

BARRIERS TO AND ENABLERS OF LEADING AND MANAGING ACTION RESEARCH AMONG THE SCHOOL LEADERS

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ABSTRACT

The article reports on a study of issues regarding the implementation of action research in schools. The study was carried out based on the concern that school leaders lacked in doing action research compared to teachers. It was considered important that school leaders themselves need to carry out action research not only to improve their practices but to motivate their teachers to do the research. The aim of the study was to find ways to effectively assist these school leaders to do action research. The study sought to find out the challenges faced by the school leaders and their needs to implement action research successfully. Data were collected from 132 school leaders from all over the country. These school leaders were purposefully invited and gathered at the researcher's institute. They were divided into four groups where they were required to identify the challenges faced and the needs required. All the data were recorded and collected. Analysis was based on all the written feedbacks provided by each group to find the themes. It was discovered that lack of knowledge, lack of support and attitude were the main challenges faced by these school leaders. Training, mentoring, recognition and proper management were among the main needs. The study concluded that these school leaders recognized the importance of action research and they were willing to implement it. Therefore, it was recommended that more training should be provided as well as follow-up and follow-through initiatives to enable them implement action research successfully.

Keywords: Educational leadership; school leaders; action research

INTRODUCTION

Conducting research in schools has been considered as an effective way in building up teachers' professional development. It was evident that teachers who conducted research could impact their practices positively (Scott & McNeish, 2013). The relevance of conducting research by school leaders can be viewed based on the many instructional leadership roles that they have to play. Instructional leadership in a simple way refers to leading learning (Bendikson, Robinson & Hattie, 2012). This is due to the fact that a school is a place to learn and all activities that matter must be central to student learning. As instructional leaders, school improvement

programmes are one of their responsibilities that need to be implemented to ensure the effectiveness of student learning. In order to make improvement, relevant data is important for making informed decisions. This is where research is important because it provides good and reliable data.

The country's education authority namely the Ministry of Education, Malaysia has identified action research to be strongly carried out by teachers to improve their teaching practices. It was the main aim of the authority to inculcate the culture of research among teachers. Since the early 1990's, the Ministry of Education has started their integrated initiative to introduce action research to teachers and started giving series of courses to teachers beginning 1988 with the help of experts from abroad. Trainee teachers under the Ministry's institutes were made compulsory to carry out action research as their final project. It can be said that teachers at present are at least know what action research is. Efforts have also been made to encourage more teachers carrying out action research by organising special seminars and colloquiums to enable these teachers presenting and sharing their action research efforts. Proceedings of these events have also been published.

Despite all these initiatives and efforts, it was found that the implementation of action research among teachers was still unsatisfactory and action research among the school leaders was far more unsatisfactory. In 2006, Institut Aminuddin Baki (IAB), the National Institute of Educational Leadership and Management under the Ministry of Education took the responsibility to train school leaders on action research. The purposes were to expose them on the basics of action research and aspects of leadership related to action research efforts. It was hoped that these school leaders could carry out action research focusing on management and leadership aspects in their schools. It was also hoped that they could inspire and motivate their teachers to carry out action research on pedagogical aspects.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Statement of Problem

School leaders hold responsibility to inculcate research culture in schools. In order to do this, school leaders themselves need the research knowledge and skills prior to actually implement it. As a dedicated government institute focusing on educational leadership and management of the country, IAB has trained school leaders on the theory and practice of action research. It was hoped that these leaders would then carry out action research in aspects related to their leadership and management practices. However, it was found out that most of them had not implemented action research after they were given the course. This scenario would result in certain implications. Firstly, they were not able to impart the knowledge and skills obtained during the course and over time, these tended to diminish. Secondly, they were not able to get the many advantages of action research which have been proven in developing and enhancing the practitioners' professional practices. Thirdly, the

responsibility to inculcate research culture in schools would be a difficult task because they were unable to be an example to their teachers. Fourthly, this would also affect the school as a whole especially the students because action research helped in practising the concept of continuous school improvement. Action research can be seen as an effective tool in identifying weaknesses and improving them in this context due to its nature of characteristics. Lastly, this would also affect the initiatives introduced by the Ministry of Education aimed at encouraging teachers to regard Action research as a part of teaching and learning process.

Rationale of the Study

The study was required because it enabled the researcher to know the reasons why most school leaders who have been specially trained in action research theory and practice were reluctant to implement it at their schools. The understanding would be used as a starting point in assisting these school leaders to actually implement it.

Purpose and Objectives of the study

It was aimed that the study would be able get a better understanding on the problems faced by school leaders in practising action research as well as how to overcome them. Therefore, the objectives of the study were:

1. To find out the barriers of conducting action research among the school leaders.
2. To identify the enablers of conducting action research among the school leaders.

Significance of the Study

There were benefits in conducting this study. Firstly, it could give the researcher and fellow colleagues an empirical evidence that served as a basis to improve aspects related to providing the action research training. This would then benefit the school leaders themselves and future course participants. The findings of the study would also benefit the stakeholders in the Ministry of Education, State Education Departments and District Education Offices in realising the action research initiatives. Lastly, the study would also benefit academicians and researchers especially those in the educational fields.

Limitations of the Study

The study was carried out based on its own limitations. Firstly, the analysis of the study was mainly based on two predetermined questions, discussed by five groups in a classroom setting with the given time between 45 and 60 minutes. In addition, the outcomes of the group discussion session were depended on the researcher's colleagues who helped facilitating the discussion in five different classroom.

Although all the groups discussed the same questions, the facilitators played an important role in ensuring the effectiveness of the session. In short, the findings could be different if other approaches, methods and designs were employed.

Secondly, the findings were limited to the study participants only and was not generalizable to all school leaders. However, the findings could serve as a basic understanding of most of the school leaders because of their general similarities in terms of professional backgrounds and school management system. The number of 132 participants from all the over the country who took part in the study could be an additional advantage although they were not randomly selected.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It was actually the responsibility of school leaders to inculcate research culture at schools (Nugent, Malik & Hollingsworth, 2012) although it was a difficult task to realize this according to Hahs-Vaughn and Yanowitz (2009). They asserted that doing research was something that teachers were being afraid of. This was where action research approach was suitable for teachers as well as school leaders because its methodology was characteristically different from other types of research. One of the most distinct characters of action research was that the research focus had to be mainly on their own practices. That was why action research was also known as practitioner research because the researchers studied their own practices which they did on a daily basis. In other words, they studied their routine practices aimed at improving these practices. Therefore, there should be not much problem in deciding the focus of study compared to other research types.

Hine and Livery (2014) highlighted three advantages of carrying out action research in the school context. Firstly, it helped to gain new knowledge by bridging the gap between theory and practice. Secondly, it empowered teachers by making decisions based on data they collected themselves. Thirdly, students and schools would be benefitted because action research allowed teachers to take risks and implement changes.

Implementing action research had its own challenges. Hine and Livery (2014) mentioned three main challenges especially to teachers. It was time-consuming, difficult to validate the data and hard to anticipate the potential solution unless the whole cyclical process of action research was carried out. Zhou (2013) reported that teachers' lack of knowledge, time, library resources and pressure were some of the challenges faced in carrying out action research.

Moreover, Johnson (2011) also agreed that time was the biggest challenge in carrying out action research. She has also listed out four other challenges of conducting research in general and action research in specific. Firstly, it was the lack of resources including financial support. Secondly, the challenge in identifying a relevant research question. Thirdly, there existed a lack of support from the schools

as well as from the district education departments. Lastly, ethical aspects had to be well regarded because the nature of action research mostly involved human subjects that there were stakeholders to consider.

Zhou (2013) suggested five strategies to overcome the problems, these were:

1. Provide guidance.
2. Manage time and resources wisely.
3. Get assistance from the university and simplify teachers' research methodology curriculum.
4. Provide coaching and mentoring.
5. Encourage self-motivation.

Hewitt and Little (2005, p. v) provided seven guidelines on how school leaders could facilitate action research in schools. These were:

1. Build knowledge of the action research process.
2. Understand the benefits of action research.
3. Identify and address implementation issues.
4. Develop goals that include action research.
5. Establish a support system for teachers.
6. Provide action research professional development.
7. Provide opportunities for collaboration.

To sum, school leaders are responsible in "creating the need for research and establishing an environment for conducting classroom action research" (Hewitt & Little, 2005, p. 2). It is admitted that there are many barriers to conducting action research however, there are enablers to overcome these. Only the school leaders understand the barriers they are facing and how to resolve them provided that they realise the need first.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative approach using a conceptual content analysis for the acquired data. It involved 132 school leaders consisted of school heads and senior assistants from primary schools and secondary schools. These school leaders were all former participants of action research courses carried out by the researcher's institute. They were cohorts of a three-day standard course of action research for school leaders. In most part of the training, the participants were exposed with the important aspects of action research namely, its concept, identification of research focus, data collection, preparation of research proposal and implementation planning.

The school leaders were invited and gathered at the researcher's institute meant to get feedbacks from them regarding the training that they had attended. The collection of data employed a focus group method using a group discussion technique as suggested by Flick (2009). A group discussion enabled participants to express, share and validate

views to produce the best strategy according to Flick. They were divided into five groups and each group consisted of between 25 and 27 participants. Each group was assigned to give feedbacks on the after-training challenges they faced in the implementation of action research at their schools. They were also asked to list out their needs in implementing action research initiatives at schools. The groups were required to discuss and make a consensus on finalizing their feedbacks. The groups took between 45 and 60 minutes to complete the tasks.

All the written feedbacks from each group were collected and analysed. The researcher listed out all the given feedbacks from all the groups on the computer. These were divided into challenges list and needs list. The analysis involved a three-step process namely identifying irrelevant responses, sub-grouping similar or redundant responses and assigning relevant themes.

FINDINGS

The study found that there were 20 responses regarding the challenges and 32 responses regarding their needs provided by all the five groups. It was discovered that all the responses were relevant to the tasks and could be further analysed. For the sub-grouping of similar or redundant responses, there were three main categories of challenges and four main categories of needs discovered based on the analysis.

These categories of challenges and needs were then further analysed to assign relevant themes. It was decided that the relevant themes for the challenges responses were lack of knowledge, lack of support and attitude. The relevant themes and number of responses for the challenges identification task are shown in the following table:

Table 1: Themes Identified for Barriers

No	Themes	No. of Responses
1	Lack of Support	13
2	Lack of Knowledge	5
3	Attitude	2

Table 1 shows that lack of support was the most difficult challenge faced by the school leaders in implementing the action research initiatives. There were 13 responses indicated the lack of support compared to five responses for the lack of knowledge and only two responses for attitude. The participants revealed that they lacked support from the higher authorities, community and other external agencies. Some participants who were Senior Assistants indicated that their school heads also did not provide necessary supports. Furthermore, an analysis was made to identify the relevant themes for the needs responses. The study suggested training, mentoring, recognition and proper management to be the themes based on the responses. The relevant themes and number of responses for the needs identification task are shown in the following table:

Table 2: Themes Identified for Enablers

No.	Themes	No. of Responses
1	Proper Management	11
2	Training	9
3	Recognition	7
4	Mentoring	5

Based on Table 2, it was found that the participants mostly needed to have a proper management of an action research implementation based on the 11 relevant responses analysed. This was followed by training with nine responses, recognition with seven responses and mentoring with five responses.

DISCUSSION

The study managed to identify support, knowledge and attitude to be the three main challenges faced by school leaders in their efforts to implement action research at schools. Among these, the lack of support found to be the most dominant one. Further analysis found that the participants did not have supports in relation to resources, allocation of time due to workload, financial aspects and proper guidelines. The second most difficult challenge was the lack of knowledge. The school leaders admitted that they still did not have ample knowledge to manage and lead action research initiatives in their schools despite the fact that they were given the three-day training of action research. The last theme identified for the challenges identification was teachers' attitude. The participants stated that teachers did not have the interest and passion to carry out action research. All These findings were consistent with Hine and Livery (2014), Zhou (2013) and Johnson (2011).

In relation to their needs, the school leaders wanted a well-structured organization of action research initiatives from the highest level of authority to the school levels. They suggested that a special committee of action research to be set up at schools to lead and manage all aspects of action research. The school leaders also revealed that training on action research to be their second most requirement. Further analysis indicated that the aspects of training they needed were in-house training, series of courses, focused courses and workshops. Moreover, the school leaders also revealed that recognition to be the third most important of their need. They wanted the action research efforts made to be given due recognition such as giving incentives to researchers, the schools and considered it to be part of performance appraisal. Lastly, the participants needed mentors to guide them implement action research. It was discovered that most of the needs listed out by the participants were consistent with Hewitt and Little (2005) and Zhou (2013).

The study identified these recommendations to be made:

1. Set up a repository of action research resources that were easily accessible to school administrators and teachers.

2. Restructure the organization of action research Initiatives to produce a well-organized management system from the higher authority level to school levels.
3. Review the training initiatives by all the relevant bodies to improve the effectiveness of training provided.
4. Allocate a dedicated budget for action research to enable more school leaders and teachers implement, publish reports and present findings of action research.
5. Provide national-level recognition to school leaders, teachers and schools who actively implemented action research.
6. Provide follow up and follow through initiatives to former course participants as a form of coaching and mentoring process provided by qualified trainers.

CLOSURE

It can be said that carrying out research in schools by school leaders as well as teachers enabled to develop their professional practices. Inculcating research culture among the teachers was one of the school leaders' responsibilities in instructional leadership. Implementing action research could be a good alternative for teachers and school leaders instead of other types of research due to its distinct characteristics. Still, implementing action research had its own challenges especially the support from various relevant bodies. The most important aspect that needed consideration was to ensure the effectiveness of training process so that school leaders and teachers could gain the knowledge, skills and confidence in carrying out action research.

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