

**IREM KIZILASLAN & BRUNO LEUTWYLER****PRE-SERVICE TEACHER ACTION RESEARCH: CONCEPT,  
INTERNATIONAL TRENDS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER  
EDUCATION IN TURKEY****Abstract**

Action research is increasingly recognized as an important component in initial teacher education programs in different countries around the world. Either as an inquiry project conducted during a field experience, or as a research-inclusive course, action research processes are introduced to student teachers during their study period in order to support the development of reflective teachers. The present contribution briefly examines some pre-service teacher action research practices in different countries, identifies similarities and differences and discusses implications for teacher education in Turkey.

*He who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead;  
his eyes are closed.*  
Albert Einstein

**Introduction**

In recent years, action research as a means of providing reflective practice and educational change has become a major component in teacher preparation programs around the world. This “teacher as researcher” movement has developed particularly in contexts such as the United States and Australia, where the professional identity and practices of teachers are quite developed (Adler, 1997). It is noteworthy that action research in initial teacher education does not aim to transform teachers into academic researchers, but rather to educate autonomous and reflective teachers (Choi, 2011; Krokfors et al., 2011). Action research is a tool that enables teachers to constantly improve their teaching practices and make their work more professional. In other words, it is a means to empower student teachers to reflect on their own professional experience in the light of a scientifically based discourse, as it was described ideally with the model “reflective practitioner” by Donald Schön (1983).

Regarded as a unique genre within the action research tradition, the concept of pre-service teacher action research is defined by Phillips and Carr (2010) as follows:

Action research for preservice teachers is a process of learning with community to think and act critically, to recognize and negotiate political systems, and to focus passion growing in one’s identity as a teacher. Such a process evolves out of a desire to become a caring, intelligent, transformative educator and includes honing the art and science of planning, assessment, and a critical reflective practice... The result of action research for preservice teachers is the beginning of a journey in becoming a teacher living in the teaching/research life to simultaneously improve teaching practice, student outcomes, and systems of schooling to be more just and equitable for all children and adolescents (p.17).

Educational researchers have identified several reasons for introducing action research to pre-service teachers:

- Action research is important as a tool for bringing theory and practice together, by bridging the gap between school and the world outside school. It is an important strategy for linking what students learn about teaching from their school experiences with what they learn from university experiences (Ax, Ponte and Brouwer, 2008; Phillips and Carr, 2010; Ponte, Beijard and Ax, 2004). According to the model of the “reflective practitioner”, action research aims at integrating scientific knowledge and procedural knowledge as two integral parts of professionalism: Whereas scientific knowledge can be seen as “knowledge about practice” (Messner and Reusser, 2000), procedural knowledge refers to “knowledge in practice” (ibid). Action research combines “knowledge about practice” and “knowledge in practice” towards “knowledge for practice” and contributes, thereby, to solve one of the key challenges in teacher education.
- In line with the current constructivist thought on teacher education, action research can enable student teachers to actively pursue their own questions, build upon their own knowledge base, and interact within a social environment as reflective practitioners (Rock and Levin, 2002; Ross, 1987).
- By allowing student teachers to critically reflect on their process of becoming a teacher, action research helps them develop their voices and perspectives about teaching. Through action research, student teachers are given space to tell their own stories and create their own meaning in their own voice (Phillips and Carr, 2009; Phillips and Carr, 2010; Price, 2001).
- The added responsibility and opportunity for initiative that action research provides bring the experience of being a real teacher forward into the pre-service year. In other words, it makes the process of learning to become a professional educator a more conscious effort (Kosnik and Beck, 2000).
- Teachers today deal with both academic and emotional domains and feel not only academically but also socially responsible for their students. In addition, they are expected to teach heterogeneous, inclusive classes, with higher responsibility towards parents. They are also expected to be engaged in research and seek professional development. Thus, action research can be an effective way to prepare student teachers for these multiple roles and conflicting expectations they may face in today’s world (Kosnik and Beck, 2000; Phillips and Carr, 2009).
- Action research is also an important qualification for lifelong learning in the workplace after university education (Ponte, Beijard and Ax, 2004).

### **Method: Comparative Education**

Comparative education analyses and presents the standards used in educational practices of other countries. This analysis may help policymakers and educational leaders make the right decisions for their country (Erdogan, 1995). A comparative perspective is a useful tool for a better understanding of the educational process in general and of one’s own system in particular. According to Grant (2000), “a comparative perspective can get under the skin of other systems of education; it can try to understand how they relate to our own problems, and how and why they differ

from our own” (p.310). Similarly, Bray (2004) explains that looking outwards is surely useful: “An alternative way to promote objective understanding of one’s own society, however, is first to look outwards and then to look back” (p.252).

However, the dangers of imitating others’ practices without considering the realities of one’s own country should not be neglected (Demirel, 2000). Great care is needed here since the other countries’ practices may be misinterpreted or they may be too closely bound up with their specific contexts to be applicable anywhere else. Therefore, it is important for researchers to test the feasibility of the transfer of ideas in question and then to analyze what happens as the stages of its adoption evolve (Grant, 2000; Phillips, 2006).

The present study analyses some good pre-service teacher action research practices around the world. In line with the structure for comparative inquiry proposed by Phillips (2006), educational phenomena in different countries are first described. The next stage comprises isolating differences and similarities through direct comparison of the phenomena. Lastly, the implications of such differences and similarities as well as the applicability of the findings are discussed.

### **Examples of good practices in different contexts**

#### *The United States*

The concept of developing teachers as active researchers of their own practice is integrated into all 5-year teacher education programs at the first selected case in the United States. All student teachers complete a 1-year internship after fulfilling requirements for a bachelor’s degree. They earn their graduate credit during the internship and associated coursework, including the completion of an action research project in the primary placement of the internship year. Action research, with the focus on the “action” part mostly, is regarded as a practical tool for addressing real problems in real schools. Throughout the year, their instructors teach them how to do and write up each step of the project, from the review of the literature, and methods and procedures sections up to data analysis, conclusions and implications. At the end of the school year, action research projects are shared with peers, school administrators, and university faculty at a presentation event (in Hatch, Greer and Baile, 2006).

In the second selected case in the United States, a cohort of secondary student teachers were introduced and instructed in the process and value of conducting action research while completing their field experience. Throughout this federally sponsored project, the student teachers organized, prepared, presented and evaluated their research activities. On the whole, the students found their experiences both affirming and insightful, stating that they acquired needful and beneficial skills and abilities for reflection (in Hansen and Nalder-Godfrey, 2004).

#### *Australia*

In the selected case in Australia, a formal compulsory research oriented unit – *Research Skills for Beginning Teachers* – was introduced in the final year of the study period in order to help student teachers develop their professional research awareness in their school community. Based on the idea that the pre-service teacher education program is the best time to commence the development of teachers’ understanding of action research, this unit aimed to help students acquire classroom

research skills. It also equipped them with the ability to collaborate with colleagues on school-based research activities. The unit provided opportunities for students to work collaboratively in analyzing sets of outcomes, conducting interviews, systematically observing a classroom situation, conducting focus group discussions, conducting surveys and reporting the results in qualitative and quantitative forms (in Gray and Campbell-Evans, 2002).

### *Israel*

In the selected case in Israel, a college of education, senior student teachers are engaged in an action research project as a compulsory assignment in the course *Teacher as Researcher*. By linking theory to practice, the course aims to support the students in crossing the bridge from being students to becoming teachers. The students conduct action research projects on a self-regulated authentic professional problem, derived from their personal teaching experience. At the end of the school year, an academic conference is held to give the students the opportunity to share their personal learning process and insights with peers, other students and teachers of the program (in Smith and Sela, 2005).

### *Lessons learned from the good practices*

This brief look at the implementation of action research as an element of teacher education programs in different contexts suggests that the notion of ‘teacher as researcher’ and ‘producer of knowledge’ is of central importance. Reflection, integration of theoretical and practical knowledge, and pedagogical thinking seem to be at the heart of these practices. In the first American example, the students spend a whole year conducting their action research projects after fulfilling requirements for a bachelor’s degree. This 5-year model provides time and opportunity for building action research processes, which is not always available in more traditional program organizations.

The initial teacher education programs at the Australian university and the college of education in Israel offer compulsory courses on action research in the graduate year of the program. The student teachers are required to do full action research projects within the framework of these courses which emphasize the “action” part of action research. Since the aim is to encourage the students to reflect on their practice, the projects are expected to focus on inquiry skills, rather than research skills (statistics, interview, observation etc.). It is also noteworthy that the insights and results are generally shared with others through a small conference, which gives the message that the university values the impact of teacher action research results (Choi, 2011).

### **Implications for teacher education in Turkey**

Despite some positive changes made by some education faculties in their curricula (see Kuzu, 2009) or some teacher educators’ individual attempts to integrate action research into the content of courses, it is still hard to claim that action research has become a major component of teacher preparation programs in Turkey. As a result of the globalization process and Turkey’s EU accession period, the Higher Education Council has made some changes in the curricula of education faculties. The idea behind these attempts was to change the curriculum from a

teacher-centred didactic model to a student centred constructivist model (Bulut, 2007; European Commission Report, 2010).

However, it is hardly possible to say that the sorry state of teacher education in Turkey has changed considerably since then. Student teachers still spend hours learning about their subject and general education, but little time is spent on actual teaching. The courses offered to student teachers focus mostly on theoretical knowledge and fail to contribute to their critical thinking skills (Korkmaz, 2009). Besides, hardly any attention is given to the research skills that will enable them to improve their teaching practices in the classroom. Education faculties offer a two-credit, one-term course entitled *Scientific Research Methods*, which is too broad in content and insufficient for setting the stage for an action research course that might be taken by student teachers later in their study period. There appears to be no single course on action research which will certainly help student teachers bridge the gap between theory and practice in instructional endeavours.

Student teachers in Turkey start practice teaching in their graduate year which consists of two semesters. During the first semester they visit the same school and observe the same classroom atmosphere for several months. They do not have the chance to observe pupils of different ages or the instructional processes in different classes and grades. In the second semester, they do three or four micro lessons (10 - 15 minutes of teaching) within the term. As Altan (1998) suggests, the purpose of these courses is rather “outmoded” and “hazy”. Therefore, there is little opportunity for them to put their knowledge into practice or do action research projects during a field experience.

Even if student teachers are equipped with the necessary means of doing action research, it is unrealistic to expect that they will prioritize their teacher-researcher role. The largely exam-oriented nature of the present education system in Turkey creates a serious challenge to the implementation of action research practices by teachers. Both state and private schools require teachers to prepare students for the national placement tests. This requirement forces teachers to focus mainly on testing strategies and changes the way they see education.

Besides, the realities of being a student teacher in Turkey do force them to deal primarily with the problem of KPSS, a qualification exam that they have to pass in order to become teachers at public schools. Preparation for this comprehensive test that includes questions from various subject branches takes much of their time and energy, constituting a serious stress factor for especially senior student teachers, as supported by the research literature (see Gundogdu, Cimen and Turan, 2008; Kızılaslan, 2011).

Moreover, young teachers who become successful in this qualification exam have to wait for years to be assigned by the Ministry of National Education, which causes serious demoralization. And when they are assigned, they are generally sent to the rural parts of the country where they have to complete their compulsory service. In these regions, devoted young teachers are expected to overcome serious problems resulting from poor physical conditions and/or security problems. To illustrate, in September 2011, 8 teachers in two separate provinces in south-eastern Turkey were kidnapped by the PKK. Also, in October 2011, during the 7.2 magnitude earthquake which hit the eastern part of the country, a total of 75 young

teachers were killed mostly because they had not been provided with appropriate accommodation conditions.

Taking all these contextual factors into consideration in the country, it is possible to claim that the crafting of an action research component in the curriculum requires special attention. Such an endeavour needs to consider such situational factors as the insecurities of prospective teachers, the realities of the country and of the teaching profession. It is important that an action research course or project offers worthwhile experiences for student teachers, providing a framework that will help them evaluate and improve their teaching practices in relation to the everyday realities of students and teachers in the Turkish context.

In conclusion, it is noteworthy that action research in teacher education is embedded in a learning and teaching culture that enables active, mindful, intentional, critical thinking (in the sense of constructivist approaches) and that the "tool" of action research itself might perhaps not develop its potential if it is not connective with the prevailing learning-teaching culture. A successful implementation requires a stronger awareness of the contextual conditions and a desire to overcome serious obstacles caused by the social, political and cultural constraints.

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