

Action research as a research method

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Abstract

There are various kinds of approaches in carrying out a research. Most of these approaches aim at providing a better comprehension about things we are interested in by producing books to readers. However, it is inadequate that only understand and interpret the world (Levin, 1948, cited in Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p.226). More importantly, as Marx (cited in Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p.226) points out in his *Theses on Feuerbach*, it is necessary to change the world. Action research, which combines “action” and “research” together, is widely adopted in the educational field in order to help people understand as well as make improvement of this world. It is just like what Cohen, Manion and Morrison (p.226) put forward “action research is a powerful tool for change and improvement at the local level”.

This essay will analyze and discuss action research in detail. First of all, it will address the question “what is action research” and this definition about action research will be described from its scope and situation including an analysis of different perspectives provided by different people. Secondly, the main characteristics of action research will be discussed. In this section, I will discuss the advantages as well as disadvantages of action research from different aspects. By doing this, the quality of action research will be discovered. Then, I will analyze the procedure of conducting an action research. Some strategies for data analysis in action research will be put forward in this section and a consideration of ethical implication will be also taken into account. Finally, the main ideas of this article will be concluded plus a view of my own understanding on action research. From this article, it understands that action research methods are extremely important to us in educational area. They can help educators to improve their investigation as well as develop education itself. To Chinese education, action research can be widely used in order to improve its own situation.

Keywords: action research; research method; exploit

The definition of action research

Action research is a widely used approach in educational area. It has an extensive scope when researchers adopt this approach. That is to say people can use this approach in any situation such as teaching methods, learning strategies as well as other educational fields in order to solve

problems people are confronted with. Furthermore, a large range of people from individual teacher to other interested parties can undertake this approach. (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p.226)

However, different people hold different opinions when they think about the meaning of action research. Hopkins and Ebbutt(1985, p.32, cited in Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p.226) suggest that “the combination of action and research renders that action a form of disciplined inquiry, in which a personal attempt is made to understand, improve and reform practice”. This view concludes the purpose of action research very well. There is a commonsense that “action research is designed to bridge the gap between research and practice” (Somekh, 1995, p.340, cited in Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p.227). Stenhouse (1979, cited in Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000) also points out that not only practices but also a theory of education and teaching can benefit a lot from action research.

To sum up these opinions together, “action research is a form of collective self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices are carried out.(Kemmis and Mc Taggart, 1988, p.5). In my opinion, this definition provides a clear description about the meaning of action research. The emphasis of self-reflective and improvement of social and educational practice makes action research distinguish from other research methods. Action research provides a way of working which links theory and practice into the one whole: ideas-in-action (Kemmis and Mc Taggart, 1988, p.6). Action research is not just a simple activity like everyday action. It is a process of “plan, act, observe and reflect through a careful, systematic and rigorous way.”(Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000)

Characteristics of action research

Action research contributes a lot to educational development. In order to make a better comprehension of this approach, it is necessary to think about characteristics of action research in detail. There are many characteristics of action research. Here I would like to discuss some particular aspects of this approach that are different from other approaches. In my opinion there are four main features for action research which are significant in thinking about this approach.

First of all action research is a collaborative activity. “Action research is the way groups of people can organize the conditions under which they can learn from their own experience” (Kemmis and Mc Taggart, 1988, pp.8-9). It is more systematic and collaborative. It is said “the approach is only action research when it is collaborative” (Kemmis and Mc Taggart, 1988, p.5). Hill and Kerber also emphasis this opinion by saying that action research is a co-operative, collaborative activity. (Cited in Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). “Collaboration, in enquiry and critical reflection, through the creative and emancipatory model of action research, offers considerable possibilities for improving the quality of education for our pupils” (Lomax, 1989, p.28). For those people who support this opinion, they insist on the view that action research can only be achieved by group activity. “To lapse into individualism is to destroy the critical dynamic of the group.” (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p.226) However, in my opinion, although group work is very important in action research, the contribution of individual cannot be neglect.

Group work comes from the action of individual group members. It is too limited to say that action research is just group activity not individualistic. It is possible for action research to be an individualistic as well. (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p.230). This point of view can be also testified by Whitehead (1985, cited in Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000) as he argues that an individual teacher can also ask questions such as how to solve the problems. I agree with his opinion because I think an individual can also complete an action research.

Secondly, action research aims at solving the problems of people's own work not the work of the others. In my opinion, this is representative feature of action research. Kemmis and Mc Taggart (1988, p.22) points out that action research is not done on other people. It is "research by particular people on their own work, to help them improve what they do, including how they work with and for others." That is to say, action research can make change and improvement of peoples' own life. I think this point is worthwhile as it makes action research as a participatory activity that encourages researchers to change their own work. This is good for the researchers as they can be more actively in the whole process of the action research and well participate in the activity than just as a researcher of other peoples' work.

Thirdly, action research is a spiral process. That is to say action research complies with a process of loop that includes: planning, acting, observing and reflecting. (Kemmis and Mc Taggart, 1988, p.22). This view is also put forward by Sanford (1970, p.4, cited in Mc Taggart, 1991, p.7) as he shows process of action research which is similar to Kemmis and Mc Taggart's "spiral process" view. It develops through the self-reflective spiral. This spiral process makes action research much better because in the process of this circulation the issues will be improved constantly and finally the purpose of the problem will be solved.

Finally, action research creates its self-critical communities. (Kemmis and Mc Taggart, 1988, p.5). I think this is good for people to know their own situation. "It aims to build communities of people committed to enlightening themselves about the relationship between circumstance, action and consequence in their own situation, and emancipating themselves from the institutional and personal constraints which limit their power to live their own legitimate educational and social values" (Kemmis and Mc Taggart, 1988, p.23). From my point of view to create a self-critical community can lead people aware their situation and accomplish works more effectively.

In spite of the features analyzing above, there are also some other characteristics for action research such as its contribution to a science of education and its improvement to the quality of human actions (Kemmis and Mc Taggart, 1988). These features as well as the other features analyzing above are significant for people to better understand action research. Action research contributes a lot to teachers. "It lays claim to the professional development of teachers", (Kemmis and Mc Taggart, 1988). Action research is the most effective research for improving staff development (Lomax, 1990, p.10).

The characteristic analyzing above can be seen as the strengths of action research. However, there is also some weakness for action research. For one thing, since action research allow

researchers to make assumptions during the whole spiral process of the research, it is possible to lead the researchers “lose the essential evaluative cutting edge of this approach” (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor and Tindall, 1994, p.118). For another, as action always takes place accompanied by research, sometimes it cannot predict the results of the action. Sapsford and Abbott (1992, p.103, cited in Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor and Tindall, 1994, p.118) realize this weakness by saying that “you can never be completely sure exactly what action produced what results.”

Nevertheless, as a widely use approach in educational field, action research has its own value. It is a qualitative approach that contributes a lot to the improvement and development of this world.

Procedures for action research

There are many ways to analyze the steps of action research. Since action research is “a blend of practical and theoretical concerns, it is action and research” (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p.237). It is necessary to think about this “action and research” process. Although there are many ways to analyze the procedures of action research, I choose Lewin’s four-stage opinion on action research as my target of discussion. Levin puts forward a four-stage procedure for action research: planning, acting, observing and reflecting (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p.234). To follow by Lewin’s four-stage opinion, I will analyze the procedures for action research.

The planning phase of the action research cycle is the phase in which “you orient yourself, with your collaborators for action” (Kemmis and Mc Taggart, 1988). That is to say, when researchers begin to do a research, they have to think about what the target for improvement is and what kind of conditions they are going to face. In this stage, one must take a lot of things into account. To begin an action research, researchers have to think about the problems they are confronted with. (Kemmis and Mc Taggart, 1988). For example, they have to decide what they will do in order to improve education in their setting. That is to say, planning of an action research must be forward looking (Kemmis and Mc Taggart, 1988, p.11) Follow by this instruction; we can begin our action research properly.

The next stage is action. It is “accompanied by ongoing fact-finding to monitor and evaluate the intervention, i. e. to act as a formative evaluation” (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p.234) Action is guided by planning. In this stage, researcher may confront with some difficulties because sometimes there are some circumstances that our plan cannot envisage. That is to say, thing may change before we are properly underway. At this time, we have to modify the plan as soon as possible. (Kemmis and Mc Taggart, 1988) In my opinion, this stage is very important as it is a practical stage of the action research. Futhermore, as Banister, Burman,., Parker, Taylor, and Tindall (1994) points out action research is a “multimethod research”, in this stage the plans will bring into effect and the participants of the research can adopt a lot of instruments in order to collect data. Questionnaires, diaries, experimental design, interviews, case studies and rating scales, all of these instruments can be used in the action research. (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p.237). Thus action research is a widely used method includes a large scale of techniques.

The third stage is observing stage. Since sometimes action will be limited by constraints of reality, it is necessary to have an observation. The researchers in action research have to observe the

process of action, its influence, the situation that constrains on action as well as some other issues arising in the process of action research (Kemmis and Mc Taggart, 1988). I think observing stage is necessary because it also provide a base for reflection.

The last stage is reflection. In fact, reflection can be occurred in every stage of action research (Hall1996, p.29). “Reflection has an evaluative aspect-it asks action researchers to weigh their experience-to judge whether effects were desirable, and suggest ways of proceeding” (Kemmis and Mc Taggart, 1988, p.13). Cohen, Manion and Morrison, (2000, p239) pointed out that “reflexivity is an integral element and epistemological basis of action research.” Through such a spiral process, action research continues to development and it purpose for change or make improvement of the world can be undertake successfully.

There are two kinds of techniques when applying action research. One is Norminal Group Technique (Morrison, 1993, cited in Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p.237). it is a process that a group member puts forward question with a four-stage discussion. It is very useful in gathering data from individuals and putting them into some order which is shared by the group. (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p.238). Another one is Delphi technique. It is a written partner to the Nominal Group Technique. The advantage of this technique is that it does not require participants to meet together as a whole group. In doing so it “engages the issues of confidentiality, anonymity and disclosure of relevant information whilst protecting participants”. However, it also has disadvantages such as the leader has much more work to do in collecting and synthesizing data (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p.238).As participatory techniques both the Norminal Group Technique and Delphi techniques are valuable for data collection and analysis in action research (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p238).

When people apply action research, it is necessary to take ethical issues into account as well. “The ethical guidelines for research have to be stringently applied in action research. There has to be respect for the whole life of the person, not just as a research subject” (Banister., Burman, Parker, Taylor and Tindall, 1994, p.112). I agree with this opinion because in the executive process of action research researchers have to work collaboratively in order to make improvement of existing problem. Thus it is quite necessary to take this issue into account. As a high school teacher, I think action research can be widely used in school. For example, research activity between teachers in order to improve their teaching quality can be seen as an effective practice of action research.

Conclusion

As a widely used approach in educational area, action research is very important for people who want to make improvement about their problems. It is also designed to improve the quality of human relationships (Lomax, 1991). It is necessary for people to have a comprehension on the definition of action research as well as its characteristics. The four main stages: planning, acting, observing and reflecting must be taken into account carefully in thinking about research method. As far as it is concerned, it is quite necessary to choose an appropriate method in order to complete a research effectively in educational area. At the same time, many former researchers have emphasized the importance of ethical issues in the research processes. Ethical issues are

very significant for the research processes. Joseph, M., Barbara, S., & Roger, G. (2015) stated, "Ethical issues may stem from the kinds of problems investigated by researchers and the methods they use to obtain valid and reliable data" (p.461-462). All action research involves people, hence must involve some ethical issues (Erickson, C., Jennifer, A., 2014). It needs to be considered in the further research.

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