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Action Research: Bridging the Gap between Teaching and Researching

Abstract

This paper aims to discuss ways in which teachers' professional practice can be improved by implementing action research projects. It seeks to explain in simple terms the key aspects involved in carrying out classroom research and how investigation and teaching can be linked. Action research can help teachers find solutions to some of the problems they find in their classes by encouraging them to adopt a reflective, systematic and critical approach to deal with those issues. As action research is basically collaborative in nature, it helps teachers exchange views and experiences, discuss problems and work out possible solutions together as a team. Action research is presented as a means to improve teachers' professional practice based on informed decisions rather than on intuition.

Resumen

El objetivo de este trabajo es analizar en qué forma la práctica docente puede ser mejorada implementando proyectos de investigación-acción. Procura explicar en términos simples los aspectos fundamentales que deben ser tenidos en cuenta para desarrollar investigación áulica. Asimismo intenta establecer cómo se puede vincular la investigación y la enseñanza. La investigación-acción puede ayudar a los profesores a encontrar soluciones a los problemas que enfrentan en el aula, alentándolos a adoptar un enfoque reflexivo, sistemático y crítico para resolver estas cuestiones. Al ser básicamente colaborativa por naturaleza, la investigación-acción alienta a los

profesores a intercambiar puntos de vistas y experiencias, analizando los problemas y trabajando en equipo para encontrar soluciones. La investigación-acción es vista como una forma de mejorar la práctica profesional docente basada en el conocimiento del problema y no en la intuición.

Action Research: Bridging the Gap between Teaching and Researching

It Bids Pretty Fair

The play seems out for an almost infinite run.

Don't mind a little thing like the actors fighting.

The only thing I worry about is the sun.

We'll be all right if nothing goes wrong with the lighting.

Robert Frost

Action research can be helpful to teachers in two main ways: it can provide an opportunity to analyse their practice systematically and critically and, by doing this, it can contribute to their professional development. Obviously, teachers' professional development will, in turn, result in benefits for their students.

Most teachers tend to regard research as something that has little or no relationship with their professional practice. «School-based educators are often uncomfortable in discussions of theory and research. The idea of conducting research may be seen as something that other people do in other places, usually ivory towers, that has no real bearing on what happens in schools. Research may be seen as unrelated to the work of schools» (Homlar Fradd and Larrinaga McGee, 1994, p. 83).

To ordinary teachers, research seems to be associated not with their daily practice, but with the world of academics, who spend their time studying, reading and developing different hypotheses and theories. To many teachers, science and theoreticians appear detached and disconnected from classroom problems. Teachers are more concerned with their every day tasks, with overcoming the difficulties they face in their jobs than with dealing with research. They need practical solutions to ordinary problems. Although reading and researching may sound appealing to some teachers,

they have limitations as regards time, money and facilities. It is not always easy for working teachers to take part in research. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to explore the concept of action research, and analyse its usefulness and practicality within the field of our professional practice.

What is action research?

«The concept of action research originated in the work of Kurt Lewin (1948-1952), a social psychologist who brought together experimental approaches to social-science research and the idea of «social action» to address social issues. Two ideas were central to Lewin's work: group decision and a commitment to improvement. A distinctive characteristic of Lewin's action research model is that those affected by planned changes can be responsible for deciding the kind of action that will possibly lead to improvement, as well as for evaluating the results of what was tried out in practice» (Gebhard and Oprandy, 1999, p.61).

Stephen Corey, from Columbia University, was one of the first teachers to use action research in the field of education because he believed that «formal research following a scientific method had little impact on educational practice and that through action research, changes in educational practice are possible» (Gebhard and Oprandy, 1999, p.61). In Corey's work, the teachers involved in the research stated that «our teaching is more likely to change» than it would from «reading about what someone else has discovered regarding the consequences of his teaching. The latter is helpful. The former is almost certain to be» (Corey, 1953, quoted in Gebhard and Oprandy, 1999, p.61).

One of the central ideas implied in action research is the focus it gives to reflection. The «reflective cycle» as Wallace (1998, p.13) calls it, is at the core of action research. Professional Practice is linked to Professional Development through Reflection. It is thanks to reflection on our professional practice that we may develop professionally.

Action research gives teachers the possibility to bring investigation into their classrooms. It implies focusing on particular problems that can

be analysed, and studied systematically. This observation leads to reflection and some proposed response or course of action whose effects are then assessed to consider its usefulness. This assessment may, in turn, lead to further action and projects, in what Wallace calls the «reflective cycle», which starts with professional practice and leads to professional development. In the middle, there is reflection which leads to action research.

However, stating that action research means reflection on our professional practice is an oversimplification. Action research is certainly research and as such it should be carried out systematically and adjust to the procedures and principles which research entails.

One of the requirements is the collection of data closely linked to our professional practice. There should also be a systematic analysis of the data and other stages that will be discussed later. Perhaps what makes action research so dear to working teachers is the fact that «the major focus of action research is on concrete and practical issues of immediate concern to particular social groups or communities» (Burns, 1999, p.24).

Rapoport (1970, quoted in Burns, 1999, p.28), adds scientific goals and an ethical framework to this practical concern for immediate problematic situations. Burns also quotes other sources to illustrate the concept of action research:

«Action research is the systematic collection of information that is designed to bring about social change» (Bogdan and Biklen 1982, quoted in Burns, 1999, p.215).

«Action research is simply a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out» (Carr and Kemmis 1986, quoted in Burns, 1999, p.162).

«At one level, action research is about teachers identifying and posing problems, as well as addressing issues and concerns related to the problem. It is about working toward understanding and possibly resolving these problems by setting goals and creating and initiating a plan of action, as

well as reflecting on the degree to which the plan works» Gebhard and Oprandy, 1999, p.61)

«Action research is the application of fact finding to practical problem solving in a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it, involving the collaboration and co-operation of researchers, practitioners and laymen» (R. B. Burns 1994 p.293).

«It is done by systematically collecting data on your everyday practice and analysing it in order to come to some decisions about what your future practice should be. This process is essentially what I mean by the term *action research*» (Wallace 1998, p.4)

Perhaps there are two factors that make action research different from other traditional forms of enquiry. The first one is the link between a «contextual, small-scale and localised» (Burns, 1999, p.30) problem and a systematic process of investigation. The other is the loop process, which implies that findings trigger new lines of investigation, which in turn feed the reflective cycle already mentioned.

Difficulties in implementing an action research project

No matter how enthusiastic we might feel about carrying out research, we must admit that working teachers face many problems when trying to undertake a research project. Research in Argentina and particularly in Salta may seem wishful thinking to many working teachers. A poorly organised educational system, time constraints, lack of resources and also lack of research knowledge and training, may be some of the drawbacks we may encounter. Besides, there are also many other factors that may discourage us from carrying out research. We may feel inhibited by other more experienced or self-assertive colleagues, we may want to avoid professional jealousy, and we may feel anxious about «opening» our class to other teachers as that makes us vulnerable to criticism. We can continue the list of problems we are likely to encounter: little support from school authorities and/or colleagues, timetable and exam pressures, problems with writing an account of the research, disseminating the research and, above all, the additional

work which a research project entails.

Reasons for implementing action research

These constraints may discourage many teachers from undertaking action research, but that may mean that they will fail to obtain the benefits derived from it. Through action research, teachers may develop strategies to solve their own particular problems, they may help their students in many ways by addressing the issues that inhibit their learning, they may develop a critical attitude towards their practice, obtain «a greater understanding of the dynamics of one's classroom practice» which may lead «to curriculum change that enhances learning outcomes for students»(Burns, 1999, p.30).

From all this, it is clear that if teachers want to improve their professional practice and achieve their daily tasks effectively, they should consider action research as a valuable tool that fosters critical systematic reflection and informed action. Action research addresses ordinary problems and seeks to provide practical solutions. Through action research teachers' decisions are based on genuine research rather than on intuition.

What are the stages of action research?

Different authors point to different stages involved in action research. Perhaps, the fact that there is not a general research model to be used by all researchers highlights an important characteristic of action research: its flexibility. Action research «must be able to respond to the unpredictability of the social and political situation in which it is used» (Burns, 1999, p.32). Researchers warn against the danger that action research models may turn research into a prescriptive course of action where the dynamic action and complexity of the action research processes are overlooked. However, it is necessary to draw out a general framework to illustrate the possible steps of an action research process.

Kemmis and McTaggart (1988, quoted in Burns, 1999, p.32) consider

four essential steps within a spiralling process:

- Develop a **plan** of **critically informed action** to improve what is already happening.
- Act to **implement** the plan,
- **Observe** the **effects** of the critically informed action in the context in which it occurs, and
- **Reflect** on these effects as the **basis for further planning**, subsequent critically informed action and so on, through a succession of stages.

Somekh (1993) highlights the need for action researchers to focus on social settings. He includes the following features:

- The research is focused on a **social situation**;
- In the situation participants **collaborate** with each other and with outsiders to decide upon a research **focus** and **collect and analyse data**,
- The process of data collection and analysis leads to the **construction of theories and knowledge**;
- The theories and knowledge are **tested** by feeding them back into **changes in practice**;
- To evaluate these changes, **further data** is [*sic*] collected and analysed, leading to **refinement of the theories and knowledge** which are in their turn **tested in practice**, and so on so forth...;
- At some point, through **publication**, these theories and knowledge are opened up to **wider scrutiny** and made available for others to use as applicable to their situation. This interrupts the cyclical process of research and action, but it is useful in bringing the research to a point of resolution, if only temporarily.

Somekh (1993, quoted in Burns, 1999, p.34).

The following schema used by Burns in collaboration with other researchers provides an easy and clear course of action. She explains that

the research process was viewed as a series of interrelated experiences where the collaborative discussions among the participants provided key elements for reflection and change:

1. exploring
2. identifying
3. planning
4. collecting data
5. analysing/reflecting
6. hypothesising/speculating
7. intervening
8. observing
9. reporting
10. writing
11. presenting

Phase 1: Exploring

This is the initial stage where the teacher-researcher sets out to identify possible research questions. They may start collecting some information and doing some reading to obtain ideas for research.

Phase 2: Identifying

In this stage, the researchers refine their ideas about the general focus area and prepare for more systematic investigation. They spend some time documenting observations which relate to the research area in a broad and relatively unfocused way. In this way, they obtain a clearer picture of the nature of the problem and may plan further action.

Phase 3: Planning

This phase implies developing a plan for data gathering and selecting appropriate research methods. The plan should aim at trialing a particular course of action and collecting data on the results of the action.

Phase 4: Collecting data

Data are collected using the procedures previously selected. There may be other data gathering moments but this phase begins the process of going more deeply into the issue being researched.

Phase 5: Analysing/Reflecting

This moment implies a combination of both analysis and reflection. The data are analysed using a systematic process of analysis and interpretation according to agreed criteria.

Phase 6: Hypothesising/Speculating

In this phase, teachers draw out hypotheses or predictions about what is likely to occur. These hypotheses are based on the data collected so far, on their analysis and on the reflections that have arisen from the analysis.

Phase 7: Intervening

Classroom practices are changed or redirected according to the hypotheses made before.

Phase 8: Observing

This step involves observing the results of the intervention and reflecting on its effectiveness. It involves new strategies and activities and another period of further data collection.

Phase 9: Reporting

This phase involves articulating the activities, data collection and results within the research group. It implies discussing and «problematizing» the activities, analyses and observations by extending and critiquing them with other members of the research team.

Phase 10: Writing

In this process, the research questions, the strategies developed, and the analyses and results are put together in a report or an article. This phase ensures that the research is disseminated to others. It makes the research available to other teachers and researchers who may be interested in similar issues.

Phase 11: Presenting

This phase also aims at ensuring that the research is presented to a wider audience. It involves giving talks to a number of interested audiences.

It is important to point out that these steps are illustrative of the possible stages within action research and in no way should they be seen as prescriptive steps. Many times the stages may overlap or their division may be blurred. They may also be recursive or cyclical. «In practice, action research turns out to be much more «messy» than commonly presented models suggest and the process should be adapted to suit the needs and the circumstances of the particular participants who are involved in it» (Burns, 1999, p.43).

Reliability and validity in action research

Any research project should meet certain scientific standards. Two of them are reliability and validity. Reliability means the extent to which the research is replicable. In this sense, it can be said that action research data, for their particular characteristics, are not highly reliable as not all the variables can be controlled. However, one way of increasing reliability in action research is by having more than one source of data. This can be achieved through involving different perspectives to the research (triangulation).

Anderson *et al.* (1994, quoted in Burns, 1999, p.34), argue that criteria for validity in action research probably differ from academic concepts of validity. These criteria respond to different purposes, which are using the knowledge gained from the research in specific practical contexts rather than with creating knowledge or generating theories in order to disseminate them to the wider academic research community. The key question here is whether the collected data are relevant to the problem being investigated. Burns poses two questions in relation to internal validity and external validity. «Internal validity asks the question: How trustworthy are the claims that the outcomes are related to the experimental treatment? In other words, do the interventions researchers make in the research context result in the outcomes that can be inferred from the data? On the other hand, external

validity asks: how generalisable to other contexts or subjects is our research?» (Burns, 1999, p.160). Action research implies a different view of validity, less concerned with «...establish(ing) relationships between variables or isolat(ing) causes and their effects... Action research is concerned with gaining insights in one specific situation that may be useful or relevant in illuminating issues for other teachers» (Burns, 1999, p.161).

«In many cases practitioners are less concerned with generating generalisable knowledge than with solving pressing problems associated with their own particular workplace ... if they address questions of interest to other practitioners, if they generate data, and if they contain analysis and interpretation, then they qualify as research» (Nunan, 1996, p.18-9).

Action research aims to illuminate and enhance our understanding of a particular learning problem and its findings are valuable within that context. Although those findings may not be directly applicable to other instructional situations, they may generate different hypotheses which can be tested later on. In this way, action research can be considered a theory-generating instrument which can be used to address the real needs and problems of school-based educators.

The role of action research in professional development

Action research, helps break the boundaries that tend to isolate teachers from researchers. Thanks to action research, teachers may view their professional practice under a new light. It may also help them overcome a common problem among teachers, which is professional insecurity. Implementing small scale collaborative action research projects can foster initiative and enhance commitment among the members of the school community. Teachers may start developing a critical view of their role and it can provide them with evidence to support their views.

As pointed out by Burns (1999, p.234), «Above all, experimenting with collaborative action research builds a professional learning community with other teachers. In a profession generally characterised by practitioner isolation, the research process empowers teachers by reaffirming their

professional judgement and enabling them to take steps to make reflection on practice a regular part of everyday teaching».

Burns' final quotation summarises very realistically the key aspects of action research: «My involvement in the project has provided an opportunity for reflection on both practice and the theory of practice. Even though I feel that the results may be of limited value for a wider audience, the personal and professional benefits have been great and will hopefully have an ongoing impact on my teaching».

Meg Quinn (1997)

Finally, this need for continuous improvement and development has been wisely phrased by Carl Rogers in his book *Freedom to Learn* (1969): «The only man who is educated is the man who has learned how to learn; the man who has learned how to adapt and change; the man who has realised that no knowledge is secure, that only the process of seeking knowledge gives a basis for security». These words should guide our professional practice and our personal life.

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