Action Research as an Alternative Teacher Professional Development Approach

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Abstract

The article refers to action research as an alternative teacher professional development approach. Firstly, the main teacher professional development models are presented. There is an emphasis on the characteristics of each model (technical, reflective and critical) and especially on the connection between the critical model and action research. Concerning action research, the article focuses on its philosophy, design and characteristics, in order to illustrate how it affects teacher professional development. The main part of the article is the presentation of an example of the conduction of action research by an Austrian teacher concerning English language teaching at a secondary school in Austria. The action research refers to the presuppositions for the oral communication of her students in English language teaching and the researcher used several data collection tools. The main finding is that the conduction of the action research helped the teacher reflect on her practice and communicate successfully with her colleagues. So, the main idea of the article is to illustrate the way action research can be incorporated and affect teachers’ practice. We aim to discuss the relationship between teacher professional development and action research under the light of empirical evidence and underline the importance of action research at the daily practice of teachers.

Keywords

Action Research, Teacher Professional Development, Teachers as Action Researchers

1. Teacher Professional Development

During 1980’s teacher professionalism arose as an important issue which was directly connected to the improvement of school practice and teachers’ role. There was given emphasis to teachers as professionals and their ability to correlate their classroom practice with the social context and the principles of Pedagogy. The basic idea was that teachers as professionals cannot only rely on their teaching competence and their experience, but should examine the socio-economic context which has a great impact on their practice and adjust to it (Papanaooum, 2003).

Moreover, the growth of the field of Continuing Education during 1980’s underlined the importance of the continuing professional learning throughout their career. Professionals are required to be able to conform to the changing socio-economic conditions which may render their initial education insufficient. So, it is obvious that teacher professional development is not the result of a predictable process, but the outcome of the correlation between age, experience, personal characteristics and socio-political context (Papanaooum, 2003).

2. Teacher Professional Development Models
According to academics, the prevalent models of teacher professional development are the following: technical, reflective and critical. The first model focuses on the basic teaching competencies, so that teachers would avoid didactic faults. In this case, teachers are provided with a safety net, but they are totally controlled by the government. Furthermore, there are strict quantitative assessment criteria for them, which focus on the requirements of labor market. Apparently, the technical model is positivistic and it requires teachers to implement the curriculum and the educative law without critical reflection (Lionarakis & Fragkaki, 2009; Vougioukas, 2011).

The reflective model implies the importance of reflection for the educational practice and is directly connected to the application of the scientific knowledge and the creative power of teachers (Vougioukas, 2011). More specifically, this model questions the existence of the objective truth which derives from the scientific research and promotes the idea that knowledge is socially constructed and highly affected by the social context. Consequently, the reflective model constitutes a subjective approach which focuses on the analysis of authentic educational incidents (Lionarakis & Fragkaki, 2009).

According to the critical professional development model, teachers analyze critically the contradictions and the dilemmas of education, comprehend their causes and find solutions which are in agreement with the sociopolitical context. Moreover, teachers set for discussion certain problems which are related to issues that students as well as teachers have naturalized and are incorporated to the educational establishment (Vougioukas, 2011). So, this model emphasizes on the moral and political aspects of education, underlines the educational dilemmas and the alternative teaching choices and leads to the emancipatory action of teachers as a professional group (Lionarakis & Fragkaki, 2009). Apparently, the critical model focuses on action research as a teacher professional development approach and as an alternative solution to the passive role of teachers which is a central characteristic of the traditional models (Vozaitis & Ifanti, 2013).

3. Action Research

![Figure 1. Action research cycle (Altrichter, 2002: 40).](image)

As we stated previously, the critical professional development model of teachers promotes action research, a term that was introduced by Kurt Lewin (Carr & Kemmis, 1997; Zografou, 2002). Action research emphasizes on collaboration and it is considered to be a self-critical kind of research, which focuses on solving problems related to the professional practice and aims to find
solutions through personal and collective critical reflection (Carr & Kemmis, 1997).

One central characteristic of action research is that it is based on a spiral ordinance and evolves in successive cycles which include certain steps.

The design of the research begins with the initial idea which is later analyzed and further investigated. Teachers process in depth certain issues that bother them and become researchers of their own practice, their beliefs and of the circumstances. Consequently, action research can be considered as a participatory research of those whose work in a classroom. Teachers jointly organize a plan for their actions and they implement it gradually. During the implementation of the plan, teachers talk together, analyze their actions and subject them to criticism. This procedure also takes place after the completion of the research, which is followed by its assessment. The assessment may lead to a new cycle of planning and implementing certain actions and may be followed by a modification of the research hypotheses which were proposed for the solution of the problems that teachers originally faced (Carr & Kemmis, 1997; Zografou, 2002).

4. Action Research Aims

Action research focuses on two central aims. The first one is the participation of teachers on all its phases and more specifically in the planning, the implementation of the research plan, the observation and the reflection. Its second aim is to contribute to the transformation of a practice and the improvement of teachers’ understanding of their own practice (Carr & Kemmis, 1997). We should also mention that action researchers aim to the improvement of the general educational context and that is a reason why they try to analyze in depth the institution of education, historically and socially, and to act towards its transformation (Carr & Kemmis, 1997).

5. Action Research Characteristics

The basic characteristic of action research is that the research questions are formulated by the teachers and refer to problems and issues they face on their professional practice (such as problems in their classrooms, with their students). The research questions are not hypotheses that are formulated by academic researchers in order their academic field to evolve. This characteristic highlights the active role or teachers as action researches, who should reflect on the research questions, analyze them and transform their practice in order to solve the problems they face and improve their professional practice (Altrichter, 2002). This implies a certain epistemological stance on the behalf of teachers, who should realize the importance of a firm theoretical background which will support their actions. Moreover, it implies that teachers should distance themselves of their practice in order to examine it, understand it and interpret it deeper (Zografou, 2002).

Another characteristic of action research is that teachers are required to think about different approaches during the examination of a situation and be open to alternative perspectives which are proposed by their colleagues or by the literature they study. More specifically, the experience of the colleagues is really important as a central characteristic of action research is communicating, introducing different ideas and accepting the criticism of teachers in order to formulate a professional community at school (Altrichter, 2002).

The active role of professional teachers in action research is also related to another fact, which is the control of the research in all its phases (design, implementation and completion) by teachers and not by freelance partners. Professional teachers are in the centre of action research as the consequences of their actions have a great impact on them and their classroom practice. Thus, we should highlight the importance of the negotiation of teachers with their colleagues in order to interpret the findings of the research and clarify the results of the actions that took place during the action research. The cooperation of teachers at this phase is crucial as teachers’ experience is enriched by sharing and announcing their experience to their colleagues, who may work at other schools too. This process has also a political dimension as it promotes dialogue between teachers at school.
where they can refer to school problems, their professional practice and to the future of the education system in general. Moreover, teachers’ dialogue can concentrate on the actions they should take towards the transformation of the social system and social change (Altrichter, 2002).

6. An Example of the Conduction of Action Research

Herbert Altrichter (2002) published an article concerning the reasons why teachers should implement research on their practice and how they could do that. The article presented an example of a case study which was an action research that took place in the classroom of a teacher named Ines Morocutti. The teacher worked at a secondary school in Austria and taught English as a foreign language. The action research focused on the oral communication and work at English language teaching in her classroom (Altrichter, 2002: 35).

Firstly, the teacher stated the research questions that were related to her daily practice in her classroom. She discussed about those matters with her colleagues and this led her to understand deeper her professional practice as well as the basic assumptions to which the research questions were related. After that, she decided that the central research question would refer to the presuppositions for the oral communication of her students in English language teaching. She examined this question in a classroom of 15 students where she taught English as a foreign language (Altrichter, 2002: 35).

The investigation of the basic research question required several data collection tools; the teacher used a journal to observe her teaching, she created a teaching protocol for 6 weeks and she recorded 3 of her lessons in the classroom. The teacher collected important data during this procedure and started to reflect on her daily practice, the way she taught and the participation of students in her classroom. Her basic remark concerned the fact that boys participated more actively in her lessons than girls (Altrichter, 2002).

Subsequently, Ines Morocutti tried to examine her finding about students’ participation in her lessons and reflected on how and to what extent she reproduces stereotypes and socially constructed images about gender role during her lessons. In order to investigate those matters, one of her colleagues conducted interviews with 2 boys and 2 girls of her classroom. The students reported no difference in the participation of girls and boys in the lessons. The false image of students about their active role in the lessons was similar to the image that the teacher had formed before the collection of the research data. The new data that were collected during the interviews gave an incentive for further investigation about the self-image of students and the gender roles they think that are acceptable. She was also motivated to start experimenting with different teaching methods and techniques (Altrichter, 2002).

At the end of the action research, Ines Morocutti referred to the importance of the research process that helped her to enlighten some central aspects of her teaching and realize that before that she was acting unconsciously and without deep understanding of the importance of her teaching actions. Her reflection about her teaching helped her to form and try different teaching conditions in her lessons and give emphasis on increasing the participation of girls in it. Furthermore, she shared the findings of her research with her colleagues and attempted to discuss them together at in-service training programs and at an initial teacher training program (Altrichter, 2002).

The example of the conduction of action research that was described above helps us understand the importance of action research as an incentive for teachers to reflect on their daily practice in their classroom and improve their educational role. Furthermore, the example of Ines Morocutti highlights that action research requires communication between the researchers and other people, mainly their colleagues, before, during the conduction of the research and after its completion.

7. Discussion

At this point it is essential to discuss some of the basic points of our presentation which highlight the importance of teacher
professional development nowadays and the crucial role of action research for the improvement of the institution of education. First of all, we should remark that lately there have been formed different models of teacher professional development, each of which is related to different aims and characters and promotes a different approach and image for teachers and their work. We could say that teacher professional development can be represented on a continuum; on the one side there is the technical model which gives emphasis on special competences and skills that teachers should acquire, while on the other side there is focus on teachers’ reflection about the socio-economic context and its contradictions. The sides of continuum that was described above are related to a different approach and aims in educational policy. In the first case education is considered to be a merchant that is offered to students-clients and should be improved according to their needs and requirements. This school image was formed during 1990s and it is reflected on the choices of European and Greek educational policy. Contrariwise, in the second case the focus is on education as every student’s right and a central idea is that education should not be connected to financial terms of labor market.

Consequently, when there is emphasis on education as a right, the profile of professional teachers is related to their social awareness. Professional teachers in this case should make reasonable choices and organize their work by taking into account their personal principles and their pedagogical aims. Furthermore, teachers should examine the ideological conditions and the social context in which they live and work. As a result, the role professional teacher in this approach is strictly connected to a participatory form of professional development which is related to action research.

Examining the different forms of in-service teacher training nowadays, we could say they focus on special competences of teachers and perceive the educational practice as a technical procedure. On contrary, action research is related to an active role of teachers, who undertake the role of researchers in order to examine their daily practice and find solutions to problems they face in their classrooms. Action research also connects teachers to their colleagues and promotes the formulation of professional communities at school. Consequently, its basic strengths is that action research promotes the active role of teachers, their reflection about their daily practice, the communication and negotiation with their colleagues about school issues and their coordinated action towards educational changes in their school. So, action research is a useful tool that promotes teacher professional development as it requires them to examine and assess their work, taking into account the ideas of their colleagues as well as their own expectations and assessment criteria (Dakopoulou, 2002).

Another important remark is related to the importance of action research for the connection between daily school practice and scientific research. The two domains are mainly separated and their personnel works in a different way; teachers work at school with their students, while scientific research is usually conducted by academics in the university or by researchers in other research institutions. In the case of action research the gap between them falls, as teachers are the researchers of their daily practice and they usually cooperate with academics during the conduction of their research. This form of cooperation between school and university is of highly importance and helps to the reconstruction of unequal power relations that exist in other forms of teacher professional development. Academics work with teachers and help them during the conduction of the research by having an advisory role. They provide a firm theoretical background before the conduction of the research and they play a crucial role during the interpretation of the data and the explanation of the findings. So, we could say that action research is a learning experience for teachers as well as for academics, as it helps to the understanding of the correlation between science and daily classroom practice (Dakopoulou, 2002).

References


