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Pupils as action researchers - benefits and limitations

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is promotion of the idea of practicing action research as a teaching strategy and the role of the pupils as action researchers.

In the first part Action research - the way of learning there is a theoretical critical elaboration of the learning through action researches. Pupils as action researchers, as a second part, assures us about the possibilities of using action research as a teaching method and explains the roles of pupils in that process. The possible benefits and limitation from the implementation of the approach “ARP” action research pupil are given in the third part.

Keywords: Action research; teaching methods; action research pupil; strategies of teaching.

1. Action research - the way of learning

Action research is a practice in the modern teaching process which gives opportunities for secondary productive development of the person. Completing the primary aims of the learning and teaching are supported with research and action solutions which redefine, support and modernize the realization of the primary aims. The meaning of the action research given by Elliot J. in which we can see a chance “…to improve practice rather than to produce knowledge” (2001, p. 49), and that one which stresses that: "...all action research has the aims of improvement and involvement..." (Carr W & Kemmis S., 1986 in Schwandt T. A. 1997, p. 2) are completely sufficient indicator for the difference in approaches. In that direction are the views of Lawton and Gordon, who think that it is a research whose “intention is not simple to understand and transmit but to make certain improvements.” (1993, p. 47)

Promoting of understanding the practice, their improvement and making a new reality are the base of the definition of the action researches given by Bognar B. and Zovko M. (2009): “…central point of an action research inquiry is not merely acquiring knowledge, but developing our creative potentials and it is only from them that we are able to create new realities, and thereby new knowledge.”

Seen from our perspective, the action researches can be defined as motivated tries getting to know our own practice, arranged tries for changing of that practice, arranged evaluation and reflective criticism through which the involved learn. Through that process we form the educational practice, “…that is, mutually beneficial and life-
affirming to all parties. In undertaking action research a researcher is investigating how they can improve their own learning so that they are better placed to help others. (McNiff with Whitehead, 2002, p. 89)

2. Pupils as action researchers

There are numerous authors who are unanimous in the promotion of the idea for inclusion of pupils in the process of school improvement. According to SooHoo “…As teachers, we need to find ways to continually seek out these silent voice because they can teach us much about learning and learners.”(In: McCall J., 2001:75) In the context of the research activities the pupil very often finds himself in the role of active subject in the process of adopting knowledge through research in the form of: finding of individual approaches in the realization of the goals of learning, organization of space and time for learning, creating and using the media in that process, finding, selecting and using the contents for achieving certain aims etc. The given research activities of the pupil are limited by the length of the class or the working days, selected and used strategy of teaching created by teachers, reflective teaching, requirements of the national curriculum etc.

The reflective research activities of the pupil in a form of action research start at that moment when is questioned the degree of the individual engagement in their own development, the relationship between then individual and the common in fulfilling the aims of learning, appropriateness of the methodological solutions in teaching etc.

In some way, the diversity of teachers, and the dilemmas and unanswered questions of the pupils stress the needs of inclusion of pupil as ““coproducers” and “cocreators” of their own learning” (Wylie T. 1999: 196) This give us right to suggest overcoming of the dilemmas with the teacher researches “…which arises from a conflict between the value of critical openness to pupils and respect for the professional expertise of colleagues…” (Elliot J., 2001: 59) As Elliot point out, the evaluative value of the students which is a product of pupil action research is “… a major source of that data”. (ibid, 10)

3. “ARP” (Action research pupil) - the truth

As subject in the process of learning and teaching, the pupils should be empowered for enlarging the “…abilities to govern their own lives,” which will results “…in ability to take action in a more self-conscious way…” (Boog B., 2001: 3) If we agree that “…the chief researcher in any piece of teacher research is the teacher whose classroom is under investigation…” (Lankshear C. & Knobel M., 2006:4), than we should be convinced in the possibility the pupils, who are actually input and output in the process of learning and teaching, to participate in creating, critics and evaluation and improvement of that classroom.

Action research pupil (ARP) is a concept of defined behaviour of pupil in creating understandable perception, acceptable and wanted actions, expected conditions and achieved goals in their own, unique but inappropriate learning environment.

The defined behaviour of the pupils is a step which refers to use of eclecticism in the selection of philosophical bases for action. The inability of students to choose one of the philosophies and paradigms of research is the same with the abilities for free choice of rational and functional solutions which are common with the practice, not with theory. It would mean that in, so called, steps in action research “…theoretical, communicational, action, critical and continuous acting” (In: Iliev D., 2006: 152-154) or a steps seen by McKernan J. (1996: 29) “define the situation or problem, needs assessment, hypothesis ideas, develop action plan, implement plan, evaluate action, decisions” pupils have the opportunities to make clear perspective in learning with understandable perception of the situation. That means that pupils can see the environment (classroom) through their own eyes, and according to that perception to create acceptable and wanted action(s) to change current situation. Acceptable and wanted action(s) are those defined, implemented and leading from pupils based on a learning context and learning situation. The mastering of this learning process is not so rigorous and patterned.

The behaviour of pupils in ARP can succeed in expected conditions in the classroom. Those conditions, usually sets by the teacher, must be arranged and defined together with pupils so they would not create additional difficulties in carrying out the action research.

In the processes of definition of the goals of the action research the pupils should negotiate with the teachers in order not to create a parallel process of learning or/and teaching, but the processes which will support the teaching activities of the teachers. In the same time those goals should contribute to the learning goals of the pupil: primary
learning - for their own development and secondary learning - for improving of their own learning. In sense of the previous mentioned, everyone engaged in this process should support active learning of all of the parties who benefit from that process. If there is no common interest, there can occur “…limits to reflection in action” (Schön A. D., 2003:228,229) according unilateral control of the action. The authenticity of the insider solution of pupils can be important point in improving the process of learning as well as the teachers work. The defined behaviour is a process of methodological maturation of the pupils which is aimed toward the expected condition.

Through practicing the concept of ARP, the processes of learning and teaching can have their own benefits and limitation. The basic benefits which can be used in promoting the values of the concept of ARP can be: process oriented, pupils oriented and teacher oriented.

Benefits oriented to the quality of the processes of learning and teaching are fundamentally focused on a better understanding, organization and realization of those processes. Some of these benefits are the follows:
- Action research pupil can influence a better understanding among teachers and pupils;
- Action research pupil can improve the achievement of the goals of learning and teaching;
- Action research pupil can improve the implementation of the changes in the classroom learning;
- Action research pupil can support methodological decision in creating the teaching and learning process.

Pupil oriented benefits from practicing of the concept of action research pupil are:
- Participation of the pupils in decision making in the classroom;
- Strengthening the abilities of pupils to create their own learning environment;
- Better personal abilities of pupils;
- Motivated pupils in participation in the classroom and school activities;
- Developed abilities of pupil for self evaluation;

Such and similar benefits contribute to the status of pupils as partners in the classroom, their position as a leader in the classroom and school context.

Teacher oriented benefits are seen as crucial in classroom development. Legally, the responsibility of the success of the classroom is on a teacher. Because of that, the level of fulfilling of the pupil and process oriented benefits can influence on realization of the profession of the teacher. The benefits from action research pupil can be presented through:
- Better result from the external evaluation of the teacher;
- Strengthening the self-confidence of the teacher;
- Improved reflective activities of the teacher etc.

The limitations of the concept of ARP can be divided in two groups: physical limitations and methodological limitations.

In the physical limitations belong the problem with consistence in critical action and the problem with keeping attention during the whole action research. The pupils have physiological inability for critical thinking due to the age and can’t focus their attention for a long period of duration of the action research.

The group of methodological limitations of practicing the concept of action research pupil refers to the structuring of the instruments for data gathering, persistence of the ethical principles in realization of the action research, producing the system of knowledge based on the results of the research, complete dependence of the implementation of the results from “the others” etc.

Actually, the benefits and limitation of the practicing action research pupil concept must be taken into consideration in the process of changing the behaviour in the classroom, the changes in learning and teaching and the development of productive reflexive practice.

4. Conclusion

The realization of the action researches in a school and classroom context is vital for the success of the teachers and pupils. The teacher should know that using the concept of action research pupil can benefit with the intrinsic critics of the change, partnership in the process of improvement and shared unique educational values. The teacher should use the benefits of using the concept of pupil as action researcher and reduce the limitation follows of that concept. Through respecting and using of that benefits teacher will achieve the requirements of the contemporary classroom. Everyone who wants the best for teaching and learning should accept and support the practicing of the concept of action research people.
References


