



SECOND EDITION

# ACTION RESEARCH

for Improving Educational Practice

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE

Valsa Koshy



# Action Research for Improving Educational Practice

*A Step-by-Step Guide*

*Second Edition*

Valsa Keshy



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# About the Author

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Valsa Koshy is a Professor of Education, at Brunel University. She draws on her diverse experience which includes: teaching and supervizing PGCE, Master's and doctoral students and leading teachers' professional development in several education authorities. She has also supervised a large number of externally funded action research projects, as part of the activities of the Research and Development Centre which she directs. Prior to working in higher education, she was a classroom teacher and, subsequently, was a member of the advisory team of the Inner London Education Authority.

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I am indebted to many people and organizations for providing me with the opportunity to support practitioners with their action research. I have learnt a great deal from these experiences and this learning has guided me in writing this book. Although it is impossible for me to list all the people who have influenced me over the years, I would like to express my gratitude to all of them. My special thanks to the following:

- The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) for supporting 14 groups of practitioner researchers, across the country, to research into aspects of a complex and challenging topic – developing the gifts and talents of children aged 5–7. I had the privilege of experiencing the impact of the action research process on their practice and the enhancement of opportunities for these children. This support, provided by funding from the UK government, convinced me of the significant role of practitioner research for improving practice.
- All the practitioners from schools and educational organizations I have guided, over the years, to carry out action research. I have learnt much from my students, at undergraduate and postgraduate levels and, more recently, those who are studying for their Professional Education doctorates (EdD) who have carried out action research as part of their academic work. I have seen, first-hand, the level of enthusiasm, excitement and commitment of these people which has convinced me of the unique opportunities provided by action research for improving educational practice.
- The many children I have observed, who were the ultimate beneficiaries of the action research carried out by the practitioners.
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# Introduction

‘Doing a piece of research on how to enhance the learning opportunities of gifted children has been the most rewarding experience of my working life. I secured a grant from a government agency, which enabled me to use action research to design a lens to get my classroom work into focus – magnifying what was good and gratifying, but also highlighting those aspects in need of redirection and rejuvenation. Before that elevating experience I assumed that all forms of research were the exclusive province of academic researchers in universities. Gaining access to that ivory tower has enabled one practitioner – me – to illuminate sound strategies to enable colleagues to navigate their way through the parts of the maze of gifted education.’

Laura, a classroom teacher

I vividly remember Laura’s excitement when she secured a grant to carry out an action research project on a topic relating to provision for higher ability pupils, which I had the privilege of supervizing. At the time of obtaining the grant there had been very little research carried out on aspects of provision for higher ability pupils in England and Wales. Laura’s interest stemmed from her noticing how bored some children were in her classroom. Comments from an inspection team that the whole school needed to address the issue of more effective provision for very able children confirmed her reason for concern. She carried out the study within ten months, in stages: defining the topic for her research, finding out what was happening in her class and that of a willing colleague, reading around the topic, planning activities which demanded higher cognitive skills, collecting and analysing data, reflecting on her practice, evaluating and disseminating her findings to her colleagues at her school and at the local teachers’ professional development centre. My aim in writing this book is to share some of my experiences, such as supervizing Laura’s action research, and to generate a set of guidelines for practitioners to enable them to undertake action research so as to enhance their own professional practice as well as to provide leadership to their colleagues.

Similar testimonies to that of Laura’s, from practitioners, on the benefits of undertaking action research were reported in the *Times Education Supplement* (2004), appropriately entitled ‘Classroom Discoveries’. In an illuminating article, MacGarvey compares teacher researchers to gardeners nurturing new plants and shares her experience of working with teachers who are enthusiastic about practitioner research, are keen to test out theories about learning styles and motivational strategies, and interested in methods of investigation.



In the past few years, action research has become increasingly popular as a mode of research among practitioners who are constantly faced with the challenges of providing effective teaching strategies, raising achievement, exploring pedagogical issues and addressing the special needs of students. The main role of action research is to facilitate practitioners to study aspects of practice – whether it is in the context of introducing an innovative idea or in assessing and reflecting on the effectiveness of existing practice, with a view to improving practice. This process is often carried out within a researcher's own setting. The importance of professional development for enhancing the quality of practice has long been recognized both within the United Kingdom and abroad. Hargreaves (1996) points out that research-based practice would be more effective and satisfying for practitioners.

Action research is quite often used as the method of enquiry by undergraduate and postgraduate students in higher education who are studying for accredited courses. In recent years, students studying for taught doctorate (EdD) degrees with their focus on practical aspects of education have also been adopting action research as a method of study. This book attempts to meet the needs of all the above groups of people by providing a coherent, accessible, and practical set of guidelines on how to carry out action research. However, it also needs acknowledging here that one book alone cannot provide a complete account of all aspects of research. Readers, therefore, are given a list of some authoritative sources and readings for further support.

The contents of this book draw mainly on my personal experience of fifteen years in guiding researchers in various settings – as Course Leader for Master's programmes, as Director of Academic and Professional Development for practitioners in education and also through my involvement in research training for doctoral students at my university. During this time I have also supervised a number of practising teachers who were carrying out funded action research projects. What I have written is also informed by the many conference presentations on action research at national and international research conferences I have attended as well as the increasing number of published articles based on action research.

As the main purpose of this book is to offer practical guidance to those who intend to carry out action research, I feel it is important to ask three key questions:

- What is action research?
- When would it be appropriate for a practitioner to carry out action research?
- How would one go about carrying out action research?

I have attempted to address all of these questions in this book. To start us down the right track, it would be useful to consider why we may undertake action research. Doing action research facilitates evaluation and reflection in order to implement necessary changes in practice – both for an individual and within an institution. As new initiatives are introduced with greater frequency within education policies all over the world, practitioners can often be left with

conflicting viewpoints, doubts and dilemmas which in turn need exploration, evaluation and reflection. Evaluating one's own practices is an integral part of an applied discipline such as education.

This book addresses the needs of two groups of researchers:

- Those who wish to undertake small-scale research into an aspect of their practice. This may be facilitated by external funding or may be the outcome of a local necessity to evaluate the effectiveness of an innovation or an initiative. Undertaking an action research project would involve looking at issues in depth and gathering and assessing the evidence before implementing new ideas or changing one's practices.
- Students – undergraduate, postgraduate, or those studying for practical doctorate courses – who wish to carry out research as part of accredited courses. Some of the projects within this context could, of course, belong to the first category where a university course may provide added support to the action researcher.

I hope that both the above groups will find the step-by-step guidance provided in this book useful.

My own belief is that carrying out action research is all about developing the act of knowing through observation, listening, analysing, questioning, and being involved in constructing one's own knowledge. The new knowledge and experiences, gained will inform the researcher's future direction and influence action.

This book is written in an interactive style and the reader is invited to join the author in exploring aspects of what is involved in conducting *practitioner research*, as it is sometimes called. The use of examples, case studies and short tasks in the book should make the contents more accessible.

The book is presented in eight chapters. **Chapter 1** explores the concept of action research and considers how it is distinctive from other forms of research. Readers are provided with an overview of how action research has developed over the past decades, its background and the key concepts of action research – planning action, evaluation, refinement, reflection, theory building. References to experts' views and models of action research should assist the new action researcher to plan his or her work as well as help to justify the choice. The possible advantages of using action research as a methodology are discussed here. Detailed examples of action research projects, carried out by practitioners from a variety of contexts and dealing with a range of topics, are also presented. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the theoretical underpinnings of action research in order to support the researcher to articulate his or her positioning in terms of ontological and epistemological assumptions.

Chapters 2 to 6 will address the various stages of action research. **Chapter 2** addresses some of the criticisms raised against action research as a methodology. It explores the views of experts – in terms of its role in the professional development of a researcher – and discusses the structure and processes involved in



conducting action research. The aim of this chapter is to offer practical guidelines to action researchers who are about to take the first step. It offers examples of topics selected by practitioners for action research. Although the stages of action research are not strictly linear, it should help a researcher to think in terms of planning the project in stages – with a built-in flexibility to refine, make adjustments, and change direction within the structure. This feature of flexibility for refinement makes action research an eminently suitable method of enquiry for practitioners. Using examples, the reader is guided in his or her choice of topic for research and is also helped to consider the suitability of using action research in various contexts.

*Chapter 3* focuses on the role of a literature search and writing research reviews within action research. The justification for undertaking research reviews and guidance on how to gather, organize, analyse and make use of what is read are presented. Utilising electronic sources for a literature search is dealt with in this chapter, along with some additional support culled from the evaluation of sources of literature obtained from the Internet.

Having selected a topic and collected the background literature, a researcher would then begin to plan his or her project. *Chapter 4* supports the reader, using practical examples to illustrate how interventions and activities have been planned by other practitioners. In my experience, one of the most challenging aspects of conducting action research arises when making decisions on what kind of data are needed and how to collect these to achieve the aims of the project. The process of action planning is discussed and a practical planning sheet is also provided. Special consideration is given at this point to the all-important aspect of ‘when things go wrong’ as researchers are conducting research. In *Chapter 5*, different types of instrumentation for gathering data are presented. Using practical illustrations, the advantages and disadvantages of using different methods are discussed. The importance of being systematic in the data-gathering process is emphasized. Ethical considerations are also dealt with.

*Chapter 6* focuses on the complex issue of the analysis of data and data display. Action research, by its nature, is unlikely to produce universally generalisable findings – its purpose is to generate principles based on experience. The analysis within action research seeks to identify themes and issues which are relevant and applicable to a particular situation. Guidance is provided on how the data may be analysed and presented, including the use of computer software packages. Examples of practitioners’ accounts of data analysis are provided within the chapter. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the fundamental issues of establishing the trustworthiness of evidence and the validity of both the procedures and the conclusions.

The type of report written by an action researcher will depend on the circumstances of that researcher. Funded research requires a certain format to be followed, whereas a report in the form of a dissertation for an accredited course will need to follow a different and often predetermined format. Examples of producing reports and the processes involved in writing up or disseminating

findings are provided in *Chapter 7* and *Chapter 8* discusses more ways of disseminating the findings. Guidance on how to publish action research in various forms – newsletters, conference presentations and journal articles – is also provided.

There is a reference section in the final part of the book which draws on a range of authors who have contributed to the ongoing dialogue on action research. Further readings and a list of useful websites are included at the end of the chapters where these are appropriate.

What I have attempted to do in this book is to provide a clear set of practical guidelines for undertaking action research. I hope you will find them useful. Working alongside action researchers in various settings has provided me with a great deal of enjoyment and satisfaction over the past years. I hope you will share some of what I have experienced through your reading of this book.

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# What is action research?

This chapter focuses on:

- the nature of action research;
- the development of action research;
- what is involved in action research;
- models and definitions of action research proposed by experts in the field;
- examples of action research carried out by a range of practitioners;
- the theoretical underpinnings of action research.



Research is a form of disciplined enquiry leading to the generation of knowledge. The knowledge that your research generates is derived from a range of approaches. Your approach to research may vary according to the context of your study, your beliefs, the strategies you employ, and the methods you use. The paradigm (a collection of assumptions and beliefs which guide you along the path to conducting research and interpreting findings) you select will be guided by your subject discipline and beliefs. Action research is a specific method of conducting research by professionals and practitioners with the ultimate aim of improving practice. Throughout this book, where it is appropriate, references are made as to how epistemological and ontological views may influence your research and the research methods you use. Further readings are also provided at the end of the chapter for those who wish to delve deeper into these issues.

What is the purpose of conducting action research? In the context of this book, action research supports practitioners to seek ways in which they can provide good quality education by transforming the quality of teaching-related activities, thereby enhancing students' learning. With this purpose in mind the following features of the methodology of action research are worthy of consideration:

- Action research is a method used for improving educational practice. It involves action, evaluation and reflection and, based on gathered evidence, changes in practice are implemented.
- Action research is participative and collaborative; it is undertaken by individuals, with a common purpose.



- It is situation-based.
- It develops reflection based on the interpretations made by participants.
- Knowledge is created through action, and at the point of application.
- Action research can involve problem-solving, if the solution to the problem leads to the improvement of practice.
- In action research findings emerge as action develops, but they are not conclusive or absolute.

The following extract, included by Reason and Bradbury (2001: 1) in the introduction to their *Handbook of Action Research*, is helpful to us in trying to locate action research as a unique paradigm:

For me it is really a quest for life, to understand life and to create what I call living knowledge – knowledge which is valid for the people with whom I work and for myself.

(Marja Liisa Swantz)

So, what is this living knowledge? As the above authors explain, the purpose of action research is to produce practical knowledge that is useful to people in the everyday conduct of their lives and to see that action research is about working towards practical outcomes, and also about

creating new forms of understanding, since action without reflection and understanding is blind, just as theory without action is meaningless. The participatory nature of action research/makes it only possible *with, for* and *by* persons and communities, ideally involving all stakeholders both in the questioning and sense making that informs the research, and in the action which is its focus.

(Reason and Bradbury, 2001: 2)

During my first meetings with teachers and trainee teachers who are about to undertake action research, I share with them a strong belief that I hold. And here it is. I believe that ultimately the quality of educational experiences provided to children will depend on the ability of a teacher to stand back, question and reflect on his or her practice, and continually strive to make the necessary changes. This is true of any practitioner. These processes of reflection and self-evaluation do not happen by accident and I believe that carrying out action research provides practitioners with an opportunity to be engaged in such processes in a meaningful way. With the above statements in mind, I define action research as an enquiry, undertaken with rigour and understanding so as to constantly refine practice; the emerging evidence-based outcomes will then contribute to the researching practitioner's continuing professional development.

In this chapter I will trace the development of action research as a methodology over the past few decades and then consider the different perspectives

and models provided by experts in the field. Different models of action research are explored and an attempt is made to identify the unique features of action research which should make it an attractive mode of research for practitioners. An understanding of different interpretations and viewpoints of action research should be useful to readers whether they are about to start a project or are in the process of doing one. Researchers who are carrying out action research as part of an accredited course are usually expected to demonstrate their understanding of the processes involved. Those who are involved in action research following personal interests, or as part of their institutional change, will also need to gain insights into the processes involved, so that they can engage in action research with greater confidence and understanding. Examples of action research projects undertaken by practitioners in a range of situations are provided. In the final section of this chapter, we examine the philosophies and theoretical underpinnings relating to action research.

## **The development of action research: a brief background**

Whether you are a novice or progressing with an action research project, it would be useful for you to be aware of how action research developed as a method for carrying out research over the past few decades. Zeichner (2001) and Hopkins (2002) provide us with an overview of how action research developed as a research tradition. The work of Kurt Lewin (1946), who researched into social issues, is often described as a major landmark in the development of action research as a methodology. Lewin's work was followed by that of Stephen Corey and others in the USA, who applied this methodology for researching into educational issues.

In Britain, according to Hopkins (2002), the origins of action research can be traced back to the Schools Council's Humanities Curriculum Project (1967–72) with its emphasis on an experimental curriculum and the reconceptualization of curriculum development. Following on this project, Elliot and Adelman (1976) used action research in their Teaching Project when examining classroom practice.

The most well-known proponent of action research in the UK has been Lawrence Stenhouse whose seminal (1975) work, *An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development*, added to the appeal of action research for studying the theory and practice of teaching and the curriculum. For Stenhouse (1983), action research was about emancipation and intellectual, moral and spiritual autonomy. There was also the participatory research movement supported by Stephen Kemmis and Robert McTaggart, as reported by Hopkins (2002), at Deakin University in Australia.

In the past two decades action research has been growing in popularity in the United States where it has often been supported by universities. Zeichner

(2001) points out that most of the action research carried out in the past involved university academics and teachers and represented the rejection of a standards- or objective-based approach to curriculum development, in favour of one that was based on a pedagogy-driven conception of curriculum change as a process dependent on teachers' capacities for reflection. According to this view, Zeichner maintains, the act of curriculum theorizing is not so much the application of classroom theory learned in the university as it is the generation of theory from attempts to change curriculum practice in schools.

In the past decade there has been growing interest in action research as a methodology across the world. Educationists in different roles – teachers, policy makers and administrators – see the potential of action research in producing applied knowledge in a number of applied contexts which can be of practical use. An increasing number of papers based on practitioner research are being presented at international research conferences. There are several websites and practical networks, such as CARN (see the websites mentioned at the end of this chapter) which provide forums for those interested in action research as a methodology, as well as the existence of international journals, such as *Educational Action Research* (once again, see the relevant website at the end of this chapter).

## What is involved in action research?

Research is about generating knowledge. Action research creates knowledge based on enquiries conducted within specific and often practical contexts. As articulated earlier, the purpose of action research is to learn through action leading to personal or professional development. It is participatory in nature which led Kemmis and McTaggart (2000: 595) to describe it as *participatory research*. These authors maintain that action research involves a spiral of self-contained cycles of:

- planning a change;
- acting and observing the process and consequences of the change;
- reflecting on these processes and consequences and then replanning;
- acting and observing;
- reflecting;
- and so on ...

Figure 1.1 illustrates this spiral model of action research proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart, although the authors advise us against using this as a rigid structure. They maintain that in reality the process may not be as neat as the spiral suggests. The stages defined above, they maintain, *overlap*, and initial plans quickly become obsolete in the light of learning from experience. *In reality the process is likely to be more fluid, open and responsive.*