ROZPRAWY I ARTYKUŁY

Daiva Jakavonytė-Staškuvienė   https://doi.org/10.26881/pwe.2025.61.01
ORCID: 0000-0002-8080-8848
Vytautas Magnus University, Education Academy
daiva.jakavonyte-staskuviene@vdu.lt

Jolita Kudinovienė
ORCID: 0000-0002-8675-0392
Vytautas Magnus University, Education Academy
jolita.kudinoviene@vdu.lt

Action Research as a Prerequisite for the Development of Learning Situations and Learning Support for Primary School Pupils: Teachers' Experiences

Action research in educational practice is defined as the systematic exploration of how to change the status quo in educational practice, and how to find new ways of doing things in order to bring about positive change for all those involved in the educational process, i.e. to improve student learning and achievement. It is an activity that enables the planning of a strategy for action, which is implemented, systematically monitored, reflexively reflected upon and modified. In action research, the teacher as researcher takes on the responsibility of solving a particular learning problem, and this cannot be done without deep critical thinking abilities, which is why it is important to have deep, reflective educators in schools. Action research enhances teachers' capacity for professional development, autonomy, and the ability to evaluate and take responsibility for educational practice and its improvement. The article presents teachers' experiences of the value and meaning of action research in primary education practice.

Keywords: action research, learning situations, learning support, primary school pupils

Słowa kluczowe: badania w działaniu, sytuacje uczenia się, wsparcie w nauce, uczniowie szkół podstawowych

Theoretical background. Modelling action research in educational practice

Dominique Macaire (2007) notes that two aspects can be considered when modelling action research: the structural parts of the data collection protocol and the implementation of the intervention (educational change); the replicability / duplication of action research, i.e. how much detail is provided in the process of action research so that it can be used by other researcher-researchers or practitioner educators who wish to conduct the same action research in their own setting. Action research is a qualitative rather than a quantitative method. It uses tools to investigate direct educational practice. Semi-structured interviews,

participant observation of the educational process are often chosen. It is useful to observe and analyse teaching practice when the activity is filmed, and then it is possible to work with video, photographs, pupils' work in progress, drawings, etc. However, to be of exploratory value, the study must be based on a precise protocol that includes a variety of data collection tools and covers a well-defined and manageable period of time. Relevant and authentic situations and their detailed description.

The added value of action research is seen when, at the end of the study, we see in the teachers' comments that they have objectively changed if we compare how they thought at the beginning of the study (Lafontaine 2006; Macaire 2007; Clark 2012; Carignan et al. 2016; Lafontaine et al. 2016; Eden, Ackermann 2018). The second indicator that teachers often talk about is the attitude towards certain theories: they have become clear, they have become happy…, they have become fond of… and want to try it out…, they often take the whole practice more personally (reading, travelling, starting to work on a certain computer programme…) than professionally. The development of practices is usually based on concrete examples. Teachers are also aware of the values that underpin professional practice, their understanding of change and the practical benefits. Dominique Macaire (2007) acknowledges the lack of explicitly described methodologies in action research that can be applied to different practices and situations. The field of primary education is particularly suited to this research because primary teachers, since they include all learners, must be particularly deep and responsible reflective practitioners. In addition, the teacher as researcher should also take responsibility for the epistemological and attitudinal domain. In addition, it is useful to base innovative project-based activities on action research (Lacelle, Boultif 2016), which develop students' critical thinking abilities.

The proactive cycle of action research, which consists of 2 models, has been developed by Robert A. Schmuck (2006) and Emmanuelle Soucy (2019). The 1st model of this author starts with the researcher's expectations rather than with the problem, and immediately implements a new, or different, classroom practice, and then collects the data.The researcher already has new expectations when planning a new action research. Expectations can be formulated in terms of questions that the action research will seek to answer. The questions can also be linked to the new activities and their performance indicators or attributes. The data collection also should be linked to the questions that have been asked in the expectations phase, as this will provide the data and allow for the justification of the practices to be implemented and for the collection of evidence on the elements of interest.

Methodology and organisation of the empirical study

Research question: what are the educational problems and ways in which action research in primary classrooms helps to solve them?

In the empirical phase of the study, we developed research questions for the focus group members before identifying patterns in the application of action research in practice

(Leutenegger 1999). Focus group interviews are important for our study because focus group participants reflect on their experiences and put them into words, which allows us to create a representation of how action research is carried out/understood in the practice of the research participants (Maurel 2008, 2009). The questions that were asked of the focus group participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Theoretical background to the focus group questions

Question for focus group members	Justification of the question
In your bachelor thesis, you carried out an action research study. Have you put this experience into practice? How? What? Why? How often?	This question asks participants to recall and reflect on both their own pedagogical experience and to try to relate it to the experience of conducting action research. The question allows the research participant to provide examples of experiences and arguments about what and how was applied, from which the researchers will be able to judge whether the research participant is advanced in action research design or more of a beginner (Maurel 2008; 2009).
Can you give examples, in your experience, of how often you base your pedagogical practice on action research?	The examples provided by the research participants allowed the researchers to find out in which activities teachers are able to apply action research or its elements in practice (Leutenegger 1999; Mondada 2005).
What motivates you to organise pedagogical practice based on action research? What motivates you to do so?	This question is designed to investigate whether action research-based practice is underpinned by teachers' intrinsic motivation (Thoonen et al. 2011; Goodnough 2016; Vanblaere, Devos 2016; Kyriakides et al. 2017; Mohan et al. 2017; Postholm 2018), a desire to improve one's own educational practice, or extrinsic motivation, such as the motivation promoted by the head of the educational institution when building a learning community in the educational institution (King, Stevenson 2017; Silva et al. 2017).
How do you prepare for research-based practice? What aspects of the activity do you reflect on in advance? Do you prepare specific tips/reminders/strategies for children to learn certain aspects, how do you provide support? Please give examples.	The question was designed to reflect on the elements of teachers' preparation for action research, and the examples allowed us to reveal whether teachers are able to reflect accurately, choosing the right words to describe certain stages of preparation (Skott, Møller 2017; Wolff et al. 2017). The questioning also allowed educators to express the challenges faced when planning action research activities (Knauder, Koschmieder 2019; Panskyi et al. 2019; Hubalovsky et al. 2019; Al-Huneini et al. 2020).
How else do you integrate inquiry-based learning in children's everyday activities? What percentage does inquiry-based learning represent in the overall educational field?	The question helped to reveal whether the participants in the study already use action research as a routine practice or whether they do so relatively infrequently (Hattie 2009; Chapman et al. 2011; Helmke 2012). The frequency of conducting action research reflects teachers' ability to ground practice in research (Roy et al. 2013; Knauder, Koschmieder 2019; UNESCO 2021).

Table 1. cont.

Question for focus group members	Justification of the question
With which social contexts do you work? How would you describe your pupils? Are there children from other cultures, e.g. speakers of other languages who have come to Lithuania from other countries?	The question helped to identify the types of environments with which the study participants work (Dolbec, Clément 2000; Lafontaine 2006; Lafontaine et al. 2016; Eden, Ackermann 2018). Action research provides teachers with an opportunity to step back and reflect on their practice (Cain, Harris 2013). It has also allowed us to investigate whether action research applies to overcoming difficulties.
Do you have any other observations about inquiry-based learning that you would like to make?	The question is designed to add to and clarify the views of the research participants (Maurel 2008, 2009).

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Focus group interview data analysis method. The qualitative thematic content analysis (Weber 1990; Braun, Clarke 2006; Žydžiūnaitė, Sabaliauskas 2017) was chosen. This approach uses concepts or phrases and a description of the relationships between them. It groups empirical data into categories based on the language of the research participants and the revealed experiences (Jørgensen, Phillips 2002; Žydžiūnaitė et al. 2009; Lambert, Lambert 2012). The data analysis approach is *insight-driven*, the analysis process *is interpretive*, based on the researchers' *expertise*, *experience* and takes practice into account. The main data analysis strategy chosen was *comparison:* an interpretative comparative analysis of the data was performed according to categories covering the reasons for the teachers' chosen action research, examples of motivation, aspects of planning and reflection (prior to the action research), the forms in which the inquiry-based activities are developed, the timing of these activities in relation to the entire educational content, and with whom the teachers in the school can consult and confer regarding the planned and implemented activities. The qualitative thematic content analysis is a valid method for drawing specific conclusions based on the text being analysed. We used both inductive and deductive analytical strategies in an iterative cyclical manner to investigate and integrate teachers' application of action research in primary classrooms when teachers are advanced in this field. Categories and statements were developed directly from the data, taking into account the scientific literature to identify the prevalence of action research use, the reasons for it, and the design aspects of the educational process (Merriam, Tisdell 2016). The text provided by the informants is the research material for the content analysis, reflecting the process of personal reflection (according to Mayring 2019). The process started with an analysis of the teachers' interview material.

Location and timing of the focus group interviews. Two focus group interviews on the Microsoft Teams platform to be conducted at the following time: 23/03/2021,

interview recording time 2 h 15 min (1 group). 31/03/2021, interview recording time 1 h 53 min (Group 2). Due to the limited scope of the paper, only the analysis of the interviews of the participants of focus group 1 will be presented in this paper.

Characteristics of focus group interview participants

Study participants. The respondents were selected on a qualitative and targeted basis. Teachers who were able to think responsibly about the problem under investigation and express their thoughts and new ideas on the issue under investigation were specifically selected (Bitinas et al. 2008). Criterial sampling was used because the participants of the study were selected purposively, all the participants of the focus group discussions are alumni of Vytautas Magnus University Academy of Education, who prepared their bachelor's thesis on the basis of action research. We purposively selected these teachers in both focus groups, knowing their level of expertise (Patton 2002; Merriam, Tisdell 2016; Hesse-Biber 2017). All participants in the study were invited to participate in the study by contacting them directly via email. All teachers agreed to participate of their own free will and were informed of the aims of the study and that the interview would be recorded. In the paper, the participants are referred to by other names such as Cecile, Zita, Clareta, (…) Ilona. The characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Characteristics of the focus group participants, undergraduates who graduated from VMU 3 years ago, working in primary classrooms

Teacher's name	Experience (years)	School
Cecile	3	City Public School (Vilnius)
Zita	3	City Public School (Šiauliai)
Clareta	4	City Public School (Klaipėda)
Milana	4	City Public School (Vilnius)
Oksana	3	City Public School (Klaipėda)
Ilona	4	City Public School (Vilnius)

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Focus group 1 consisted of primary school teachers currently working in different cities in Lithuania, all of whom were former students of the Primary Education Study Programme of Vytautas Magnus University, Academy of Education. This focus group includes two teachers who are immediately continuing their studies at the Master's Degree Programme in Educational Management and Leadership at Vytautas Magnus University and who had graduated at the end of the semester at the time of the research.

Everyday practice of primary school teachers who use action research as a basis for their educational process: analysis of the results of semi-structured focus group interviews

Class contexts. All the teachers in the study work in public schools in three major cities (Vilnius, Klaipėda and Šiauliai). Most of the teachers have already been working in their 4th year and therefore have 3 or 4 years of experience. As these are large urban schools, there are many pupils in the classrooms (at least 24 pupils). In addition, there is a wide variety of cultural situations, with pupils who have come to Lithuania or have returned to Lithuania with experience in other countries. There are pupils with individual learning needs in the classes.

Cecilia's class: there are a lot of socially strong families in the class and two children at risk. The children are well provided for. There are children from different cultures, from different countries. There are children from Syria, from the war front; there are also children from Turkey, from Istanbul, from Russia, and there are children from Italy. The girl speaks Italian fluently, and she also speaks Lithuanian fluently. There are six children who speak fluent Russian. The pupils are sophomores. The children are happy to be from different countries. They sang the national anthems of all the countries and studied the texts of the anthems. They are curious; they are interested in why there is a war in Syria. They were interested in how wars are fought; they analyse how they could defend themselves.

Milana's class: lots of children with different abilities. The pupils are fourth-graders. There is one Turkish pupil who not only speaks Turkish, but is also learning Spanish. There are Russian-speaking children. There is a child who has learnt Russian in the backyard. There is a child with special educational needs. There is one girl with Asperger's syndrome. She finds it more difficult to express her opinion. There are also two girls who lived in the UK before school. One of them has adapted very well, and the other one still has a lot of links with the UK and today, she is struggling.

Clareta's class: the parents are simple, sincere, open, the parents treat me with respect as a teacher. There is one boy from Japan whose parents speak Russian. The boy's dad is Japanese. The child has already attended a pre-school group in Lithuania. The pupils in the class are first graders. In some cases, the boy has difficulty understanding the Lithuanian language.

Zita's class: there are children in her class who have returned from emigration. A girl has returned from Ireland. She pronounces some sounds differently and is learning to write letters. A few children have come back a little earlier. There is a dark-skinned boy who has adapted well, is a leader in the class and has many friends. Most of the children are from middle-class families. The pupils are first graders.

Oksana's class: there are 26 pupils, there is a boy with autistic spectrum disorder, there is a girl with adapted programme. As the school is in Žemaitija, some children shorten words, pronounce and accent many words incorrectly. They have problems pronouncing long and short vowels, so their pronunciation interferes with the correct pronunciation of words. There are no children from socially disadvantaged families. Almost half of the children have a good command of Russian, even though they are all Lithuanians and have learned Russian from their backyard and urban environment. The children are second graders.

Ilona's class: 24 second-year pupils, 14 boys and 10 girls. Three Russian-speaking children struggle to distinguish Lithuanian sounds such as -e- and -ė-. One girl has returned from Italy and has no learning problems. There are some children who learn very well, some who learn moderately and some who learn very poorly. One child is socially neglected because he does not know some elementary things. From the very beginning there was a very different class: some of the children are already excellent readers, and some of them could not even read their names and write them down. The pupils' parents come from cultural backgrounds: children of singers and actors. As a result, some parents allow themselves to be disrespectful to the teacher (the teacher mentioned one public conflict with the parent of one child because of her young age). Although the general context of the class is good, some children are spoilt and mischievous.

During the interviews, the focus group participants were asked about the contexts in which they currently apply action research and the lessons learned from their bachelor's thesis in their current teaching work. The teachers' views can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3. Focus group interviewees' views on their experiences of using action research

Experiences of applying the action research	Examples of views of survey participants
In the area of identifying / testing students' abilities (N = 2)	I do small action research all the time, it happens spontaneously, and sometimes with a specific goal in mind. (Cecile) I used action research to determine students' abilities by assigning tasks of varying complexity and analysing the results when students came back to second grade after the holidays. (…) I also have an autistic boy, so I am very responsible in observing and analysing what helps him, looking for ways that can help him to understand better. (Oksana)
Monitoring personal progress (N = 4)	We draw personal progress charts and graphs with the children. I notice what it means to them when they do it. It is a desire to go up the steps, not to go down their chart. Whether it's a bar chart or whether it's a graph, they still don't want to go down. It motivates them to make progress. (Cecile) Pupils have notebooks in which they write and set themselves goals to work towards and analyse how they have achieved them. They also fill in personal progress charts. (Zita) As far as self-assessment is concerned, this is an area that I am still learning how to do well. The problem I face is the lack of time for quality self-assessment, I experience a lack of time. (Ilona) Sometimes you don't even think it's a study and you do it, and it comes naturally. The children are first graders, with very different reading abilities, so we did an activity study because some of the children didn't do this work, (...). I can see that it is necessary to talk to them in great detail about what needs to be done and how. (Clareta)

Table 3. cont.

Experiences of applying the action research	Examples of views of survey participants
Empowering pupils when working in groups (N = 2)	I think that activities that challenge children but they can cope with are very important and memorable for them. I divide the pupils into groups. For example, playing the bagpipe. The children were divided into groups of four and became the evaluators, as they judged each other's work according to the criteria. (Milana) The pupils are constantly making observations and suggestions for improvement. (Zita)
Visual tools, excursions (N = 2)	During the excursion, the children became journalists, as they went to the Birds' Village, so they had to choose one bird, collect all the information about it, and when they came back they had to prepare a presentation. They not only took pictures during the tour, asked questions of the tour guides, but also, when they returned, they took additional interest in the bird and gathered more information. (Milana) During this period I have prepared additional visual aids for the pupils to try out in the educational process, i.e. a clock, multiplication tables and shutters. (Ilona)

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

From the thoughts expressed by the participants (see Table 3), we can say that they carry out the performance tests in a very focused and responsible way, because the identification of the pupils' abilities in a certain area shows what the children already know and what they are not yet able to do, i.e. what is their problem area that could be a further area for improvement. As many as 4 participants in the study highlighted and gave different examples of how children learn to monitor their progress, certain changes in the activity areas and why it is important to monitor this area based on data. Teachers see that personal monitoring motivates pupils to go further and that revisiting and discussing certain issues in more detail helps to motivate pupils to do activities that require more effort. Teachers also identified problems, such as lack of time for deeper assessment activities. Activity inquiry is also suitable for students' deeper self-knowledge, for presenting themselves in a different environment, and the teacher's example shows that activity inquiry can be used in virtually all educational practice. Teachers stressed that in action research-based activities, children can be more independent and involved in the activities themselves, while the teacher can calmly observe the pupils' activities and provide support only when necessary. It is important that pupils' observations are taken into account and that they give feedback on how to improve certain activities. This is how modern educational practice is created. Two teachers mentioned tools – targeted support to help them understand the content and to enable them to achieve the outcomes on their own. It is important that learning outside school is targeted, fun and based on activities that children can understand. The primary school

teachers in the study were interested in what motivates them to carry out action research in their classrooms. The distribution of teachers' views on this issue is shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Examples of motivations for developing action research in educational practice, as expressed by participants in focus group interviews

Examples of motivations for choosing an action research	Examples of views of survey participants
Pedagogical enthusiasm (N = 3)	I keep thinking, what if… and I think it's interesting to see what change will happen if we change a certain element. I am driven by curiosity and the desire to see for myself what will happen, what will be the change – whether it will succeed or fail. (…) And the curiosity comes from a certain situation. (Cecile) I like seeing where we are and then thinking about what we want, where we want to go. Then you try to make an effort, you see what the children need so that I can help – that's what motivates me the most. (Clareta) Intrigue about how much you can do and what interesting activities you can come up with. I ask myself what to do with children of average ability, because we tend to focus on the very gifted and those with very high individual needs. And the question is how to motivate everyone to want to do their best and to be able to say that they have done their best to achieve this or that goal, to be proud of themselves and to set their own internal goals so that they can achieve success. (Milana)
Having a goal (N = 2)	You always have a purpose, even if you don't think of it as a study: either to check what the children have learned or to teach them something. For example, when I organise group work, I don't organise it in any way, but I have a system and from that I can see what the children have developed, what they have learned. In this way, I organise more interesting activities where children's emotions come out. (Zita) I want to keep the whole format of the activity – from the beginning to the end. The evaluation is like the end of the activity. (Ilona)

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

The teachers' answers show that they are enthusiastic, questioning and looking for solutions. It is also positive that the teachers identified themselves as curious, flexible, analytical, willing to make decisions after a good analysis of the situation. This shows that they are ready to work and highly motivated. They also identified the starting point for action research, because when you analyse a problematic situation, you have a goal to work towards in order to make and see change. The study was interested in how the participants prepare for the action research. Responses are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Focus group interviews: participants' answers on how to prepare for the action research

Examples of preparation for an action research	Examples of views of survey participants
Anticipating all the stages of an activity, preparing specific tools for individual children (N = 6)	I clarify the purpose of the activity and anticipate all the steps involved. (…) Because I have a boy with a different language, I have to prepare additional tools for him, because he does not understand some of the content. I create specific memos for the children. (Clareta) I am teaching the first graders this year to evaluate their work. It is also about correcting the work and checking and correcting the pupils' own work. They assess according to the criteria and when they are able to assess adequately, then they can help a friend. (Zita) We have laminated flashcards that the children know about and can use. (…) They know where to find the rules and they can use these tools. There are a lot of laminated instruments in my classroom. (Oksana) I always teach my children to make a plan. We signed the work plan on the board. We worked out each stage and the children had something to go on. I always give the children materials to refer to, which can be questions, with clarifications. (Milana) In the case of blended education, when some of the students were home-schooled, I had to think about how to present the material so that everyone could understand and do the tasks. (Ilona) I immediately foresee how the children themselves will be able to observe and evaluate the stages of their activity, the change. (…) I also give them the possibility to choose the strategy for doing the activity. For example, when children are solving mathematical problems, they can choose whether to visualise the solution by hand or by using an app. And after the activity, they can discuss among themselves which strategy was more useful. (Cecile)
Working in groups (N = 2)	We do a lot of group work, even though the children are only first graders. I like this way of organising work. It helps to motivate the pupils, because there is a clear system, they are involved and help each other. (Clareta) There are a lot of activities based on action research when children work in groups. I also think a lot and even who is going to work with whom, because there are some children who just can't work together, so there is no randomness in the allocation of groups in my class. I think about everything very carefully. (Zita)

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

It is important that each participant in the study mentions the stages of the action research. In addition, they gave examples related to their specific classroom contexts. This situation shows that writing an undergraduate thesis from the field of action research has developed the ability to plan, implement, monitor and reflect on the process of action research based on the educational situation of specific students in a particular classroom.

Discussion and conclusions

The organization of the study of activities based on the experience of children as researchers is an important aspect highlighted by the participants of the interview, saying that this experience allows not only to solve a certain set problem, but also to achieve much deeper results, on the basis of the study of activities. If the activities are organized according to the structure of the activity research, it begins with targeted planning, implementation, observation when collecting data) and deep reflection (Kurshumlia, Vula 2021; Putra et al. 2022). Such a system of organization of activities allows to develop students' independence, activity and purposeful learning, when the child himself takes responsibility and monitors his progress and abilities. It is important to leave children as much freedom as possible so that children can make as many decisions as possible on their own (Milana).

The majority of participants in our study said that they were motivated by setting personal goals and monitoring their personal progress. In a classroom with many children from different cultures, the teacher used action research to enable them to gain a deeper understanding of themselves and to introduce their culture to their classmates. Similarly, Vishalache Balakrishnan, Lise Claiborne (2017), who conducted an action research study with a culturally diverse group of participants. The application of action research provides insights into opportunities and strategies that can be personalised to the individual. The opportunity for participants to contribute to and shape the research process is a key feature of action research (Bradbury et al. 2019; Posch 2019), and the findings suggest that action research is more open to participants shaping the process than might be expected from a purely theoretical perspective (Hopwood 2024). This is supported by our study, where more than one interviewee stated that only consistent planning, monitoring, reflection and consideration of specific needs helped to tailor the educational content to each individual pupil.

Action research-based project activities help children to develop psychomotor abilities and a better understanding of subject concepts (Sumarni et al. 2016; Balakrishnan, Claiborne 2017), such as a better understanding of dance music production and the expression of creativity in music (Taryana et al. 2021). Participants in our study expressed similar ideas when talking about a field trip, which can include project-based activities where the student takes an interest in the chosen object and records information about it during the field trip and collects additional material after the field trip. The various visual aids mentioned by another teacher in the study also help primary school pupils to learn more about concepts. When students create, collect and record data themselves, the better they are able to assimilate the learning material and apply it to their lives (Sumarni et al. 2016). Empowerment through active learning in groups was also mentioned by teachers in our study. School-based approaches have been found to be adaptable, implementable, and often provide significant changes in teaching practices, institutional collaboration, and other important aspects of schooling when applied through action research (Hopwood 2024).

It is clear that the educational methods chosen in the action research are helping teachers to achieve significant changes in various aspects of education: from improving

students' cognition, content mastery, classroom team building and individual motivation. In addition, such activities provide teachers and children with a theoretically informed approach to changing educational practice. In this case, teachers alone act as agents of change, although, as our research has shown, they sometimes do not feel confident or even unconsciously conduct action research to solve problems (Bradbury et al. 2019; Hopwood 2024). Furthermore, the flexibility of action research helps to address many of the issues of successful implementation of educational content (Manfra 2019; Wei et al. 2022), although there is a lack of time to make deeper changes or to implement action research even more consistently in the way the teacher would like to see it (Thorgeirsdottir 2015).

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