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Ministry of Education, Human Resource Development & Labour
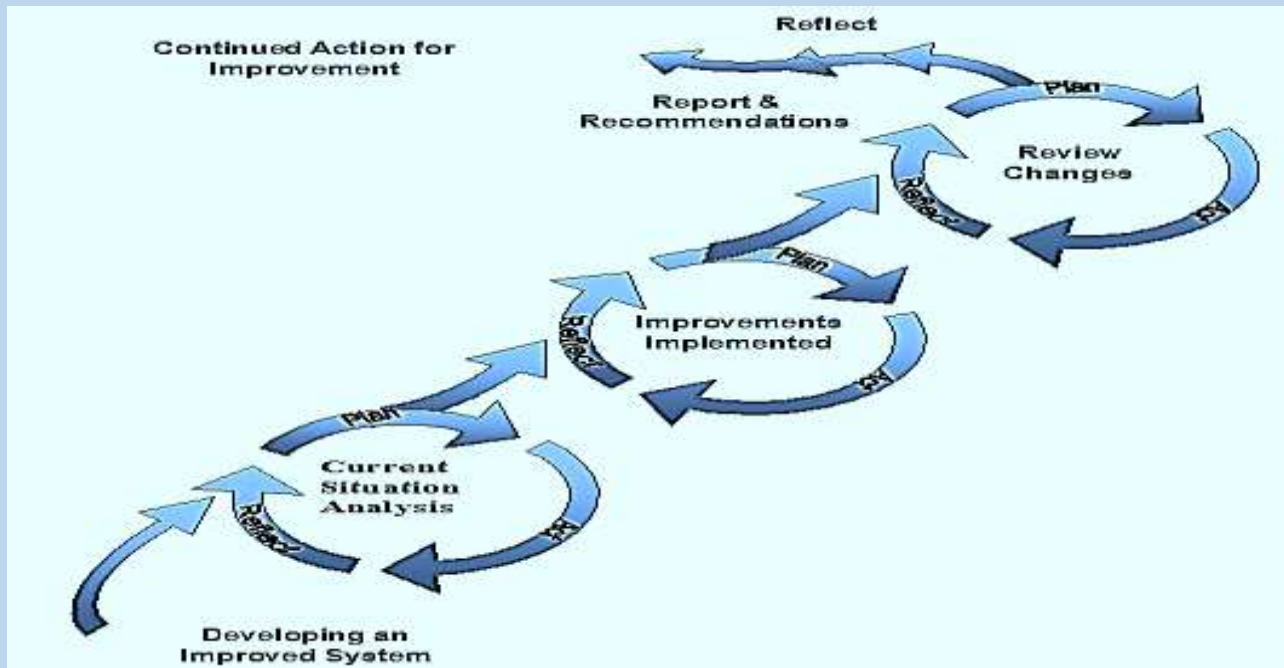
ACTION RESEARCH GUIDE

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What is Action Research?

Action Research is an emergent research methodology which is action oriented and generally participatory (Dick, 2003). Simply defined, action research is a disciplined process of inquiry conducted *by* and *for* those taking the action' (Sagor, 2000). Hence the reason it has been referred to as practitioner research. The practitioner is the one responsible for designing, and conducting the research as well as analyzing in order to advance their own practice which is an inherent difference between this method of research and traditional research. Developed from the work of Kurt Lewin, this method's definition is evolving, but its concentration remains on a spiral or cyclic process of planning, acting, observing and reflecting in an effort to find solutions to issues/ problems (*see Figure One*).

Figure One- Piggot-Irvine's Action Research Model

Source: Piggot-Irvine (2002)

Why conduct Action Research?

As educators, we have a crucial role in shaping the future of a nation. Our approach to instruction and practice can either make or break our students which by extension affects society. Sagor (2005) accredits teachers as the group most emotional and passionate about the preferment of students' achievement. Many go above and beyond the call of duty to ensure that their students receive the best educational experience. Action Research is a useful tool for practitioners and others to draw from and document their successes. It is an effective tool through which educators can reflect, analyze and find possible solutions to issues which may impede their practice (Huang, 2010; Avison, Lau, Myers & Nielsen, 1999; Mckay & Marshall, 2001). This combination of theory and

practice through a research interest cycle can facilitate much needed change and research in the education sector.

The benefits of action research to the practitioner, the education sector, students and community include but are not limited to the following:

- Encourages practitioners to reflect on their actions and environment as they plan for change.
- Encourages creative, critical and analytical thinking which enhances decision making skills/ awareness.
- Practical knowledge is produced which is useful to instructional leaders and managers in the everyday conduct of their professional duties.
- Educators are provided with hands-on experience in conducting action research which can serve as a vehicle for personal and professional development.
- It can help invigorate teaching and decease teacher burnout.
- Educators are empowered to become agents of change and to lead positive educational change.
- Action research projects can help shape staff development programs, curricula in schools and support school improvement initiatives.
- It fosters a connection among students' achievement, practice, and policy.

Conducting Action Research
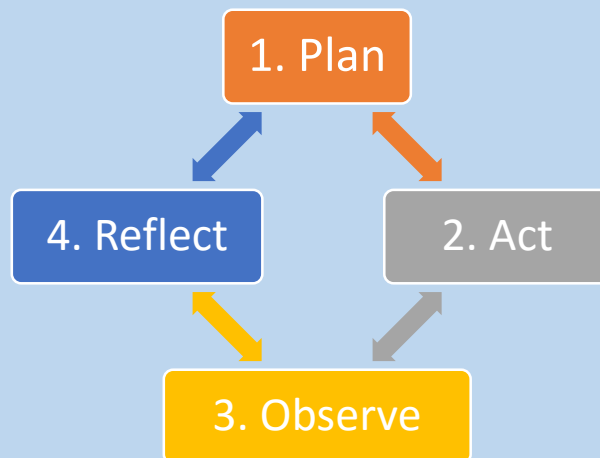
Action research is iterative; it is a continuous and reflective process. Because of the cyclical nature of the processes involved in conducting action research, not every cycle will be complete. There may be times when it is advisable to stop and start a new cycle; for instance, the original question(s) may change slightly or totally. The flexibility of action research based on constant evaluation and reflection means that the cycles may be shortened as new ways to proceed.

Getting Started

The basic idea of action research is to collaboratively engage teachers in seeking solutions, sharing best practices and promoting professional growth and development within the education sector. As one undertakes an action research project, it may seem daunting, but practitioners should not be dismayed as action research is very similar to what they are already doing. It may just require a little more careful, systematic and critical planning and review as it 'builds upon natural skills and processes' (Dick, 2003, p 60-4).

To begin, the researcher need to select an area of focus. To achieve this, he/she should engage in serious reflection. According to Sagor (2005) researchers would should ask themselves, w*hat element(s) of our practice or what aspect of student learning do we wish to investigate?'*

Some possible questions which can assist in issue identification include

- Based on school and classroom data (attendance records, examination results (MST, CEE, CXC, CSEC), what do students need to learn in order to achieve in school?

- What instructional practices are we implementing that have positive results on student learning?

- What instructional practices are we implementing that do not have positive results on student learning?

- What do we need to know or learn in order to ensure our students achieve their learning goals?

- What instructional practices or techniques should we investigate and research?

- How are we going to learn about these instructional practices and ensure student impact?

- How will we know that students are achieving their academic and behavioral goals?

Once confident that the research topic is relevant and time worthy, researchers should begin reading on the various models used in conducting action research as well as their topic of interest. This initial research will help in framing a research question. It is important to limit the research question to one that is meaningful and achievable in the confines of one's (in this case teachers') daily work. Example of good research questions:

How can I use cooperative learning in my high-school mathematics class to improve student learning?

How can I construct and use student feedback to improve my instruction in English?

How does rote learning affect the learner's retention?

Research Teams

After the formulation of the research question, there is need for the formation of a school-based research team. This team will be responsible for leading the research. The team should comprise of individuals at the school who are directly impacted or who may have an interest in the area being researched. It is advisable that this team comprises of at *least four members including the principal. The research team should develop a timeline to ensure that all processes are included in the research.*

Preliminary Investigation and Planning

Planning is critical to the action research process. Now that the focus area, research question and team have been established, before acting, it is important that a one gather some initial data on the issue identified to clarify the researcher's perspective and understanding. Conducting a thorough literature review will assist.

A good literature review will help put the research into perspective. It helps the researcher contextualize the research as it exposes 'what has been done and needs to be done', the nature of the problem, key variables which need to be addressed, controversies surrounding the research, methodologies and research approaches suitable for the topic (Pine, 2008). Therefore, read extensively on your topic then narrow your focus ensuring enough background literature and data is included. Sources to consult include journals, books, official government publications, internet sources and research reports. The sources included should be up to date and the review be comprehensive, coherent, concise and balanced exhibiting critical and logical thinking.

Additionally, the researcher needs to engage in a serious exploration of the proposed intervention. This can be done using the logic model (*see appendix*). It is advised that the action plan is examined carefully and objectively before implementing.

Identifying Data Sources

Zeroing in on the data source may prove challenging. As observed by Pine (2008, p. 251), 'data are everywhere'. As such, data collection must be focused, purposeful and well planned. It must connect to the research question and tell something about the research problem. Attention must be paid to how it will be collected, analysed, organized, recorded and reported.

Act on Evidence: Intervention

What intervention strategies can be implemented? It is important to make reference to research which has been conducted. Whatever intervention selected must result in a change whether negative or positive. Carefully monitor and document the intervention process.

Data Collection

At this stage of the research, it is necessary to think about how information will be derived to answer the research question and reflect the intervention process. Both qualitative and quantitative data is significant in order to establish validity and reliability. In action research it is best to use at

least three sources of data (triangulation method). Select the instruments that are most appropriate for the issue being researched.

Data Analysis

The key to making sense of action research is analysis of the data collected. This step involves looking systematically at all the data to see what trends or patterns emerge and what conclusions if any can be drawn. Quantifiable data can be analyzed without the use of statistics or technical assistance. Other data, such as opinions, attitudes, or checklists, may be summarized in table /graph form. Qualitative data can be reviewed holistically and important elements or themes can be noted.

Evaluate Result, Reflect & Report

Assess the effects of the intervention/strategy to determine if improvement has occurred. It is important to think about whether the data clearly provides supporting evidence. Ask yourself;

- How has the research enhanced the lives of the participants by empowering them, changing them, or providing them with new understanding?

- What changes or solutions to the problem emerged from your intervention?

Finally, it is imperative to share the findings of research with all relevant stakeholders, in order to effect change throughout the education system. At this phase of the process, the research is brought together, the data is interpreted, and a summary is given of critical conclusions as well as recommendations for further research in one document (*see appendix*).

Conclusion

Action research will not provide all the answers to the questions about students' learning or pedagogical practices. However, through action research the answers to these questions can be sought and immediate action can be taken. Through action research, teachers are empowered to take a leadership role in their local teaching contexts (Donato, 2003).

Ethical Considerations

The researcher must ensure that consent is sought and received from participants in the research to be conducted.

- The researcher must ensure that participants have a complete understanding of the purpose and methods to be used in the study, any risks involved, and the demands placed upon them as participants.

- If the intended participant is under the age of eighteen (18) years, consent must be sought and received from parents or guardians.

- Individuals reserve the right either to participate or refuse to be involved in the research.

- Participants must understand that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

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Appendix

Guidelines for Action Research Report

Title – Name of project, school, team members, and date of submission

Abstract- Keep short and concise discussing the problems, methodology, process, main results and implications

Introduction- Identify the problem / topic or issue to be studied. Include in this section;
- statement of the problem
- Purpose of the research using literature to justify it
- Describe briefly the background and setting or setting of the study

Literature Review- Present a summary of the literature on the variables of your study and previous works involving the use of the intervention selected.

Action Research questions – Discuss what you hope to examine and state the question (s).

Methodology - Explain how you undertook the research**.** Describe the intervention using literature where possible to support the procedure taken to conduct it. State who formed the study's population and sample as well as the data collection process, analysis and justification.

Results- This section presents an evaluation of the intervention. What were your findings? What are the implications of the findings? Charts, graphs and pictures may be used to enhance this section.

Summary and Conclusion- Reflect on the finding. State any limitations you encountered, what worked or didn't and reasons why certain outcomes resulted. Identify any changes you would undertake differently during the next cycle of the intervention and why as well as the impact of the intervention on you personally.

Recommendations- Suggest areas for further research on your topic and other recommendations emerging from the study.

References - Use the APA form of referencing

Appendices –Include any copies of questionnaires, consent forms, interview and observation schedules in this section.

Please note;

- Project should be **no less than 20 pages** beginning from chapter 1 – 4 of your report.
- Double space should be used between all lines and paragraphs justified.
- Document margins: 1 1/2 in (3.8 cm) left margin; all others 1 in (2.54 cm)
- Keep titles as short and concise as possible
- Keep acknowledgements short and to the point.
- Abstract should contain no more than 350 words.
- Use active voice rather than passive voice in your report.
- Use past tense as the research has been conducted
- Use of third person in all sections including the discussion section

Logic Model

Intervention:

Goal:

INPUTS	ACTIVITIES		OUTCOMES		
What we invest	What we do	Who we reach	Why this intervention: short-term results	Why this intervention: intermediate results	Why this intervention: long-term results

Assumptions	*External Factors*