

Action Research in Educational Management

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ABSTRACT

Action research in educational management serves as a dynamic and collaborative approach to improving practices within institutional and policy frameworks. Rooted in reflective cycles of inquiry identifying problems, planning, acting, evaluating, and reflecting this methodology empowers educators and administrators to critically examine and transform their work environments. This paper synthesizes key components of action research including its theoretical foundations, historical development in educational leadership, methodological applications, planning strategies, and stakeholder roles. Drawing on global case studies, the research highlights how action research bridges the gap between theory and practice, offering pragmatic, context-specific solutions in complex educational settings. It underscores ethical considerations, participatory data collection and analysis techniques, and provides a 4D framework for evaluating leadership actions. Ultimately, action research in educational management is positioned not only as a research methodology but as a philosophy of continuous institutional learning, collaborative growth, and systemic transformation.

Keywords: Action Research, Educational Management, Reflective Practice, Educational Leadership, Stakeholder Participation, Data Collection, Ethics in Research.

INTRODUCTION

It is challenging to find a universally accepted definition for Action Research, which is frequently mentioned in education. The most encompassing definition might be "A philosophy of practice that seeks to improve the quality of practice through self-reflection and self-evaluation." Many writers discuss various definitions, categories, models, and typologies, while others propose evaluation plans. Action Research covers various research traditions, from established ones to newer methodologies. Subsequent sections will delve into these definitions to help audiences grasp the concept and their preferences within research literature. Writers typically categorize Action Research into three typologies based on research study time frames, objectives, and researcher participation. The cyclical Action Research spiral consists of five stages: (i) problem identification; (ii) plan; (iii) action; (iv) evaluation; (v) reflection. Each stage of this research cycle is elaborated and illustrated. Additionally, four knowledge bases essential for conducting research are presented: methodological knowledge, knowledge about the subject and context, knowledge of systemic conditions, and interpersonal knowledge. These definitions, however, are not exhaustive [1, 2].

Historical Context of Educational Management

Theories of educational administration have evolved significantly, with early concepts still influencing current issues. Initially focused on bureaucracy and rigid hierarchies, educational systems grew more complex, leading to negative outcomes like formalism and alienation. This sparked the 'human relations' movement, which highlighted informal structures and group dynamics. In contrast, later models revisited formal structures, introducing concepts like 'cycles' and focusing on 'choice' as a managerial theme. While these ideas have been rich in development, they often excel at identifying problems rather than offering practical solutions. Critiques emphasize that many methodologies overlook deeper assumptions related to choice, trust, and coordination. As a result, management tends to address certain aspects while neglecting others, leading to overly general or vague explanations. Thus, there is a clear need for practical tools that

go beyond existing models to explore these underlying assumptions. Despite recognizing the necessity for research into choice-related factors, many scholars face disincentives due to previous unsuccessful initiatives. Consequently, educational institutions must prioritize change and technology management to maintain service quality and relevance. Failure to adapt can negatively affect performance and management integrity. Instances of high access without meaningful learning highlight the need for actionable insights into change, ensuring that the choice of action is informed by a thorough understanding of existing challenges [3, 4].

Theoretical Frameworks for Action Research

Educational leadership is a complex activity characterized by interaction and movement, involving practitioner leaders whose actions result in various consequences for individuals and systems, including policy, practice, relationships, outcomes, and the leaders' own identities. Action encompasses four interrelated domains: deciding (policy, promoting, involving), enacting (framing, focusing, modeling), configuring (organizing, representing, protecting), and developing (questioning, monitoring, guiding). This complexity renders educational leadership risky for both practitioners and organizations. Theoretical frameworks for studying educational leadership have been under-conceptualized, despite being critical for insights into practice dynamics. Essential to this practice are the activity systems within which actions occur. Adopting an activity systems perspective enables a deeper exploration of the interactions between educational leadership and its varied contexts. This paper outlines this framework and its research implications, introducing a study in Northern England focused on the interplay between 'top down' policy influences and 'bottom up' local responses aimed at enhancing educational leadership. These inquiries are analyzed through a social constructionist lens, using adaptive framing based on findings to inform public policy at high levels. Educational leadership involves 'deciding', 'enacting', 'configuring', and 'developing', leading to a '4D' framework for data collection and analysis. Each domain contains at least three facets, generating 12 interrelated perspectives on practice to help practitioners observe, interpret, and respond to the dynamics of their actions across multiple levels [5, 6].

Methodology of Action Research

This paper details the methodology for action research. A literature survey was conducted to compile secondary data and rules of conduct, assessing various sources for developing a reporting framework. A systematic research design targeted a database of action research papers published in relevant journals. Selected studies were read critically, focusing on diverse themes and educational strategies. The methodology section summarizes successful action research papers in educational management. While not comprehensive, the literature review introduces key references for those interested in action research. An inclusive search strategy targeted journals likely to publish such studies, supplemented by recommendations from teaching peers. Only English-language, online-accessible studies were included. A clear selection strategy was used to assess reports based on quality criteria, ensuring recent studies and geographical diversity. This section provides a systematic approach to evaluating successful action research reports in educational management. Key writing rules identified assist potential researchers in drafting their reports. Though focused on educational action research, the methodology may be applicable across other disciplines and could stimulate contributions to the field of action research [7, 8].

Planning Action Research Projects

This is a complex educational action research project being conducted in a Brazilian public university, with some possible adaptations to be done beforehand. Before embarking on any action research project, it is essential to convince oneself of the validity and applicability of action research principles to the particular context and theme of that inquiry, given the multiple definitions and versions of action research available. The initial version of this general plan has two parts. The first part serves as a summary for one of the guidelines on how to plan an action research project. Locally content-tailored versions might be distributed to students early on in the course as a guide. The second part is an example specifying an action research project addressable to students taking a third-semester EFL course that focuses on pronunciation issues and broader oral competence objectives. The emerging practices in the context of inquiry procedures in developing an action research project in the current graduate teacher education course are described. The action research project content is outlined in general, and basic guidelines on how to plan an action research project are provided. Model narratives are also included to illustrate how to give form to an action research project contextually adaptable by students' needs and expectations. The intention is not to provide a rigid plan to be followed, but to provide a guide to planning a complex, and likely messy process. Action research became one of the paradigms since its emerging in the 1940s,

gaining impetus, not only in education but in many areas, particularly at the interface between science and action. Nevertheless, action research has not spread evenly all over the planet. There is still a considerable gap among different countries and contexts concerning the applicability of broader social phenomena. If action research approaches are to be successfully adopted in contexts where there were none before, some possible pitfalls have to be pondered [9, 10].

Data Collection Techniques

Action research studies as well as reports arising from such studies are inherently different from conventional academic research studies or reports. The data collection and reporting boundaries of the research must be democratically negotiated, then reviewed and consented to within the group prior to data collection. The data must be collected at times and places selected democratically within the group. No one outside the group must be allowed to report or present the data unless a consensus is reached by the entire group. No group member may imply or suggest that data is representative of typical behaviour unless there is consensus that it is representative. Where it is not representative, such data must be presented in context with an explicit warning that it is unrepresentative. The aim in collecting and reporting data is not to present a picture of 'truth', or a total account, but simply to present some evidence in a style which is consistent with this account. Data collection is a means to an end, not an end in itself. Data collection and reporting formats and technologies should be selected democratically by the group. Various formats should be trialed, for example, survey instruments, narrative recounting, statistical graphic representation, pictorial data, process recordings, post-it note data, video data with transcription, etc. Decisions are made collectively about formatting and data collection equally important are concerns about the fluidity, flexibility and negotiability of the style images of the action research, the style and data collection being contingent on the group [11, 12].

Data Analysis in Action Research

This chapter analyzes data from previous action research cycles, offering both specific event descriptions and broader thematic analyses. Recognizing that action research is change-induced and often incremental, the analysis reflects evolving views over time, with later cycles producing more representative and comprehensive data. Consequently, analyses from all cycles have a similar influence on this research project, focusing on a broad overview rather than exhaustive detail. Each analysis concludes with a summary of findings that serves two purposes: they prepare for a higher level of abstraction regarding overarching processes and address whether the internationalization of educational management at a Dutch University of Applied Sciences supports the acculturation, socialization, and professionalization of Russian students. The findings indicate that internationalization is nuanced and context-sensitive. Data from cycles two to six facilitated an extensive narrative on three specific events, acknowledging their complexity. Broader thematic analyses suggest that in a globalizing environment, internationalization in educational management manifests as subtle but significant innovations. These innovations are often unnoticed yet have extensive implications for institutional politics and the visions of researchers pursuing internationalization in educational policy and decision-making. Since broader analyses do not directly answer the action research question, they are discussed in the final chapter at a higher level of abstraction [13, 14].

Ethical Considerations in Action Research

In addition to fostering professional development, action research presents ethical dilemmas for educational leaders. This chapter examines the ethical aspects of conducting action research in schools. Action research aims to enhance practices, inform decisions, and legitimize public claims in management. A defining feature is the collaboration between practitioners in designing and executing research and interpreting findings. Consequently, ethical considerations surrounding vulnerability, privacy, and confidentiality are essential. Despite this, many practitioners view action research as low-stakes, believing its ethics do not warrant deep scrutiny. However, the educational environment is critical. Although action research is collaborative, school leaders play a key role in approving the research, which may affect ethical choices. Leaders can dictate research focus and methodology, potentially limiting analysis and findings to align with their perceptions of effective practice. Moreover, findings from action research are public, making practitioners susceptible to criticism regarding their decisions and practices in leadership. In extreme cases, it may become a "naming and shaming" scenario for those feeling vulnerable due to previous judgments. Additionally, educational leaders usually possess access to sensitive information about employees and internal practices, raising the risk that research findings could infringe on confidentiality [15, 16].

Case Studies of Action Research in Education

This paper illustrates the role of a semistructured questionnaire-based action research in education through a case study involving ten students in a management action learning exercise. Action research engages practitioners as co-researchers, aiming to influence human activity and investigate controlled changes to inform future actions. Though widely used in healthcare, action research is underrepresented in education, specifically educational management. The study analyzes the MODULE programme's impact on graduate students in an executive MBA course through a semi-structured questionnaire, emphasizing its effectiveness in data collection and interpretation reliability checks. The MODULE group's first assignment involved preparing a funding proposal for their project, requiring collaboration in action learning sets to create marketing video, technical specifications, and a detailed paper. They presented their work to peers and university staff assessors, facing unexpected challenges rooted in tension between learning expectations and the actual process. Action research fosters collaboration between practitioners and researchers, enabling interaction among research, teaching, and thinking. However, incorporating action research into undergraduate courses presents practical difficulties. Action research follows principles and guidelines of pragmatism, leading participants to collaboratively develop and implement actions based on their inquiry cycle [17, 18].

Role of Stakeholders in Action Research

Action research (AR) originated in the mid-40s as a participative research method, gaining prominence in educational contexts. Defined as a process where participants scientifically study their own issues to enhance understanding, AR emphasizes its participative nature. This perspective highlights the importance of collaboration between researchers and subjects, introducing the term 'stakeholder' to encompass all individuals involved in educational development. Many local educational actors contribute individually or collectively to academic research, making the stakeholder model more relevant than the traditional 'researcher'/ 'researched' dichotomy. This model fosters a holistic view of AR, allowing for a richer understanding of its processes, as the roles of teachers and students expand beyond simplistic classifications. The importance of stakeholder participation in enriching AR in educational settings is underscored, demonstrating that educational research scope can grow by acknowledging varied stakeholder participation and extending AR beyond school confines. Reflecting on over a decade of collaborative research, which began with an educational actor-researcher, this study advocates for a stakeholder perspective over the conventional researcher/researched framework. This approach provides a deeper comprehension of AR, accommodating the complexities of educational development related to stakeholders. Ultimately, the study aims to enhance existing literature by detailing the expanding nature of stakeholder perspectives in terms of participation levels and the broadening scope of educational action research [19, 20].

Reflection and Iteration in Action Research

Action research is proposed as a method for managing and evaluating change in continuing professional distance education contexts, aiding institutional and academic professionals in navigating these processes. This qualitative and collaborative approach fosters joint inquiry between practitioners and researchers into complex problems, aiming for mutual understanding and improvement. Rapid technological, societal, and economic changes impact all higher education, prompting a shift in educational quality, cost, and pace. New ICT integration is a prevalent change, transitioning towards more open and distance education, which revolutionizes learning environments, often dissociating them from traditional sources of educational opportunities. However, this transition is complex, as technology can be employed in diverse ways, leading to varied educational practices. Professionals worldwide face two main challenges: cultural and pragmatic. The cultural challenge involves shifts in roles, values, and institutional structures as technology alters traditional educational dynamics, making previously uncontrollable factors like time and space pivotal. The pragmatic challenge stems from professionals' often limited understanding of technology, leading to a tendency to seek quick-fix solutions that may be shortsighted, exacerbating existing ambiguities in managing these changes effectively [21, 22].

Impact of Action Research on Educational Practices

Educational practices are undergoing transformation due to numerous reform initiatives aimed at enhancing outcomes, equity, and welfare globally. These initiatives impact schooling structures, student competencies, and improve instructional effectiveness. Complex international reforms have pressured national education systems to adapt, with global demands for accountability triggering changes in educational practices at all levels. Educational practices face pressure from both national and

supranational levels across Europe. There is significant interest in analyzing the effects of school reform initiatives and educational changes. This paper posits that investigating the impact of these reforms necessitates a clear understanding of the educational practices involved. By establishing an analytical framework for educational practices, the paper examines knowledge production and use in policies, methodologies, and curricula. It further discusses how impact analysis can inform future studies of educational reform. The findings demonstrate that national policies, methodologies, and curricula significantly influence the development of educational practices in schools within participating countries, particularly during initial design phases, rather than during subsequent modifications [23, 24].

Action Research and Professional Development

There is increasing recognition amongst educationalists that the traditional model of in-service training, in which 'experts' pass on 'best practice' to entrenched practitioners, is incapable of impacting on the complex reality of classroom practice. There is growing awareness that teachers need to be involved as partners in their own professional development. Unless teachers engage with the change process and find ways of integrating the new ideas into their own contexts, the impact of the change process is likely to be negligible. Research indicates that change is considerably more likely to happen when teachers have input into the development of an initiative. The importance of teachers developing their own ways of understanding a proposal was highlighted. If they are permitted to do this, rather than being handed down methods with the expectation that they will be immediately adopted, they are much more likely to make the proposed change work in their classrooms. This highlights the multifaceted nature of professional development and the ways in which something as simple as tinkering with a piece of technology can have far-reaching implications as a process for catalysts for the future. It is likely that a different interpretation, manifestation and impact on teachers' practice of something that is ostensibly the same, is the reality in any education system. The literature is filled with examples of teachers working in different ways and for different purposes with computer technology, such as for example, changes in work roles, issues of equity and gender, sharing of practice and community building [25, 26].

Barriers to Action Research Implementation

Schools are seen as dynamic social systems that are constantly changing, yet their institutional mechanisms are stable and complex. They have numerous norms and routines that facilitate action and learning but can also hinder innovation and new initiatives. While various innovation strategies have been promoted in educational administration, many have not yielded the expected educational impact, leading to disappointment among authorities and educators. A key issue is whether innovations are adopted appropriately, which is influenced by the perceived relevance of development tasks and the initiator's intent. This highlights that in the complex social system of schools, various dynamics can either hinder or promote innovation. Research should focus on the implementation process over time and how traditional institutional frameworks affect new initiatives. Existing studies have explored behavioral dynamics, particularly around school culture, and proposed models to understand aspects of implementation in school management. However, the interplay between educational dynamics and school management remains underexplored. Most studies on school management in the context of innovation are exploratory, lacking a comprehensive view of how educational dynamics operate within the school's institutional framework. Analyzing these dynamics requires a deeper understanding of the internal mechanisms at play in the implementation of innovations within schools [27, 28].

Future Directions for Action Research in Education

The use of action research in education is likely to develop further in three main areas of the field: initial teacher training or teacher education; school-based change initiatives; and the creation of learning communities. Action research can be defined as "the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it" which inherently must involve the active participation of those involved in the situation being studied. Its main lineages are both roots and branches of the same tree this is sometimes called the 'action research canon' foremost. Action research practitioners can be understood as either or both generalists or specialists. It includes both action and research four procedural aspects that are a part of each aimed at and attending to systematic change in a social situation of interest. The essential idea is to ask a socially relevant question, read the appropriate literature, collect data to answer it, analyze the data, report the answer and further engage with the situation in its light. Both good and bad points of action research in general, however, mainly relate to action research and not to detail-specific aspects of this form of everyday intelligence, of cultural practices and lenses. In the last few years, however, many reports of academic events have been of action research and related topics like systemic

evaluation. Further, an effort was made to put together a special issue on action research in education for a major educational research journal. The fish has been safely returned to its pond; there is every expectation that its future will lie with the continued cultivation of trust and respect both locally and with the larger porpoise group with which it has made contact [29, 30].

CONCLUSION

Action research has emerged as a vital paradigm for transforming educational management through collaborative, reflective, and iterative inquiry. Its flexible yet structured framework enables educators and administrators to address context-specific challenges while grounding change initiatives in empirical data and inclusive dialogue. The strength of action research lies in its participatory nature, empowering stakeholders students, teachers, administrators, and policymakers to co-create knowledge and drive improvement. While its implementation presents ethical and methodological challenges, particularly regarding data transparency and power dynamics, these can be navigated through democratic processes and principled leadership. As educational institutions face growing demands for accountability, innovation, and equity, action research offers a sustainable path toward meaningful reform, embedding inquiry and adaptability into the culture of educational leadership.

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