can overcome employees turnover and social conflict, and thus, can achieve a better productivity level (Burnes,2007). Lewin also discusses the chasm between social theories suggested by researchers and actions taken by practitioners. He criticizes the researchers for developing no application after conducting their scientific studies and disapproves of taking actions without prior theoretical background (Peters & Robinson, 1984). He calls for collaboration between them to obtain effective solutions to practical problems (Cuningham, 1993). In another word, he suggests, in his article, that doing research and taking action should be a simultaneous process which should not disconnect the investigation from the required work to solve the problem in real-life situations (McFarland & Stansell, 1993). He insists that there should be: “no action without research; and no research without action” (McTaggart 1997, p.81); thus, he clearly calls for advocating experimentation in action research. Lewin, indeed, gives a dominant consideration to the old scientific paradigm based on testing, along with the need to observe to be able to make valid changes that may end up by significant contributions towards solving the research problem (Clark, 1976). Furthermore, Lewin suggests a cyclical process that involves planning, data gathering, taking action, evaluating, and reflecting (Pelton, 2010). He describes this non-linear process as a: “spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action, and fact-finding about the result of the action” (Lewin, 1946, p. 38).

Although Lewin was the first to introduce and formulate a definition for Action Research, many ambiguities and questions were left unanswered after his sudden death of a heart attack in 1947. Lewin had never clearly stated a systematic view of Action Research within his relatively short

article (about 22 pages). The chance, however, was open for several subsequent contributions to elaborate upon the original definition of Lewin, trying to re-interpret it and expand it to suggest distinct aspects of the process (Dickens & Watkins, 1999).

His students, Chein, Cook, and Harding, who worked with him as researchers in the Research Center for Group Dynamics in the Institute of Technology and the Commission on Community Interrelations, further developed his work after his death. They distinguished four types of action research: *Diagnostic Action Research* that focuses on problem-identification, *Participant Action Research* that engages individuals to examine local issues, *Empirical Action Research* to gather data and *Experimental Action Research* to test hypotheses (Hendricks, 2019). Nevertheless, Action Research, after Lewin, received intense critiques that doubted the validity of resolutions suggested by Action Research which, according to them, may not introduce any significant contributions to the body of knowledge. Action Research was even considered by some critiques as a non-social science research (Brooks & Watkins, 1994), for lacking the true spirit of scientific research (Cohen & Manion, 1980), having less internal and external control of the natural environment (Merriam & Simpson, 1984), in addition to the fact that solving an ongoing problem in a real-life situation may change before any solutions can be suggested due to the long spiral process of the action research (Dickens & Watkins, 1999). Despite these critiques, action research was applied in several projects within different fields after the mid-twentieth century. Most of these projects followed the Lewinian classical model, using his concepts of social engineering and re-education as vital tenets of action research, especially in USA and UK.

2. Applying Action Research in Education

Action Research was brought into education in USA in the late 1940s, based on the works of Kurt Lewin, by Stephen Corey, a chief principal of Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute at the University of Columbia. As an experimentation school, the aim of the institute was to improve curriculums at schools and bridge the existing gap between practice in classrooms and research findings (Olson, 1990). Corey and his colleagues worked closely with many district principals, supervisors, and teachers across the United States to spread ideas of cooperative action research, believing that teachers can obtain better educational results through collaboration, mainly if teachers conducted some studies to support the decision they took in the classroom. Corey followed almost the same Lewinian spiral steps of Action Research with the exception of the emphasis on the need to formulate and test hypotheses that included problem identification, hypothesis formulation, data collection, decisions and generalizations, and retesting these generalizations (Zeichner, 2001). Nevertheless, Corey's suggestion to adopt Action Research as a form of inquiry of educational knowledge had been largely ignored in the US educational system until the late 1980s with the rise of the North America Movement that emphasized the teacher-researcher role. This movement started to receive, at last, an echo after the growing popularity of the use of case studies in research and education in general, and with the spread of some notable works by teachers like Nancy Atwell (Zeichner, 2001).

In the United Kingdom, the idea of using Action Research in education began to develop during the 1960s, as some teachers in modern secondary schools started to adopt the teacher-researcher role to enhance some curriculums of humanities (Elliott, 1976). Many teachers decided to adjust the content of curriculums to be closer to students' lives, using an interactive way that stressed the

role of students through discussions rather than merely transmitting knowledge, as suggested by the traditional method (Zeichner, 2001). Academics further developed these ideas in the Humanities Curriculum Project, the Ford Teaching Project, and Teacher-Student Interaction and Quality of Learning Project. Many notable scholars were supporting these projects like John Elliott and Peter Holly, leading to the establishment of the Collaborative Action Research Network (Zeichner, 2001).

3. The Role of Educational Action Research in Promoting the Teacher's Professional Career

Action Research in education, nowadays, can refer to studying any school situation with an attempt to deeply understand it and improve the quality of education (Hensen, 1996; Johnson, 2012). It uses a systematic process (McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead, 1996) that is designed mainly to solve some classroom problems (Mills, 2011). This process, which entails as a fundamental step the identification of the research problem and the formulation of hypotheses before it proceeds with data collection and analysis, adopts mainly the participatory action research, as it involves many participants.

There are several studies which suggest that Action Research enables teachers to develop different skills and allows them to promote their professional growth (Baron et al. 1996; Hensen, 1996; Tomlinson, 1995). To illustrate, the educators can, for example, enlarge their theoretical knowledge by reading and making use of previous research findings as they take the role of teachers-researchers. Thus, they reduce the existing gap between research and practice (Mills, 2011; Johnson, 2012) _ to effectively solve some problems that they might encounter in the classrooms. Moreover, as teachers-researchers always keep reading about different issues related to the issues they have already identified, they become more open to new ideas and flexible in their teaching (Seider, 2004). Not only this, action research enables teachers to enhance their critical thinking skills as they observe different problems and difficulties that may stand in front of achieving better results in the education process (Davis & Broome, 2004). Some scholars also suggest that this empowers teachers (Finch, 2005), mainly when they contribute to enhancing different syllabi with their continuous reflections and observations in a top-down process where instructions and syllabi come from decision-makers. In another word, teachers, more than anyone, know better about the effectiveness of such guidelines and recommendations as they put them into practice. Teachers, indeed, can explore some possible defects through their daily contact with learners. This allows them to experiment with different things, in variables they can better understand and administer.

Being alone in the classroom compels teachers to be sufficiently flexible to deal with different possible scenarios and solve their problems which makes them more independent, confident, and self-reliant. In brief, Adopting educational action research can facilitate the suggestion of practical solutions to some daily classroom problems and helps teachers to promote their careers.

Conclusion

Even though most scholars and academics had been downright suspicious of action research and constantly mistrusted its findings for many years after Kurt Lewin had first formulated it in 1946, the field of Action Research knew some revivals by the end of the twentieth century. Many scholars tried to interpret and expand the theory of Lewin, accentuating the point that Action

Research should not separate theory from practice. They stressed also the importance of communication and collaboration to suggest practical solutions to real-life problems using a cyclical process. Educational Action Research, based on the theory of Lewin, began to be adopted in several projects in the United Kingdom and the United States. The growing use of Action Research in education was in parallel with the urgent need of teachers to deal with ever-increasing classroom problems that compel them to read, experiment, and reflect on possible findings after observing and identifying some research problems. Teachers became aware that to ensure better education outcomes they had to overcome many classroom issues. Or in another word, they realized the need to play the role of teacher-researcher which became, almost, a necessity that enabled many teachers, like Nancy Atwell and others, to present exciting action research findings. Such outcomes called for re-assessment of the widely-held view that teachers lacked basic knowledge of scientific research, and thus, cannot be trusted in their findings. Nowadays, more scholars and researchers than ever stress the importance of using action research in education to serve both learners and educators. From one side, educational action research can help in achieving sustainable development through suggesting practical solutions to varied classroom problems. It also helps teachers in their jobs, from the other side, as it raises awareness among them and makes them more collaborative, flexible, pragmatic, adaptive, self-reliant, and knowledgeable about issues related to pedagogy and education, Therefore, using action research in education empowers teachers and offers them the opportunity to develop different skills to promote their professional development while it effectively overcomes some real classroom challenges to achieve the pragmatic objectives set forth. Thus, teachers can work comfortably in a more variables-controlled environment.

About the Author

Dr. Djihed Messikh is a young lecturer and an ambitious researcher at the faculty of Letter and Foreign Languages, University of 20th August 1955, Skikda, Algeria. Her research interests are mainly in the areas of foreign language learning and teaching, and history of political thought.

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