

Action Research and Teacher Education

Part I

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In recent times, there has been an increasingly urgent thrust to develop more effective programmes for teacher education. The recognition that education cannot be considered “effective” if it does not help to promote social reform; the growing evidence that pedagogical practice is not always adequate to deal with efforts at education reform; and our national commitment to lifelong learning for all our citizens have all led to a drive to rethink the way we prepare teachers for the immediate challenges they meet in classrooms, as well as for continuous professional growth. It is this awareness that has informed the School of Education’s emphasis, over the years, on including an action research component as a core element of its certificate and diploma programmes.

“Action research” was introduced as long ago as the 1940s by Kurt Lewin, who promoted it as a problem-solving cycle for improving organisations. The process entails disciplined inquiry, starting with data collection to diagnose problems experienced by an organisation, followed by a search for possible solutions, selection of a course of action, and constant monitoring of the results of action taken.

One benefit of this process is that it helps to bridge the gap between education theory and practice, by promoting the development of theories about education that are grounded in the realities of school life. Recent research undertaken by Levin and Rock (2006) suggests that, in addition, teachers who undertake such research become more critical of their own practice, and more confident of their ability to deal with the challenges of life in classrooms.

Our own experience at the School of Education has been that many teachers who undertake action research are revitalised by the awareness that they have the capacity to develop effective solutions to authentic problems, and that those solutions will be relevant to the contexts in which they are applied. Clearly, this approach is a potentially powerful tool for successful institutional and curriculum reform.

However, such reform has not always taken place. Individual schools have done well. Individual teachers continue to use action research to support their own professional growth and to address issues that concern them. In many cases, however, initial efforts have suffered attrition and died a natural death.

In one of my classes, I recently discovered that out of twenty-five teachers, perhaps three have continued practising action research. Extremely enlightening was a comment from one that, “we did it because it was required. Nobody told us that we were expected to share it with other teachers. And most of them aren’t really interested anyway.” Further probing revealed that a few had experienced actual hostility from some of their colleagues when they sought to share their ideas. Some seemed offended by the implication that their practices could be improved, while others had the attitude, to quote one teacher, “as if they want to say, who you feel you are, to come telling us what to do?”

Even more troubling have been other narratives I have heard of principals who resent these attempts at action research, regarding them as intrusions to be tolerated for as long as teachers are enrolled in teacher education programmes, and then to be thankfully forgotten.

Clearly, as long as teachers returning to schools have these experiences, the benefits of action research will not be realised. A teacher who has been ridiculed, or even ostracized, for trying to develop relevant solutions to problems encountered is likely to stop trying. Far from feeling more confident of his or her ability to deal with the challenges of the classroom, such a teacher may become demoralised, because exacerbating the discouragement of not being able to address problems encountered is the frustration of knowing that even if solutions are possible, they are not necessarily welcome. And schools where action research is ignored or discouraged will probably not progress very far towards becoming learning organisations.

We know that action research has been shown to be useful to schools and to individual teachers. The challenge now facing institutions of teacher education is to design interventions that will include whole schools in the cycle of research. It is clear that collaboration between such institutions and individual teachers is not enough to ensure that reforms will be institutionalised in schools. As part of the process of decentralisation, tertiary institutions must make systematic efforts to collaborate with entire schools and districts. This will, however, demand a reconceptualisation of the roles of such institutions and schools, as well as of other stakeholders, in the research process.

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