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Improving Teaching and Learning through Action Research

Abstract

Action research can be considered as a continuous investigation through which the teachers aim to improve teaching strategies taking into account the strengths and weaknesses of students. This study will identify the importance of Action research as an instrument to ensure teachers methodological framework, to analyze and improve the process of teaching and learning. It will aim in gathering the positive practices of teachers in terms of research, which can serve as models for their colleagues in analog schools.

We will rely on the experience of teachers and school administrators of secondary schools of Durres and Elbasan. This study will make use of a structured questionnaire, as an instrument of data collection. It will gather information about the teachers' perceptions of the research impact on teaching practices and efficient class management.

The findings of the study reflected a positive perception of teachers about the process of action research, as an instrument of a successful teaching. Teachers should have the basic knowledge about action research in order to practice it as a part of their educational practice. The application of a quasi-experiment in two cases, created the possibility of a concrete commitment of teachers who applied the action research, passing each stage of this process. Such a practice should be ongoing in terms of identification and management of classrooms problems and offering a productive environment and a successful teaching.

Keywords: Action research, teaching, learning, reflective teacher

1-Introduction

The teaching process is a journey, in which teachers should explore and analyze its practice, to enhance the quality of this process. In educational practice a wide range of problems, including: Failure of learning tasks, hyperactivity, irregular attendance, aggressiveness, lack of attention, disengagement in activities inside and outside the classroom, the disobedience, the malfunction of a teaching method or lack of understanding of a concept, requiring solutions that cannot be found in books or training.

Each of these problems poses a challenge for the teacher, who must balance his successful efforts to convey new information, to facilitate learning among students and to manage the class. Considering this aspect, action research can be considered as a teacher aide in implementing the curriculum. Rather than focus on theory, research allows practitioners to address those problems in their teaching environment, which they can influence and make a difference by giving us the right alternatives in solving problems.

In the Albanian context, system changes influence the education, in moving it towards teaching that enables the student to request information, develop critical thinking, and actively interact by sharing and collaborating. Undoubtedly, such reformations dictated the need of further qualifications for teachers, in order to be consistent with the new approach to education. Although many teachers are successful in their work, they cannot manage every dynamic created in the classroom. Increasing research would help not only teachers but also students, transforming the classroom into a friendly and effective environment based on their level of learning. Regardless of foreign literature cases of action research (Lewin 1946), we cannot find evidence of this practice in Albania.

This study will identify the importance of action research as an instrument to ensure teachers methodological framework, to analyze and improve the process of teaching and learning. Teachers should be trained to understand the impact of their teaching practices, student outcomes, to create a learning environment that encourages research, reflection, collaboration and experimentation. The aim of this study is to gather positive practices of teachers in terms of research, which can serve as models for their colleagues in analog schools.

2-Literature Review: Basic concepts about action research

Action research is a process of continuous research on problems related to teaching and includes undertaking several actions to resolve them. It is regarded as a dynamic, purposeful and ethical process led by teacher in order to improve teaching and learning. Beginnings of action research dates back in 1940 with Kurt Lewin, whose work served as a benchmark for other researchers in the following years.

Action research aims to bring a change in the context of the given situation. According to Rawlinson and Little (2004), research enables teachers in learning about their teaching practice and continue to monitor student learning. Carr and Kemmis (1986) have described the research as a way to: (1) improving teaching practice, (2) improving the understanding of practice, (3) improving the situation in which the practice occurs.

For several decades, teacher's reflective practice has become an inseparable part of the teachers' practises, considering it as an essential part of teachers work and not as an act of adding (Brockbank and McGill, 1998).

Implementation of research in educational environments (classroom/and school) is considered as a positive impact and engagement of those, who work in these environments because the findings can be applied immediately and problems can be resolved quickly (Guskey, 2000). During the research, teachers may choose to focus on a small group of students, in one or more classes or the whole school. It depends on the support, needs, problems and interests of the teachers/ or school. The reflection on teaching practice is essential if the results necessary make changes in creating another class operation framework of the educational process.

Parker (1997) states that action research enables the teacher to reflect systematically on teaching practice. It is regarded as a continuous professional development with direct impact on teaching and learning. (Calhoun, 2002). It allows research to measure the impact of teaching practice and the results serve as a basis for planning and decision-making. Action research can be used in nurturing the art of teaching and helping the teacher to organize and facilitate learning.

3-Research in Action Steps

In an attempt to explain the action research, scholars engaged in this field, have built different research models based on some basic steps. Despite the steps identified in this process, research is considered as a cycle (Mertler and Charles, 2011). Other authors, like Parsons and Brown (2002) have described it concisely as the process of “obsevation- action-observation-adjustment”

Nine steps model of Mertel (2008) includes:

- (1) **The planning stage**, which includes (i) identification of the issue, (ii) the collection of information, (iii) review of the literature, (iv) developing the research plan
- (2) **The action stage**, which includes (i) the implementation of the plan and data collection (ii) data analysis
- (3) **The development stage**, which involves developing the research plan
- (4) **The reflection stage**, which includes (1) sharing and communicating results and (ii) reflecting on the process.

4-Advantages of action research for teachers

Boud, Cohen and Walker (1993) defines research as a process that involves the exploration of experience as a tool for emphasizing understanding. Researchers consider some advantages of research for teachers who apply it, considering it as a way to solve their problems, (2) as a process that can begin at any time and can produce immediate results, (3) brings opportunity to better understanding and improvement of educational practices, (4) promotes the establishment of strong links between staff, (5) provides the first alternative approaches to educational dilemmas and improve their teaching practice. (Mertler and Charles, 2008) . As stated above research is seen as progress towards professionalism helping in solving problems that teachers face in their classes. Given that research can be done in several ways, it responds to the needs of a single teacher, a group of teachers or a school.

According to Koshy (2005), survey advantages lie in the fact that (1) it corresponds to a specific situation or context (2) the applicant may participate, (3) includes ongoing assessments and modifications, (4) through research we obtain open results. Baimba (1992) based on his work, emphasizes that teachers after applying action research: (1) have a clear idea about the aims and objectives of the curriculum, (2) understand the nature and ways of gaining knowledge, (3) become more creative, using local resources in classroom activities, (4) see themselves as researchers and feel of owning teaching modules.

Action research generally used issues and problems associated with the class and / school (Atweh and Burton, 1995, Stringer, 2008), such as teaching practice, problems and activities related to curriculum, administration, organization and evaluation. According to Mertler and Charles (2008) categories that can be the focus of the research are the classroom, teaching materials, classroom management, teaching methods, grades and assessment.

5- Methodology

The research model applied in this study is a direct study of teachers, gathering descriptive and quantitative data on the perception of teachers about action research.

a- Research questions

Research questions addressed in this study are:

- (1) What are teachers' perceptions on the impact of action research in their teaching practice?
- (2) Do the teachers' perceptions vary in rural schools about the importance of research?
- (3) How does the experience of teachers influence their perceptions on difficulties in conducting action research?

The research questions will find answers through a structured questionnaire designed for this purpose.

b- Instrument

The instrument used for the collection of quantitative data in this study is a structured questionnaire constructed by 12 questions. Its design is made to obtain information on: (1) the experience of teachers on research (2) their perception of the areas on which research can be carried out (3) perception of obstacles and difficulties in the implementation of research. (See appendix 1)

Questionnaire items consist in two forms:

(1) Seven closed items by dichotomous answers “yes”; “No” (items 1-4, items 6 -7 and 11)

(2) five items based on a five Likert scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly agree” on issues related to the incentives of research (question 5); possible areas of research (question 8); The main obstacles to conducting research (question 9); profile of a good survey (question 10). In the last question (12), the degree of difficulty encountered while conducting research used a Likert scale with five units ranging from “Not at all” to “Very”.

Items of this questionnaire were created in aiming to measure agreement on issues related to, the need, perceived advantages and disadvantages of action research. As such, they serve strictly to the research questions raised and guide the establishment of relevant recommendations.

c- **Data analysis**

This study made use of SPSS 22, in analyzing quantitative data. Initially the program reviewed the statistical parameters of the instrument, in testing the internal validity expressed through Cronbach Alpha value and tested the correlations between different variables. Cronbach Alpha value was .76, reflecting a satisfactory reliability.

d- Results of the questionnaire

In binary response questions, it was noted a unique response between teachers with a few exceptions. All the teachers stated that they had information on action research. They also stated that they were aware for research that was generated in the respective schools. Being asked whether they themselves had undertaken any research, the teachers were answered positively. None of teachers being asked does not hesitate to consider research as an auxiliary instrument of teaching practice.

As stimulated factors for carrying out an action research, there is some degree of higher agreement between teachers, with the majority of them. According to an ascendent order, there were some factors, which were identified as key in conducting an action research, such as: (i) improvement in results of specific students (80%), (ii) management of student behavior problems and those hyperactive (from 74% of teachers), (iii) improving learning style and professional growth (74%) and (iv) improvement in the results of pupils (53%). It is worth to stress that for the half of the respondents, there are teachers that stand side to split the role of action research for learners to manage behavioral problems, their professional growth and improve the style of learning.

Only about 15% of teachers disagreed with the fact that every teacher is able to do action research, they stated that teachers were not prepared for this type of research. About 27% of the respondents, do not see connection between the pedagogical ability in themselves and teachers incitation of research. Most of the respondents are of the opinion that the teachers who have teaching skills are in the condition of conducting action research.

Asked about areas of interest of action research, which would have been supporting roles, the teachers have expressed their attitudes, which derive from concrete experiences in psyche-sociological, but also the requirements in the application of contemporary methods of teaching. Improved work in-group shows potential as a field of interest from teachers about 60% of them. Whereas 74% of teachers consider as valuable in practice education subjects and the involvement of learners in different projects that are considered as ways to drive creativity and cooperation between them. More than 87% of teachers consider as extremely important greater flexibility en-

gagement of parents and reinforcement of strategies of learning. Behavioral problems in psyche-sociological pupils remain a challenge for 60% of teacher, who identified it as possible a field of research. Teachers involved in this study promote critical thinking because the main goals of contemporary teaching are not only placing the learner at the center but also fostering analytical and exploratory learning.

About 94% of them consider the need to practice action research as techniques that stimulate critical thinking of learners. Moreover, 67% of teachers aim to teach more in terms of motivation of learners to read. The unappropriated use of books and education subjects is not considered to teachers inter priority concerns in their classes; meanwhile, the learners' attention during the learning stage is the main inconvenience of teachers. For more than half of teachers, the homework remains a challenge that reflects not only the fulfillment of the obligations that learners have, but also as a reflection of the work that should be carried out independently tated in the home.

Regarding the perceived or actual barriers faced by the teachers in the implementation of action research, lack of support, parents were considered as very important partners by 60% of the respondents. While 54% of teachers, did not consider the lack of qualifications as a limiting factor for action research. They see themselves as available to undertake the preparation of a process.

It is very interesting the fact that the same regulation appears the percentage of teachers have ambiguous answers in the absence of motivation as a limiting factor of research. While 80% of teachers have determined their problems about the lack of books as extremely important because it does not allow them to engage in research. Ultimately, 60% of teachers found difficulties in supporting materials in English, as shown in the table below.

Table1. Descriptive data about the obstacles faced by teachers in research

	N	Min.	Max	Mean	Std. dev
Derecognition of the process	15	2	5	3.73	.884
Limitations on the recognition of foreign languages	15	2	5	3.47	1.187
Lack of time	15	3	5	3.67	.816
Lack of support (leader / parent)	15	2	5	3.87	.990
Lack of qualifications to do research	15	1	5	3.87	1.356
Lack of motivation to do research	15	1	5	3.47	1.187
Lack of guidelines for research	15	1	5	3.60	1.404
Derecognition of the process	15				

Teachers are also asked about their perceptions a research, which may be considered as a good process. The selection of alternatives on this scale is made besides highlighting the perception of teachers, the control and remained recognition of this process from their point of view. Teachers have determined in a significant proportion of the research, which follows rigorous steps. Specifically, about 40% of teachers do not consider action research run by them. The teacher reflected that they were unaware of this process. On the other hand, about 67% of teachers related the quality of research to positive results. In 54% of cases, the teachers have identified the financial support as an element required for the success in research. While 60% of them supported the idea that an expert can do research

better than a teacher. In fact, this is contradicted to the above statement that they have qualifications and skills necessary for conducting research. The duration of action research, 67% of teachers do not consider as adequate for a good process.

Asking how often they felt necessary to reflect about their decisions in phytosociological, only 27% of teachers answered often. About 40% of them emphasize that it is necessary to reflect during their practice meanwhile 34% of teachers stated that they had never done it.

Based on variables such as age, education and experience, there are differences between core subcategories of teachers involved in the study. Neither the profile of urban and rural schools served not as a variable determinant of changes in perceptions of teachers surveyed.

Determining possible differences of the fore mention variables were analyzed correlations, which did not considered significant differences.

The first research question. What are perceptions of teachers on the impact of action research in their teaching practice?

It was observed that the processing of data was the fact that teachers regardless subcategories such as education level, age, experience and profile of rural or urban schools where they work, responded positively to the recognition of the process of action research. The first interpretation that can be made against such an attitude can be derived from a clear misidentification of action research as a form of research. However taking for granted their responses, the following discussion will be based on the results of questionnaires.

All respondents considered research as a helpful tool for teaching and accurately identify those priority areas in which action research can help. He is considered by Wallace (2000) as a local process on the context that aims to explore, develop and monitor changes in teaching practice. The exact perception of respondents remains the ability of any teacher to engage in action research.

A positive result attached to a research that brings results quantitatively and qualitatively in classrooms, judged a success. However, researchers see research although closely related to the context

and issues in which rise beyond this. Research not inadvertently regarded as a cycle in each stage which required teachers to reflect becoming the impetus for expected changes that are illustrated with self-reflection, improvements in the professional and the class as a whole (Ferrance, 2000; Johnson & Button 2000; Sax & Fisher, 2001). Despite being, a part of teachers' responses can flow intuitively assisted suggested assertions, saying that they should have kept the elements and aspects of the research. Teachers involved in this study shared the opinion that prevails in the districts of their international colleagues on the positive effects of action research as a facilitator for successful teaching.

The second research question. Do the teachers' perceptions vary in rural schools about the importance of research?

Although the profile of the school, rural or urban as there was not a deliberate variable in designing, the study, due to the accessibility created by Marinas school in the completion of the questionnaires, created a subcategory among respondents.

There was a perception that, as might be the stereotypical, sees teachers in rural and remote areas as teacher of less quality because there were fewer monitoring practices. Professional development can be costly, time intensive and teachers in rural areas appear to be fewer than their counterparts.

The literature shows that education in rural areas focuses on issues faced by teachers, students and community by leaning mostly on the negative aspects of rural schools. Among these issues can be mentioned the professional development of teachers, their recruitment for rural schools, a relatively large number of new teachers and social isolation that often accompanies rural areas. (Collins, 1999 Allen, 2000, Mathews, 2004). Collins (1999) also claimed that teachers in village schools should have a rural background and qualify in more than one subject, considering the basic elements of education in the village availability, acceptability, adaptability and support continued access.

The third research question. How does the experience of teachers influence their perceptions on difficulties in conducting action research? For many teachers, research seems a complex series of steps difficult to engage during leisure time. In addition, in

fact different from the scientific publications, there are not many done by teachers. Apart from sporadic, their issues do not adjust too many daily activities within class. (Ferrance, 2000; MCBee, 2004). But beyond this, action research is done in different educational environments and classes are transformed in «laboratory» of research by the teachers themselves and these classes are considered as best classes. (MCBee, 2004).

Action research considers the teachers as agents and sources of educational reforms not object to it. This process should be seen as continuing professional development that provides an orientation to direct some learning. (Calhoun, 2002).

Teachers enjoy equality of privilege through research that knowledge is power. Browsing the literature brings examples of perceptions and positive achievements of teachers who have conducted research, but nonetheless for large portions teachers remains an uncharted new approach properly. Research is considered as complex challenge for the teachers and it was used periodically as a development tool.

No doubt, about the fact that the teachers tend to be professional growth and the positive results during exercise can achieve practice of education subjects. The first in this view of action research comes as a form of professional growth, in encouraging study of personal pedagogy, critical and analytical view of their work, generally discovering what it is most effective in improving education practice subjects (Mills, 2007). Seen in this aspect, action research can influence their professional achievements, so teachers are reluctant to engage in research.

Having reviewed the findings of questionnaire with the teachers, noted that the experience does not adequately serve as a differentiator variation in their attitudes toward research. Comparisons more than most can be made for the teachers in the 0-30 years' experience criteria, as with a great experience criteria of more than 30 years were only two teachers. Teachers regardless of their years in teaching have recognized the importance of research in improving teaching.

It is noted that the majority of teachers, as a main obstacle to research, has designated the lack of leisure time. Lack of manuals

guiding identified, at most as obstacle by the teachers with 10-30 years' experience criteria. Teachers with the same regulation that the origins of these experiences intervals as illustrated in the tables, also identify the non-recognition of the research process as a factor that hinders their involvement.

An interesting fact noted a lack of motivation associated with half of teachers with different levels of experience have confirmed this obstacle, meanwhile that the other half has chosen to appear on staying neutral not refused this obstacle.

Attitudes of teachers included in this study, regardless of not involvement in action research, identify the obstacles in fact the same regulation and restrictions as those reflected in the literature.

6-Conclusions and recommendations

The study was conducted in three schools of Durres and El-basan although with a limited sample to act as a path in studies on the needs of teachers in conducting action research. Despite that, the participants of this study stated that they knew action research, their rejection for not being involved in quasi-experiment on grounds of ignorance of the process, rejected their prior claims.

Data collection during the stages of research indicated that teachers owned methodological skills necessary to understand and implement action research in education. This served as a framework to prop up and develop further, teaching repertoire. Considering the experience of several decades on the application of action research, it is worth to emphasize that the practice of research should go on.

Some of the recommendations that may arise are:

- Similar studies but with a more lengthy stretch are necessary to take place also in other schools of the district.

Action research should be offered as part of the formative curriculum of new teachers

For the teachers with experience criteria in schools it is necessary to develop training programs on action research, as the form of

Leaders in schools should support and stimulate the teachers to explore research in assisting their professional growth

In collaboration with the research experts who can serve as mentors for the teachers may organize consultations on the accurate identification of variables of pupils, classrooms and those related to the teachers that impact to learners.

- Practice and monitoring methods must be monitored and designed in long-term effects of action research.