

# Action Research Underutilised in Primary Schools: What does it Take to Improve Teacher and Pupil Performance?

By

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## Abstract

*This descriptive survey was carried out to evaluate how action research is underutilised in primary schools in Harare, Zimbabwe. A total of 300 respondents were drawn from selected 20 primary schools. They responded to a questionnaire that comprised both open and closed-ended questions. They established that the studied teachers were not valuing action research at their workplace. It however found that action research has several advantages to offer to primary school teachers. It also revealed that action research cannot be underutilised in schools in the presence of well designed and structured staff development, clinical supervision, and coaching, team-teaching, peer-teaching and reading programmes. The attitude of teachers was identified as an area for improvement. Schools were urged to staff develop teachers in action research as a matter of policy to promote the attainment of quality education.*

**Keywords:** *Action research, Teacher performance, Pupil performance, Underutilisation*

## 1. Background to the study

All qualified teachers undertake Action Research Project as part of their training programme. It is meant to benefit both the teacher and the learner. Unfortunately, the findings of the Action Research projects are left unused as they are made to gather dust in book shelves or desks (Hussein, 2006; Farrell, 1998). Action research is designed for use in real life situations as its main aim is solving real problems (O'Brien, 2001). One of the reasons why action research is applicable to school situations is that it is used by practitioners who want to improve understanding of their practice (Wilson, 2000). School teachers could benefit schools from action research by improving their performance and pupils' performance because its findings are easy to use (Downer, 2001).

The above observations were carried out in other continents other than Africa. They lack context specificity particularly to Zimbabwean primary schools. The findings managed to point out some of the benefits of action research in schools. They however did not pin-point the degree to which action research projects' findings are underutilised in primary schools. The preceding background seems to call the need for the researchers to evaluate the extent to which Action research projects' findings are underutilised in primary schools in Zimbabwe. It also prompts the researchers to find out what it takes to improve teacher and pupil performance in the studied schools.

### *Statement of the problem*

The conduct of action research is not done as a formality in Zimbabwe's Teacher Training Colleges. It is done with a purpose in mind. The present study aimed at evaluating the degree to which action research projects are underutilised in the primary schools in Zimbabwe. It also aimed at unearthing what it takes to improve teacher and pupil performance in the studied schools.

### **Research Questions**

The research is guided by the ensuing sub-problems:

1. What are the features of action research?

2. How does action research benefit schools?
3. How are action research project findings underutilised in the primary schools?
4. How can action research project findings be utilised to improve teacher and pupil performance in the primary schools?

## 2. Literature Review

A review of some of the definitions of action research would provide a sound guide to the conduct of this study. Action research is a special kind of research that is carried out by pragmatists in the field to improve their practices (Thomas and Nelson, 2001). In the same vein, action research is the study of a social phenomenon with the intent to improve the quality of action within it. Action research is research that is concerned with improving the quality of service – it is carried out to identify areas of concern, develop and test alternatives and experiment with the new approaches (Kumar, 2008:108). Action research seems to follow two traditions (Kumar, 2008). First, the British tradition tends to view action research as a means of improvement and advancement of practice (Carr and Kemmins, 1986 in Kumar, 2008:109). Second, in the American tradition, action research is aimed at systematic collection of data that provides the basis for social change (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992 in Kumar, 2008:109). Action research, in common with participatory research and collaborative inquiry, is based upon a philosophy of community development that seeks involvement of community members (Punch, 2005). Involvement and participation of a community in the total research process from the problem identification to implementation of solutions are the two salient features of all the three (action research, participatory research and collaborative inquiry) (Cresswell, 2005). In all three, data are collected through a research process and changes are achieved through action. This action is either taken by officials of an institution or the community itself in the course of action research (Gray, 2009). Kumar (2008:109) documents two focuses of action research:

- An existing programme or intervention is studied in order to identify possible areas of improvement in terms of enhanced efficacy and/or efficiency. The findings become the basis of bringing about changes.
- This is where a professional thinks that there is an unattended problem or unexplained issue in the community or among a client group. Through action research, data is gathered to justify the introduction of a new service or intervention. Research techniques establish the prevalence of the problem or the importance of an issue so that appropriate action can be taken to deal with it.

The review of literature alluded to demonstrate the utility of action research in general. It does not specify the kind of organisation that action research targets. It was against such gaps in theory and practice that the conduct of this study was made possible. The study therefore intended to evaluate the degree to which underutilised in the primary schools.

## 3. Research methodology

The study made use of descriptive survey design. Researchers settled for the descriptive survey design for three reasons.

- First, the overarching advantage of using descriptive survey is that it enables descriptions and explanations of phenomena of particular interest to the researchers.
- Second, Gall, Borg and Gall (1996) posit that descriptive surveys enable investigators to understand attitudes, perceptions and opinion prevalent in a large population.
- Third, by the same token, Babbie (2000) accentuates that descriptive surveys enable descriptions of what is seen over and beyond.

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Convenience sampling was used to select schools and a total of 20 primary schools were used for this study. Each school provided 15 teachers who were randomly sampled to come up with a total of 300 respondents. The combination of the two sampling procedures enabled researchers to come up with an equal number of researchers per school.

Questionnaires with closed and open-ended questions were used to collect data. The instrument was considered plausible enough as it enabled respondents to respond to the questionnaire freely and in the comfort of their privacy (Flick, 2009). Three hundred questionnaires were distributed, that is, 15 per school during the third term of 2010. A hundred percent return rate was experienced as all questionnaires were returned. The researchers personally distributed and collected the questionnaires. They spent almost a month collecting the questionnaires from the research sites. Follow-ups were made on those that were not forthcoming.

Researchers chose to employ both quantitative and qualitative approaches of data analysis to cater for the different types of questions. Frequencies and percentages took care of quantitative analysis, while textual analysis was used to cater for qualitative data (Silverman, 2006).

### 4. Results

**Table 1: Distribution of respondents by gender (N = 300)**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Male	72	24
Female	228	76
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 1 shows that about 24% of the respondents were male and about 76% were female. The distribution shows that the studied primary schools had more female teachers than male ones.

**Table 2: Distribution of respondents by length of teaching experience (N = 300)**

<b>Length of teaching experience in years</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
0-5 years	34	11
6-10 years	161	54
11-15 years	74	25
16+ years	31	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>

Just above half of the respondents (54%) in Table 2 had a teaching experience of 6-10 years; followed by 25 percent of the respondents with 11-15 years, and (11%) respondents had a teaching experience of at least 16 years. Respondents were experienced enough to realise the benefits of action research in their schools.

**Table 3: Distribution of respondents by professional qualifications (N=300)**

<b>Professional Qualifications</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Certificate in Education	18	6
Diploma in Education	23	8
Bachelor of Education	171	57
Bachelor of English and Communication Studies	16	5
Bachelor of Science in Special Education	19	6
Bachelor of Science in Psychology	11	4
Bachelor of Science in Counselling	9	3
Master of Education	33	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>

The majority of respondents (57%) were holders of a Bachelor of Education degree. These were followed by (11%) who were holders of a Master of Education Degree, (8%) who were holders of a Diploma in Education, (6%) who were holders of a Bachelor of Science in Special Education, another (6%) who were holders of a Certificate in Education (4%) who were holders of a Bachelor of Science in Psychology and (3%) who were holders of a Bachelor of Science in Counselling. Results seem to indicate that respondents were qualified enough to be conversant and appreciative some of the potentials of action research findings at their work stations.

### Features of Action Research

**Table 4: Distribution of respondents' perceptions of features of action research (N = 300)**

Feature of Action Research	Frequency	Percentage
It is conducted by practitioners.	300	100
It begins from practice.	280	93
It is tailored to the needs of teachers.	275	92
Its data collection methods fit situations.	291	97
It links theory and practice.	300	100
Each research serves a specific purpose	300	100

Respondents gave their views regarding features of action research as they observe it in their schools. All (100%) respondents agreed that action research is conducted by practitioners. All (100%) respondents agreed that action research is conducted by practitioners. All (100%) respondents were content that each action research project serves a specific purpose and all (100%) respondents agreed that action research links theory and practice. Ninety-seven percent (97%) of respondents indicated that action research data collection methods fit situations while (93%) felt that it begins from practice and (92%) were content that action research is tailored to the needs of teachers. These findings seem to confirm earlier observations by Altrichter, Posch and Somkeh (1993) who put forward six characteristics of action research as:

- It starts from praxis (practical questions).
- It must fit in with the values of the school and the working conditions of the teachers.
- Its methods of data collection are tailored to suit the circumstances.
- It has constant effort to link reflection and practice.
- Each research project is designed for specific sets of circumstances and is unique.

Researchers subscribe to Altrichter et al's features of action research in general. From the above findings and literature, researchers propose to go beyond what has been discovered by previous researchers for three reasons. First, action research actively engages teachers in identifying practical problems from one's teaching in the classroom. It is experiential, analytical, and reflective and performance improvement focused. Second, identified problems are solved by teachers and their supervisors themselves. School personnel do not rush to invite outsiders to help them solve problems. Third, action research is small-scale research that optimally uses locally available resources. The researchers registered that action research capacitates the teacher for the benefit of the pupils. They go on to point out that a capacitated teacher is flexible enough to generate, accommodate, and incorporate new teaching or disciplinary approaches meant to add value to the quality of learning by pupils.

## Benefits of Action Research to Schools

**Table 5: Respondents' perceptions of the benefits of action research to schools (N = 300)**

Benefits of action research to schools	Frequency	Percentage
Action research is performance improvement focused.	300	100
It is a self-evaluation process.	287	96
It can be carried out any time.	250	83
It is decision-making device	272	91
It is not a rigid research	269	90

Respondents perceived a six-fold benefit of action research obtaining in schools as put across in Table 5. All (300%) respondents hailed action research for its ability to improve performance of the teachers. Researchers feel that action research findings inform practice for teachers to improve their ways of doing things. If teachers improve their performance, their pupils gainfully learn from their teachers. Researchers also feel that teachers and pupils' performance is improved by action research that is implemented subject to the availability of other resources such as time, money, books, committed school personnel and pupils, libraries and classrooms.

Ninty-six percent of the respondents held the opinion that action research is advantageous in their schools as it is a self-evaluation process and mechanism. Srivastava (1994) appears to support this finding by arguing that action research is carried out by people who want to evaluate their work situations. Two reasons for this perception can be drawn. First, researchers can deduce from the findings that teachers could use action research to try and test new methods, theories and techniques to improve their classroom practices. Second, researchers can infer from the findings that action research permits teachers to draw comparisons between old and new practices in search of better and improved classroom performance. In the studied schools, teachers tend to forget about their action research soon after training. Once that happens there is no improvement in the way teachers deliver lessons. They would be devoid of innovation, creativity, originality and inventiveness.

Another advantage of action research which 83% of the respondents put forward is that it can be carried out any time. Ten percent of the respondents disregarded this advantage on the basis that the value of action research tends to diminish once a teacher qualifies from college. Researchers were surprised to note that even some university graduate teachers share similar sentiments to their non-graduate counterparts. They assumed that university graduate teachers were supposed to lead by example as far as implementation of action research findings is concerned.

Ninty-one percent of the respondents were agreeable with the perception that action research is a decision-making device. Action research if well carried out and implemented, there is no doubt that it improves the decision making capacities of the members of the organisation (Punch, 2005). Researchers argue that teachers in the studied schools' decision-making capacities are on the wane as a result of lack of carrying out action research. This underscores the fact that action research empowers teachers with abilities to make calculated, swift and sound decisions in the classroom and school at large.

Ninty percent of the respondents indicated that one other advantage of action research is that it is not a rigid form of research. Supportive of this finding is Srivastava (1994), who highly regards that action research is flexible and changeable. It can be easily changed to suit new circumstances. While respondents are aware of this benefit of action research, they hardly employ it to benefit their learners and themselves. It is therefore imperative that teachers are constantly conscientised about imminent benefits of action research.

### ***Underutilisation of Action Research***

Respondents responded to open-ended questions and their responses were compressed thematically using textual analysis. They identified some areas in which action research is being under-utilised in their schools. Respondents noted that the practice of forgetting about action research upon qualifying as teachers was a curse to the profession. It destroys the culture of research. It waters down the teachers' problem solving capacities.

Respondents also revealed that action research is underutilised by teachers' lack of desire to research or negative attitudes towards research. In the absence of action research, researchers hold the opinion that teachers fail to appreciate the value of new innovations in the pursuit of quality education.

Researchers also registered that respondents felt that action research is underutilised in the field of actual lesson delivery. Absence of researched new knowledge about lesson delivery means that teachers resort to routine teaching at the expense of reflective teaching. Routine teaching occurs when teachers stick to old ways of delivering lessons.

Respondents also indicated that action research is under-utilised in classroom management. Researchers are content that if teachers research to experiment, experience and attempt to employ new classroom management techniques, there is no doubt that orderliness would be the order of the day in the classroom. Where there is orderliness, quality education abounds in the classroom.

### ***What it takes to improve teacher and pupil performance***

Being cognisant of the ways in which action research is underutilised in schools, respondents suggested a host of areas of what it takes to improve teacher and pupils' performance. The practice of conducting post-training or in-service action research is associated with rejuvenated staff development programmes. School supervisors and teachers need to improve their practices and harmonise their individual and organisational goals. Regular staff development programmes could be one of the ways that ensures that action research is not underutilised in schools.

Post-training or in-service action research is reminiscent of clinical supervision in schools. Supervisors and teachers identify their instructional needs, deficiencies and inadequacies. These may prompt them to carry out action research. Action research produces findings that motivate supervisors and teachers to collaboratively plan, teach and evaluate taught lessons for the purposes of promoting quality education. In this regard, clinical supervision could be one of the ways that attempts to make sure that action research is not underutilised in primary schools.

Respondents put forward the view that action research is illuminative of sound measurement and evaluation practices. Researchers exhort that administering well researched testing and evaluation practices is a positive step towards quality education. Teachers would be able to identify strengths and weaknesses in their instructional practices with the intent to administer remedial and extension work measures.

Researchers recorded that respondents surmised action research in association with team teaching, coaching and peer teaching. Action research findings provide tried and tested ideas about team teaching, coaching and peer teaching. Through team teaching, pupils tend to benefit from diverse teachers' skills, experiences and expertise. As a result of coaching, teachers guide each other to improve their practices. Also, consequent upon peer teaching, teachers demonstrate and model to each other possible best approaches to teach learners.

Respondents sounded the opinion that action research is the springboard on which emerging teaching methods could be put into practice in schools. As a result of action research, teachers indicated that they could make use of Future's Wheel, Critical Incident Analysis and Brainstorming to teach subjects like

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Social Studies, Environmental Science, Religious and Moral Education, Home Economics and HIV and AIDS. These methods actively engage the pupils in the learning process such that they gainfully master the content. While the forgone teaching methods benefit pupils very much, they overburden teachers with a lot of preparation work, thus teachers shun the methods.

### 5. Conclusions

From the data gathered, the ensuing findings emerged. The descriptive survey on the Harare primary school teachers' perceptions of how action research projects are underutilised resulted in the following emergent issues:

- that action research is hardly obtaining in the studied schools;
- that the potentials of action research are ignored, undermined and left to die a natural death in the studied schools. These studied schools surprisingly, have university graduate teachers whose perceptions of action research are synonymous to those of non-graduate teachers;
- that action research has several advantages to offer primary school teachers provided they change and adopt the right attitude towards the utility of action research;
- that action research is a platform on which professional development and polished pupil performance can be advanced;
- that action research cannot be underutilised in schools in the presence of well designed and structured staff development, clinical supervision, coaching, team teaching, peer teaching and reading programmes.

### 6. Recommendations

Emanating from the study's observations, it is recommended that:

- All trained primary school teachers be encouraged and motivated to carry out action research to keep on improving their practice and boost pupil performance as well.
- All schools to staff develop their teachers in action research as a matter of policy meant to promote the attainment of quality education.
- Proper strategies and procedures to utilise action research findings should be instituted and adhered to.
- Encourage trained teachers to reflect on their pre-service action research findings as a starting point for carrying out in-service action research.

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