PROMOTING COLLABORATIVE ACTION RESEARCH AMONG IN-SERVICE TEACHERS THROUGH LESSON STUDY: A PROPOSED APPROACH

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Abstract

The Educational Planning and Research Division (EPRD) introduced action research (AR) in 1988 and since then, various AR models and approaches were used in inculcating and implementing AR among teachers and educators in schools, and teacher training colleges (now known as institute of teacher education). Nevertheless, studies carried out (e.g., EPRD, 1993, 1996, 1997,1999; Madzniyah Md. Jaafar, 1998, 2002, 2006; T. Subahan, Abd. Rashid Johar & Jamil Ahmad, 2001) and my own experiences as AR facilitator among in-service teachers since 1996, found teachers and educators preferred to conduct individual AR projects. Currently, in-service teachers conducting lesson study (LS) faced similar challenges and issues related to time, space and LS related skills faced in AR. My analysis of AR and LS found commonalities in terms of the stages involved other than the required skills in implementing AR and LS. Thus, a more beneficial approach in promoting collaborative AR is through LS whereby LS emphasize team work whereas AR emphasize systematic inquiry into the teachers' own practices and documenting the process. However, various implications are identified in this proposed approach that would require us, among others, to revisit the existing condition and situation in schools, and a more robust approach towards promoting professional learning community and continuous professional development among in-service teachers.

Keywords: Collaborative action research, lesson study, professional learning community, continous professional development, in-service teachers

Abstrak

Bahagian Perancangan Dasar dan Polisi Pendidikan (EPRD) memperkenalkan penyelidikan tindakan (PT) pada tahun 1988 dan sejak itu, pelbagai model dan pendekatan PT digunakan dalam pembudayaan dan pelaksanaan PT di sekolah, maktab perguruan (kini dikenali sebagai Institut Pendidikan Guru) dalam kalangan pendidik. Namun, kajian yang dilakukan (contoh, EPRD, 1993, 1996, 1997,1999; Madzniyah Md. Jaafar, 1998, 2002, 2006; T. Subahan, Abd. Rashid Johar & Jamil Ahmad, 2001) dan pengalaman saya selaku fasilitator PT dalam kalangan guru dalam perkhidmatan sejak 1996, mendapati guru-guru berkenaan lebih cenderung melaksanakan projek PT secara individu. Pada masa ini, guru-guru yang melaksanakan *lesson study* (LS) menghadapi cabaran dan isu yang lebih kurang sama dengan PT berkaitan dengan masa, ruang dan kemahiran. Analisis saya terhadap PT dan LS mendapati ada persamaan dari segi peringkat serta kemahiran yang diperlukan dari segi pelaksanaan aktiviti berkenaan. Justeru, pendekatan yang lebih bermanfaat dalam mempromosikan PT jenis kolaboratif ialah melalui LS yang memberi penekanan kepada kerja berpasukan manakala PT pula memberi penekanan pada inkuiri secara sistematik pada amalan kendiri guru serta pendokumentasian proses berkenaan. Namun, pelbagai implikasi dikenal pasti dalam cadangan pelaksanaan pendekatan ini yang memerlukan, antara lain, penelitian semula situasi dan keadaan di sekolah dan suatu pendekatan yang lebih *robust* diperlukan dalam mewujudkan komuniti pembelajaran profesional dan perkembangan profesional secara berterusan dalam kalangan guru dalam perkhidmatan.

Kata kunci: Penyelidikan tindakan jenis kolaboratif, *lesson study*, komuniti pembelajaran profesional, perkembangan profesional secara berterusan, guru dalam perkhidmatan

Introduction

The Ministry of Education, Malaysia (MOE) has promoted continuous professional development (CPD) among teachers since 1990s through the notion of reflective practitioner (Schon, 1987) with the objective of producing teachers who are life long learners. Thus, various programmes, such as, reflectivity activities, action research (AR) and currently Professional Learning Communites (PLC), were and are implemented in schools, Institute of Teacher Education Campuses (ITEC) (then known as Teacher Training Colleges) through Teacher Education Division (TED) and Institute of Educational Leadership and Management (Institut Aminuddin Baki).

Background of AR in Malaysia

The MOE through the Educational Planning and Research Division (EPRD) introduced AR to Malaysian educators in 1988. Various AR projects and activities were and are implemented then to foster the culture of research among educators, such as, Program for Innovation, Excellence and Research (PIER) (1993-1996) spearheaded by EPRD, with the cooperation of State Education Departments, and TED through ITEC. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Malaysia, such as, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Universiti Malaya, and Universiti Sains Malaysia, also promote AR in their respective programmes. So do Matriculation Colleges and MARA Profesional Colleges.

As for pre-service teachers at ITEC, AR was taught as part of the Education Studies course or part of Major Courses in the Post Graduate Teaching Program curriculum (TED, 1995, 1997). Since the year 2010, pre-service teachers at all the 27 ITEC implement AR as a research method in all major courses (course code 3113/3133 and 3115/3153) during their final year of the four years Degree in Teaching with Honours Programme [known as "Program Ijazah Sarjana Muda Perguruan (PISMP) dengan Kepujian"] (ITEM, 2009; ITEM, 2014).

Action Research Models and Approaches Used In Malaysia

Since the introduction of AR in Malaysia by Stephen Kemmis in December 1998, various AR models (e.g., Elliott, 1978, 1980, 1987; Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988; McNiff, 1988) were and are used as guidelines in implementing AR in schools (see Figure 1).
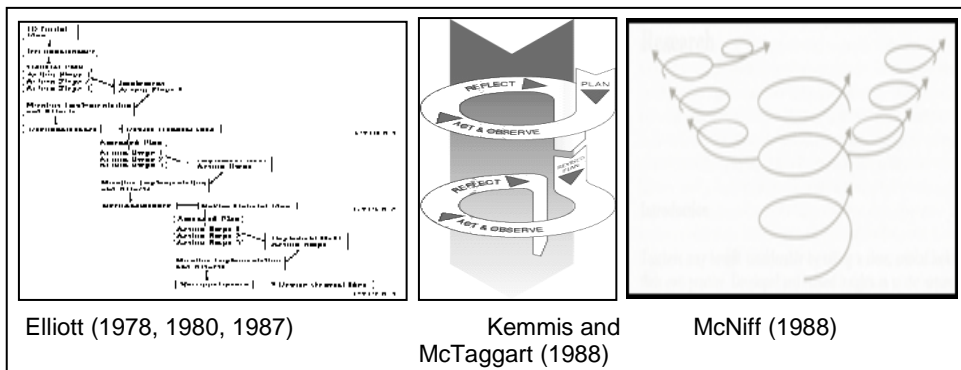

| Elliott (1978, 1980, 1987) | Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) | McNiff (1988) |

Figure 1. Various AR Models Used in Schools in Malaysia

As for ITEC, an adaptation of Lewin (1946) and Laidlaw (1992) AR models (TED, 2001) incorporating the five stages of implementing AR are used in the ITEC AR curriculum (see Figure 2).
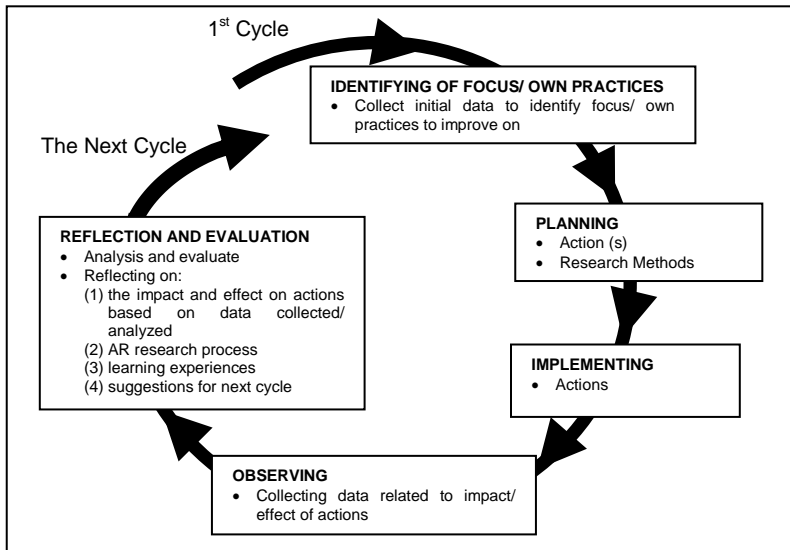

Figure 2. Adaptation of Lewin's (1946) and Laidlaw's (1992)
AR Models (TED, 2001) used at ITEC in Malaysia

Various approaches too were used in CPD programmes in relation to AR learning. The developmental approach in addition to one-shot training programme and cascade model were and are among the approaches used in inculcating AR among teachers and educators. Hence, throughout the years, it is not surprising to see the generation of countless AR projects and reports produced by in-service, pre-service teachers and post graduate students. National seminars (e.g., EPRD National Seminar, 2003, 2005) and international conference (e.g. International Conference on Action Research in Education 2014) in addition to state and district level seminars were and are held to enable the sharing of AR findings. Various AR publications in the form of AR Proceedings (EPRD, 2003, 2005); AR Module (EPRD, 1994); AR Manual (EPRD, 2003); AR Guidelines (TED, 2001); and AR Journals (e.g. ITE Batu Lintang Campus AR Journal, 2005 – till now)

Issues and Concern

Despite the years of cultivating AR among Malaysia educators generally and teachers specifically, studies carried out by EPRD (1993, 1996, 1997,1999) and some researchers in Malaysia (e.g., T. Subahan, 1996; Edahwati Abd. Halim, 1997; Lee Soon Guan, 1997; Madzniyah Md. Jaafar, 1998, 2002, 2006; T. Subahan, Abd. Rashid Johar & Jamil Ahmad, 2001; Jamil Ahmad, 2002); my own experiences as facilitator in conducting AR among in-service teachers since 1996, and analysis on in-service teachers' AR reports and papers (Chuah, 2006) found teachers preferred to conduct individual AR projects. Among the reasons identified for doing individual AR projects were related to time and space other than having the related AR knowledge and skills.

Reflection on my own experiences in conducting AR and involvement as a teacher educator for AR courses among in-service teachers and pre-service

teachers doing AR since 1996 showed that conducting AR is not an easy task, what more for beginners. Similar to other types of research, doing AR involves different types of knowledge and skills; and the synthesis of such knowledge and skills at every stage of a research process. As a result, beginning action researchers face various issues related to AR as a research method other than issues related to time, space and support in implementing AR. In addition, teachers need to implement various policies introduced in line with the Malaysian Educational Blueprint 2013-2025 (MOE, 2013), such as, PLC program in addition to the school-based assessment (Curriculum Development Centre, 2011). Thus, a more practical approach is needed to enable the implementation of AR among Malaysian in-service teachers in schools.

Objectives

This article is written with the aim of proposing a more practical approach, that is, "Collaborative AR through Lesson Study (LS)" in implementing AR towards improving the quality of AR among Malaysian in-service teachers in schools.

Lesson Study

Lesson Study is a Japanese model of teacher professional development for in-service training that is school-based. This training program is based on a long-term continouus improvement model that has been practiced by Japanese teachers for more than 40 years (Lim, Abdul Rashid Mohamed & Shuki Osman, 2014) and has been used since 1870s (Dudley, 2014). In Japanese, LS is known as *jugyokenkyu,* which means 'research study'. The aim of LS is to improve the quality of teaching and learning experience that teachers provide to their students by training teachers be more responsible towards students' learning through enhancing their teacher practices (Saito & Sato, 2012). Nevertheless, the key principles of LS are constant focus on students' learning, focuses on direct improvement of teaching in context, collaboration and reflection.

Lesson Study in Malaysia

Lesson Study is one of the activites suggested in the PLC program that was introduced by MOE in 2011 to be implemented by Malaysian school teachers (TED, 2011). In Malaysia, LS started with a pilot study titled "An exploratory Lesson Study on five Malaysian trainee teachers" (Chiew & Lim, 2003) that was carried out in 2003 at a secondary school in Kedah. From the year 2004-2009, there were at least 10 primary schools and five secondary schools in Penang and Kedah that participated in LS projects. Since the year 2011, LS was officially introduced and implemented in Malaysian schools. For instance, 42 secondary schools in Sabah carried out LS (Katina Matanluk, Khalid Johari & Ovelyn Matanluk, 2013) in 2011. Other states in Malaysia carried out LS too.

Proposed Approach: 'Collaborative AR through Lesson Study'

Conducting individual AR is not an issue or concern here but time, space, commitment and support available for in-service teachers to implement AR are. In fact, Calhoun (1993) was of opinion that there are basically three types or approaches in AR, namely, individual, collaborative and school-wide AR. I support the implementation of the different types or approaches of AR in lieu of differences in aims when doing AR. I also adhere to the basic characteristics of AR and AR definition stated by most AR proponents, such as, Kemmis and McTaggart (1988),

Elliott (1988, 1991), and McNiff (1988). Action research is generally defined as a form of systematic enquiry undertaken by the practitioner(s) to study or research on his/her own practice(s) towards the improvement of his/her own practice(s) other than solving related problems identified in his/her practices. Nevertheless, this systematic form of enquiry is best conducted collaboratively whereby collaboration could be used to validate reflection and for collaborative planning despite individual practice and improvement being the focus.

Elliott (1991) explained that the attempt by teachers to improve the educational quality of pupil's learning experiences through AR made it necessary for teachers to reflect about the ways curriculum structures shape pedagogy. Thus, by doing AR, teachers are actually studying curriculum structures and this should not be done in isolation or detachment to bring effective change. For Elliott, when teachers reflect in isolation, he/she "would become aware of his/her powerlessness to effect change" and "dissociate his/her professional development from curriculum development and evaluation or research." This would in turn "allow others to utilize such activities as forms of hierarchical surveillance and control over their practices"(p. 55). Hence, he proposed the transformation of the professional culture that supports collaborative reflection about practice.

Kemmis and McTaggart's (1988) AR definition emphasizes its participatory, collaborative and self-reflective nature and firmly locates it as a form of social action oriented towards improvement concurred with Elliott's (1991) definition. For Kemmis and McTaggart, "the approach is only action research when it is collaborative, though it is important to realize that the action research of the group is achieved through the critically examined action of individual group members"(pp. 5-6).

McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead (2003) supported collaboration through participation of critical friend (CF) in research. They mentioned that CF also played the role of "offering as well as receiving advice, even if it is painful or unwelcome, and always aiming to praise and offer support" (pp 38-39). They asserted that the CF "regardless of status or role, is expected to help you (*the researcher*) achieve a critical perspective – what some philosophers call 'rendering the familiar strange' - even though this may challenge the normal assumptions underlying your (*the researcher's*) work. (p 112) (*Note*: my own notes in italic).

Altrichter (1997) in his study on Austrian INSET project described the following scene.

> Action research aims at a different image of the teaching profession where reflective practitioners collaborate with their colleagues and clients in order to responsibly develop their practice and their competencies. This type of professional practice also implies transformed conditions of work, e.g., time for reflection, conversation, and coordination during the school day; readiness to give up the comfortable aspects of the 'single combat' mentality of the classroom teacher, etc. These conditions are presently lacking…. (p 37)

Thus, it is not surprising that Day (1999) was of opinion that opening one-self to external perspectives in double loop learning is crucial in gaining better understanding of one-self through others. In the process of engaging alone and with others in different kinds of reflection, the teachers would encounter self-confrontation. Thus, the teachers need intellectual and affective support other then "be both individual and collaborative inquirers" (p 26).

The collaborative characteristic discussed in AR is also found in LS (Lewis, 2002; Dudley, 2014) whereby teachers collaborate since the first stage of identifying and formulating goals till the stage of teaching and revising the lesson plan when implementing LS. The emphasis given to collaboration in LS would serve as a powerful tool in promoting collaborative AR. Thus, a more beneficial approach in promoting collaborative AR is through LS. That involves integrating LS into AR or vice-versa. Studies by Chiew and Lim (2003), Katina, Khalid and Ovelyn (2013), Lim, Abdul Rashid and Shuki (2014), for examples, showed promotion of collaboration among those involved in the LS.

In addition to that, my analysis of AR and LS found commonalities in terms of the stages involved in implementing AR and LS. As shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2, there are some commonalities in the stages of AR to the steps in implementing LS. For instance, formation of group and identify and formulate goals in LS is similar to identify practice to improve on in AR; plan lesson collaboratively (Plan action individually or collaboratively in AR); teach and observe the lesson (implement and observe the action during lesson in AR); reflect and revise the lesson plan (reflect and evalute the action in AR); and teaching the revised lesson plan (the next cylce begins again with revised focus or action in AR). In fact, Dudley (2014) is of opinion that LS is "a highly specified form of classroom action research focussing on the development of teacher practice knowledge" (p 1).

Likewise, AR emphasis on systematic inquiry into the teachers own practices and documenting the process would serve as a useful tool in LS. My own experience in facilitating a group of secondary school teachers at Simunjan conducting LS in 2014 found the teachers needed support in terms of research knowledge and skills, such as, observation, and reflection in documenting their LS. They also needed knowledge in writing AR report. They were of opinion that it would be beneficial to many if they use systematic inquiry to document their LS.

Implications

Various implications are identified in this proposed approach that would require us to revisit the existing condition and situation in schools, and a more robust approach towards PLC and CPD of in-service teachers, among others. For instance, the school time table for teaching and learning, and time for group reflection need to be planned in such a way that supports collaborative AR through LS. This in turn require the support from the school management.

The school teachers themselves need to be flexible, open-mind and be willing to participate in the LS. The notion of participating willingly in LS mean be willing to allow others to "enter the teachers' classroom and world" for collaboration, professional discussion and group reflection. This require a new mindset that allows the teachers to counter one own self and engage with others in order to gain better understanding of one self and other perspectives.

Not only that, support in the form of collaboration with significant others, such as, other educators outside schools, for instances, School Improvment Coaches, School Improvement Partners, and other master trainers in different subjects and research from Institute of Teacher Education and universities would also play an important role in enhancing the quality of LS and AR. This win-win approach would further enhance the establishment of PLC among the stakeholders.

Conclusion

I do admit that implementing AR is not an easy task for beginning action researchers among in-service teachers, especially when they have to juggle between teaching and fulfilling other tasks required of them in schools. As a result, in-service teachers mostly conducted individual AR and in isolation. The introduction of PLC program require school teachers to implement LS, for instance.

Thus, collaborative action research should be promoted through LS and vice-versa to enable the teachers to reap the benefits from conducting both AR and LS. Nevertheless, this proposed approach would require a relook at the school situation and condition that would function as enablers of AR and LS other than a more robust approach towards PLC and CPD of in-service teachers, such as, through collaboration with significant others outside schools.

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