Action Research in Education

Sadaf Shallwani
Aga Khan Education Service, Kenya
August 8, 2007, Kisumu, Kenya

Workshop Objectives

In this workshop, participants will:

- Be introduced to action research as a method for inquiry and professional development.
- Conceptualize the action research model and understand what is involved at each step of the cycle.
- Consider characteristics of ‘good’ action research.
- Be familiarized with different approaches and variations in action research.
- Begin planning their own action research project.
- Be introduced to ways to apply and share research findings.
- Consider some of the benefits and challenges of engaging in action research.

Case Study:
A Proposal for Sheila

A marriage proposal has come for your daughter Sheila.

The marriage proposal is from the Malik family. They are requesting Sheila's hand in marriage for their son Asad.

You do not know anything about Asad, or about the Malik family. They live in the neighbouring village where your sister Rehmat resides.

What do you do to determine whether or not you should accept the marriage proposal for Sheila?

- What do you need to find out?
- How will you get this information?
- How will you ensure this information is accurate?

adapted from *Community-Based Participatory Research: A Training Manual for Community Researchers* (Sadaf Shallwani and Shama Mohammed, 2007)

What is Research?

- Research is: seeking evidence to answer a question.
- Steps in research (Wadsworth, 1998)
  - Raise a question
  - Plan to seek answers
  - Fieldwork (seek answers)
  - Reflection/analysis
  - Draw conclusions

What makes ‘good’ research?

- An important question that can be investigated empirically
- Build on previous research
- Procedures that reduce biases and inaccuracies
- Being open to new and unexpected findings
- Using research methods that are well-suited to the specific question and situation (sampling, triangulation)
- Documentation and dissemination
- Ethical considerations

Buzz Groups

- Turn to the person seated next to you and tell them about a time you observed, reflected upon and changed something in your professional practice.

What is Action Research?

- Kurt Lewin (1946) coined the term ‘action research’:
  - Work that does not separate the investigation of the problem from the action needed to solve the problem (McFarland & Stansell, 1993).
  - A cyclical process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting on changes in social situations (Noffke & Stevenson, 1995).
  - Those affected by planned changes have the primary responsibility for deciding on courses of action which seem likely to lead to improvement, and for evaluating the results of strategies tried out in practice (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Retallick, 2004).

Action Research Model

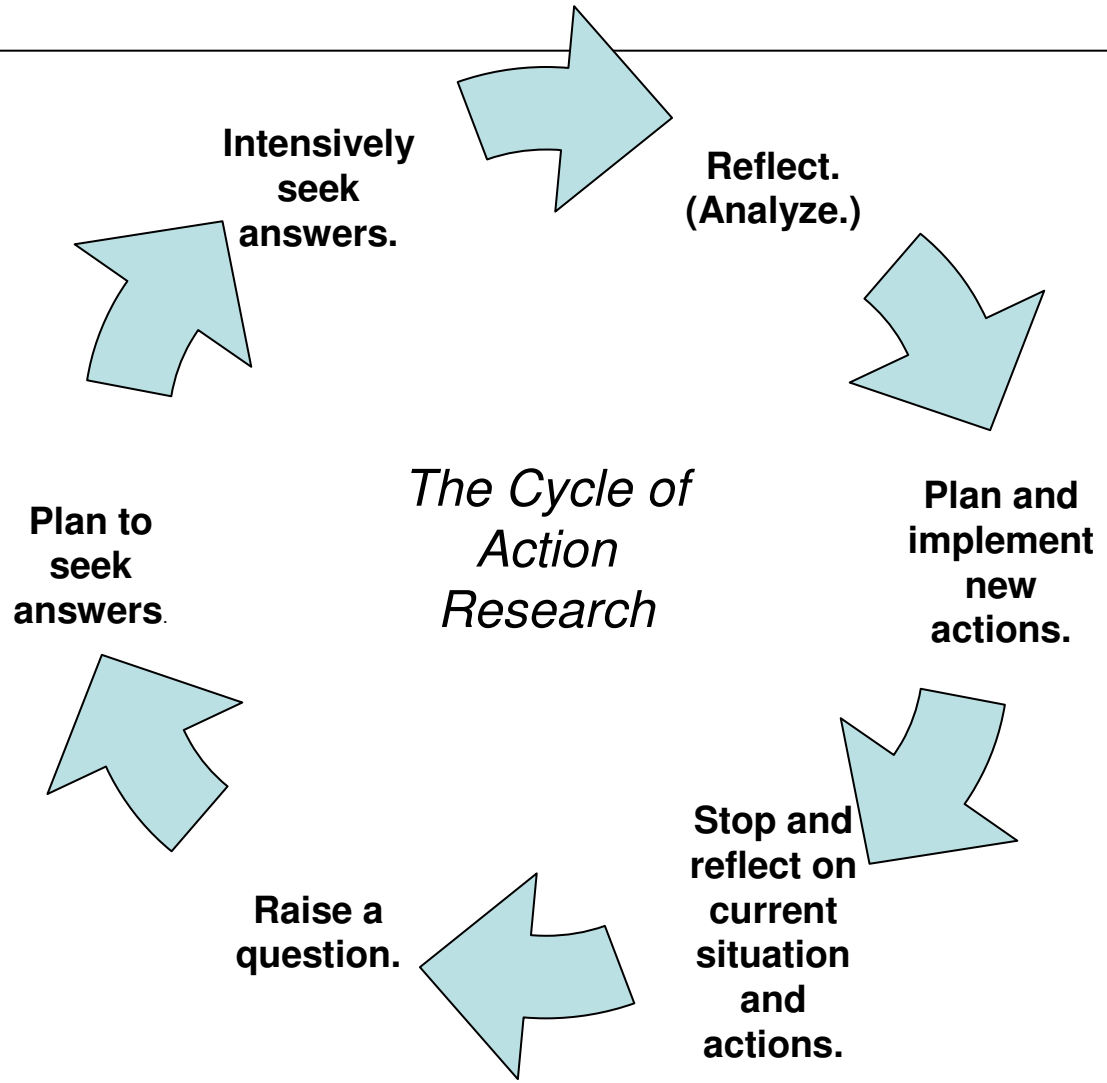
- A spiral of steps, each of which is composed of planning, action, and the evaluation of the result of the action.
  - Have a general idea and a sense that some kind of improvement or change is desirable.
  - Decide on a field of action.
  - Engage in fact-finding about circumstances in field of action.
  - Deciding on a plan of action
  - Before taking the first action step, devise a way of observing and monitoring the effects of the first action step, the circumstances in which it occurs, and what the strategy begins to look like in practice.

Action Research Model

- Take first step.
- As new data comes in, the circumstances, action, and effects can be described and evaluated through reflection.
- Reflection leads to new understandings, which lead to new planning.
- Revise plan of action in light of the new information.
- Second action step is planned for, implemented, monitored, and evaluated as the first step;
- Spiral of action, observation (monitoring), reflection (evaluation) and re-planning continues.

The Conventional Research Process

Raise a question. → **Plan to seek answers.** → **Intensively seek answers.** → **Analyze.** → **Draw conclusions.**



Typical Characteristics of Action Research

- Cyclic
- Participative
- Qualitative (usually)

Action Research in Education

- Stephen Corey (1953)
  - Applied the method in number of teacher-managed research projects, as a way for teachers to reflect upon, change, and improve teaching practices
  - Felt that the value of action research is in the change that occurs in everyday practice rather than the generalization to a broader audience.
  - Emphasized the need for teachers and researchers to work together.

Action Research in Education

- Resurgence in 1970s: Elliot & Adelman
  - As a means of helping teachers to develop enquiry learning in their classrooms; as a means to solve education issues.
- Recent conceptualizations
  - As a tool for professional development
  - As a tool for school reform and educational change
  - As a method for practitioners to live with the complexity of real experience while, at the same time, striving for concrete improvement; a way of managing complex situations critically and practically

Action Research in Education

- Individual Teacher Research
  - Focuses on changes in a single classroom
  - Teacher identifies a problem or area of interest: classroom management, instructional strategies or materials, or students' cognitive or social behavior; then seeks solutions to the problem
- Collaborative Action Research
  - Focuses on problems and changes in a single classroom or a problem occurring in several classrooms
  - Two or more teachers and administrators, working with staff from university or other external agency
- Schoolwide Action Research
  - School faculty selects an area or problem of collective interest, then collects, organizes, and interprets on-site data, as well as external data, to inform decision-making
  - Focuses on school-improvement (Improve organization as a problem-solving entity, improve equity for students, increase breadth and content of the inquiry)
  - Leadership team to keep process moving

Buzz Groups

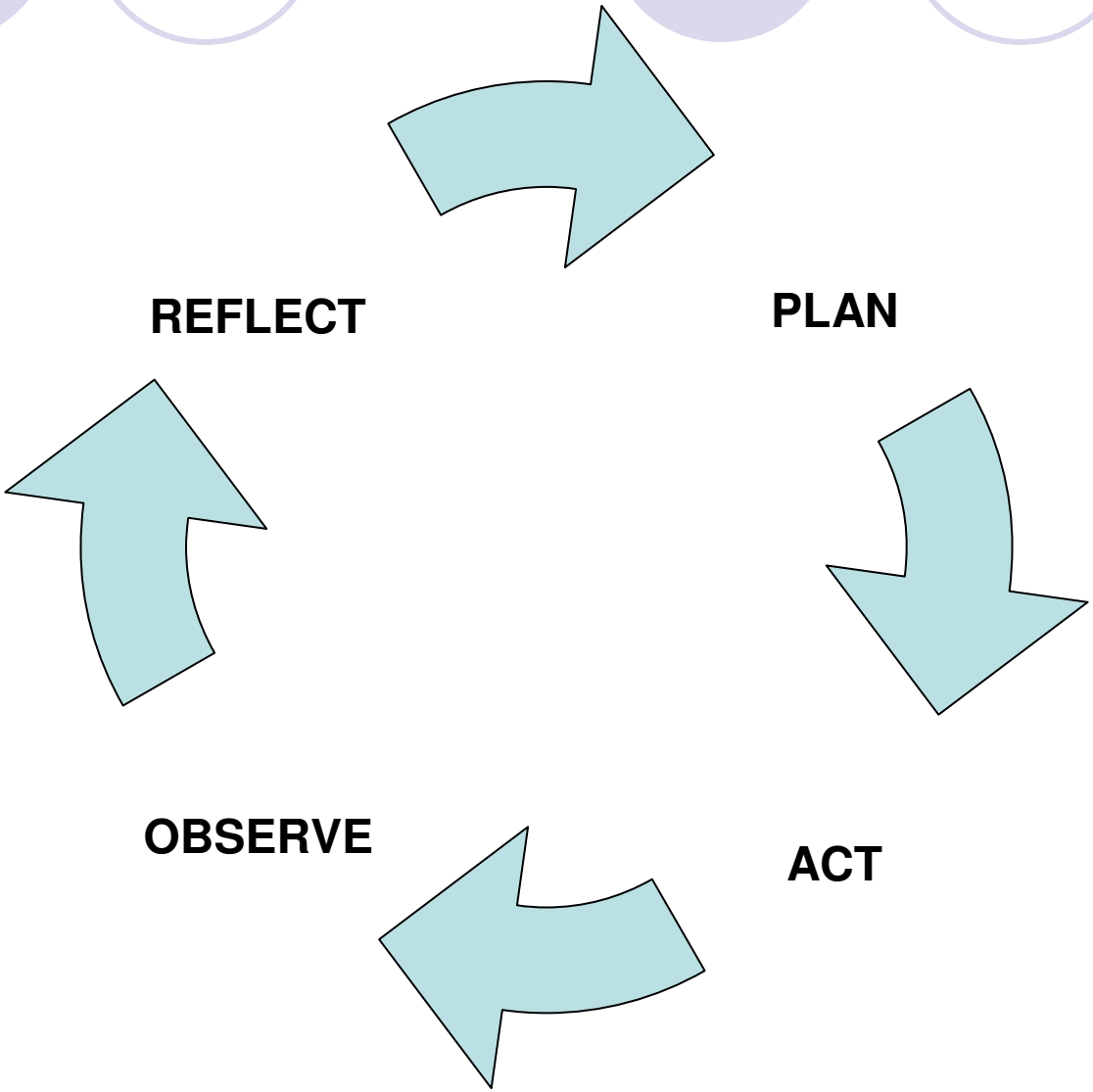
- Turn to the person next to you and talk about aspects in your teaching practice that you feel would benefit from a careful action research study. These could be:
  - issues in the classroom (directly related to your work)
  - questions you have about the effectiveness of your own instructional practice
- While it is fine to think about ‘big ideas’, focus your discussion on ideas that are specific, relevant and feasible to carry out, given your organization’s and your own constraints and resources.

Four ‘Moments’ of Action Research

Kemmis, McTaggart, & Retallic, 2004

- To *do* action research, one undertakes:
  - to develop a *plan* of action to improve what is already happening;
  - to *act* to implement the plan;
  - to *observe* the effects of action in the context in which it occurs; and
  - to *reflect* on these effects as a basis for further planning, subsequent action and so on, through a succession of cycles
- ‘Moments’
  - Not static steps, complete in themselves, but rather moments in the action research spiral process

Four ‘Moments’ of Action Research



Action Research Moment: Planning

- Prospective or prior to action; forward looking
- Recognize that all social action is to some degree unpredictable and therefore somewhat risky
- Flexible enough to adapt to unforeseen effects and previously unrecognized constraints
- Strategic:
  - Taking into account the risks involved in social change, and recognizing real constraints in the situation
  - Chosen because it allows the practitioner to act more effectively over a greater range of circumstances, more wisely and more prudently.

Action Research Moment: Action

- Deliberate and controlled: careful and thoughtful variation of practice.
- Practice as ‘idea-in-action’
- Guided, but not controlled, by plan and prior practice
- Risky, in real time, dealing with real constraints
- Fluid and dynamic, instant decisions, practical judgement
- ‘Struggle’ towards improvement

Action Research Moment: Observation

- Documenting the effects of action
- Prospective: provides the basis for reflection now but more so in the immediate future
- Careful observation is necessary because action will always be limited by constraints of reality, and all of these constraints will never be clear in advance
- Observation must be planned, so that there will be a documentary basis for subsequent reflection, but it must not be too narrow – must be responsive, flexible, and open-minded
- Observe:
  - the action process
  - the effects of action (intended and unintended)
  - the circumstances of and constraints on action
  - the way circumstances and constraints limit or channel the planned action and its effects
  - other issues which arise
- Guided by intent to provide a sound basis for critical self-reflection

Action Research Moment: Reflection

- Retrospective, recalls action as it has been recorded in observation
- Seeks to make sense of processes, problems, issues and constraints made manifest in strategic action
- Takes account of the variety of perspectives possible in the situation
- Aided by discussion among participants
- Through discourse – a reconstruction of the meaning of the social situation, leading to a revised plan
- Evaluative aspect: practitioner is to judge whether effects/issues were desirable and suggest ways of proceeding
- Descriptive aspect: new understanding, a more vivid picture of the situation, the action, and what might now be possible

What makes ‘good’ action research?

- In addition to characteristics of ‘good research’… ‘good action research’ is:
  - Emergent
  - Responsive (cyclic nature)
  - Participation
- Multiple cycles, with planning before action and critical analysis after it
- Within each cycle:
  - Use multiple data sources
  - Try to disprove the interpretations arising from earlier cycles
- Constant critical reflection and flexibility

Benefits of action research

- Professional development
- Experience and model problem-solving for students
- Revitalize learning community
- Support initiatives by individual teachers, schools, communities
- Improve school quality and student learning

Sharing your findings

- Research can lead to refinements in programmes or practices
- Research can lead to more research

- In writing: reports for colleagues and other stakeholders; email discussion groups; publications from professional organizations; research journals
- Verbally: presentations for staff, students, parents; at professional meetings and research seminars