



Short Communication

The Challenges of Action Research Implementation in Malaysian Schools

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ABSTRACT

Teachers can improve their practices through the application of action research. However, many challenges prevail over its implementation (action research). This paper discusses major challenges to implementing action research in Malaysian schools and offers concrete suggestions for overcoming them. The main challenges which will be discussed in this article are teachers' heavy workloads, time constraints, and a lack of in-depth understanding and skills related to this methodology. Possible solutions include coaching strategies to enhance teachers' action research knowledge and skills. Action research should be a mandatory component of teachers' official duties and a component of their annual performance evaluations to motivate them to work towards implementing action research. Action research conferences could be periodically held to provide teachers with opportunities to share their action research experiences and recognise research output.

Keywords: Action research, challenges, implementation, solutions, teachers

INTRODUCTION

Currently, teachers in Malaysia must, from time to time, modify their teaching and learning practices to ensure quality of the country's educational system. According

to Noraini (2010), implementing action research could help teachers to improve understanding of their practices and thereby enhance them. This methodology is also supported by the Education Planning and Research Division (2008), which advises teachers to develop a deep understanding of teaching phenomena or problems that they encounter in their schools by collecting and interpreting action research data.

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Therefore, action research is a method that could improve the quality of education through the activities of teachers who are critically aware of their own practices and are willing to change (McNiff, 1988). Teachers' implementations of action research could improve teaching quality (Madzniyah, 2006); however, teachers who want to implement action research tend to face challenges in doing so, such as time constraints and heavy workloads (Nor' Azah, 2007; Othman, 2011). Teachers also are challenged by their lack of knowledge and skills in action research (Norasmah & Chia, 2015). This paper aims to identify all the major challenges to action research implementation in Malaysian schools and to propose feasible solutions.

ACTION RESEARCH

Lewin (1946) was a pioneer of action research in social psychology. He defined action research as a spiralling process involving three stages: (1) planning, (2) action, and (3) understanding the results of the action. Corey (1953) was the first to apply action research in the field of education, proposing action research as a process of reviewing problems, taking corrective actions, and evaluating those actions. Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) pointed out that:

“action research is a form of collective self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own

social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of those practices and the situations in which the practices are carried out.” (p. 5)

Glickman (1990) described action research in the educational environment as research conducted by teachers in school settings to improve their instructional practices. Thus, action research in education is an active process that involves planning, action, observation or evaluation, and reflection on the action taken to identify its (action) influence on research participants and improve the action researcher's practices.

However, the basic questions remain regarding the purposes of action research and the philosophy that sets it apart from other approaches. The philosophy that underlies action research directly speaks to its purpose, the action researcher's functions, and how it is practiced. In particular, John Dewey's (1916) philosophical ideas directly influenced the development of action research philosophy. He stated that:

“When we experience something we act upon it, we do something with it; then we suffer or undergo the consequence. We do something to the thing and then it does something to us in return. ... The connection of these two phases of experience measures the fruitfulness or value of the experience. ... When an activity is continued into the undergoing

of consequences, when the change made by the action is reflected back into a change made in us, the mere flux is loaded with significance.”
(p. 163)

This statement reflects a need to continuously engage in a spiralling process, such as action research, until improvements or improved understanding of achievement is obtained.

Bridges (2003) described the philosophy of action research in education as guided by three principles: (1) epistemological, (2) social, and (3) ethical. Epistemological means that “action researchers” do not refer to any externally generated theories for developing their understanding of a problem; instead, they refer to their personal experiences in real situations. Koshy (2005) characterised action research as creating new knowledge out of specific practical problems. This new practical knowledge cannot be generalised to large populations, but it can be generalised to situations that are similar to that in which they were developed (McGinty & Waters-Adams, 2006). The social principle refers to teachers taking responsibility to act as action researchers to develop their personal practices. This idea was supported by Elliott (1994) who stated that:

“The rationale for involving teachers as researchers of their own practice is connected to an aspiration to give them control over what is to count as knowledge about

practice. As action researchers, teachers are knowledge generators rather than appliers of knowledge generated by outsiders.” (p. 133)

The third principle concerns ethics, in which action researchers have an ethical obligation to protect the rights of their research participants, whether they are students, parents, or themselves. According to Elliott (1975), teachers must be responsible for their actions and behaviours, which include protecting students. Moreover, the action research process should not harm or disadvantage anyone involved (Cook, 2010).

Many different approaches to action research can be found in the literature, along with their related concepts, because of the numerous theoretical orientations adopted by action researchers. However, current action research work *falls into* three general types of action research (Carr & Kemmis, 1986): (1) technical, (2) practical, and (3) emancipatory. *In technical action research, the action researcher sets and/or identifies a problem and formulates an intervention, whereas a practitioner only takes part in an intervention. The focus is to determine the effectiveness of a given intervention.* The practical action research approach promotes the teacher as a researcher, focusing on understanding specific practices in the classroom or school setting. In emancipatory action research, the action researcher collaborates with practitioners to find effective solution to a given problem and

promotes a critical consciousness towards social change.

From the perspective of the purposes of action research, four types of action research are found in the field of education: (1) individual, (2) collaborative, (3) school-wide, and (4) district-wide, two of which are commonly performed by teachers in Malaysian schools. The first of these is an individual action research, in which a teacher conducts action research alone on a single issue in the classroom or in co-curricular activities. The particular issue may be related to instructional strategies, student achievement, or classroom management. The second approach used in Malaysian schools is collaborative action research, in which two or more teachers work together to plan, act, observe, and reflect on a common issue involving more than one class. These teachers usually focus on innovation in educational material resources, student learning problems, or school management.

Action research has many advantages. It is considered an appropriate method with greater potential than traditional experimental research for practitioners to understand their practices in actual situations (Yee & Teoh, 2015). According to Koshy (2005), action research can be conducted within educational settings, meaning that action researchers are not outside of the phenomena being researched. In other words, teachers can assess their personal capabilities through the actions they personally take (Rahimah, Abu, Ismail, & Rashid, 2014). Action research also provides opportunities for researchers to

develop a theory from real life research and application. Alis (2009) described teachers in classroom or school environments as gaining a deep understanding of instructional practices and problem situations through their action research, by which they are more reflective and creative in their activities and more willing to change and evaluate the problems they face. In addition, action research can be a foundation for making decisions and can thereby contribute to a teacher's professional development (Othman, 2011).

However, despite the many advantages of action research, it has some limitations. Among the most common problems is the time commitment, in that, teachers performing action research activities tend to find it challenging to find sufficient time to collect data, reflect and share their findings with their colleagues (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Brown, 2002; McGinty & Waters-Adams, 2006).

CHALLENGES TO ACTION RESEARCH IMPLEMENTATION IN MALAYSIA

Workload and Time Constraints

Studies have indicated teachers who are already burdened with multi-tasking tend to report inadequate time for action research (Volk, 2010; Zhou, 2013). These results correspond with the findings of Nor' Azah (2007) and Madzneyah (2006), who found that time constraint is the main factor preventing teachers from engaging in action research such as action planning, action implementation, data collection, and data

analysis are time consuming (Othman, 2011). Teachers of General Certificate of Education in particular face time constraints associated with completing their syllabi as quickly as possible to prepare students for examination (Madzniyah, 2006). In addition, teachers are often expected to perform non-teaching tasks, including participation in meetings and clerical work (Azita, 2012). Consequently, many teachers have been unable to implement action research projects in schools.

Lack of Action Research Knowledge and Skills

A lack of in-depth knowledge of action research practices may prevent teachers from implementing this methodology because they simply do not possess the required skills. According to Othman (2011) and Shamsahhimi (2007), teachers tend to be unclear about action research. This contention is supported by Madzniyah (2006), who found that lack of understanding of action research relates to teachers belief that action research implementation involves extra work that is unrelated to teaching and learning practices. Nor' Azah (2007) reported that teachers indeed generally lacked the skills necessary to conduct action research in schools while Madzniyah (2006) found that teachers' reflection skills tend to be low, and they often do not know whom to consult when faced with problems related to their action research projects. Thus, there is a general doubt among teachers of the whole exercise of action research and its positive influences.

Limited Support

Teachers also may encounter lack of support by their school administrators regarding action research (Shamsahhimi, 2007; Othman, 2011). Rozita (2009) found that school administrators did not support teachers who attempted to implement action research because the administrators did not understand the concepts and processes of action research. Lack of support from administrators may cause teachers to feel pressured, frustrated, or it may lower their confidence in their abilities to successfully perform action research activities (Nor' Azah, 2007).

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS FOR MALAYSIA

Coaching Strategies

Coaching may help improve a teacher's problem-solving skills, increase the quality of their reflections, and raise the levels of their work satisfaction (Allan, 2007) thereby developing their professional skills (Teemant *et al.*, 2011). Schools should consider appointing experienced teachers to coach their colleagues which in turn could encourage them to implement action research. It is expected that coaching can improve teachers' confidence in the success of their action research and help them experience positive outcomes from implementation. Norasmah and Chia (2015) found that coaching increased teachers' understanding of action research as a methodology and improved their confidence. The Kolb Cycle model can be combined with the GROW model as an action research

and coaching tool (Fig.1). It has successfully been used to coach and assist teachers to implement their action research.

Action Research as an Official Duty

Malaysian teachers generally hesitate to implement action research because it is not one of their official duties; they conduct action research only in response to coercion or orders from their school administrators (Madzniyah, 2006; Shamsahhimi, 2007). In 1999, the Thailand Education Act announced a policy that required all teachers to implement action research, which compelled them to learn about action research and how to implement it; consequently, all Thai teachers developed themselves as researchers to improve their

teaching practices which directly contributed to student achievements (Wasun, 2011). Stringer, Christensen, and Baldwin (2010) argued that action research should be implemented as part of a teacher’s routine work to enable them to systematically solve problems. Action research would therefore be a good idea for Malaysian teachers as well as Thai teachers.

Annual Performance Evaluation

It would be beneficial to incorporate assessments of action research into teachers’ annual performance evaluations. These annual evaluations are important in Malaysia to determine eligibility for promotions, salary increases, and outstanding service awards (Public Services Department

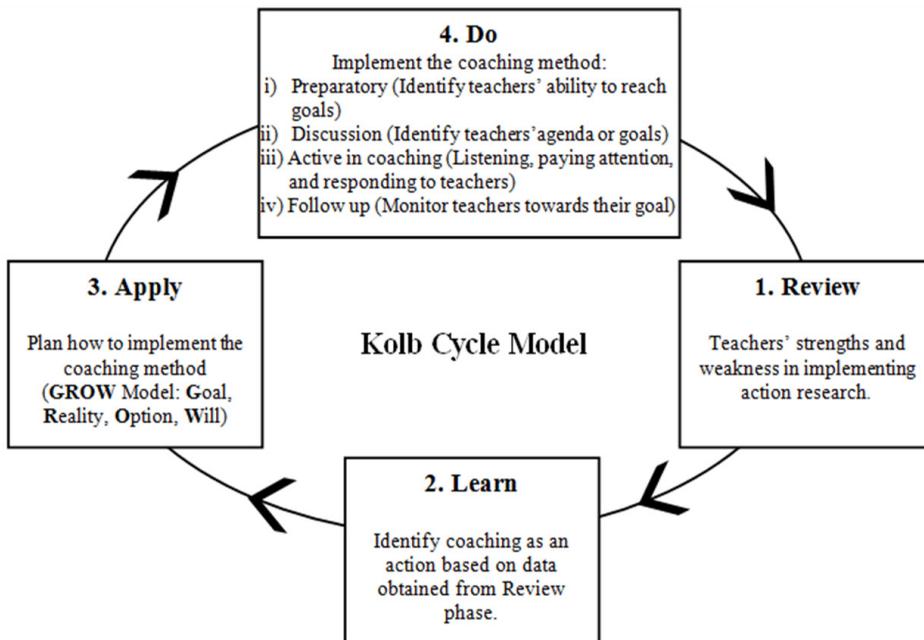


Fig.1: Overview of a coaching strategy using the Kolb Cycle Model (adapted from Norasmah & Chia, 2014)

of Malaysia, 2011). In Thailand, action research evaluations are used as evidence for promotion evaluations (Wasun, 2011). Thereby, teachers interested in promotions and salary increases may be motivated to find ways to implement action research.

Action Research Conferences

One of the ways to overcome challenges of implementing action research would be to create contexts in which teachers could network and share their research. It is important for them to present reports and share their findings with colleagues. Schools or district educational offices could hold conferences periodically to facilitate these activities. These conferences could serve as venues for in-service training and professional development. In Malaysia, this idea is currently supported by the Sibul District Education Office (2014), which qualifies participation in the Sarawak Teachers' Conference on Action Research, Innovation, and Research as in-service training. Books and certificates are symbols of recognition and awards recognise the achievements of teachers who have successfully implemented action research to improve their teaching practices.

CONCLUSION

This paper provides an overview of the challenges of implementing action research in Malaysian schools and prospective solutions. The outcome of this study could be used to guide the Ministry of Education officials and other stakeholders in their efforts to promote action research

in schools. Through their efforts, more teachers could implement action research to meet the challenges and demands of the educational environment. Action research implementation has demonstrated its value for improving the quality of education in numerous contexts, and it would benefit the Malaysian educational system as well.

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