

Unit 9: Action Research

INTRODUCTION

One of your roles as an inspector is to bring about change and improvement in the education system, or to support those who are doing so.

During the course of your duty, you will encounter problems which may include:

- problems relating to teaching and learning
- curriculum development and implementation
- school management
- staff or professional improvement

In order to respond to these and many other problems, you, and those you work with, will need certain techniques of investigation. Action research is one of these techniques.

In this unit you will be introduced to the principles and skills of action research. Case study material from examples of real action research projects is used throughout the unit to illustrate potential progress and pitfalls.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- define the term action research
- give reasons why action research is useful
- identify methods used in data collection
- describe how data is collected
- describe how data is analysed
- explain how data is interpreted
- write a research report
- make necessary recommendations based on findings
- take appropriate action

DEFINITION OF ACTION RESEARCH

Different people have come up with different definitions on the subject of action research. Cohen and Manion in J. Bell (1993) describe it as:

“essentially an on-the-spot procedure designed to deal with a concrete problem, located in an immediate situation.”

Bogdan and Bicklen (1993) define it as:

“The systematic collection of information designed to bring about social change.”

Activity 9a

Study the different definitions of action research and come up with your own definition which is applicable to your job as an inspector or change agent.

COMMENT

We hope that your definition included the following:

- Action research can be defined as applied research aimed at solving particular problems.
- Action research is usually small scale and confined to one classroom, one school or a cluster of schools.
- Action research is ongoing and on the job.

The main features of action research are that:

- Participants research in their own institutions i.e. practitioner based.
- It leads to change or action.
- There is collaboration between researchers and researched.
- Action researchers are concerned with the improvement of a situation, through active intervention and collaboration with the parties involved.
- It focuses on the examination of a single situation using knowledge drawn from experience and research findings, to illuminate and improve that situation.

THE PURPOSE OF ACTION RESEARCH

The following are some of the reasons for doing action research:

- To identify problems related to teaching and learning.
- To remedy problems identified in a specific situation such as classroom, school, cluster of schools or in a community.
- To bring about improvement in a given situation e.g. improving pupil performance, teacher performance, school administration, school and community relationship.
- To bring about a change in policy.

Case Study

Following a full school inspection of a secondary school the headteacher and staff received a report which was positive about many aspects of the school. However, the criticism of some weaknesses in teaching methodology in some departments brought home to the headteacher that he did not know sufficiently well what was going on in the classrooms. He had been so busy with administrative tasks that he had neglected his managerial responsibility with regard to the quality of teaching. In his view this was a vital aspect of pupil achievement and he decided to engage in an action research project in classroom observation to remedy the situation. Working in collaboration with his inspector he planned an action research programme.

Activity 9b

Write down three reasons why you would embark on action research if you were the headteacher of this school.

COMMENT

There will be situations where you will need to investigate problems affecting teaching and learning in schools.

In such situations, action research will help you solve the problems based on research findings.

STAGES OF ACTION RESEARCH

Action Research can be carried out by following the stages outlined below:

Stage 1: Problem Identification Or Situational Analysis

In this stage you will need to clearly define the problem you wish to investigate.

Look back to the first reference to the case study. Is the problem clearly defined?

Stage 2: Planning To Investigate

This is where you:

- draw up a short list of topics
- select one topic for investigation
- list the aims and objectives or questions to be investigated (formulating a hypothesis)
- read about the topic (literature review) and talk to other people about it
- decide on the methods and the sample to be used
- Some of the methods are:
 - observations
 - questionnaires
 - surveys
 - case studies
 - interviews

If you are using questionnaires, you may wish to trial-test them. This is to perfect the instrument. This will ensure that the information which is being gathered is addressing the aim of the study. Refine the instrument after trialling.

When deciding on the sample size, please remember to keep it small.

- draw an outline of the research project.

Case Study

The headteacher called a meeting with his two deputies and the inspector. They wanted to ensure that learners would achieve their full potential through quality teaching across the school. The method they selected was classroom observation followed by regular meetings to exchange their findings, and followed possibly by interviews later on. The headteacher and deputies decided to focus, in the first instance, on the mathematics, English and Science departments.

Activity 9c

What do you think was the basis for focusing on Mathematics, English and science first? Why did the headteacher involve the deputies?

Stage 3: Carrying Out The Investigation

This stage involves the collection of data through the methods outlined above.

When collecting data, it is important to keep accurate notes and records of the information which is being gathered. This applies to the literature review as well.

Case Study

By the time of the next meeting of the headteacher and deputies, they had done eight classroom observations between them. They had run into some difficulties. The heads of department were somewhat suspicious about the observations. The teachers were nervous (but also admitted that the pupils behaved better when senior staff were present). The main problem was that the senior management team could not compare data because they had all used different check-lists to do their observations.

Activity 9d

If you were the inspector of this school what advice would you give to the senior management team?

COMMENT

The senior management team have fallen into two classic difficulties. They did not communicate sufficiently what they were doing and they did not have an agreed common instrument for data collection.

Stage 4: Reflecting On Data/Evidence

Raw data (taken from questionnaires, interviews and other methods that you have used), should be recorded, analysed and interpreted. As you analyse data, you will be constantly looking for:

- similarities and differences,
- groupings and patterns, and
- relationships.

You will present your information in a manner that is easy to interpret. In order to do this, the information may be regrouped, sequenced, tabulated and arranged in graphs, charts or diagrams. It may be useful to present figures in the form of percentages and averages.

From the analysis of the data, conclusions and recommendations will be drawn.

Case Study

After ten weeks the senior management team had observed *all* teachers in the mathematics, english and science department. They were able to analyse their findings and identify only *two* teachers who needed professional support and development. Instead of writing a final report at this stage they decided to take a number of interim measures:

- involve HOD's in the next stage of observations
- support the two "failing" teachers starting with interviews with the headteacher
- circulate a short report explaining to all teachers, that the action research programme was to be extended.

Activity 9e

What has been the value of the action research so far? What problems might the headteacher face in the extension of the programme?

Stage 5: Report Writing

In writing the research report, you will compile the information collected during the various stages of the research i.e. putting together all the information gathered. A research report should include:

- topic
- objectives/research questions
- literature review
- methodology
- research findings
- interpretation of findings
- conclusion and recommendations.

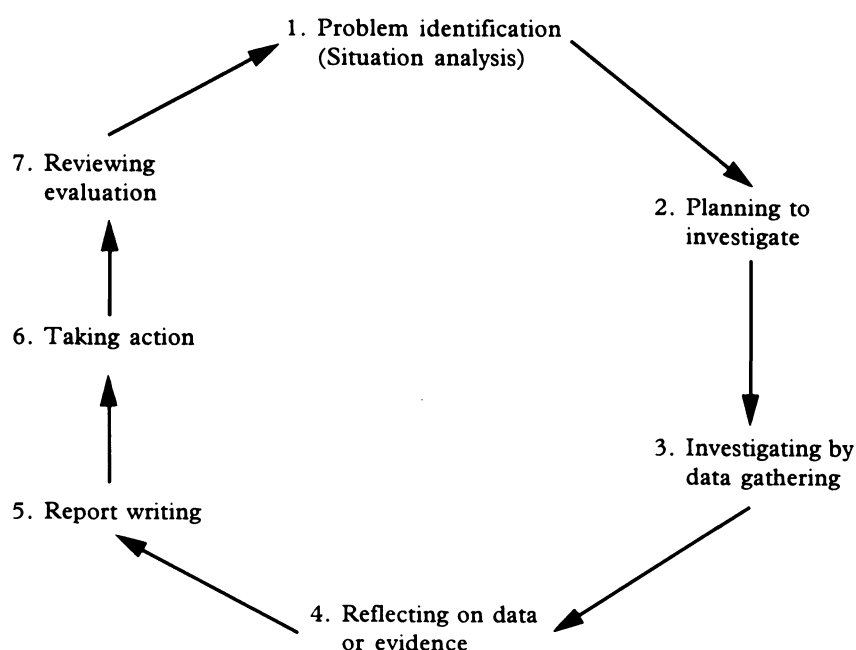
Stage 6: Taking Action

The recommendations from the research findings are translated into action (implementation).

Stage 7: Evaluating And Reviewing

Action research aims to facilitate the continuous improvement of educational practice. It is, therefore, important to evaluate the results of the action taken. Therefore, the task does not end when the research is conducted. You, as the researcher, should continue to review, evaluate and improve practice.

The above stages of action research are summarised in the diagram shown below:



Case Study

The report that the headteacher and senior staff wrote was based on observation across all departments. The recommendations included regular classroom observation by HOD's and some in-school staff training on effective teaching strategies. It is fair to say that the whole school is now more aware of the issues and more focused on the important task of raising pupil achievement.

Activity 9f

At Nyumba Co-educational School, the results indicate that boys perform better than girls in science subjects. Using the information given in the stages of action research:

- (a) identify the research topic/problem.
- (b) plan how you would conduct the research on the topic.

COMMENT

Your investigation in the above case will certainly need the use of action research skills that will help you prepare a good research report and recommendations.

Your plan should include, for example, possible causes of and solutions to the problem. You should also plan for action and follow-up activities.

SUMMARY

In this unit you have learnt what action research is, its purpose and the procedure for conducting it. It is expected that the unit has helped you to develop the basic skills of conducting action research. Some of the skills are:

- problem identification
- planning
- data collection
- data analysis
- interpreting data
- drawing conclusions and recommendations from the research findings
- taking action
- evaluating the course of action
- reviewing

You should remember that action research is aimed at reviewing, evaluating and improving educational practice.

REFERENCES

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- Bogdan, R.C. and Bicklen, S.K. (1982) *Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theory and Methods*, Allyn & Bacon, Boston, MA
- National Extension College (1982) *Techniques of Investigation*, National Extension College Trust Ltd