

Implementing Action Research in Developing Professional Practice: An Experience in Thai Schools

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Abstract

This study aims to: 1) examine implementations of action research in developing professional practice in schools, 2) examine outcomes of professional practice in schools through action research, and 3) investigate problems of implementing action research in developing professional practice. Informants consisted of 317 Master's degree program students majoring in educational administration at Mahasarakham University, who conducted research during 2004-2006 and all of whom had professional practice as personnel of different schools. The instruments used for gathering data were an interview form and a note-taking form on the results of students' research reports. For checking the quality of data, the triangulation technique was used. The results were presented by means of a descriptive analysis.

The results of the study were: (1) Implementation of action research in developing professional practice was found to have three main differences: 171 Master's degree program students (53.95 percent) conducted research in developing to increase professional knowledge and abilities of their staff; 54 Master's degree program students (17.03 percent) used action research to develop school systems and school information systems; and 92 Master's degree program students (29.02 percent) used action research to improve personal characteristics of learners. (2) Results of developing professional practice of the personnel at schools was found that the Master's degree program students who used action research for developing the personnel caused the personnel in the focus group to increase knowledge, understanding, and abilities in their profession in these issues: conducting classroom research, organization

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of child-centered learning activities which included project learning activities and integrated learning activities; efficient school systems and school information systems were obtained; there occurred changes in learners' characteristics in different better aspects. (3) Problems of implementing action research in developing professional practice at schools was found that there were limited participation and collaboration in solving problems; decision-making still depended on the researcher, not coming from participants opinion; problem analyses lacked clarity, and planning for developing or solving problems was not concrete which could lead to practice.

In conclusion, implementing action research in developing professional practice at schools could generate changes in the schools where the Master's degree program students conducting action research generated changes in professional practice, situations in professional practice, and learning together of the group of participants. However, the issues that should be urgently improved were: involved person's participation in planning which had to be clear, and cooperatively practice following the plan to originate learning together in continuity.

Keywords : Longitudinal research, Professional practice, Action research, Master's degree program students, Educational administration program

Introduction

Educational reform according to National Education Act 1999 (Revised in 2002, Version 2) has caused important Thai educational changes from improving the structure of educational provision as a whole with an emphasis on decentralization to schools, the units of practices, to have flexibility and ability to manage themselves as called school-based management (Runcharoen, 2005 : 77 ; Office of the National Education Commission, 2001 : 7). The learning-teaching system has been improved to be child-centered system. There have been internal quality control systems leading to quality assurance of school educational management. These changes have caused

school administrators and personnel to change their own ways of working to be efficient; leading to higher quality. It is professional practice (Newton and Tarrant, 1992, 17-19 ; Runcharoen, 2003 : 8-9). For school administrators and personnel to have professional practice or to be professionalism, it is necessary to develop all components of the organization to originate efficiency in practice and to achieve the goals of practice according to the missions of schools: development of personnel potentials and knowledge and ability, development of school systems and school information systems to be efficient, acceleration and seriousness in solving student problems, and cultivating desirable characteristics to originate in students (Hargreaves and Jarvis,



2000 : 4-7 ; Tesaputa, 1999 : 135). For all these, it is necessary to have full cooperation from persons involved.

Mahasarakham University is a local university focusing on responding to local and social development as a whole. Simultaneously, the university offers 17 different faculties, and the Faculty of Education is a faculty that was established at the same time as the university in 1968 when it was called College of Education at Mahasarakham. At present, Faculty of Education offers at Bachelor's degree, Master's degree, and Doctor's degree levels with a total of 24 programs. Educational Administration program is a program in this faculty, which has offered a Master of Education degree since 1983, and a great number of Master's degree graduates have been produced to serve the society.

Late in 2001 the Educational Administration program improved the research direction of this program in the Master of Education degree by emphasizing students who have responsible jobs as practitioners in particular workplaces to conduct research to respond to the needs for developing the quality of education in the part they involved. This program has students using action research for developing and solving problems within their own workplaces. Workplace research is development leading to professionalism together with studying the Master's degree programs. On 5 days of practice, the students had to practice work as practitioners in their own workplaces. On the other 2 days, Saturday and Sunday, they attended classes at Mahasarakham Uni-

versity.

Action research aims for improvements to improve practices, to improve situations, and to improve knowledge and understanding of practice and situations (Bigum, Henry, and Kemmis, 1992 : 9). The action research principle is working together of the thematic concern group as a team with cooperative decision-making by upholding the principles of democracy (Zuber-Skerritt, 1991 : 11). Everyone in the team is in the status of a co-practitioner under the process of planning, action, observation, and reflection (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988 : 11-15 ; Cunningham, 1993 : 7-10). Action research is regarded as being appropriate to generate development of efficiency in practice by practitioners in their responsible workplaces to achieve higher expected quality in continuity.

This researcher is an instructor of a Master's degree in Educational Administration program, works as the chairman of the administrative committee of the Educational Administration program, and realizes the importance of developing Master's degree program students' knowledge and abilities to conduct action research with direct benefits for developing their own workplaces. It is a connection between theories and practice.

Purposes

The purposes of this study is to: (1) examine implementations of action research in developing professional practice at schools, (2) examine outcomes of developing professional



practice at schools by using action research, and (3) investigate problems of implementing action research in developing professional practice at schools.

Scope and Limitation

The scope of this study covered a group of students in the Master's degree in Educational Administration program, Maharakham University, who conducted research by using action research for developing professional practice in workplaces where each student was responsible as a practitioner. The researcher worked as an academic advisor or the chairman of examining lists of research during 2004-2006. It did not cover the students who the researcher was not their academic advisor or their examiner of research reports.

Methodology

This study was a longitudinal research using the qualitative technique for collecting data during 2004-2006 from 317 students in the Master's degree in Educational Administration program at Maharakham University, who conducted research for solving problems or for developing their professional practice in their own workplaces by using action research.

Data was collected by interviewing with students and studying research reports involving developing professional practice of the students in the Master's degree in Educational Administration program. The quality of data

was checked by using the triangulation technique. The results of data analysis were then presented by means of a descriptive analysis.

Results

The results of the study could be summarized as follows: 1) The results of implementing action research in developing professional practice at schools could be classified into these 3 aspects: (a) Totally 171 students (53.95 percent) used action research for professional practice in developing personnel comprising 94 students (54.97 percent) who developed personnel involving classroom research; 68 students (39.76 percent) who developed personnel involving management of child-centered learning which included project learning activities and integrated learning activities; 4 students (2.34 percent) who developed personnel involving production and uses of instructional media; and 5 students (2.92 percent) who developed personnel involving authentic measurement and evaluation. (b) Totally 54 students (17.03 percent) used action research for professional practice in developing school work systems and developing school information systems comprising 12 students (22.23 percent) who developed inventory systems and inventory control systems; 11 students (20.38 percent) who developed business affairs, financial, and correspondence systems; 6 students (11.11 percent) who developed internal supervision systems; and 2 students (3.70 percent) who developed internal quality assurance systems. In addition, 17



students (31.48 percent) developed academic information systems; and 6 students (11.11 percent) who developed personnel information systems. (c) Totally 92 students (29.02 percent) used action research for professional practice in developing learner desirable characteristics comprising 68 students (73.91 percent) who created student discipline in different aspects including responsibility, punctuality, dressing, and cleanliness; and 24 students (26.09 percent) who created student morality and ethics. 2) For the results of developing professional practice at schools by using action research, the following changes emerged: (a) Personnel at schools received developing to have higher professional knowledge, understanding, and abilities in these different aspects: classroom research, management of child-centered learning, production and uses of instructional media, and authentic measurement and evaluation. The strategies used for development were workshop, supervision, and document studies. (b) For school work systems and school information systems, many school work systems were redesigned to have more highly efficient stages and methods of practice. This could be indicated by the practice outcomes with more correctness, more rapidity, and more up-datedness including inventory systems, business affairs and correspondence systems, financial systems, internal supervision systems, and internal quality assurance systems. However, for the school information systems, the manipulation systems were improved from manual to manipulation by using a computer program. The obtained

information could respond to the needs of more users, and the information was accurate, complete, updated, and easier to retrieve. The strategies used for development were focus group, workshop, and supervision, directing and follow-ups.

In terms of learners, the outcomes of developing professional practice at schools could generate changes in different aspects in the focus group students including: students were more responsible, more punctual, and were aware of keeping their bodies and school compounds clean; the students dressed themselves appropriately in conformity with the regulations of school uniforms; and they were modest and showed respect to other people. Most of the strategies and activities used as drivers were: coordination in cooperation between homes and school, organization of camping for developing morality and ethics, creating good models, and organization of activities in front of the flag-staff, and homeroom activities.

For the results of examining problems of implementing action research in developing professional practice at schools, the following were found: (1) Most of the students who conducted research for developing professional practice at schools by using action research lacked skills in convincing people and creating awareness to others to be volunteers as research participants. (2) Participation was still in a limited scope. Most decision-making often depended upon the researcher; and decision-making lacked equality. (3) Development planning lacked an analysis of clear current



conditions. (4) Determination of development targets was not related with available resources. (5) The strategies for solving problems lacked diversity; and decision-making on selecting a strategy emphasized achievement in effectiveness rather than efficiency. Therefore, this caused limited learning about the process to emerge. Finally, (6) the operational plans for development were not concrete. Instead, it was often in the type of thinking, doing, and solving problems at the same time.

Conclusion and Discussion

1. This study found that most of the students in the Master's degree in Educational Administration Program implemented action research in developing professional practice at their schools in terms of personnel development the most (53.95 percent), and the next from most were development of learners' desirable characteristics (29.02 percent), and development of school work systems and school information systems (17.03 percent). This was so perhaps because it was during the period of educational reform leading to students' achievement in higher quality and because Article 30 of the National Education Act 1999 and the revised version 2 in 2002, states clearly that educational personnel must have knowledge and abilities involving research. Therefore, research is an important instrument to cause personnel to have processes of systematic thinking and planning and to be able to learn from practice together with conducting research. This will generate development of

their own professional abilities to achieve solving learners' problems. Moreover, teachers' entering academic positions must present academic works, particularly research involving professional practice which can make teachers more alert to learn about conducting classroom research.

In terms of developing learners' desirable characteristics which will make students good, smart, and joyful people, it is another important goal of education provision. Each school does not have less important roles than each family in doing duties to polish students' manners. Therefore, this may be another important cause of conducting research for development and solving problems concerning students next to the highest rank.

In terms of developing school work systems and school information systems with conducting research in the third rank, it may be because these schools had to improve methods and stages of working to be more efficient to achieve the practice goals as Deming (Cited in Paine, Turner, and Pryke, 1992 : 10) points out that if work does not achieve the primary goal, we should check the working system before checking Practitioners. If the working system lacks efficiency even though practitioners have clear knowledge and work in full ability, the goal cannot be reached because it is practice that follows the low-efficient system.

Nevertheless, there were conditions for developing operational efficiency to achieve school goals in different aspects to respond to standards and indicators of quality of educa-



tion provision. These would lead to school quality assurance. It is regarded as an important condition that all schools have to operate development of operational efficiency in different aspects to achieve quality under the national standards of education.

2. The results of the study revealed that development of professional practice at schools by using action research could cause school personnel to be developed to have more knowledge, understanding, and abilities; particularly in terms of conducting classroom research, management of child-centered learning activities, development of school work systems with higher efficiency, and school information systems with improvement of manipulation from manual to the use of computer programs. This could obtain information which was more accurate, complete, updated, and easier to search. The students in the target group at the schools with development had behavioral changes in these aspects: higher responsibility, more punctuality, more awareness of keeping their bodies and school compounds clean, and appropriate dressing in school uniforms. The study results mentioned above could be explained that at present, different organizations have tried to upgrade their standards in every aspect. Teachers have to develop themselves with professionalism, focused knowledge, abilities, and potentials in pedagogy, research, and work according to their school missions (Ubben, Hughes, and Norris, 2001 : 14 ; Runcharoen, 2007 : 357-359). At the same time, to achieve practice outcomes, it is necessary to depend on good work-systems. All

of the school operation has its focus: quality of the students, which must develop them not only to be smart people but also to be simultaneously good and joyful people. Therefore, with all the involved persons' common awareness of operating their own roles in full abilities in every aspect, changes in different issues mentioned above emerged.

3. The results of examining problems of implementing action research were: (1) Most of the students who conducted action research for developing their professional practice at schools lacked skills in convincing people and creating awareness to involve people to volunteer to be research participants. (2) Participant's participation was still in a limited scope. Most decision-making often depended on each researcher. They lacked equality in decision-making. (3) Planning for development lacked clear analysis of current conditions. (4) Determination of development goals was not related with the available resources. (5) The strategies for problem-solving lacked diversity, and decision-making on selecting each strategy focused on achieving effectiveness, not on efficiency. Therefore, learning about the process of development of the research participants occurred limitedly; and (6) The operational plans for development was not concrete, but often each plan was in the type of thinking, doing, and solving problems at the same time.

The results of the study mentioned above indicated that the implementation of action research in developing professional practice at schools, particularly in Thai context, had



several problems and limitations including: limited scope of participation, and limited awareness of participation. These might be because analysis and decision-making on selecting problems for development began from the students who conducted research, not from those who involved directly in those problems, and communication for making understanding was inadequate; the students who conducted research lacked skills in convincing people; decision-making at different stages of problem-solving often depended on each student who conducted research; obtaining each strategy for problem-solving or for development still lacked decision-making together; working together in teamwork was not sufficiently strong; and plans for practice lacked clarity and were not concrete in practice. This might be connected with the foundation of work that did not have the base of creating a sense of belonging and did not originate from a consensus idea; and determination of goals to achieve was not related to strategies or specific methods used for problem-solving.

Recommendations

1. Implementing action research in de-

veloping professional practice at schools is appropriate to help originate changes and development in different aspects, leading to achievement in learners' quality. Schools should implement action research in solving complicated problems which need to rely on common synergy of involved people.

2. To achieve the goals of implementing action research in problem-solving or development, it is necessary for the researcher to communicate with those involved, and to create common awareness for those involved to have a sense of belonging.

3. The goals of development should be determined as common goals which are appropriate and feasible, and congruent with conditions of time and resources.

4. An emphasis should be on development of potentials in planning of the researcher and research participants in order to obtain feasible and practical plans and to be able to achieve the goals of practice.

5. The research scopes should be extended to cover the specific issues which are critical problems of schools and which can respond to standards of educational quality including sub-indicators involved.

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