



POLICY BRIEF

Institutionalizing Practice-Based Action Research in Teacher Education Programme in Afghanistan

A Multi-Modal Approach to Teacher Professional Development in Low Resource Settings

Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, Afghanistan
2024

Supported By



AFGHANISTAN RESEARCH TEAM

Mr. Mohammad Tahir Ismat (Co-Principal Investigator)

Mr. Mohammad Sadiq Dehzad (Project Coordinator)

Mr. Charles Olaka Kesa (Senior Education Specialist who participated till March 2022)

Mr. Anwarullah Sadat (Senior Education Officer/Research Team Member)

Ms. Zulaikha Rafiq (Consultant)

Disclaimer: The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of International Development Research Centre (IDRC) or its Board of Governors.

Acknowledge: This work was supported by the Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange, a joint endeavour with the International Development Research Centre, Canada.

Policy Brief

Institutionalizing Practice-Based Action Research in Teacher Education Programme in Afghanistan

A. Executive Summary

This policy brief is advocating for the institutionalization of the Action Research in the Teacher Education Programmes in Afghanistan. By using practice-based Action Research, teachers can be involved in reflective practices in teaching, engage in critical analysis of their teaching methodology, and make significant contributions to improving the education system ensuring quality education in the schools in the country.

A small cohort of Afghanistan teacher educators and teachers participated in a South Asia Teacher Educator (SATE) fellowship programme under the project called 'A Multimodal Approach to Teacher Professional Development in Low Resource Settings (MATPD)', which was implemented in Afghanistan, Nepal, and Maldives, led by Villa College in Maldives and co-led by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in India, from May 2021 through November 2023. In Afghanistan, it was implemented by the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, an international NGO that had provided 40 years of support to the education sector in Afghanistan. The MATPD was a unique opportunity for Afghanistan education practitioners to experiment with different alternative modes of teacher professional development, which were especially relevant in the context of the acute shortage of technical expertise as well as material resources needed to build the professional capacities of teachers. Action research was a critical component of this project, and as in the other two participating countries, Afghan research fellows had the opportunity to engage in and learn experientially, how to use action research as a tool for teacher professional development, as an alternative and a complement to the conventional teacher training workshops provided periodically by the Ministry of Education and its partners.

Through this brief, we make a case for integrating collaborative Action Research in pre-service and in-service Teacher Education Programmes in Afghanistan. Learning how to use action research can strengthen the teachers' professional development, furnishing them with the required knowledge, skills, and methods to fulfill the educational needs in the country.

This policy brief highlights the benefits of Action Research, identifies key challenges for the successful implementation of Action Research, and proposes recommendations.

B. Introduction

Afghanistan's education sector is severely under-resourced, both in terms of physical resources as well as qualified manpower. There is a shortage of qualified teachers at all levels of schooling, particularly in rural and remote parts of the country. Consequently, it is unrealistic to expect schools and teachers to provide consistent and quality education to Afghan girls and boys in school. To improve the education quality and strengthen the education system in Afghanistan there is a need to invest in the teacher education component as teacher education plays a very important role in enhancing the quality of education in the country (Ministry of Education Afghanistan, 2019)¹. Traditional teacher education programmes (comprised of periodic seminars and training workshops on predetermined topics) are often not sufficient to equip teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills to address effectively challenges encountered in the classroom (UNESCO, 2018)². There is a need to upscale, update, and diversify options and opportunities that school teachers and teacher educators can benefit from, to improve professionally within the limitations of their contexts. To fulfill the demands of the students in the classrooms and provide a better quality education in Afghan schools, innovative ways to build the teachers' capacities must be explored. One such innovation is institutionalizing the practice of Action Research.

Action research 'is a process that improves education by incorporating change and involving educators working together to improve their own practices; it is collaborative and participative since educators are integral members of the research process; it is practical and relevant, allowing educators direct access to research findings; and it focuses on critical reflection about professional practice.'³

Action Research is an area teachers, teacher educators in Afghanistan, and MoE staff are not familiar with (Landscape Mapping Study, 2022)⁴. It is missing from the teacher education curricula. It has the potential to bring positive changes in Afghanistan's Teacher Education and enable the solving of educational problems and bringing required improvements in education at the level of schools and teachers. By integrating Action Research as an important component of the teacher education programme, Afghanistan can foster a culture of inquiry, reflection, and continuous improvement among the teachers and teacher educators (Stringer, 2007)⁵.

¹ Ministry of Education Afghanistan. (2019). Education Strategic Plan 2017 – 2021.

² UNESCO. (2018). Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2018: Migration, displacement, and education - Building bridges, not walls. Paris: UNESCO Publishing.

³ Mertler, Craig A. (2021) "Action Research as Teacher Inquiry: A Viable Strategy for Resolving Problems of Practice," Practical Assessment, Research, and Evaluation: Vol. 26 , Article 19.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/pare/vol26/iss1/19>

⁴ Landscape Mapping Study Report, Country Report – Afghanistan 2022. A Multi-Modal Approach to Teacher Professional Development to Address Evolving Educational Changes in Low Resource Settings.

⁵ Stringer, E.T. (2007) Action Research. 3rd Edition, SAGE Publications Ltd., London.

A Behavior, Attitude, Skill, and Knowledge (BASK) study (2023)⁶ of participating Afghan research fellows revealed that the fellows found Action research very effective in addressing specific education related issues in specific contexts, and they stressed the importance of incorporating action research formally into the TPD in the country. This is possible when MoE recognizes its value and accepts it as a vital component of the TPD, incorporating it into the preservice and in-service curriculum.

C. Approaches and Results of the MATPD

Fellowship Programme to Enhance Practices Using Action Research

A 10-month South Asia Teacher Educators (SATE) fellowship programme was implemented as part of an International project titled - Multimodal Approach to Teacher Professional Development in Low-resource Settings (MATPD). It was conceptualized by a South-South collaborative MATPD consortium with Villa College, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, and the Swedish Committee of Afghanistan as partners. The SATE fellowship programme was designed to provide professional development to fellows recruited from Afghanistan, Nepal, and Maldives, incorporating characteristics like content-based active learning, supporting collaboration, use of models of effective practice, mentoring, and sustained feedback and reflection during the fellowship duration.

The MATPD project aimed to develop professional communities that empower practitioners to identify problems of practice to devise contextualized solutions and develop professional capacities of teachers (TPD) through collaborative action research with teachers. The intervention design was based on four principles of distance learning online for Continuous Professional Development (CPD); social learning through interaction with peers and experts on various platforms; practice-based learning through engaging in problems of practice and trying innovative practices during action research, and contextualization by adopting and adapting the design of TPD and lessons based on challenges experienced in low-resource settings by learners.

Practice-based Action Research

During the course of the fellowship, 15 research fellows who were mainly Teacher Educators (TEs) worked on various subjects in different contexts in Afghanistan, in collaboration with teachers, to implement innovative pedagogical practices in low-resource contexts thereby building the capacities of teachers and improving student learning and engagement in the classroom. The research fellows developed an understanding of the context, classroom teaching

⁶ Behavior, Attitude, Skill, and Knowledge (BASK) Study, Report 2023. A Multi-Modal Approach to Teacher Professional Development to Address Evolving Educational Changes in Low Resource Settings.

practices, and how teachers and students learn. They also learned how to negotiate on-field challenges, etc.

A comparison of baseline and endline studies of participating research fellows was used to measure the change in beliefs, attitudes, skills, and knowledge of the fellows in the fellowship programme. The findings related to the action research revealed that:

- RFs found action research to be useful for educators to build their professional capacity and seek solutions to local contextual issues related to education.
- Research fellows found that the team-oriented approach allowed the teachers to identify issues of teaching and learning and developed their skills in devising solutions to help themselves through collaborating with peers and mentors.
- Participation of teacher educators in the Action Research process supported their professional growth.
- As a result of action research implementation, classroom practice was improved and better teaching and learning strategies were adopted by participating teachers.
- All research fellows reported positive outcomes of their action research.
- The research fellows expressed interest in continuing to engage in action research and proposed that teacher mentors could teach it to other teachers to broaden their professional development.
- Research fellows pointed to the need for funding support, education material, technical assistance from the government, and help from international NGOs to establish action research as part of teachers' professional development programme.

Advantages of Incorporating Action Research in Teacher Education and Teaching Practices

Professional Development

Teachers learn to be reflective practitioners who evaluate and continue fine-tuning their teaching approaches based on proven practices. Individual reflection and ongoing learning allows educators to enhance their instructional techniques and adapt them to learning needs. Action research increases teachers' pedagogy knowledge and their perception of students' learning (McNiff, 2013)⁷.

Contextualized Learning

Teachers identify specific problems arising in the classrooms and institutions and apply their findings appropriately, to find valid and relevant solutions. Using action research allows teachers to individualize interventions based on their real settings, improving effectiveness in teaching and learning.

⁷ McNiff, J. (2013). Action Research: Principles and Practice (3rd ed.).

Action research enables a localized approach to address issues that are unique to a classroom, school, or community. This is important in Afghanistan because the educational context differs widely between regions and communities.

Empowerment and Ownership

Teachers become empowered and are involved in the educational decision-making process, taking ownership of their growth. This enhances their confidence, autonomy, and understanding of themselves as agents of change through active involvement in the research process. It makes teachers responsible for their professional growth and assists in enhancing their practice. An increased sense of agency and empowerment translates into higher job satisfaction, motivation, and retention of teachers (Cochrane-Smith & Lytle, 2009)⁸.

Knowledge Generation

Action research leads to important discoveries that can impact wider changes in education policy and reform. Teachers can use the data they collect and analyze to support their evidence-based practice, support for political decision-making, and the improvement of educational systems. It helps to identify gaps and provides information needed to make decisions and policies for improving schools and developing the country's education system. Afghanistan should use research findings to ensure that the country's educational practice is in context and backed with evidence.

D. Challenges and Barriers

Limited Awareness and Training

The majority of Afghanistan teachers and teacher educators are ignorant of action research methodologies.

Resource Constraints

Resources like time, money, research material, and technical support, are currently lacking to support the widespread adoption of Action Research.

Infrastructural Limitations

Inadequate access to technological infrastructure and internet connections, and research database access may hinder teachers' research activities.

Cultural Factors

The cultural norms as well as the organizational structures inherent in education institutions could serve to discourage teachers from participating and sharing research findings. There is a need to establish an enabling culture that appreciates and rewards teachers' research undertakings in order to provide incentives to encourage more participation in education research.

⁸ Cochrane-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. L. (2009). *Inquiry as Stance: Practitioner Research for the Next Generation*. Teachers College Press.

E. Recommendations for Effective Implementation

Curriculum Integration

Include action research modules in pre-service and in-service teacher development programmes where teachers develop both pedagogical knowledge and research skills. The curriculum for teacher education should provide course units dealing with action research methodologies, ethics, and techniques of data analysis.

Capacity Building

Carry out broad-based ongoing professional development programmes to enable teachers and teacher educators to learn about action research methods, data analysis, and research ethics. The programmes should allow teachers to interact and make observations and get reviews concerning their research.

Resource Allocation

Provide the necessary resources such as financial support, enough time, and modern technologies to enable the effective participation of the teachers in action research. This aspect entails offering access to research materials, and data analysis technologies, and facilitating academic paper dissemination.

Collaborative Networks

Foster networking between teachers, schools, Teacher Training Colleges, and education stakeholders for collaboration and knowledge sharing, mentoring, and peer support during the action research endeavor. Developing research networks and communities of practice will foster a platform whereby teachers will work together in research and exchange their evidence and experiences.

Policy Support

Develop supportive policies and guidelines (conclusive policies) that appreciate action research in teacher education programmes and reward participation and sharing of the findings and innovations in teaching and learning. Policy frameworks toward research must promote collaboration among researchers, value teachers' research, and offer avenues for disseminating the findings to neighboring communities, regions, and nations.

F. Conclusion

The institutionalization of action research in teacher education programme in Afghanistan has the potential to strengthen teachers' professional development and improve educational standards and quality of education. Action research empowers teachers who learn to engage in reflective practice and inquiry and makes them active contributors to the success of the education system. For this to be possible, issues of limited consciousness, lack of resources, infrastructural restriction, and cultural hindrance must be addressed. Through incorporating action research into the teacher training programmes, comprehensive professional

development, availability of requisite resources, fostering networks, and developing appropriate policies Afghanistan will generate a supportive culture for the teachers to undertake action research and enhance the quality of education in the country.