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RESEARCH ARTICLE

EMERGENCE AND CONTINUANCE OF 'ACTION RESEARCH' FOR ACADEMIC AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT.

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Abstract

Action research is a form of inquiry carried out by professionals into their own work. Teacher-researchers explore their own teaching, or their curriculums, or some other aspect of their professional context. It can be an individual effort, but it is even stronger when it involves cooperation among colleagues and also, where appropriate, cooperation with students is high. It carries the message that we can learn and improve things through our own efforts but much better through the cooperation of various other factors. Though it is known that the practice is always located somewhere, at a certain time, among certain people, we may or may not expect that action research in different places will produce theories that have some overlap and some differences. But, by sharing our practices and our theories, we can learn from both the overlaps and the differences. This paper highlights the introduction as emergence of Action research, basics and goals, its developmental stages, its inception into education, reflective practice, types, and the necessity of focus and support in its conduct from various sources.

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Introduction:-

Action Research is any systematic enquiry conducted by teachers, researchers, principals, school counselors, or other stake holders in a teaching or learning environment to gather information about the way how that particular school operates, how they teach, how well their students learn etc., during any ongoing action or process in progress. In another way "Research done by teachers for themselves" is also known as Action Research. It is meant for any professional as teachers to seek the need of opportunities for Professional Growth. It helps in order:

1. To reflect on our practice for improvement.
2. To ensure life-long learning!
3. To assume responsibility for our own professional development. Without development, we can't grow.
4. To improve collaboration for enriching our professional development.

The origins of action research are unclear within the literature. Authors such as Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), Zuber-Skerrit (1992), Holter and Schwartz-Barcott (1993) states that action research is originated with an American psychologist Kurt Lewin. McKernan (1988 as cited in McKernan 1991) states that action research as a method of inquiry has evolved over the last century and careful study of the literature shows "clearly and convincingly that action research is a root derivative of the scientific method reaching back to the Science in Education movement of

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the late nineteenth century.” (McKernan 1991:8) It is persuasive and authoritative for examining issues or problems or phenomena. Action research is relevant.

Basics and Goals:

Teachers have access to their research findings in it. The primary goals of it would be to improve the lives of children and to learn about the craft of teaching. In its process, the teacher becomes the inquirer involving: Teacher as a practical researcher examining a real classroom-based problem. Teacher frames the questions as problem of enquiry. Such questions for inquiry can change throughout the passage of time; context, situation, and year etc., More than one question can be pursued at a time. The foundation for those questions can be curriculum based. Infact, curriculum goals can be used to frame questions for classroom inquiry. The basic steps of Conducting action research must include: a) Identify a Problem b) Identify methods of Enquiry c) Identify your participants d) Collect and Analyse evidence e) Interpret and Share. Procedure of Collecting data and evidence includes: a) Observing b) Discussing and questioning c) Interviewing d) Collecting students’ work samples. Analysing and Summarizing the data includes: a) writing summaries of changes in students’ performance b) Journal judgments of student achievement c) Designing tables and other visual displays to compare and contrast the information that was collected triangulating data. Interpreting and making sense of results includes: Identifying patterns that might lead to possible generalizations about the data collection that can lead to new actions for addressing the questions of the inquiry.



Figure 1:-Action Research

Action Research Explored:

The term action research was coined by the social psychologist Kurt Lewin in the United States in about 1944 in connection with research which aimed to promote social action through democratic decision making and active participation of practitioners in the research process. The target group for Lewin’s programme of action research was field workers who were trying to improve relations between minority groups in American society. Lewin believed that through action research advances in theory and much needed social change might simultaneously be achieved. It was in the field of group dynamics and human relations that Lewin’s ideas flourished initially and continue to flourish today. For instance he directly influenced the foundation and subsequent work of the Tavistock Institute for Human Relations which was established after his visits to Britain in the 1930s. Since that time, most attempts to explain action research have emphasised the close relationship between research or investigation on the one hand and action or practice on the other. For example Rapoport (1970) defined action research as: ... a type of applied social research differing from other varieties in the immediacy of the researcher’s involvement in the action process. (In Deakin University, 1988, The action research reader, p. 89)

In addition there is a clear understanding that action research is research undertaken by those in the field: field workers, teachers, administrators or supervisors in order to change and improve their own practice. It is moreover usually thought of as a group process which enables co-operative work to influence both thought and action among group members.

Action Research into Education:

Under Lewin’s influence, the idea of action research was adopted by educationalists and Lewin himself worked on action research programmes with teachers. His ideas were particularly influential at Teachers’ College, Columbia University in the areas of curriculum research and collaborative research with teachers, schools and school districts.

In spite of the continuing interest in action research in other fields of social inquiry, in education it was subject to criticism on the basis of the methodology, effectiveness, and practicality, and interest declined in the late 1950s only to re-emerge in the 1970s in a different guise under the influence of Stenhouse (1975). A negative reaction to action research is understandable if we recall that for most of this century the dominant models of educational research have been the natural science model based on the research paradigm used in the physical sciences and, more recently, the interpretative research model which aims to discover and interpret the perspectives of participants in the educational process. Clearly action research presents a challenge to these research models since it aims to promote change in specific situations rather than discover 'truth' and derive general laws. Many educators have been concerned with the apparent gap between research and theory on the one hand and daily practices of education on the other: educational problems as defined by researchers and as defined by practitioners can be very different. Action researchers try to close this gap between research and practice by creating a situation in which practitioners define research problems and conduct research in such a way that the outcomes are directly useful to classroom or other educational situations.

Kemmis (1988), who himself contributed to the renewal of interest in the potential of action research, attributes the revival of interest to several factors:

1. A strong interest among educational researchers in helping practitioners deals with problems of practice.
2. A broad methodological interest in interpretative or illuminative methods which attempt to define the problems of the field in ways which represent the understandings of practitioners.
3. A growth of collaborative curriculum development and evaluation work.
4. An explicit commitment to addressing social and political problems of education through participatory research carried out by practitioners on problems of immediate and more general public concern.

During its re-emergence in the 1970s, action research took on a different kind of rationale than in its original form. Lewin's early work, though it emphasised field work, did not seek to abandon the scientific rigour of traditional research in the social sciences. Quite the reverse. What he was trying to do was make sure that research ended in real life applications rather than just written accounts of theory. Later, under the influence of curriculum theorists such as Stenhouse, Schwab, Elliott and Skilbeck emphasis shifted to the idea of practical deliberation, focusing on human interpretation, negotiation and detailed descriptive accounts in place of measurement and statistical analysis. With this trend came the assumption that the enquiry processes must develop naturally rather than being constrained by preconceived ideas. Hence, the expectation is that there should be a continuing number of cycles of enquiry. According to this interpretation, action research aims to develop teachers who are not only active practitioners in the field but also reflective professionals. It leads to a new and enhanced status for the activity of teaching in that it is now seen as an activity which can be investigated, considered and improved. The outcome of this process is to enable teachers to provide a clearer rationale for what they do, based upon their own professional observation and experience. The third development in action research revolves around the work of Kemmis and his colleagues at Deakin University in Australia. These writers explicitly reject positivistic models of enquiry in education and social science and interpretative models which do not lead to action, in favour of critical enquiry linked to human action. Following Habermas, the goal of this enquiry is emancipation from traditional ways of thinking which impede effective action and effective development and communication.

As McKernan (1991) points out, the agenda for this kind of research endeavour is expressly political:

Critical action research is seen as a politically empowering process for participants; the struggle is for more rational, just and democratic forms of education. ... As a theoretical activity it invites teachers and other practitioners to consider not only the curriculum and other educational domains, but the totality of relationships within the social system and structure of the society in which they live and work. (p. 27)

In this process, Lewin's model of a spiral of planning, action, observation and reflection is nevertheless maintained. Each of the models of action research can be and are used for improving teaching in higher education-indeed it is difficult to conceptualise them as totally separate. From our experience it is not always possible to begin a project using a critical emancipatory model of action research. It may be desirable to start action research projects with a small group of like-minded individuals who are teaching the same course so that the group can then reflect together on the progress of the project, and can together make changes to the course. It is not always possible to do this, however, as members of a department do not always share the same concerns about teaching and nor do they have a common wish to engage in action research. Individuals can still start worthwhile projects by using as sounding boards those from other departments or staff of an educational development unit. At some later stage in the project

other staff from the department may wish to be become involved. Several of the case studies described in Experiences Sharing started with one lecturer each and, because of the enthusiasm of those individuals, have extended to wider circles within their departments.

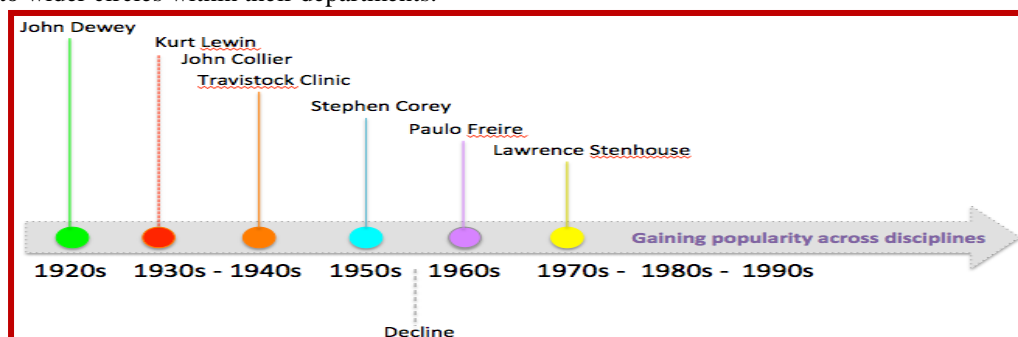


Figure 2:-Developmental Stages of Action Research

Reflective Practice:

A variant of action learning is reflective practice, which has become widely associated with the name of Donald Schon (1983; 1987). Schon has developed a model of professional practice which encourages teachers and other professionals to engage in reflection upon their actions as a means of solving problems encountered in practice. Reflective practice, in Schon's terms, might be seen as a form of action research or action learning by the individual. Action research is normally envisaged as a collective and participative activity so that it can lead to change in social situations. Reflection-on-action can be an individual activity and may influence only the practices of the individual reflector.

Action Research at present:

It might be useful to summarise the above discussion by providing a brief definition of action research. That of Carr and Kemmis (1986, p. 165-166) would be widely accepted.

It can be argued that three conditions are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for action research to be said to exist: firstly, a project takes as its subject-matter a social practice, regarding it as a form of strategic action susceptible of improvement; secondly, the project proceeds through a spiral of cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, with each of these activities being systematically and self-critically implemented and interrelated; thirdly, the project involves those responsible for the practice in each of the moments of the activity, widening participation in the project gradually to include others affected by the practice, and maintaining collaborative control of the process.

Types of Action Research:

There are three basic types of Action research viz., Individual Action Research, Collaborative Action Research and Systematic Action Research. These are explained through the diagrammatical representation below:

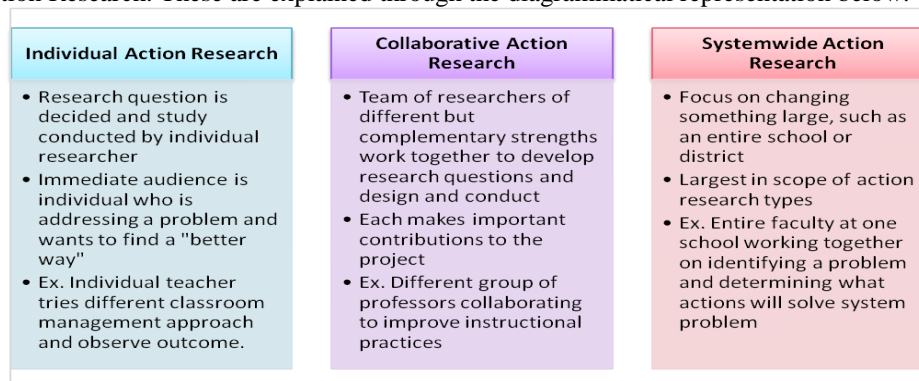


Figure 3:-Types of Action Research

Focus and Support:

For the genuine and smooth conduct of Action Research, it is mandatory to ensure the focus of ones' action research aspect and the possible support needed in pursuing and achieving the expected outcomes of it. The necessity of focus and needed possible support is given in the diagrammatical representation form below

	Individual teacher research	Collaborative action research	School-wide action research	District-wide action research
Focus	Single classroom issue	Single classroom or several classrooms with common issue	School issue, problem, or area of collective interest	District issue Organizational structures
Possible support needed	Coach/mentor Access to technology Assistance with data organization and analysis	Substitute teachers Release time Close link with administrators	School commitment Leadership Communication External partners	District commitment Facilitator Recorder Communication External partners

Figure 4:-Focus and Possible support needed for Conducting types of Action research

Conclusion:-

Action research is a form of inquiry carried out by professionals into their own work. Teacher-researchers explore their own teaching, or their curriculums, or some other aspect of their professional context. It can be an individual effort, but it is even stronger when it involves cooperation among colleagues and also, where appropriate, cooperation with students is high. Over the last few decades, though in existence earlier, action research has become increasingly popular in the field of education. Action research can be a very valuable way to extend teachers teaching skills and gain more understanding of themselves as teachers, their classrooms and their students. This paper focuses to provide a rationale on the use of action research in the field of education.

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