Participatory Action Research

in Programme Development, Implementation, and Evaluation

Sadaf Shallwani

Kenya School Improvement Project

Education for Marginalized Children in Kenya

Madrasa Resource Centre Kenya

Introductions

- Turn to the person next to you and interview them. Find out their:
  - Name
  - Position
  - Past experience with participatory research and action research
  - Expectations of this workshop

Introduce the person you interviewed to the whole group.

Workshop Objectives

In this workshop, participants will:

- Explore basic research concepts.
- Evaluate 'participation' of different parties at different steps of a research project, and consider the benefits and challenges of promoting participation in research.
- Conceptualize the action research model and cycle, and compare/contrast it with the conventional research process.
- Know the key tenets of participatory action research, and consider the benefits and challenges of engaging in it.
- Begin planning their own action research project.

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?

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?

- Procedures that reduce biases and inaccuracies
- Being open to new and unexpected findings
- Representative sampling
- Triangulation of data (quantitative, qualitative)
- Proper documentation and dissemination
- Ethical considerations!

Participatory Research

- All social research requires the participation of human participants.
- Four typical conceptual parties to a research project:
  - the researcher(s)
  - the researched
  - the researched for: those who have the problem the research is to solve (the critical reference group)
  - the researched for: those who might benefit from better information about the situation
- Participation:
  - Non-participation
  - Passive participation
  - Active participation

Evaluating Participation in a Research Project

- Think about a research project in which you have been involved. This may be a needs assessment, baseline survey, impact evaluation, etc.

- What was the level of participation of each stakeholder, at each step of the research process?

- For each stakeholder, what are the consequences (benefits and disadvantages / challenges) of different levels of participation?

Participation in Conventional Research

- Researchers (those commissioning or carrying out the research)
  - Participate the most: they choose the questions, decide how they will be answered, interpret the answers and decide what has been 'discovered'.
  - Are constrained to present their findings in particular ways.
  - Are expected to withhold personal experiences or views because research is supposed to be 'objective', 'unbiased', 'value-free'.
- Critical reference group (those who have the 'problem' that the research aims to 'solve')
  - Participates the least; professional and academic research largely researches *on* and *about*, and speaks *for* the disadvantaged
  - 'Studying down' (Nader, 1972)

Participation in Conventional Research

- Other stakeholders (other than the researchers and the critical reference group)
  - E.g. funders, politicians, other NGOs
  - Typically participate only at the outset or at the end (establishing a committee, allocating funds, receiving a research report)
- The researched
  - May or may not be the critical reference group
  - Typically: passive participation

Consequences of Non-Participation in Research

- Confusion, lack of agreement regarding direction and purpose of inquiry
- Disagreement about form and design of study
- Wrong directions are taken, dissent is suppressed or ignored, wrong questions are asked, data is irrelevant, conclusions are useless
- Misunderstandings about participants' perceptions
- Conflict over interpretations and analyses
- Disagreement about what these imply for change in action

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.
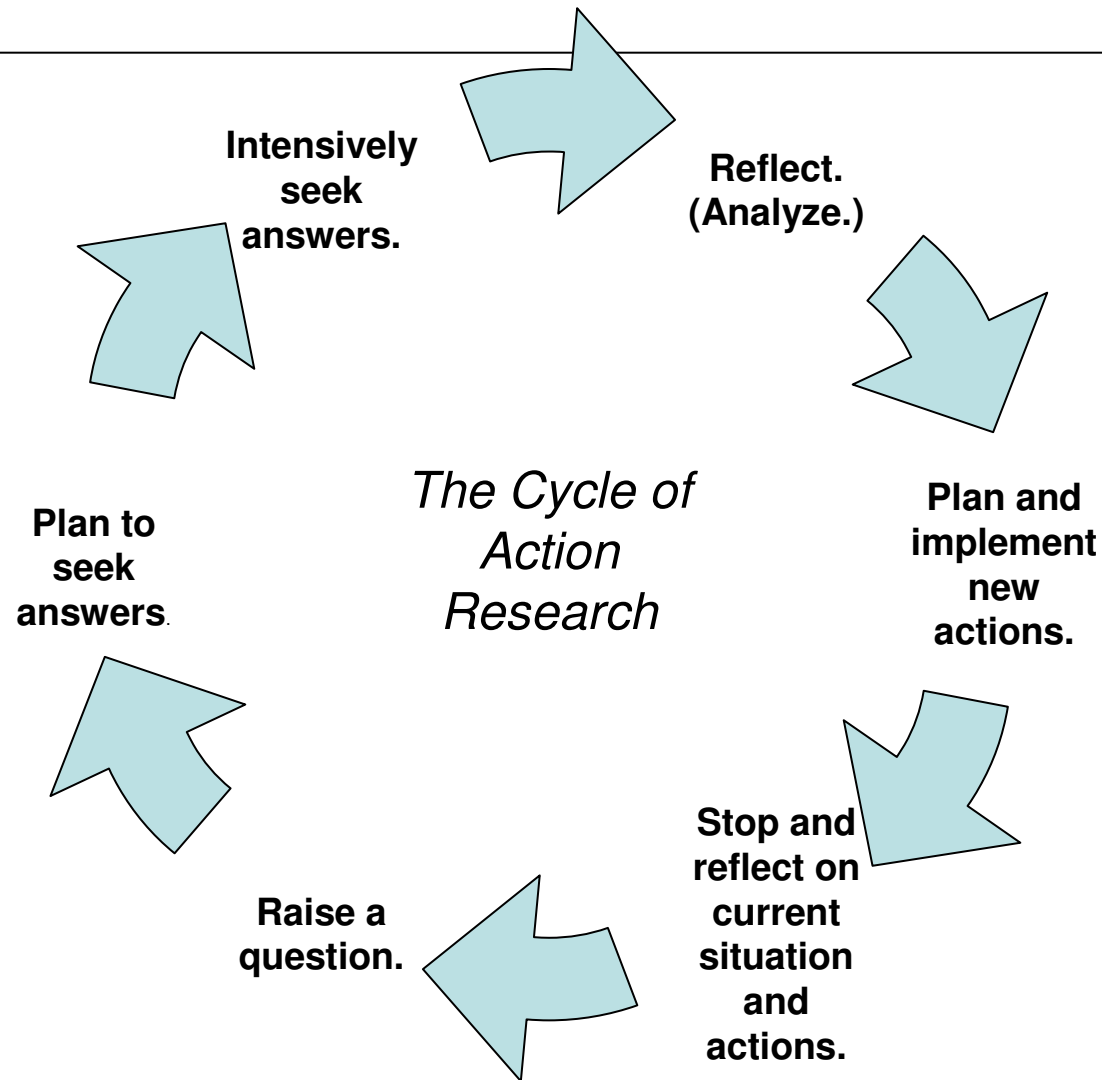
Action Research Model

- 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.

The Cycle of Action Research

Intensively seek answers.

Reflect. (Analyze.)

Plan and implement new actions.

Stop and reflect on current situation and actions.

Raise a question.

Plan to seek answers.

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

Buzz Groups

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

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

REFLECT

PLAN

OBSERVE

ACT
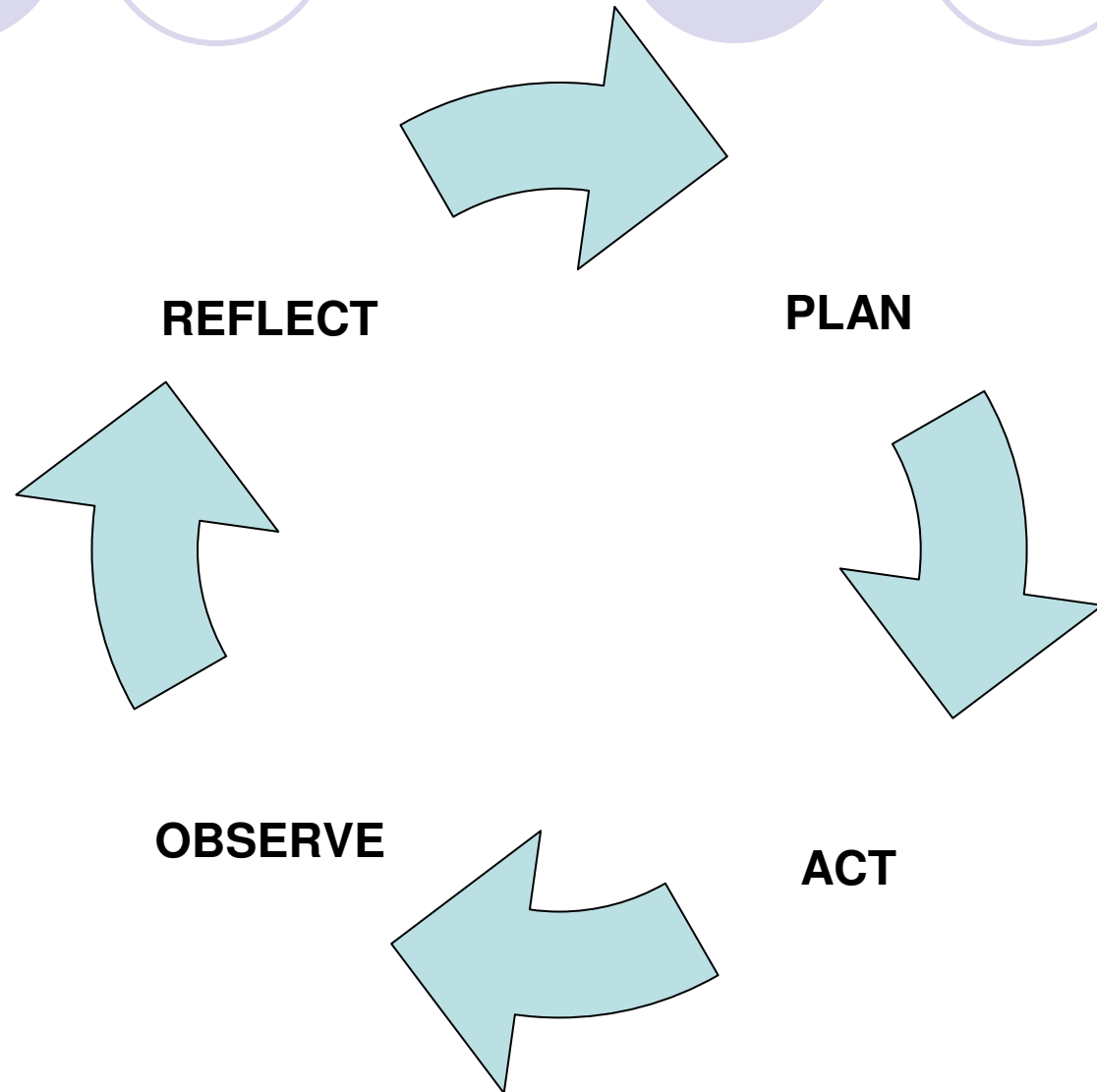
Action Research Moment: Planning

- 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

Buzz Groups

- Turn to the person next to you and talk about aspects in your professional practice that you feel would benefit from a careful action research study. These could be:
  - issues in the field (directly related to your work)
  - questions you have about the effectiveness of your own practice (e.g., training, community mobilization)
- 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.

Participatory Action Research

- Involves all stakeholders in *all steps* of the cycle of action research.

- Not simply consultation; aims to be *active co-research*, by and for those to be helped.

- Tries to be a *democratic non-coercive process*, whereby those 'to be helped' determine the purposes and outcomes of their own research and actions.

Participatory Action Research

- aims to put the process of knowledge generation in the hands of marginalized communities, thus enabling them to improve their lives through systemic transformation (Park, 1993 & Hall, 1981)

- *people-centred*: participation of marginalized people throughout the research process, from identifying research questions, selecting study designs, disseminating findings, to mobilizing for social change (Sohng, 1996)

- *power-conscious*: as community members become more closely involved in the knowledge development process, they move from margins to the centre of the discourse surrounding issues related to themselves, thus beginning to define their own realities (Sohng, 1996)

- *action-oriented*: the quest for social justice is actualized through this research methodology; as research and social action engage in a continuous spiral under PAR, the theoretical aspect of the former and the practicality of the latter become inseparable (Dick, 2002)

Participatory Action Research:
A Case Study

Non-status Immigrants in Toronto

- Experienced barriers to accessing essential city services
- Formed a community group for collective social action
- Lobbied for Don't Ask Don't Tell Policy
- Found they lacked information needed for their social action
- Decided to conduct a research study to gather data on the experiences of undocumented immigrants in accessing social services in the city
- Enlisted help of university-based researchers (pre-existing relationship)
- Members of the community group:
  - drove the complete process
  - determined the research purpose and research questions from the outset,
  - played a major role in the development of data collection materials and procedures,
  - determined how the findings would be used
- Once data collection was underway, the university-based researchers transitioned research ownership to them, with the commitment to provide technical support when needed.
- But…

Challenges of Engaging in Participatory Action Research

- Time
- Resources
- Outcome vs process
- Whose interests are really being served
- Conflicting expectations and needs
- Power, knowledge, and voice

Design your own project…

- Form small groups according to your areas of work.

- Use the handout provided to start developing a proposal for participatory action research project that is relevant and needed in light of:
  - The needs and priorities of the community you are serving
  - The mandate and priorities of your organization
  - Your personal perspectives and values