A review of "Action research for improving educational practice: A step-by-step guide, 2nd edition"

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Abstract

Valsa Koshy's book "Action research for improving educational practice: A step-by-step guide, 2nd edition" is a concise guide for teachers and school leaders (hereafter practitioners) seeking to understand the potential of action research as a research methodology for addressing social problems. It also serves as a guide to conducting action research for those interested in solving various practical problems related to their professional practices. While some of the contents may seem similar to previous works in the field, the clarity with which the author wrote the book and the practical examples included throughout the eight chapters makes it profoundly readable. This review attempts to familiarize readers with the main themes, strengths, some salient features, and contributions of the book.

Introduction

Nowadays, there is more trust in action research than ever with respect to the role it plays in improving teachers' professional development and thereby classroom practice (McKernan, 2013; Hine & Lavery, 2014). Its relevance lies in its focus on addressing real-world problems and challenges faced by practitioners. Unlike traditional research methods that often prioritize theoretical knowledge, action research emphasizes practical application and the active involvement of practitioners in the research process.

Valsa Koshy's book, "Action research for improving educational practice: A step-by-step guide, 2nd edition" is one of the valuable resources for educators and researchers interested in implementing action research in educational settings. This comprehensive guide provides a step-by-step approach to conducting action research, offering practical advice, examples, and tools to support the process. One of the aims of the author in writing this book is to help teachers and school leaders enhance their own professional practice. To achieve this aim, Koshy (2010) has explained the concepts and techniques of action research in eight interrelated chapters. In each chapter, the author discussed four to fifteen sub-chapters and provided a vivid chapter summary as closing remarks. In the chapters and sub-chapters, the author has gone

long enough to unpack action research procedures and techniques supported by living examples drawn from her extensive experience and the works of her advisees.

In this review, attempts are made to explore the key themes, strengths, and contributions of Koshy's book, highlighting its relevance and significance in the field of educational research. For this purpose, the review is organized under three parts. In the first part, an overview of the book is presented. Then, attempts are made to show the strengths, contributions, and some salient features of the book. Finally, a concluding remark focusing on the book's contribution for practitioners, especially for those working in education systems where the action research tradition has not yet satisfactorily developed, is highlighted.

Overview of the Book

Koshy's book is organized under eight chapters, each focusing on different aspects of action research. The book begins its discussion with the story of Laura (a pseudonym given by the author), one of the teachers who were interested in enhancing the learning opportunities of gifted children. The story informs readers, from the very beginning the entire steps of doing action research. The introduction also states the rationale behind doing action research as 'facilitating evaluation and reflection to implement changes in educational practice' (p. xii).

Then, in the first chapter of the book the author provides the meanings of action research. Here, the author showed that action research for different scholars (Lewin, 1946; Stenhouse, 1975; Car & Kemmis, 1986; McNiff, 1992) has different meanings. After this, Koshy (2010) made a deep analysis of these definitions and pinpointed commonalities of the definitions as 'better understanding, improvement, reform, problem-solving, step-by-step process, and modification' (p. 9). She also synthesized a new definition of her own as follows:

> [Action research refers to] constructive inquiry during which the researcher constructs his/her own knowledge of specific issues through planning, acting, evaluating, refining, and learning from the experience. It is a continuous learning process in which the researcher learns and also shares the newly generated knowledge with those who benefit from it (p. 9).

The author further dwells on explaining models of action research known in the action research literature (e.g., Lewin, Elliot, O'Leary, and Macintyre's action research models). In this section, Koshy (2010) advised readers not to take one model as a panacea because of the fact that 'excessive reliance on a particular model too rigidly may adversely affect the unique opportunity offered by the emerging nature and flexibility' (p.7). Instead, she advised action researchers to use their own model as far as it fits their purpose: improving own professional practice and learning from it.

Unpacking practical steps of action research is the next focus (chapter two), where the author raised a critical question 'why would practitioners do action research?' The answer she provided seems a sine qua non for current educational practice: she posited that teaching is concerned with developing the mind of the generation not with developing a set of technical competencies. This responsibility, according to her, can only be accomplished if teachers as practitioners take time to internalize ideas through reflection. In addition to its cyclic nature,

addressing practical problems, generating context-bound knowledge, enacting change, and engaging participants are epitomized as unique features of action research. She also described the steps to follow while selecting an action research title, and closed the chapter by presenting a list of alternative action research topics for readers.

Chapter three is devoted to reviewing literature in action research where the author has emphasized on three critical aspects: finding, organizing, and writing the literature. Reviewing the literature, according to the author, is mandatory to conducting action research because the 'production of new knowledge is fundamentally dependent on past knowledge' (p. 47). This is to mean that an action researcher needs to undertake a literature search and analysis to complement his/her reconnaissance. In fact, this is not compatible with previous understandings since there is a tendency to view literature reviewing as optional in action research. Koshy (2010) has identified the sources to consult while making a literature search as policy-related literature, theoretical literature, existing research, and research methods. She also reminds readers to visit important research databases for making a review of the literature.

Chapters four through six deal with planning action research, gathering data, and data analysis respectively. Accordingly, in the planning section, Koshy (2010) reminds readers that a good action research project does not happen by accident. Instead, it is carefully planned, employs flexible approach, and needs continuous reflection on the part of the action researcher. She also noted that before starting the project, practitioners should write the title, background (including professional context), personal motivation, aims, and specific outcomes. In this section and the sections that follow, the role of a critical friend (a friend who can see other dimensions of an issue which ordinary people may overlook) is magnified.

Regarding data gathering, the author made it clear that the sample size from where the data is collected is based on the principle of data saturation and personal theorizing. She also stated that in action research, using several methods for collecting data does not make the study any better, but the quality of the data matters. This means data which has no depth is not important for planning actions. Moreover, the author provides a brief account of the paradigms, research approaches, and methods of action research. In fact, she argued in favor of the naturalistic paradigm, qualitative research approach, and qualitative data-collecting methods for undertaking action research. Nevertheless, other authors such as McNiff and Whitehead (2006) and Altrichter et al. (2000) classify action research under the category of critical theory. Criteria to decide on the type and amount of data and instruments to use are clearly presented in this section. Koshy (2010) has also advised action researchers to employ a variety of data collection methods for triangulation purposes. The guideline to prepare and use tools and the merits and demerits of each tool are also well described.

Data analysis is the issue treated in chapter six, where the author showed the mechanism to sift through data and ways of analyzing and representing it. Koshy (2010) named this stage a critical stage where the action researcher is expected to create a coherent story from all the data collected. At this stage, she advised practitioners to revisit the aims and expectations of the project, and the research questions or hypothesis before starting the actual data analysis. The author closed this chapter by presenting the ways of synthesizing findings from qualitative data (data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification) and quantitative data (quantitative description). Finally, Koshy (2010) has reminded action

researchers to find out the emerging themes and patterns based on the data analysis they carried out.

In the last two chapters, the author deals with the writing and publishing of action research reports respectively. Accordingly, in chapter seven, she looked into the process of writing action research reports. While writing the reports, the author advised, 'the intention is not to make generalizable claims but to tell a story which is of interest to other practitioners who may want to learn from it, or replicate the study or apply the findings to their situations' (p.123). However, regarding the format of reporting action research results, she moved on silently without disclosing its flexible nature unlike what she did in the previous steps. Nevertheless, other authors (e.g., Hopkins, 2002; McKernan, 2013) provided alternative formats for reporting action research projects which can be used based on the choice of institutions. In the last chapter, which is unique to this second edition provides readers with directives on how to publish action research reports. Here, Koshy (2010) strongly insisted that action research reports like research reports from other designs should be published in academic journals and other dissemination platforms. In that regard, she has provided readers with a template that action researchers may use to organize their reports for publication.

Strengths and Contributions

One of the strengths of this book is its focus on how action research can be applied in real world educational settings. In this regard, Koshy (2010) presents several case studies from contexts demonstrating successful implementation of action research to address specific challenges and enhance teaching and learning outcomes. These case studies offer examples that readers can relate to and draw inspiration from when conducting their research.

Additionally, the author includes a variety of tools and templates throughout the book to assist readers in organizing their research activities. These resources encompass sample consent forms, interview protocols, observation checklists and frameworks for data analysis. By providing these tools, Koshy (2010) ensures that readers have access to resources that can support their action research projects.

Furthermore, the book emphasizes the significance of disseminating research findings to an audience. The author provides guidance on writing research reports, presenting findings at conferences, and publishing in journals. This emphasis on dissemination highlights the authors dedication to ensuring that action research contributes meaningfully to the community.

Another advantage of Koshy's book is that it is easily understandable for readers. The author explains ideas in a way that's straightforward and easy to follow making it appropriate for both beginner and experienced researchers. The step-by-step approach and the practical examples also help readers to comprehend the essential concepts of action research and successfully apply them in their own educational environments.

A further benefit of the book is its thorough examination of numerous facets of action research. In this regard, the author discusses not only the technical elements of the research but also the ethical concerns and problems that researchers might encounter. Overall, the author provides practitioners and interested readers with a concise and straightforward procedure to conduct action research, especially on issues related to education, and that makes the title self-

explanatory. Exemplary action research projects incorporated in the different parts of the book are helpful to readers to easily acquire the practical steps of doing action research.

With regard to research tradition, the author reminds the scientific community not to overlook this research paradigm since it is critical to improve self-practice and produce context-relevant knowledge, which the author called self-theorizing. In practice, however, the author seems influenced by the academic research tradition, where scientific rigor is a necessity. For instance, her positions reflected with regard to literature reviewing and publication seem unique from other scholars in the field of action research, which likely shift the focus of action research from improving practice to generating knowledge (second priority of action research). However, action research is not something that is too rigid and technical; it is flexible and aims at better understanding, improvement, reform, problem-solving, modification, and learning something new from self-practice that guides future practice. The focus of action research is neither mere researching nor action, but both action and research; i.e., the meaningful marriage between research and action, and out of this fusion, self-knowledge that guides one's practice would be derived.

Concluding Remarks

As already indicated, Valsa Koshy's book "Action research for improving educational practice: A step-by-step guide, 2nd edition" is a valuable guide that helps educational practitioners to successfully implement action research projects. In the book, the author provides concise and straightforward ideas and procedures useful to conduct action research.

In the same corollary, the book has practical importance for education systems where the tradition of action research has not yet developed. A good example in this regard is Ethiopia. As reported by some researchers (e.g., Firdissa, 2017; Mulugeta, 2017; Mulugeta, Dawit, & Andargachew, 2022), the practice of action research has not reached to the expected level due to the presence of many impeding factors. The reviewer strongly believes that Koshy's succinct, practical, and practitioner-friendly book will make a tremendous contribution to mitigating these impediments and strengthening the practice of action research in the country's education system.

The book under discussion, I argue, is of paramount significance, particularly for practitioners of the country's general education and TVET sub-sectors, as doing action research has become a mandatory requirement vis-à-vis their professional development and career growth. Hence, I invite them to read the whole book and consider its many benefits.

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