

AN ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF TEACHING-LEARNING IN LABORATORY SCHOOL: CHALLENGES AND ISSUES

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ABSTRACT

An action research project was initiated to facilitate Government Elementary School Teachers of Laboratory School. For this purpose, a series of workshops were organized with Laboratory (Lab) School teachers. The Lab School has been established at Provincial Institute of Teacher Education (PITE) Sindh Nawabshah as a practicing school. The purpose of this paper is to provide an account of challenges and issues that came across the researcher in developing the capacity of lab school teachers in understanding and implementing the process of action research in school. The study was qualitative in nature, within this paradigm, Kemmis Cyclic action research (AR) model (Plan-Act- Observe-Reflect) was used to facilitate teachers in learning and adapting AR in real classroom setting. The population of the study includes Laboratory (Lab) School teachers. Purposive sampling strategy was used while selecting teachers. As a facilitator, it was a unique experience to facilitate government school teachers. The researcher faced several challenges while facilitating teachers in learning the process of AR. These challenges include teachers' unwillingness to shift from rote memorization model to action oriented model of teaching, limited time for AR workshops, teachers' lack of lesson planning skills and reflection. In the light of the findings of the study suggestions were put forward for improving teaching-learning in Lab schools.

Keywords: Action Research, Teaching-Learning Improvement, Laboratory (Lab) School teachers

INTRODUCTION

Action research is a powerful tool to change classroom culture from teacher-centered to child-centered. The idea 'teacher as a researcher' got popularized in the arena of education around 55 years back. Ponte, Bejjard, and Ax (2004) elaborated that the teacher as researcher has received enough support from academics and teachers in recent years. Action research is also called the practitioner research. This research helps practitioner to carry out teaching-learning reforms in classroom setting, observe them and reflect on one's action in the classroom. Zuber-Skerritt (1996) suggests that 'the aims of any action research project or program are to bring about practical improvement, innovation, change or development of social practice, and the practitioners' better understanding of their practices' (p.83). Hult and Lennung (1980:241–50) and McKernan (1991:32–3) advocated that action research: helps practitioner to solve practical problem, increase the efficiency of teachers, makes institutions culture collaborative, helps in understanding institutions culture and its approach is collective and participatory. He further elaborated that action research always focus on immediate problems and its urgent solution, its main purpose is to improve the quality of human actions, there is no issue of controlling variable in action research. Action research always helps practitioner to review their beliefs and actions. Reflection is the part and parcel of action research process. (Cited in Louis Cohen, Lawrence Manion and Keith Morrison, 2005).

In recent years, action research has captured the attention of Education and Literacy, Govt. of Sindh. For promoting action research (AR) in the province of Sindh, a number of faculty members from Teacher Training Institutions (TTIs) in public sector have been provided opportunities for professional growth in conducting and promoting action research in TTIs. Being a leading trainer in AR in Provincial Institute of Teacher Education (PITE) Nawabshah, researcher was made responsible to design and implement training programs for faculty of TTIs and PITE affiliated institutions. In order to develop the capacity of Lab school teachers, an action research project was designed and carried out at lab school. The Lab school is attached to Provincial Institute of Teacher Education (PITE) Sindh Nawabshah as a practicing school. PITE Sindh is a leading teacher training institute in public sector in the province of Sindh. PITE has been working with government teacher training institution (TTIs) since 1994 when it was established. The vision and mission of PITE are to strengthen teacher education and to promote culture of research in attached TTIs. The lab school was established to help PITE faculty in applying and testing out different learning theories in the classrooms. The B.Ed and M.Ed. students of PITE usually visit lab school for delivering their lessons and interact with students for getting their data on different projects. So the position of lab school is central in PITE. Keeping in view, the significance of Lab school and its teachers, it was decided by PITE management to improve the capacity of teachers in action research. For this purpose, two workshops were designed and conducted with lab school teachers. . Before the conduct of workshops the researcher was assuming that:

1. Teachers of Lab school regularly reflect on their classroom teaching.
2. Teachers' exposure to action research will encourage them to replicate this model in their regular teaching.

The purposes of these workshops were to unpack the idea of action research, to help lab school teachers in understanding the process of action research and to formulate and implement research problem in their specific areas of interest.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Lewin in 1946 used first time the term 'action research'. He termed 'action research' as a process that helps practitioner to develop theories and seek out solution of practical problems. The term action research is a broad and generic one which has been used to describe a multiple range of activities and methods. In brief, however, action research is an approach that 'focuses on simultaneous action and research in a participative manner' (Coghlan and Brannick, 2001: 7).

Action research is the most common form of research advocated for teachers to improve their practice or solve educational problems. However, questions have also been raised about the efficacy of action research in the classroom (Hammersley 2004). Gray, D., E. (2004) has rightly pointed out that action research attempts to raise the question: like 'What can I do about it?' while solving the real life problems action researcher get them directly engaged in improving organizational structures and processes. In other types of researches the researchers are seem disconnected from actions while in action research researchers are comparatively more committed, knowledgeable and systematic in their approach. This is the great attribute of action research.

Cohen and Manion (1994:186) define it as 'a small-scale intervention in the functioning of the real world and a close examination of the effects of such an intervention'.

Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) have discussed various aspects of action research, these aspects are highlighted in various definitions they presented. According to them, action

research is a form of investigation and inquiry that is self-reflective and it can be executed in social settings. The purpose of this inquiry is to improve the situation or any educational practices. This inquiry is based on rationality. They further elaborated that if action research is undertaken collaborative and systematically then it certainly improve the practice. Action research can be conducted at individual level as well as at collective level. The collective level of inquiry help group to examine the actions of individuals. Action research is a form of collective self-reflective inquiry 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 these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out. The approach is only action research when it is collaborative, though it is important to realize that the action research of the group is achieved through the critically examined action of individual group members.(Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988).

The purpose of action research is to improve and change the culture of individual as well as groups, institutions and society as a whole. The culture of a group encompass activities, languages and discourses. These activities focus on social interactions, practices and different aspects of relationships of the group. (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1992). No doubt, action research is planned to remove the gaps between researches and practice (Somekh, 1995:340, Cited in, Louis Cohen, Lawrence Manion and Keith Morrison (2005).

METHODOLOGY

The research was qualitative in nature. Within this approach Kemmis cyclic action research (AR) model (Plan-Act- Observe-Reflect) was employed to facilitate teachers in comprehending and implementing AR process it in classroom.

The Research Participants

All Lab school teachers irrespective of their teaching experience were part of the study. The total numbers of teachers included in the study were five. In the first instance, the researcher collected the professional profile of teachers. All teachers were female. Among them four teachers were graduates in Arts and one teacher have done her B.Sc. All teachers had One year B.Ed degree. Almost all teachers had attended 2-3 days continuously professional development programs in different subject but none of them had attended any workshop in action research. That's why teachers find this opportunity as a golden chance of their professional development.

The Workshop Facilitator

The workshop facilitator was well qualified and an experienced teacher educator. His professional experience spanned over 15 years. He has conducted several training programs for teachers. The workshop facilitator had attended several workshops in AR. These workshops were conducted under Education Sector Reform Assistance (ESRA) program. One of the purposes of ESRA was to promote culture of research in public teacher training institution of the Sindh Province.

Data Collection Techniques

As the nature of data were qualitative. Therefore, the preferred methods to collect data was considered discussion with participants and Classroom observation and reflection. For this purpose, the researcher maintained 'Reflective Diary' to capture the important moments of the workshop. The researcher also audio-recorded important discussions of the workshop and took detailed notes while duration observation teachers' lesson.

Data Analyses Procedure

As the nature of data were qualitative. Therefore, the researchers used thematic approach to analyse data. The data was audio-taped, transcribed, codes were made, assigned and classified according to themes. The data were triangulated through personal observation, facilitation and pre and post conferences with teachers to avoid personal biases during analysis. The research used his professional insight to choose important themes. After selecting important themes, key findings have been shared in the paper.

Interpretation of Data

Both workshops were organized at PITE Sindh Nawabshah in lab schools during winter vacation. While brainstorming the term ‘action research’, it was found that teachers did not hear the term. However, teachers were familiar of the term ‘reflection’. The sequences of action research steps (Plan-Act- Observe-Reflect) were quite new and interesting for teachers. The researcher explained this model with examples to the participants. While explaining these steps teachers’ level of interest surprisingly was very high and they became active in learning AR process. Teachers were also provided opportunities to revisit the process of lesson planning. While discussing the importance of AR, teachers believed, “If they adopt AR cycle, it can change their teaching enormously and make students learning effective” (Excerpt taken from Workshop discussion). When researcher asked teachers to share their problems and issues relating to classroom management, curriculum, classroom discipline and assessment, which they wanted to improve, it was surprised to note that each problem was very broad. The research helped teachers to focus on specific problem and helped them to frame research question based on their research problem. At the end of first workshop, the reflections of teachers indicated that they have realized the importance of AR for teaching-learning improvement. Teachers also realized that if they regularly reflect on their teaching it can make it useful. One of the important things that teachers realized that AR is a practitioners’ research and it has far reaching implications for raising students learning.

In the second workshop, methods of data collection and analyses were discussed. The researcher explained different methods with examples. The participants of the workshop were helped to conceive their research problem and then convert their research problems into doable research question. After a hectic sessions, participants developed their research question as under:

1. How can I improve students concept of ‘multiplication’ in Mathematics class two?(Teacher 1)
2. How can I help my early childhood education (ECE) class to learn the spellings of one syllable words? (Teacher 2)
3. How can I help class 4 students in learning “Sooratul Akhlaq” with correct pronunciation and intonation?(Teacher 3)
4. How can I teach articles (A, an, the) in pairs to class V? (Teacher 4)
5. How can I facilitate class four children in learning lesson, “To talk about the new body” through role play? (Teacher 5)

Challenges and Lesson Learnt

When I reflect on my interventions with teachers on different aspects of action research, I realized that it was a herculean and challenging task to bring teachers out of their comfort zones. Majority of classrooms are constructed in such a way that supports teachers in promoting rote memorization. There is very little room available for promoting cooperative

learning approaches. In such environment AR is really challenging. Teachers had lack of knowledge and skills to understand the philosophy of reflective thinking and teaching. During workshop, I observed that teachers were looking stressful because AR was a quite new experience for them. After, the conduct of workshop, I observed lesson plans of teachers. The purpose of this observation was to provide them follow up support in implementing their teaching plan. I regularly conducted with teachers pre and post conference. During meetings it was exposed that, teachers realized the importance of AR. Teachers explained “that before attending the workshop we thought that teaching is an easy job but after knowing about AR, our perceptions about teaching have changed completely. Now we believe that teaching is a challenging jobs’ (Post Conference with teachers).

Teachers termed their AR experience a unique one in their career. According to teachers AR cycle enrich one’s teaching experience and makes teaching systematic. During the workshop, one of the teachers asked me ‘why PITE administration is trying to get out of us from our comfort zones? The traditional teaching is much easier and teaching according to AR cycle is time-taking and attention seeking’ (Excerpt taken from Workshop).

During discussion with teachers in the workshop, teachers were of the view that AR process was quite lengthy, time-consuming and arduous. In a limited span of time teachers supposed to cover lot of course/topics in a academic year. ‘How they will manage the time?’ teachers argued. Keeping in view teachers concerns, it was mutually agreed upon that in the first instance each teacher would develop one AR project and implement it in the classroom. Bit by bit, more projects would be designed.

Teachers’ willingness towards school improvement play an important role in implementing educational reforms at classroom level. The reflections of teachers during the conduct of workshop indicted that they were reluctant to change their existing teacher-centered teaching styles and classroom culture. This was because of two reasons either teachers were not mentally prepared for this new approach or they were not ready to leave their comfort zones. Halai(2011) has also of the view that one of the difficulties towards recognition of action research is an epistemological stance of teachers which do not support them in accepting any educational change. Other reason may be that AR is still not so prevalent in schools of Pakistan. When lab schools teachers discussed their individual AR project with their head teachers, she was hesitant to give them space in school because annual examination was very near. Still the culture of Pakistan government schools hardly accepts such reforming attempts. Halai (2011) acknowledged that environment for AR was also not so friendly in West when people started working on AR. Teachers’ reflection also suggested that completion of course was also a big hurdle in implementing AR in classroom. This has been endorsed by Dean (2009) who described that teachers face challenges while doing AR in classroom because they were obliged to complete syllabus before examination. I personally believe that the focus of our examination system is to promote rote memorization among students. The projects like action research hardly capture the attention of teachers, head teachers and parents. For properly implementing AR in classrooms, availability of resources is the big hurdle. In Pakistan, specifically, in public sector, funds are hardly available to support teaching-learning improvement. The big chunk of education budget goes to teachers’ salaries.

CONCLUSION

Action research is an excellent approach to make our classrooms dynamic for students learning. It can change classroom culture. Helping out teachers in learning and doing action research is a demanding task. During the conduct of the workshop, I have learned that teachers have great potential to learn new things, if Department of Education and school

management really want to promote action research in schools then we have to facilitate teachers in terms of developing their knowledge, skills and attitudes towards interactive teaching approaches.

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