The role of action research in the promotion of quality education: Reflecting on the Save Children Norway quality education projects in Zimbabwe (Bikita) and Ethiopia (Amhara region)

B. Chenjerai Chisaka
Centre For Open and Distance Learning Research and Scholarship, Zimbabwe Open University
and
Primrose Kurasha
Vice Chancellor, Zimbabwe Open University

ABSTRACT
Perceptions of Ethiopian and Zimbabwean participants in the Quality Education project, on the Role of Action Research in promoting quality education, were sought in this research. Qualitative research methods, of interviews and document analysis were used to collect data. The research was carried out in 2007 and 2008, during workshops, which were held four times per year, and each lasting an average of four (4) days. The participants’ perceptions were that, action research improves and develops their thinking capabilities, makes them look inward (at selves) for solutions to their problems (rather than seek external directions); and that action research improves the quality of their actions and practice.

Background and Context of the Study
Save the Children Norway is sponsoring Quality Education Projects (QEP) in Zimbabwe and Ethiopia. These projects were launched in the Amhara Region in 2002, and in the Bikita district, Masvingo Province of Zimbabwe in 2005. The central concern of Save the Children Norway in this project is quality of basic primary education. According to Save the Children Norway (2006:4), through “its Basic Education programme, the organization is committed to improving the quality of education of all”. The assumption in this statement is that quality education may be lacking at the primary school in the targeted countries. The assumption is also that teachers are mostly using traditional methods and approaches in their instructional strategies, and these traditional methods mainly involve mechanical routines, which treat learners as passive recipients of knowledge and skills. The QEP project is targeted to improve the teachers’ instructional strategies through imparting knowledge and skills in action research. It is the thinking in the project movers that action research by teachers would result in their (teachers’) change of attitudes, beliefs and routines, thus adopting learner’s friendly instructional approaches, which would spin off to improved learning opportunities for the children.

One of the important learning opportunities envisaged is active learner participation in classroom activities. When this improvement in attitudes, beliefs, instructional strategies and learning opportunities obtains, then the assumption is that quality education would be the resultant outcome. The quality would be read in the ability of practitioners to own their own decisions (Hopkins, 2002; Drudy and Chathain, 2002). The quality would be read when teachers are empowered (through action research skills) to “improve their classroom practice” (Drudy and Chathain, 2002:36). Quality can be said to exist when there is an improvement in teaching and learning conditions, when practitioners “engage successfully with professional problems without recourse to external direction;” when teachers “experiment with new ideas and strategies rather than letting their practice petrify”; when practitioners reflect and take action on their everyday practical situation; when they consciously reflect on their ‘doings’ in order to develop their actions and ‘act reflectively in order to develop (their) knowledge’ (Altrichter, Posch and Somekh, 1993). Bassey (1999) implies quality exists when the practitioner, through action research, systematically and critically enquires in an attempt to improve his or her practical situation. The practitioner would be “trying to make beneficial change within (his or her) own workplace” (p 41). In our view, it is the implied “change” of a situation that would represent quality, because there can only be quality when there is “beneficial change” in a situation.

Hopkins (2002) says that, action research “combines a substantive act with a research procedure; it is action disciplined by enquiry, a personal attempt at understanding while engaged in a process of improvement and reform” (p 46). Kemmis (1983) in Hopkins (2002) also attributes the role of action research as that of improvement, reform and development in education, when he says, “in education, action research has been employed in school-based curriculum development, professional development, schools improvement programmes and systems planning and policy development” (p 43).

In our view, proponents of action research value its ability to improve “the quality of action” (Elliot in Hopkins, 2002); it’s ability to change the status quo – to improve, to reform, to transform the present situation to a new situation. The target is not just the situation that has to be transformed, it is also the beliefs, attitudes and action that have to be transformed. The central themes are change of beliefs, attitudes, perceptions and actions (practice). It is those changes that would represent quality – i.e. the new and improved ways of doing things. In education, this means new and improved attitudes towards learners, and new improved instructional strategies. These would also translate to improved opportunities for learning – empowering learners to participate more actively in classroom activities. Learners would change in terms of behavior (action) from being passive recipients of knowledge and skills, to be active participants in the creation of their own knowledge and skills. In our view, it is these changes or transformations that would constitute quality education.
It is against this background that this study is contextualized on the experiences of participants in the Quality Education Project, sponsored by Save the Children Norway in Ethiopia and Zimbabwe.

**Objectives of the study**

Action Research scholars say the following about its value to practitioners and their practice:

* That it improves and reforms practitioners' thinking, perception and practice (action) (Hopkins, 2002);
* That it brings about "beneficial change" to the workplace of practitioners (Bassey, 1999);
* That it improves "the quality of action" of the practitioners (Altrichter, et al, 1993);
* That it empowers practitioners to "engage successfully with professional problems without recourse to external direction" (Altrichter et al, 1993);
* That it promotes experiential learning in the practitioners, thereby changing their beliefs, attitudes and practice (Chilisa and Preece, 2005).

In this presentation, the objectives were to assess the validity of the above claims, with respect to the experiences and perceptions of Ethiopian and Zimbabwean participants in the Save the Children Norway Quality Education Project. These participants were taught and trained in Action Research and Reflective practice from 2002 to 2007 (in the case of Ethiopia) and 2003 to 2007 (in the case of Zimbabwe).

**Data collection methods and how they were used**

This study is the work of two researchers, Professor B. Chenjerai Chisaka (the primary researcher who did the data collection), and Dr Primrose Kurasha (the secondary researcher, who did much of the data analysis).

The study used the qualitative methodology in the gathering and analysis of data. As is the tradition in qualitative research, the primary researcher was the main instrument of data collection and, to a limited extent, analysis (since secondary researcher did a lot in the latter) (Borman, 1986; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The methods the primary researcher used in the collection of the data were interviews and document analysis. With respect to both Ethiopia and Zimbabwe, the primary researcher took advantage of the Save the Children Norway Action Research training workshops and preliminary participatory evaluation (Guba and Lincoln, 1989) in 2007 and 2008, to do the data collection and preliminary analysis.

**Interviews**

In qualitative studies, interviews provide important background information on participants (Chisaka, 2002) and present the researcher with an opportunity to reach non-verbal reactions of the participants, such as facial expressions, which are critical for purposes of reading hidden meanings. Interviews provide access to reactions such as expression of feelings and intentions which may not be readily accessed through observation and document analysis (Nyawaraanda, 1998; Yin, 1986).

With respect to the Amhara Region of Ethiopia interviews, ten participants in the Quality Education Project were involved in this study. These were given pseudonyms in the form of alphabetical letters as follows: A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, and J. All the ten respondents were those who volunteered to participate in this study, and they also gave the primary researcher permission to record the interview in notebooks and on audiotape recorder. These interviews were spread over a period of five (5) weeks, during which the Save the Children Norway International Resource Group (of which the primary researcher was a member) held workshops and carried out participatory evaluation of the Quality Education Project. The interviews would last an average of 30 minutes.

With respect to Zimbabwe, in the Bikita Quality Education Project, seven participants were involved. All the seven volunteered to participate in the study. They were also given pseudonyms as followed: Mudhumo, Mhere, Juru, Gozho, Ngombe, Mnudzai and Giwai. The participants also gave the primary researcher permission to record the interviews both on audiotape and in notebooks. The primary researcher further gave assurance to the participants that their real names would not be revealed, and instead, that the researcher would use pseudonyms (Chisaka, 2007).

In the case of the Bikita Quality Education Project, data collection and analysis were done during workshops, which were held four (4) times per year, between 2006 and 2007, and during the International Resource Group preliminary evaluation of the Quality Education Project in September 2008.

**Document analysis**

Document analysis in qualitative research is used to complement interviews and observations (Eisner, 1991). Document analysis assists to clarify some information that may not be easily accessible through interviews. It is also used as a way to triangulate methods in order to achieve validity and reliability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

In this study, the documents used were those containing summary evaluation of workshops by participants themselves at the end of each workshop (examining the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) to the Quality Education Project). The other documents were the Action Research Project write-ups, which summarized their experiences in the Action Research work that they carried out in their work places.

**Analysis and interpretation of data**

In qualitative research, analysis and interpretation are intertwined processes but which are distinguishable all the same. According to Welleott (1994), analysis represents a process of identifying key factors and relationships among one’s data, whereas interpretation represents the process of giving meaning and making sense of one’s data.

In this study, our analysis consisted of examining the thick narrations of the participants’ experiences, picking out recurring themes and identifying their relationships or common denominators. We, as researchers, identified the common perceptions that emerged from both the interview and document data.
In our interpretation of the data, we examined the data obtained against the background of the claims made by Hopkins (2002), Bassey (1999), Altrichter, et al (1993) and Chilisa and Preece (2005), among others, regarding the value of action research to practitioners in education.

Findings and discussion

In our findings and discussion, we present a synopsis of the perceptions of the participants in the Save the Children Norway Quality Education Project in both Ethiopia and Zimbabwe. The Tables below give a cross section of the perceptions in the form of emerging themes and the substantiating statements that support them.

### Table I: Ethiopian Participants’ Perceptions on the Role of Action Research in Promoting Quality Education

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<th>Emerging Themes</th>
<th>Substantiating Statements</th>
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<tr>
<td>Action Research makes practitioners look inward (self) for solutions to own challenges</td>
<td>… There are big differences in my classroom (as a result of Action Research). In most we used to externalize problems we encountered. … The first change is to recognize the problems in our own and not to externalize them and blame others. These are problems related to my practice, I have learnt to identify and solve children’s learning problems. … I resolve problems through utilizing the research methods (Action Research methods) I have learnt. I plan to act and search for solutions (Teacher B). … Before training in Action Research we felt shy. We were thinking research is not for us. But we are not shy any longer. … After Quality Education Project (Action Research training) we never externalize. … (Teacher G). … Before Quality Education Project (Action Research training) we were not the owner of the situation. Everything was externalized. Curriculum authorities, administration, all got the blame for our problems. After Action Research, we see the profession as our own (Teacher C).</td>
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<td>Action Research gives practitioners self-confidence and love for own work and seeing its worth</td>
<td>… When I joined Action Research training way back in the first group of teachers to be trained in the pilot, I was not OK with the profession. Infact I was planning to quit and leave the job. After my participation in Action Research training, I changed. I saw that education is the key to everything. In the classroom I was very autocratic. But after Action Research training I know how to treat children (properly). Their whole life depends on education and I am responsible (for that) … (Teacher A). … Contrary to previous times, now I am very quick and fast to come to school. I have come to be fond of my children. In the (Quality Education Project) project, even though you haven’t told us that we should love them, our work is centered around the children. … (Teacher J). … Before Action Research training, I didn’t care about children’s absenteeism. We (teachers) even liked it. That way we got fewer students in the class. We didn’t care about the students’ motivation or understanding. We only cared about the few brighter ones. Now it is the opposite. When I enter the classroom and before we start teaching, I make eye contact with everyone and I see how they are. I greet everyone. Before I start teaching, I talk about what they have been doing. I engage in personal conversation. … I make rapport … (Teacher B).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Action Research gives practitioners development in research and develops research skills in them</td>
<td>… Action Research made me know myself as well as the children. I will continue to use the methods I learnt in the project. At first it seemed difficult. We don’t have much culture. But through the project I have learnt a lot of new things about the job, about children and about the profession. We didn’t know about this, because we didn’t know action research. We were fearful. We didn’t know about research. … We didn’t think it was about us and our job. It was scary. But it turned out to be about ourselves … (Teacher D). … Children are now motivated to learn, because we now handle them differently and according to their needs. … Now I go to the families (of the children) to investigate why the children (were) absent from class (Teacher B). … I have learnt a lot from Quality Education Project, I have learnt how to do action research. We practice it now. It has brought about a change in attitude of teachers. We are practicing it and resolving problems. Problems cannot be externalized any longer … (Teacher J).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action Research changes and improves attitudes of practitioners towards learners and their work</td>
<td>… The project (Action Research) has influenced me. I (now) like to be a teacher and I (now) like children. Even more so now that I am able to do my job in a better way. The major change is when I encounter a problem. I know what to do to investigate and resolve them. Before I was externalizing. I have great concern about a learning these days. (Teacher I). … Action Research has helped us to ask ourselves, “Who am I?” Both at school and at home. Action Research means to think about our children and our activities. It helps me to struggle to solve our problems. Before we were practicing negative things. We were externalizing, we used corporal punishment, like, knee down. (This means the participant used to punish children by making them to kneel down) (Teacher F).</td>
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Among other themes that emerged from the perceptions of the Ethiopian Quality Education Project participants were that, action research assists that practitioner to improve his or her work; that it builds leadership qualities in the practitioner; that it develops independence and self-drive in the practitioner; that it creates better learning opportunities for children; and it leads to communities of parents developing more respect for teacher practitioners due to the changed positive performance of their children, which positive change is driven by the action research-oriented teacher. The perceptions of the Ethiopian participants in the Save the Children Norway (SCN) Quality Education Project, largely agree with the perception of Hopkins (2002); Bassey (1999); Altrichter, et al (1993) and Chilisa and Preece (2005).

The Ethiopian participants’ perceptions that action research develops a practitioner who looks inward or at self for solutions to own problem, tallies with Altrichter, et al (1993) perception that action research empowers practitioners to “engage successfully with professional problems without recourse to external direction”. Hopkins’ (2002) perception is that action research improves and reforms the practitioner’s thinking and practice. This perception corroborates with the Ethiopians’ perceptions that action research helps the practitioners to improve their work, and that it changes and improves practitioners’ attitudes towards their work and the learners therein. This perception is also in agreement with Bassey’s (1999) perception that action research brings about “beneficial change” to the work place of practitioners. This also appears to support the perception of Altrichter, et al (1993) that action research improves “the quality of action” of the practitioner.

The perceptions of the Ethiopians that action research improves the quality of leadership, develops the practitioner’s interest in research, develops love for one’s work, leads to community appreciation of the practitioner’s qualities, are not directly alluded to by the research that has been reviewed in this presentation. These would appear to be somewhat new insights on the role of action research in the development of the teacher practitioner. These “new” perceptions would appear to add more weight to the advocacy for the promotion of action research in the field of education. The perception of the Ethiopians on the role of action research in education is that it has beneficial effects to the classroom practitioner, to the learners, to the teaching profession (through making the teacher a researcher and an independent decision maker), and to the community at large (through making the latter more interested in learning activities).

Table 2: Zimbabwean Participants’ Perceptions on the Role of Action Research in Promoting Quality Education

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Emerging Themes</th>
<th>Substantiating Statements</th>
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<tr>
<td>Action Research improves quality of education and quality of professionals.</td>
<td>…My views of Bikita Action research are that it should be an on-going process to all the teachers and heads to improve the quality of education. …Professionally I feel this project enriches the professional issues. I feel that the project will produce quality teachers in the system (Juru).</td>
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<td>…From a personal point of view the benefit that accrue from the action research project are that I have developed to be a critical analyst and reflect on whatever I do in class with pupils …a paradigm shift from the old practices … (Mbudzi)</td>
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<td>…The outstanding benefit accruing from this (Action Research) project is that of arming the classroom teacher with innovative means of solving his/her professional problems … for the first time in my professional history, pupils will benefit directly. Comparing with what is in place, where most teachers work to please their heads, etc, this project helps to solve pupils’ learning problems …(Gozho)</td>
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<td>…As a class teacher, action research has helped me to seriously reflect on my teaching practices. It has enabled me to identify problem areas in my teaching and corrected deformities in my instruction delivery … As a result, my Grade 3 class has since began to show improved performance as depicted by increased overall pass rate … (Gwa).</td>
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<td></td>
<td>…I think I now have enough weapon to tackle some of the problems I used to meet as I was exercising my duties … now I have discovered that if I can think critically (through action research) I will have ways and means to mould my children … in changed behaviours for the better … (Ngombe).</td>
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</table>
Action research develops practitioner into quality leadership

...On a professional basis (action research) benefits are many. I have gained a lot of skills in my educational practices, both curriculum instruction and in administration. I have also gained a lot of respect due to the impact I make in staff development meetings...(Gozho).

...from action research I have gained the ability to accept defeat from subordinates. I benefited (in that) to gain follower’s confidence, I should de-role to their...I have also benefited that I should be a leader (and) not a boss ...(Mdhumo – a school head).

...Quite a lot of benefits have accrued from the action research training. I am going to highlight the most important ones. Personally, I am now a changed person in terms of the way I view myself. The reflection or self-assessment has made me a better person (read leader). I can now interact with others (read subordinates) quite well and completely because of this (read action research) ... From my professional perspective, I really feel my performance as an Education Officer has improved quite significantly and my actions either in the office or in schools have moved from the blame game syndrome to the “self”. Reports are now produced upon recommendations made with regards to supervision based on quality. (Mhere, an Education Officer).

Action research increases knowledge base of practitioners, their practical research experiences and improves interpersonal relationships

...action research has improved my knowledge base in research and in the field of education (Jaru).

...action research has gained me practical experience in research. It has also created ideas on how to handle challenges in my profession. It has also improved my interpersonal relationships with other key stakeholders in education (Ngombe).

Other perceptions emerging from the Zimbabwean Quality Education Project participants were that, action research promotes personal and professional growth in the practitioners, develops self-consciousness in them, and changes their beliefs and values.

The perceptions of Zimbabwean participants on the role of action research in promoting quality education largely agree with those on the literature reviewed in this presentation. This agreement is largely on the perspectives that action research improves the participant’s knowledge base, the quality of action or practice, that it promotes innovation in the practitioner’s instructional strategies. What seems to be “new” insights are the perceptions that action research improves inter-personal relationships among practitioners, develops self-consciousness and quality leadership in professionals.

Conclusion

The findings of the study support the views that action research training and practice, develops and improves the educational practitioners’ thinking and practice (Hopkins, 2002). The findings further corroborate the views that action research improves the quality of action of the practitioners, which views are propagated by Altrichter, et al (1993) as well. Furthermore, the findings of this study also support the views that action research assists practitioners to look for solutions from their own actions and efforts, rather than looking for “external direction” (Altrichter, et al (1993)). This goes for both Ethiopian and Zimbabwean practitioners’ perceptions. It follows therefore that the perceptions of the value of action research to practitioners has a universal dimension.

References


