

**Hong Kong Association of Heads of Secondary Schools
&
Hong Kong Educational Research Association**

Jointly Present

Action Research Seminar

by

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at

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Seminar One

Overview of Social Research and Action Research

Objectives of this seminar

The principal goal of this seminar is to present an overview of social research and action research, with particular reference to the process of action research. Examples are drawn from the community-based action research, action research in school setting and action research in organization to illustrate the ways that action research is operated.

What is a social research?

A sociological research needs to be carefully planned before whatever methods you use. The focus of a social research is to examine and investigate an identified social issue / social problem, with particular reference to causes, features, characteristics and consequences of the problems being identified. By means of a systematic and comprehensive approach, the selected problem / issue could be understood in a more objective and systematic way.

The Research Process

Stage One: Area of interest and background of the research

Stage Two: Research aims and goals

Stage Three: Research objectives and questions

Stage Four: Research methodology / approach

Stage Five: Choice of research methods

Stage Six: Detailed planning of the research

Stage Seven: Pilot study

Stage Eight: Revise the methods if necessary

Stage Nine: Conducting the research

Stage Ten: Analysis of the results

Key Points for Social Research

- Whether the research topic is researchable?
- Whether people are convinced that the research topic is researchable?
- Whether the research goals / objectives are clear enough?
- Whether the methods adopted are appropriate?
- Whether the researchers are well aware of the limitations of the research?
- Whether people being affected have been aware of the impact?
- Ethical considerations?
- Budget implications?
- Plan for collaboration?
- Any contingency plans?
- Significance of the project?

What is Action Research?

To different scholars, **Action Research (AR)** means differently to them. After reviewing the literature in preparation for this lecture, I read a number of interpretations of the genesis of action research, all of them interesting and informative, but all citing different authors and providing quite disparate histories. Nonetheless, the common themes that emerge from the literature of action research provide the glue that enables us to understand that AR is involved in the processes that:

- Are rigorously empirical and reflective (or interpretive);
- Engaged people who have traditionally been called subjects as active participants in the research process;
- Result in some practical outcome related to the lives or work of the participants.

Action Research: Different Definitions

- *Action Research* is social research carried out by a team encompassing a professional action researcher and members of an organization or community seeking to improve their situation.
- *Action Research* promotes broad participation in the research process and supports action leading to a more just or satisfying situation for the stakeholders.
- *Action Research* involves a critique of conventional academic practices and organizations that study social problems or organizational issues.
- *Action Research* democratizes the relationship between the professional researcher and the local interested parties.
- *Action Research* is a term for describing a spectrum of activities that focus on research, planning, theorizing, learning, and development. It describes a continuous process of research and learning in the researchers' long-term relationship with a problem.

- *Action Research* applies the methods / techniques of social research to examine a selected issue or problems and tries to resolve the problem once the causes are found.
- *Action Research* encourages the researcher to experience the problem as it evolves.

Action Research and Social Research

Similar to Social research, *Action Research* is a systematic and rigorous inquiry or investigation that enables people to understand the nature of problematic events or phenomena. Action Research can be characterized by the following:

- A problem to be investigated
- A process of inquiry
- Explanations that enable individuals to understand the nature of the problem
- Incorporate actions that attempt to resolve the problem being investigated

A Basic Action Research Routine

Look

- Gather relevant information (data gathering)
- Build a picture: Describe the situation (Define and describe)

Think

- Explore and analyze: What is happening now? (Analyze)
- Interpret and explain: How/why are things as they are? (Theorize)

Act

- Plan (Report)
- Implement
- Evaluate

The Action Research Process

Beginning the Action Research Process

Models of Change:

- Top-down Change
- Bottom-up Change

Stage One: Entry

Stage Two: Forming an action research group

Stage Three: Development of goals for the group

- *The goals must be flexible;*
- *The goals must be important to the group and significant to the organizational functioning;*
- *The goals should be feasible to those concerned;*
- *Pursuing a goal must be justifiable – there must be definite need and the authority to do something about it.*

Stage Four: Training of the action group

- *There must be freedom to change the established ways of working in groups;*
- *Group members must evaluate group processes;*
- *Group members must be willing to try out proposed improvements;*
- *Group members must be trained.*

Stage Five: The research agreement

Action Research and the Organizational Development Process

Stage One: Defining the need for change

- *The problems must be important to the person naming them and also significant for organizational functions;*
- *The problems must be manageable;*
- *Problem statements must reveal some fundamental criteria for assessing a solution.*

Stage Two: Using interviews to develop measures

- *The measures should be derived from an open-ended interview;*
- *It should yield specific data;*
- *It should provide data for client and organizational needs;*
- *It should deal with particular, present issues;*
- *It should be fairly easy to administer, analyze and feed back to respondents.*

Stage Three: Focusing and designing a program for change

- *Identifying opportunities and threats;*
- *Outlining the organization's strengths and weaknesses;*
- *Identifying values (philosophy statement);*
- *Defining the mission;*
- *Developing a vision.*

Stage Four: Implementing and developing an action plan

- *Developing the strategic issue or alternatives;*
- *Identifying strategic direction for the issue;*
- *Developing an action plan;*
- *Developing an ongoing process of evaluating and updating;*
- *Developing a commitment plan.*

Example One: Community-based Action Research

One major TYPE of Action Research is *community-based action research*, this involves the following:

Enhance everyday work practices by

- *Reviewing* goals and procedures (What things are we doing, and how are we doing them?)
- *Evaluating* effectiveness (To what extent are we achieving our objectives? How effective is our work?)
- *Planning* activities and strategies (What needs to be done? How do we get it done?)

Resolve specific problems and crises by

- *Defining the problem*
- *Exploring its context*
- *Analyzing its component parts*
- *Developing strategies for its resolution*

Develop special projects and programs by

- *Planning*
- *Implementing*
- *Evaluating*

Hence, professionals, for example like health professionals, may wish to investigate and remediate poor health conditions or practices with a particular community group and to develop appropriate remedial strategies. Or, school teachers may investigate strategies for dealing with low student achievement levels, poor attendance, student disinterest, or disruptive behaviour. School principals may formulate programs for increasing community participation in their schools. And even social welfare workers may seek to act on the prevalence of child abuse or neglect among client groups. Community workers may wish to develop programs and projects to deal with the problems of neighbourhood youth.

All of these research agendas will benefit from the use of procedures that enable them to explore systematically the conditions that operate in their specific contexts and help them develop practical plans for dealing effectively with the problems that confront them. Some of the areas in which the application of community-based action research may be fruitful in the field of education:

- School development
- Evaluation
- Classroom processes
- Class projects
- Special programs
- Parent participation
- On-site management

Example Two: Principles for Action Research in an Organization Study

- Defining the real research question
- Generating theoretical concepts from the field
- Integrating concepts with real life assumptions
- Triangulating and using multiple perspectives
- Verifying interpretations with perspectives in the field
- Treating the research setting as a case study

In assisting an organization, action research is concerned with aiding participants to solve problems, make decisions, and implement actions effectively. This involves:

- The relevant information for problem-solving is understandable;
- The information is useable and manipulated by the system;
- The cost of obtaining understanding, and using the information is not beyond the system capacity;
- The problem is solved and the decision implemented in such a way that it does not reoccur;
- The process of information use can be accomplished without damaging the implementing process.

A Check List:

In short, HOW is Action Research Undertaken?

1. We review our current practice;
2. Identify an aspect we want to improve;
3. Imagine a way forward;
4. Try it out, and
5. Take stock of what happens.
6. We modify our plan in the light of what we have found and continue with the 'action';
7. Monitor what we do;
8. Evaluate the modified action;
9. And so on until we are satisfied with that aspect of our work.

Action Planning asks the following QUESTIONS:

- What is my research interest?
- Why am I interested?
- What kind of evidence will I gather to show why I am interested?
- What can I do about it?
- What will I do about it?
- What kind of evidence will I gather to show that what I am doing is having an influence?
- How will I explain that influence?
- How will I ensure that any judgements that I might make are reasonably fair and accurate?
- What will I do then?

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