



A Review of Action Research Component in the Pre-Service Teacher Education for Elementary School in Malaysia

Malezya'da İlköğretim Okulu Hizmet Öncesi Öğretmen Eğitiminde Eylem Araştırma Bileşeni Üzerine Bir Gözden Geçirme

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Abstract. This paper attempts to outline the needs for action research component for the elementary pre-service TESL teachers in the institute of teacher education in Malaysia. The action research component used to be the compulsory final assessment for the pre-service teachers. However, the curriculum revamp in 2015 provided the pre-service teachers with the options of doing action or conventional research. It is a worrying development as the potential for most students to opt for conventional research over action research is great due to the perceived difficulty of the later. This will reduce the role of the teacher in research as a mere observer rather than an active agent of change. This paper would present a case for action research by providing the background information on the development of action research in Malaysia and also the issue of teacher quality. The case is further supported by a discussion on the concept of action research and also the significance of action research in the context of teacher professional development.

Keywords: Action research, pre-service, teacher education, Malaysia, elementary school

Öz. Bu çalışma, Malezya'daki öğretmen eğitimi enstitüsündeki temel hizmet öncesi TESL öğretmenleri için eylem araştırması bileşeninin gerekliliklerini ortaya koymaya çalışmaktadır. Eylem araştırması bileşeni, öğretmen adayları için zorunlu nihai değerlendirme olarak kullanılmıştır. Ancak, 2015'teki müfredat yenilemesi, öğretmen adaylarına eylem ya da konvansiyonel araştırma yapma seçenekleri sunmuştur. Çoğu öğrencinin aksiyon araştırması konusundaki konvansiyonel araştırmayı tercih etme potansiyeli, ilerleyen dönemlerde algılanan zorluk nedeniyle büyük bir endişe kaynağıdır. Bu, öğretmenin araştırmadaki rolünü, aktif bir değişim aktörü olmaktan ziyade salt bir gözlemci olarak azaltacaktır. Bu makalede, Malezya'da eylem araştırmasının geliştirilmesi ve öğretmen kalitesi konusu hakkında temel bilgiler sağlayarak eylem araştırması için bir örnek sunulacaktır. Dava, eylem araştırması kavramı ve eylem araştırmasının mesleki gelişim bağlamında öneminin tartışılmasıyla daha da desteklenmiştir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Eylem araştırması, ön hizmet, öğretmen eğitimi, Malezya, ilkokul

INTRODUCTION

Since the inception of the bachelor of education programme in the Institute of Teacher Education (ITE) in January 2007 (Institut Pendidikan Guru Malaysia, 2015), Malaysian Quality Assurance (MQA) has started monitoring all the ITEs for accreditation purposes. The MQA has subscribed to the implementation of outcome-based curriculum model in the formation of higher education curriculum. Within the context of outcome-based education, lecturers need to vary their teaching approaches. As a consequence, linear lecturing method alone is considered outdated and inadequate. As pointed out by Meerah & Osman (2013), 'students need to be actively involved in the teaching and learning activities in a much more stimulating learning environment' (p.149). The ITE advocated the implementation of action research as a compulsory research component in its bachelor of education programme. Through professional development courses, lecturers and students are exposed to action research methodology and they are encouraged to be actively involved in action research to develop their knowledge and skills.

Action research is a systematic activity that can be used by educators to improve their practices (Othman & Yee, 2014). It is significant in Malaysian teacher education programme and would be crucial for the trainee teachers' construction of teacher's knowledge. However, the recent curriculum change in teacher education could have been a step in the wrong direction. Action research is no longer the compulsory research component as the pre-service teachers have been given the leeway to not choose action research for their final assessment. This article will demonstrate why action research is an indispensable component in the Malaysian teacher education programme and will highlight how action research helps the pre-service teachers grow professionally.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ACTION RESEARCH IN MALAYSIA

In Malaysia, action research has gained momentum in schools, teacher training colleges and universities since it was introduced in 1989 by the Educational Planning and Research Division (EPRD). In the early 1990s, the concept became widespread and action research became part of teacher education for pre-service and in-service programmes (Ahmad, 2002). An effort to foster action research as a research culture was initiated by the EPRD through a programme called 'Programme for Innovation Excellence and Research' or PIER from 1993-1996 funded by the World Bank Loan. Through this programme, in-service courses on action research were held for the teachers to raise their awareness and the teachers were given the opportunity to apply funds to conduct action research in their respective school.

When PIER ended in 1996, the EPRD continued to make the effort to promote action research through various financial aids provided by the Committee of Action Research Co-ordination, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry Science, Technology and Environment. This initiative remains until the present day through workshops, seminars and short courses organised by the Ministry of Education, State Education Departments and the District Education Departments (Meerah & Osman, 2013). Through this initiative many teachers have gained the knowledge and skills required to conduct action research. In the last 10 years, action research on various aspects of education has been conducted by teachers in schools through collaboration with the State Education Departments. In 1999 the EPRD carried out a significant study involving 1564 teachers to gauge the level of research activity in schools and to assess the extent of the positive gained on the teaching and learning through the implementation of action research. The findings reveal that research activity among teachers had increased and the administrators had collaboratively worked with teachers to facilitate action research. More importantly the research indicates that action research benefited teachers and administrators and thus improving the teaching and learning and also the management of the schools.

TEACHER QUALITY

A report by the World Bank in 2013 on Malaysia reiterated that our teacher education system is not on pace with the nation's needs and situations. It should do more to fulfil the

demands of learning and expectations set by various educational stakeholders (Goh & Blake, 2015). The report questions the capability of Malaysian teacher education system to prepare student teachers for the demands and challenges of the global education landscape signified by the term 21st century learning. One of the main obstacles identified by the report is the disparity that exists between trainee teachers' knowledge and their ability to transform the knowledge into effective and useful instructions in the classroom. Darling-Hammond (2010) argues that teacher education should provide the required certification at the end of a training programme. However, if the curriculum lacks the platform for preservice teachers to develop their knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to fulfil the requirements of the classrooms, then the teacher education programme would be considered ineffective. Malaysian Education Master Plan (2013-2015) strives to solve this issue through curriculum changes that include the empowerment of reflective practice, such as teaching practice and action research.

Contemporary studies on the connection between teaching and learning have pointed to one overarching factor that is teacher quality (Nilsen, Trude; Gustafsson, 2016). Evidence from several studies has shown that lower achieving students are most likely instructed by the less capable teachers and the better ones by the more capable ones (Nilsen, Trude; Gustafsson, 2016). The obvious implication from these findings is that seemingly much can be done to the quality of education through the improvement of the quality of teachers. It has to be acknowledged that there are other factors, such as students' attitude, aptitude or motivation that come into play (Stronge, Ward, Tucker, & Hindman, 2007). However, the domain of teacher quality is very much up teacher education alley. It is a factor that can be well influenced through effective teacher education be it through well-designed pre-service courses for trainee teachers or in-service courses for the already practicing teachers.

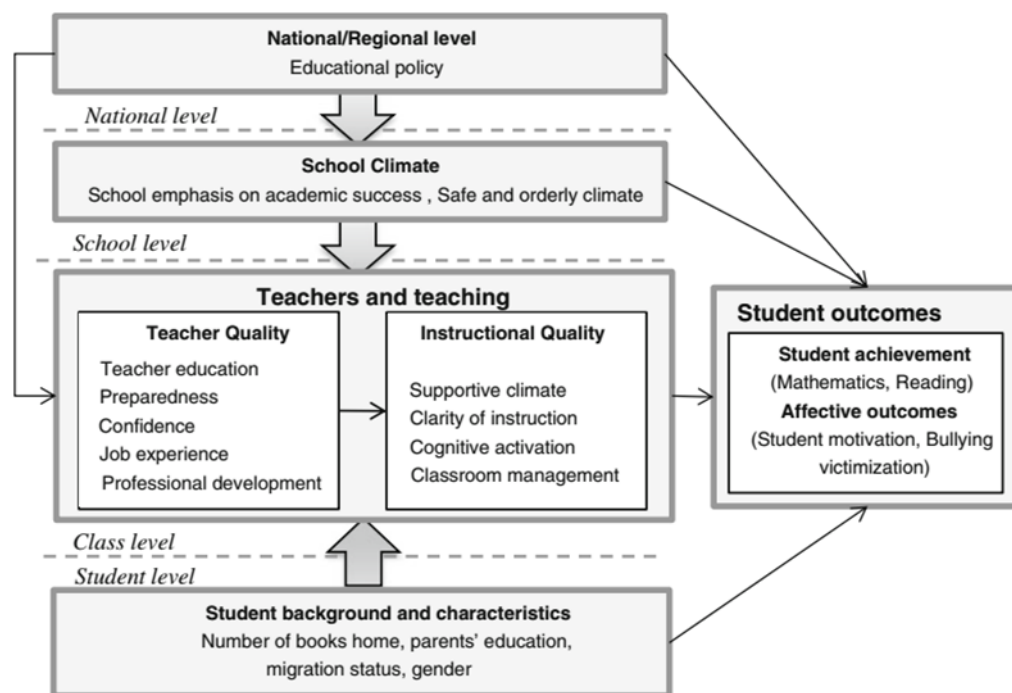


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Determinants of Students' Outcomes.
(Source: Nilsen, Trude & Gustafsson, 2016)

The conceptual framework presented by Nilsen et al. (2016) situates teacher quality as central in determining students' success. Teacher and the teaching variables are conceptualised as being very influential. Teacher quality would bring about instructional quality which in turn would impact students' achievement. The framework also highlights the interactions between

national policies, school, classroom, and student level. It shows how the national policies may directly or indirectly influence the proceeding factors. The difference between education systems in terms of cultural contexts, educational values and educational policies would spur variations between countries. There will be significant differences and similarities in the lower level factors of school, classroom and students between countries depending on the existing contexts.

THE CONCEPT OF ACTION RESEARCH

According to Meerah and Osman (2013, p.149), action research involves ‘the desire to learn what the researchers need to know, to improve performance; it is only the focus that is different’. It is a way of dealing with an issue within the researcher’s practice to be able to come up with a design of an effective strategy. More often than not, action research would help the researcher to understand the social context being studied. Action research is considered an empowering strategy where the process the researcher goes through and the adequacy of the action in overcoming an issue will establish a sense of ownership and authority (Meerah & Osman, 2013). In an innovation-based action research, a researcher is expected to design the innovation, conduct the research and subsequently contribute to the field of knowledge. The researcher is in the position to identify a problem and conduct a research to inform the practice. Students’ feedback on an innovation that they utilised is very important to inform the researcher of the strengths and weaknesses of the innovation and to further improve.

Burns (2010) asserts that action research is related to ideas of ‘reflective practice’ and ‘teacher as researcher’. Action research involves the use of self-reflective, critical and systematic approach to explore our teaching context further. Being critical in this sense does not in any way mean taking a negative, derogatory view of our practice. It does not mean seeing our teaching as problematic or ineffective. It leans towards an inquisitive stance where teacher is questioning and identifying an area that could be improved on to develop new ideas and alternatives. In action research a teacher functions as an investigator of his or her teaching context whilst acting as an active participant in it.

One of the main objectives of action research is to identify an issue that the participants, who may include teachers, students, administrators or if necessary the parents, deem worthy of investigation (Burns, 2010). In their practice teachers usually see gaps between what is actually happening in their teaching situation and what they ideally prefer to be happening. The main idea in action research is to solve the problematic issue purposefully in order to trigger changes and improvements in practice. More significantly, changes or improvements in action research are based on insights or information that has been systematically collected. Therefore, any improvements made to the practice are foregrounded in solid and sound judgements rather than assumptions or hunches that most teachers based their teaching on.

ACTION RESEARCH FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

According to Goodson (2001 p. 185) ‘reflection is at heart of what it means to be professional and teacher education, supervision and development should be constructed in ways that make such explicit reflection more feasible and more thorough’. Professional development is enhancing teachers’ understanding of the processes of teaching and learning, and facilitating their understanding of the students whom they teach (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Edwards (2010) defines professional development as a systematic maintenance, improvement and broadening of knowledge and skill, and the development of personal qualities necessary for the execution of professional and technical duties. Based on the three definitions given, it can be concluded that professional development for teachers centres on enhancing their understanding of teaching and learning and understanding of the students, developing their personal qualities and their reflective thinking.

It has to be highlighted here that many studies in the field of education are done by those who are not in the field (Vanderlinde & van Braak, 2010). Teachers are always exposed to quantitative research findings that are statistically complex shared by academicians through professional development courses or journals. Unfortunately, these teachers are not able to relate to these complex statistical analyses. This is the reason why many teachers believe that

educational research done by outsiders is not relevant to their practice (Johnson, 2012). This clash of interest has created a significant gap between the practitioners and education researchers. The obvious way to solve this is by empowering the practitioners to carry out their own inquiry through action research.

Action research has emerged as a tool for professional development especially in educational setting (Grundy, 1995). It is often described as a self-reflective form of inquiry carried out by practitioners in social or educational contexts to understand or enhance their practices (Carr & Kemmis, 1983). To accomplish professional development, it is significant that through action research process, practitioners discover more about their teaching skills and classroom practices. It should enable them to take on the role of researcher and to gain information to inform their practice instead of relying on outsiders who are alien to the teaching and learning environment.

Through action research teachers can enhance their understanding and their efficacy in pedagogy, an area that is crucial in ensuring the improvement of the education system. The findings from action research can easily be integrated into practice and through sharing, other teachers can benefit from them as well (Burns, 2010; McNiff & Whitehead, 2011; Kemmis et al., 2014; Lee & Day, 2016). Research done by teachers can enhance the quality of learning and help teachers to develop educational theories and the basis of pedagogy. The collection of data and documentation in action research would enable teachers to deeply understand the students' growth and to take the necessary steps to further nurture that growth. For trainee teachers, the sharing of information among them through article writing and seminar presentation would tremendously raise their level of awareness which can help them to quickly adapt to different contexts when they are posted.

The solving of a teaching and learning issue or problem in the classroom through the lenses of action research would provide a realistic portrayal of what is happening in the classroom (Somekh, 2006). Often educational research ignores the real issues in the classroom and the descriptive nature of a conventional educational research would only provide on the surface information of the issues being researched on. Action research offers an immediate, well thought and customized solution and provides profound information of the issue and the effects of the solution (Townsend, 2014). The realistic portrayal of the real issues would provide valuable information for administrators and policy makers for them to make informed decisions about policy or curriculum. Decisions made without realistic insights would often bring negative effects and cause unnecessary drainage of manpower and other resources.

Action research is usually done collaboratively with fellow practitioners so that the experience and findings can be mutually shared. The discussion and negotiation among researchers bring about professional development and educational changes. When teachers work collaboratively they are actually creating the culture of networking and sharing that is inherently richer and more dynamic compared to individual mode (Kemmis et al., 2014). The support mechanism is naturally built into the research and a researcher can seek immediate help from his or her fellow researcher if there is any doubt or query. This sort of support is much needed because revising an established practice by questioning the existing belief system is like taking a leap of faith. The assurance is given through the sharing of ideas and opinions by the significant others towards the goal of improving classroom practice.

In teacher education action specifically, research has been adopted as a means to assist trainee teachers to take an inquiry stance (McQuillan, Welch, & Barnatt, 2012). It completes the teaching practice component and provides answers to the issues raised and the overriding questions asked in the trainee teacher's reflective accounts. More often than not, during teaching practice these queries are left unanswered because the answers required a systematic inquiry that calls for time and resources. In the ITEs in Malaysia, during the earlier phases of teaching practice that do not involve action research, the trainee teachers would reconcile this by making hypothetical statements about how they would solve a particular significant issue. This is the reason why many trainee teachers choose an issue that has been prevalent since the first teaching

practice for their action research during the final year. Evidently, action research is considered an embedded form of professional development for pre-service teachers (Ado, 2013).

Johnson (2012) asserts that action research allows teachers to bridge the gap between theory and practice and this is especially important for trainee teachers. Most of the academic papers in teacher education programmes are theoretical components that equip the pre-service teachers with the content knowledge for their respective field. In the field of language for example trainee teachers will usually be learning grammar, literature, linguistics, phonetics and phonology, teaching methodology and classroom management. How do they effectively bring all the theories they have learned to practice? Indeed, there are practical elements within the assignments and microteachings that help them to do so. However, the impact is not as powerful as action research because only with action research they have to face the real classroom and the real problem and rise above the challenge and thus developed what is referred to as pedagogical content knowledge. Preparing the trainee teachers to investigate their practice should start during teacher training so that they will have the necessary skills when they are posted to schools (Darling-Hammond & Friedlaender, 2008).

CONCLUSION

Action research during the trainee teachers' final year fosters reflective practice that allows for systematic questioning of the teachers' own practice where they identify a learning issue to improve on or a question to explore. This establishes the link between curriculum and practice in the teacher education programme and this is evident in the trainee teachers' action research report. It is evident from the benefits that it offers, action research should continue to be developed and used in schools and teacher training programmes. Trainee teachers who carry out action research cited an elevated level of enthusiasm and self-confidence (Pelton, 2010). They feel the sense of empowerment because their role in school is not just limited to being a trainee teacher. By conducting action research and actively involved in making positive changes in the classroom, they are developing teacher identity in themselves and nurturing the sense of belonging to the school community which would effortlessly facilitate integration when they are posted to schools. One of the major problems faced by novice teachers would be their ability to adapt to an actual teaching and learning environment (Melnick & Meister, 2008). Most trainee teachers need the guidance to allow them to adapt themselves to the new environment and also the opportunity to put to use their theoretical knowledge. Teaching practice is meant to hone their skills and to prepare them mentally for the real deal. However, teaching practice alone is not enough. The process of systematic reflective practice through action research should provide the trainee teachers with the context driven problem solving skills. These skills will help them to adapt to an actual teaching and learning environment very effectively. Conventional teacher education training that is detached from the real specific issues and problems that schools are facing would be unable to bridge the gap between preparation and practice

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