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INTEGRATING ACTION RESEARCH INTO PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

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ANNOTATION

This article examines the significance of Action Research for improving teaching practices and facilitating continuous professional learning. It also explores the integration of Action Research into the professional development of teachers. The paper specifically analyzes contemporary approaches to professional development and highlights the growing importance of Action Research as a practice-oriented and reflective approach. Particularly, the main models of Action Research-based professional development, including individual inquiry, collaborative action research, school-wide action research, and university-school partnerships, are discussed. The article also reviews the methods and tools that are commonly used in classroom Action Research, such as observations, reflective journals, interviews, questionnaires, and document analysis. In addition, the study discusses the key factors that facilitate successful implementation, as well as the challenges and barriers that teachers may encounter during the integration process. The review of the literature demonstrates that Action Research contributes to the development of reflective practice, teacher autonomy, and evidence-informed instructional improvement.

Keywords: Action Research, teacher professional development, reflective practice, classroom inquiry, teacher learning

Most of the PD programs that are prevalent today have traditionally been designed and implemented to improve instructional competence and align with teaching practices, curriculum standards, and policy standards. Review of international literature indicates that PD programs are commonly delivered outside teachers' classrooms and professional context in the form of workshops, seminars, and formal training sessions (Villegas-Reimers, 2003; OECD, 2019). Importantly, PD programs are commonly developed by ministries of education, institutional authorities, and external initiatives that rarely involve teachers in identifying problems and setting goals.

Traditional PD programs have primarily focused on providing teachers with up-to-date professional knowledge, pedagogical techniques, and competencies that are necessary to reform their educational setting and practice effectively. PD initiatives are typically designed to support teacher change by introducing new instructional strategies or assessment practices, with the expectation that such changes will ultimately enhance student learning outcomes (Guskey, 2002). Correspondingly, Desimone (2009) says that many PD programs aim to improve teachers' professional knowledge through structured content delivery, focusing on coherence with curriculum goals and policy mandates.

Nonetheless, evidences from large-scale surveys suggest that while PD programs frequently have specific goals, their planned outcomes do not always bring sustained changes into classroom practice. Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) reports that teachers from different areas of the world take part in extensively in formal PD programs, though newly acquired knowledge is not followed up due to the limited opportunities for collaboration, and practical application (OECD, 2019; OECD, 2020). This means that PD programs tend to prioritize participation over long-lasting professional learning processes.

According to Avalos (2011), PD programs mostly perceive teachers as passive recipients of ready-made and externally generated knowledge rather than active contributors of professional learning journey. International review by UNESCO similarly says most of the PD programs mainly focus on standardization and accountability, that probably hinders responsiveness to teachers' professional needs (Villegas-Reimers, 2003). However, these initiatives appear limited because they mainly emphasize transmitting prescribed methods rather than fostering reflective and inquiry-oriented engagement with teaching in practice.

AR as an approach to facilitate TPD has been increasingly recognized across different educational contexts within a few decades. This growing interest did not emerge in isolation. Rather, it reflects long-standing concerns in the literature about traditional PD models, particularly their short-term nature and limited connection to teacher's everyday classroom practice (Avalos, 2011; Villegas-Reimers, 2003). As education systems emphasize more on school improvement, accountability, and decision-making guided by systematic information about teaching and learning, AR has been viewed as an approach that links teachers' professional learning more closely to instructional improvement and student learning.

One reason for AR being increasingly used in TPD can be found in evolving views of teacher learning. International research and policy reports suggest that teachers tend to value professional learning that is relevant to their own teaching contexts, sustained over time, and closely connected to classroom practice (OECD, 2019; OECD, 2020). Traditional PD activities, such as workshops and seminars delivered as isolated, short-term events, often struggle to meet these expectations. By contrast, AR involves teachers in identifying issues arising from their own practice, investigating these issues systematically, and experimenting with context-specific responses. From this perspective, PD is framed as an ongoing process rather than a single training event.

One of the key features of AR-based PD is its emphasis on **teacher agency.** Within AR, teachers take an active role in shaping their professional learning by formulating research questions, collecting and analyzing data, and making decisions about instructional changes based on classroom evidence. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) conceptualize this orientation as "inquiry as stance", highlighting the idea that teachers generate professional knowledge through systematic reflection on their own practice. This approach contrasts with models of PD in which teachers are primarily positioned as implementers of externally prescribed reforms. As several scholars have noted, opportunities for agency and ownership are closely linked to meaningful professional learning (Avalos, 2011).

Furthermore, AR is closely associated with the principles of **reflective practice**, which has long been considered to be central to teacher professionalism. The cyclical nature of AR provides teachers with a structured framework for examining their practice. Reflection in this context is not limited to informal consideration but supported by evidence gathered from the classroom (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; 2014). Through repeated cycles of inquiry, teachers are encouraged to question assumptions, evaluate the outcomes of instructional decisions, and adjust their practice

accordingly. This systematic approach distinguishes AR from more informal forms of reflection that may lack connections to professional improvement.

Inquiry-based improvement is another important dimension of AR-based PD. Traditional PD programs typically prioritize the introduction of new strategies or methods, with limited attention to how these approaches function in specific classroom contexts (Desimone, 2009). AR integrates professional learning with systematic inquiry, allowing teachers to examine the effects of particular interventions on teaching and learning which may address the limitation. In this way, AR supports PD approaches in which teacher learning is shaped through ongoing improvement and regular feedback (Guskey, 2002).

In addition, AR reflects the principle of **job-embedded learning**, which is widely regarded as a characteristic of effective PD. Studies suggest that teachers are more likely to engage meaningfully in professional learning when it is embedded in their daily work and directly related to instructional responsibilities (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; OECD, 2020). AR is inherently situated within teachers' professional contexts, as inquiry activities take place in classrooms and schools rather than separate training environments. As a result, learning through AR is often perceived as more relevant and immediately applicable, increasing the likelihood of sustained changes in practice.

The integration of AR into PD programs also offers a response to several well-documented limitations of conventional PD. Most studies have highlighted that traditional PD programs tend to be episodic, provide limited follow-up, and offer few opportunities for collaboration and adaptation to local contexts (Desimone, 2009; Avalos, 2011). AR helps to remedy these issues by promoting sustained engagement over time, encouraging collaborative inquiry among teachers, and grounding professional learning in locally identified needs. In this sense, AR makes a shift from standardized PD provision towards approaches that respond to the specific needs of teachers and their classrooms.

Review of the literature makes clear that integrating AR into PD does not happen automatically. Successful implementation of AR in PD requires deliberate planning and appropriate support structures. Studies have identified strategies that support effective integration of AR in PD, such as embedding AR within existing PD frameworks to reduce workload, encouraging collaborative inquiry through professional learning communities, and offering guidance on research methods and data analysis (Timperley et al., 2007; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). When these conditions are in place, AR can help connect ideas about professional learning with what actually happens in classroom.

Despite the considerable potential AR offers as an approach to PD, its successful integration into PD programs depends on a number of enabling conditions. Most researchers highlight several key factors that facilitate the effective integration of AR into PD. According to Darling-Hammond et al. (2017), conditions for effective PD is viewed in both school and system level, which either inhibit or facilitate effectiveness of PD itself. This study mentions seven common elements of effective PD: content focused; active learning strategies; collaboration; models; coaching and expert support; feedback and reflection; sustained duration (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). While these elements define effective professional development more broadly, their importance becomes even more pronounced when PD involves Action Research, which requires additional methodological competence and sustained professional support.

Support systems, like coaching, mentoring and support by experts are important for teachers to engage in AR because they provide guidance to formulate research questions, select methods, and interpret data. Studies suggest that the presence of experienced mentors or facilitators can play

a critical role in supporting teachers' inquiry processes and maintaining methodological rigor (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2014; Timperley et al., 2007).

In addition to practical support, **administrative support and a collaborative school culture** are frequently identified as vital enabling conditions due to the fact that school leaders play crucial role in forming conditions under which AR can flourish. In collaborative atmosphere teachers feel comfortable when sharing and discussing challenges and reflecting collectively which is important for sustaining inquiry over time.

Since the lack of time has become one of the biggest issues in TPD, **allocating more time** makes the engagement consistent and long-lasting. To integrate AR into TPD successfully, there must be enough time for inquiry, reflection, and collaboration that is built into teachers' schedule through reduced teaching loads, dedicated professional learning time, or structured collaborative meetings (OECD, 2020; Avalos, 2011).

Access to **resources and data collection tools** also important in facilitating successful integration of AR in PD. Lack of time, curriculum issues, a lack of resources and classroom management problems have been mostly identified in schools that inhibits effectiveness of PD and a lack of resources identified as the largest barrier (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). AR requires teachers to gather information related to their own practice such as classroom observations, assessments or reflective journals. Resources should be funded by institutions to enable teachers save time which otherwise may be wasted for borrowing or purchasing items for inquiry.

These facilitating conditions are closely interconnected. For example, time allocation is highly dependent on leadership decisions, while access to support and resources may be conditioned by school authoritative priorities. AR is considered to be the most effective whenever it is embedded within a broader professional learning culture that encourages inquiry, collaboration, and reflective practice rather than a separate initiative (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Kemmis et al., 2014).

Successful integration of AR into PD requires more than methodological training, it also demands those factors discussed above (support systems, adequate time, access to resources, leadership practices). These facilitating components provide an important foundation for the different models and approaches to AR-based PD.

AR can be incorporated into PD programs through different models depending on the institutional priorities and available resources. AR is typically organized through iterative cycles of **planning, action, observation, and reflection** (Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon, 2014). This enables teachers to investigate the challenges in their teaching and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions applied against them.

One of the most common approaches of AR is **individual teacher inquiry**. In this approach teachers independently investigate the problems arising from their own classroom practice. They identify a problem, design and implement an intervention, collect data and analyze the results themselves. In this way, individual AR encourages teachers to reflect systematically on their instructional decisions and supports the development of professional autonomy. Individual teacher inquiry enables educators to gain practical knowledge about teaching and learning within their own contexts (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Codina & Robinson, 2024).

Collaborative action research is another approach, where groups of teachers explore shared instructional challenges together. In collaborative AR, teachers jointly work to formulate research questions, collect and analyze data, and discuss the results of the findings. This approach encourages professional communication and shared reflection among educators, which can strengthen professional learning communities within educational institutions. Studies indicate that collaborative AR not only improves teaching practices, but also supports the development of shared

responsibility for student learning and instructional improvement (Saquer, 2024; Saifuddin & Mohammad, 2024).

School-wide action research can be implemented when inquiry activities are integrated into broader institutional development or improvement strategies. In this approach several teachers or departments participate in coordinated cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection aimed at addressing institutional challenges. School-wide AR initiatives can promote organizational learning. Because teachers examine teaching practices collectively and develop strategies for the improvement of educational outcomes. School-wide AR can contribute to the development of a culture of reflective practice and continual improvement within educational institutions (Fullan, 2007).

Teachers sometimes collaborate with university researchers or teachers to conduct inquiry projects. This **university-school partnership AR** involves academic researchers who provide methodological guidance and support for research design and data analysis, and teachers to contribute practical knowledge of classroom context. University and school partnership creates valuable opportunities for professional learning and help teachers develop research literacy and inquiry competence (Gilbertson & Janis, 2025).

While these approaches can offer an array of opportunities for PD, they differ regarding the level of collaboration and institutional support required. Among the approaches to AR, individual teacher inquiry and collaborative AR are the most commonly used ones in PD programs. Individual teacher inquiry is easier to implement as it enables teachers to investigate the challenges independently. On the other hand, shared reflection and professional dialogue may be limited in it. In contrast, collaborative and school-wide AR approaches encourage collective research and exchange of knowledge. At the same time, university-school partnership initiatives promote additional methodological guidance and support for research, despite requiring more institutional coordination and external collaboration (Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon, 2014; Darling-Hammond, Hyler & Gardner, 2017).

Burns (2019) reflects various focuses, purposes, and outcomes in different approaches to action research via the following table:

	Individual	**Collaborative**	**Institutional**	**Organizational**
Focus	Single classroom	Multi-classroom	Whole department or school	Whole district or organization
Pupose	Investigate personal classroom issues	Investigate complementary or common classroom issues	Investigate common school-wide issues	Investigate organizational issues, factors, structures
Type of support needed	Colleague/mentor Assistance with data collection, organization, or analysis	Substitute teachers Release time Administrative suppor	Institutional involvement and commitment Effective in-school communication Administrative leadership	Organizational involvement and commitment, Effective crossorganizational communication Cross-district partnerships
Potential outcomes	Changes in practice Continuing	Improvements in curriculum or syllabus design	Evaluation of school restructure/change Curriculum/program	Improved allocation of resources

	personal reflection on teaching	and implementation Greater collaboration in professional development	evaluation School policy re-evaluation	Educational policy evaluation Improved knowledge of new curriculum implementation Improved crossdistrict professional development opportunities

Table 2. Adapted from "Action Research in English Language Teaching: Contributions and Recent Developments", by Anne Burns, 2019, Second Handbook of English Language Teaching, p.993 (https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-02899-2_52)

While AR can offer various benefits for TPD, there can be a number of practical and institutional challenges. **Time constraint** is the most frequently barrier in the implementation of AR for PD. Teachers have difficulties in balancing teaching responsibilities, institutional commitments and conducting systematic inquiry into their own practice. Additional workload like data collection, analysis and reflection may discourage teachers from fully engaging in AR projects (Burns, 2010; Darling-Hammond, Hyler & Gardner, 2017).

Another huge challenge relates to **limited research skills and methodological knowledge.** Although AR is designed to be practitioner-oriented, it still requires basic research competencies such as formulating research questions, collecting data and analyzing findings. Teachers who have little experience with research methodology may find these processes difficult, ultimately, have a lack of confidence and participation in AR activities (Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon, 2014).

In some institutions PD is still organized through traditional workshops and externally designed training sessions, which leaves little space for teacher-centered inquiry initiatives (Avalos, 2011; OECD, 2020). Successful AR implementation in PD requires supportive leadership, collaborative working environment and professional learning communities. This **institutional and organizational constraints** are also identified as major barriers to AR integration.

The lack of collaboration and professional dialogue among teachers is another obstacle. Despite the fact that teachers conduct a collaborative AR, practically it may be impossible to share experience and discuss findings or receive feedback from colleagues because of the limited opportunities. This may, ultimately, reduce the potential of AR (Timperley et al., 2007).

Overall, when institutional support, opportunities for collaboration, access to resources and the availability of mentoring are present, AR can be successfully implemented for continuous professional learning. Challenges such as limited time, insufficient research experience and organizational constraints may hinder successful implementation of AR. This means that, effective AR implementation is highly depended on how it is organized and supported within specific educational contexts. While it is important to know why and under what conditions AR can be integrated into PD, consideration of how teachers actually carry our AR in their usual teaching seems to be crucial. This creates a need for the explanation of methods and tools that commonly used in AR implementation in teaching, including research procedures and data collection techniques.

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