



Bridging Theory and Practice: Action Research as a Catalyst for Educational Reform in Pakistan

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore the critical role of action research in realizing educational reform within Pakistan. It posits that the gap between educational theory and classroom practice has historically hindered significant improvements in Pakistan's education system. This makes action research and its process comprising of planning, acting, and reflecting cycle an excellent method to meet these two opposite ends. Action research is a highly formative exercise; it calls for empowering educators as researchers in their classrooms, building an organizational culture tuned to inquiry and evidence-based decision-making. This paper reviews an approach that can meet the unique educational challenges of Pakistan that arise due to complex socio-economic contexts, multilingual classrooms, and resource constraints. We illustrate case studies and review the literature to indicate how action research has supported teaching innovation, improved student learning outcomes, and created greater policy ownership. The review argues for the potential of action research in Pakistan and how it can be beneficial as a tool that fosters reflection among practitioners and as a source enriching teacher professional development and thereby triggering broader educational change. The paper concludes with suggestions of how action research might be integrated into teacher education and school improvement initiatives.

Keywords: Action Research, Educational Reform, Pakistan, Teacher Empowerment, Reflective Practice, Evidence-Based Education, Professional Development

1. Introduction

Ever since Pakistan came into being in 1947, we have been facing many challenges to improve our education system. Despite some improvements in the last 2-3 decades, low enrolments, high dropout rates, and poor learning outcomes persist (Aw et al., 2021; Durrani et al., 2017). The system is characterized by a range of public and private institutions that operate with wide disparities in quality based on geographical location, whether urban or rural (Madampage, 2023; Rashid & Mukhtar, 2012).

The significant problem continuously enhancing and making it problematic to improve education in Pakistan is persistent gap between educational theory and classroom practice. Therefore, when implementing policies and practices in the classroom, they need to address this classical disconnect issue (Halai & Durrani, 2018). Because of mismatch between pedagogical ideals and practical realities, there are inherent dangers in assuming that theories developed primarily in Western contexts can always be adapted seamlessly to Pakistan.

Action research is a promising method to address this gap between theory and practice. Action research is a form of systematic inquiry practiced by educators in their education sites (Kemmis et al., 2014), which facilitates and enables educators to become active agents of change. With this methodology, educators are encouraged to continually implement the cycle of the plan-act-reflect process for researching and developing their professional thinking toward being contributing agents in teacher knowledge building.

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It is argued in this paper that action research on the above lines can play a significant role in bringing substantial reforms to Pakistan’s education sector. Action research could catalyze improvements in teaching practices, student outcomes, and broader educational quality by enabling educators to interrogate context-specific problems systemically.

2. Understanding Action Research in Education

In education, action research is a practitioner-based inquiry process designed for educators and educational leaders. It is distinguished by its local foci, collaboratory dimension, and iterative approach to problem-solving (Burns, 2010). Action research differs from traditional forms of educational inquiry as it allows school educators to take on the dual roles of practitioner and researcher, providing a bridge between theory and practice.

Certain key principles guide the action research approach to teaching and learning in education. First, its spirit is pragmatic in nature with emphasis on solving educators’ daily, real-world problems. Second, active participation means that they are the researchers, investigating their classrooms in order to solve problems. Third, intrinsic in this process is the empowerment of educators to change practice well beyond following top-down policy directives. Fourth, reflexivity supports educators to build in practices of critical reflection, and ways for examining what we do, why and evolve. Lastly, action research acts as a mediator to merge theory and practice—joining academic understandings with practical classroom experiences which hopefully leads to more effective teaching practices. The action research cycle typically consists of four main stages:

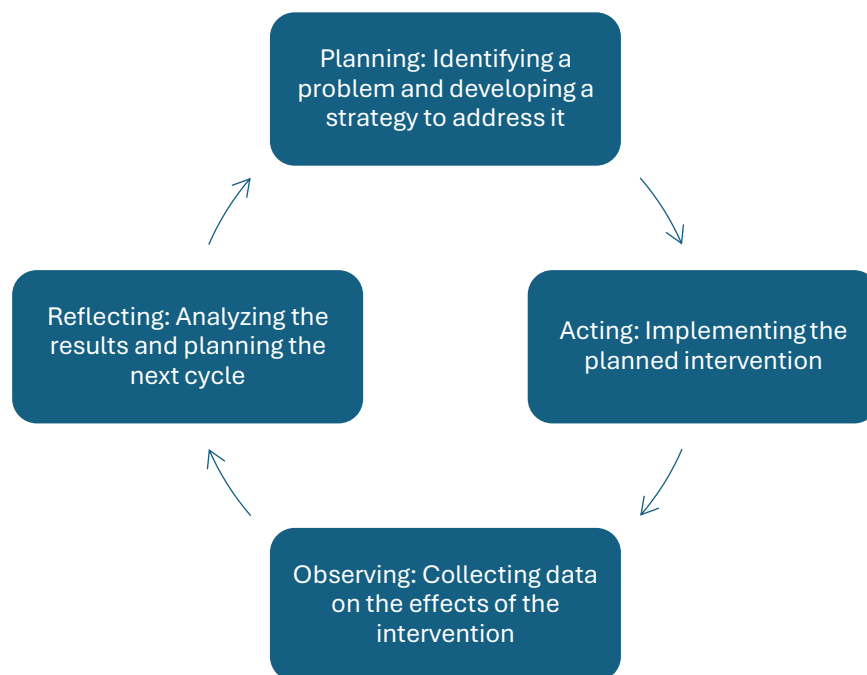


Figure 1: Four stages of action research

This cyclical nature ensures that practices are continually improved based on evidence and reflection (McNiff, 2013).

Action research has countless benefits in educational settings. It promotes professional development by assisting educators to reflect on practice and incorporating that with the latest theories of education (Mertler, 2019). Action research further creates an environment of inquiry among schools that causes enhanced decision-making grounded in evidence. They also believe in the best solutions and always make lasting adjustments. It also enables the

generation of contextual solutions that are more relevant to and thus have a better chance of succeeding in local educational contexts (Stringer, 2014).

3. Pakistani Higher Educational Context

However, Pakistan's education system has a myriad of challenges that halt its progress and effectiveness. Chief among these is the availability of educational opportunities, with millions of children in rural areas, particularly girls, still needing to attend school (UNESCO, 2020). The concern about the quality of education is similarly overwhelming as after years and months at school, most children have completed primary schooling yet lack basic literacy and numeracy skills even for grade 2 level in terms of competencies additional to institutional modeling (ASER Pakistan, 2014).

The education system in Pakistan suffers from multiple challenges that influence the overall quality and accessibility of education. The combination of these challenges is complex and interrelated, requiring comprehensive solutions.

One of the biggest problems is that schools, especially in rural areas, have an infrastructure and resources that should be improved. There is an absence of even the most modern classrooms in many schools, and toilets or electricity. A study by Zakar (2018), more than 40% of public schools in Pakistan do not have clean drinking water, and almost half lack proper toilet facilities. In addition to impeding the learning environment, leaving schools without bathrooms and running water can also place students and educators in dangerous—even life-threatening-situations.

In addition, the high student-teacher ratio, especially in public schools, makes our educational system face some challenges. On average, the student-teacher ratio (STR) in public primary schools is 39:1 (Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, 2024). These ratios need to be lowered so that educators can give students the personalized attention and support they need, thus reducing their overall quality of education.

Additionally, linguistic diversity is a critical challenge in Pakistan's education context. More than 70 languages are used at the very heart of this country. This complicates defining a language as a medium of instruction (Rahman, 2010). Urdu is the national language, and English is also used in higher education. However, if these languages are the mother tongues of some students, they will need help with them. This language barrier may impede learning, blocking progress in minority ethnic group students.

Pakistan has enormous socio-economic disparities that heavily affect educational accessibility and quality. Similarly, extreme poverty will make it impossible for some kids to attend school simply because they have to work instead of gaining an education. A study by Nasir et al. (2019) shows that there is a strong significant correlation between household income and school enrolment as well as educational attainment.

A second major challenge is severely limited teacher professional development opportunities. Most of these educators need access to regular training and support to improve their teaching ability and stay updated with modern pedagogical approaches. The lack of teacher training may lead to previously taught yet obsolete course materials and misalignment between the skills held by a given educator against what might be most desirable for students in a contemporary educational environment.

Problems with the curriculum, such as obsolete content and overemphasis on rote learning, have been exacerbating the ineffectiveness of education in Pakistan. Curriculums often need to enhance global best practices and local demands for interactivity, critical thinking, and problem-solving, which still need to be addressed with extensive rote learning. Rashid and Mukhtar (2012) pointed out the alarming fact that Pakistan's curriculum practices spoon

feed students. However, they highlighted the need for curriculum reform to promote active learning and develop 21st-century skills among Pakistani students.

Solving these challenges together requires policy reforms, monetary increases in education, and new methodologies. Improving infrastructure, reducing student-teacher ratios, addressing linguistic diversity among citizens (reducing the bias towards Urdu and English), reducing socio-economic disparities through scholarships and other compensatory measures, focusing on teacher professional development, and reforming curriculum have all been identified as crucial steps toward quality improvement in education. By addressing these areas, Pakistan can move towards an education system capable of meeting the needs of its diverse nations as well as providing students with a broad base from which to face challenges within and without. These multifaceted challenges require context-specific solutions that counter the specific realities of Pakistani classrooms. Borrowing lessons or policies from other education systems and applying them can be ill-fated since the local context must always be considered simply because one-size-fits-all approaches seldom work (Halai & Durrani, 2018).

While beneficial, traditional research methods have drawbacks in dealing with these context-specific challenges. While large-scale quantitative studies can offer big-picture trends in learning, they often need to improve on painting a complete and complex portrait of the workings of an individual classroom. While these qualitative studies executed by external researchers offer a nuanced understanding, they may not provide practical solutions educators can implement to solve their problems ((Shamim & Qureshi, 2013).

More promising is an alternative based on various action research approaches, emphasizing practitioner inquiry and context-specific problem-solving. Action research can produce theoretically informed and contextually feasible solutions to problems by enabling educators in Pakistan to observe and solve issues in their classrooms (Bashiruddin, 2011).

4. Action Research as a Bridge Between Theory and Practice

While traditional approaches to research continue to provide important lessons, they need to be revised to address Pakistan's context-specific educational challenges. These traditional ways (generally distinguished as quantitative and qualitative methodologies) offer important insights but often fall short in providing practical, implementable solutions for the unique Pakistani educational context.

Large scale quantitative analyses afford systemic views that are endearing to most policy makers and educationalists (Bao, 2024; Leavy, 2022; Muijs, 2022). These evaluations can therefore be used to give statistically generated results on enrollment, literacy rates etc. These results often however rarely reveal some small, specific, classroom contexts or the different factors that in combination with other factors affect teaching and learning. For example, a quantitative survey may find out that there is low literacy coefficient in an area but to explain why this is so or recommend how it can be overcome a qualitative approach must be adopted.

At the same time, qualitative research carried out by external researchers is also important for obtaining a rich understanding of certain educational phenomena (Brinkmann, 2023; Creswell & Poth, 2024; Tracy, 2024). These studies may use an ethnographic technique, a case study, or interviews to give the specifics of the classroom processes, teaching strategies, and students' accounts. However, such kinds of studies, as enlightening as they may be, regarding the variety within educational settings, only occasionally provide ideas that are actionable by educators. On the other hand, while external researchers may be considered as experts in their own right, they might hold different knowledge than educators concerning what could possibly work or fit. Their

recommendations may be more of theory based as opposed to other ideas that could possibly be implementable or more effective in actual Pakistani classrooms.

Shamim and Qureshi (2013) note that research in Pakistan rarely finds its way to classrooms, but implementing generic research-based recommendations in a one-size-fits-all approach may require more work. Such recommendations often need to pay more attention to the realities facing many educators, including unique classroom circumstances, limited resources, and cultural factors. This disconnect between research and practice inevitably generates frustrations among educators, leading to the perception that educational research needs to be in touch with actual teaching practices.

There is a significant gap in knowledge dissemination stretching from expert research to practice, and action research formulated on practitioner inquiry and context-specific problem-solving may be an ideal facilitator. In Pakistan, educators cannot master both theories and practices to develop theoretically imbued practicable solutions to classroom issues because, primarily, all the practitioners cannot afford them in a professional environment (Bashiruddin, 2011). Action research treats educators as authorities in their instructional settings. It casts them not only as participants but also as researchers of the phenomenon being studied.

The power of action research lies in its ability to serve as a bridge between educational theory and classroom practice. There are several advantages to taking this approach in Pakistan that are well-suited for the challenges faced by the Pakistani educational landscape.

First, action research facilitates educators as researchers. Educators participate in systematic inquiry within their classroom, moving from passive consumers of knowledge to active generators of context-specific insights through action research (Kemmis et al., 2014). It is a significant departure in Pakistan, where educators typically feel disenfranchised when making educational decisions. By participating in action research, educators could validate what they know from experience and offer it to the educational conversation.

According to Halai (2011), teacher-researchers in Pakistan gain confidence in their ability to address classroom challenges, enhancing job satisfaction; and increase teaching efficacy. That empowerment can have ripple effects throughout the educational system, as educators who feel empowered and motivated are more innovative, collaborative, and continuously seeking to improve their practice.

Second, action research also provides a framework for situating educational theories within contextual realities of the Pakistani context. While lessons from global educational research offer valuable input to any local initiative, these must be carefully adapted in a socio-culturally diverse country like Pakistan. Educators may need to aspire to action research by examining real-life problems and, through their praxis, verify theory or be reassured of the feasibility and recognition of theoretical constructs in practice (Rashid & Mukhtar, 2012). For instance, a school teacher in a rural Punjab could locate how constructivist learning theories might be adapted to consider viable activity inside multilingual classrooms. As the teacher progressively introduces and evaluates constructivist strategies, he may create a localized theory to address the demands and constraints of their learners. One of the observed challenges in Pakistan is a disconnect between academic research and classroom realities—and this process of contextualization bridges the gap in theory and practice.

Third, creating practical and evidence-based solutions is a significant result that emerges from action research. Systematic acts of observation, self-reflection, and adjustment in practice give rise to theoretically valid and operationally acceptable solutions (Burns, 2010). This approach is especially beneficial in a country like Pakistan, where resource constraints create the need for innovative and context-specific interventions in diverse learning environments. For instance, a teacher who deals with student engagement issues in an over-sized classroom may

seek to design and trial cooperative learning strategies using action research. As this teacher implement those strategies, she can observe what works and reflect on how some existing ideas may be modified or refined so that each method can operate effectively within their classroom contexts. This inevitably produces better teaching practices and a burgeoning bank of indigenous educational wisdom that can be leveraged by other educators dealing with similar difficulties.

Action research assists educators in recording and communicating these solutions, which instantly create a library of indigenous knowledge (Shamim & Qureshi, 2013). This community of practice can help to develop an ongoing network through which Pakistani educators draw upon the shared context-specific insights, support each other in their daily work, and ensure the continuous generation of improved practices across the education system.

In addition, action research can enable the informing of education policy and reform efforts in Pakistan, known as a "two-way" relationship that needs to be developed further (McNiff, 2013), but not yet evident in Pakistan, where research reports are usually produced by international consultants. Teacher-researchers can give invaluable evidence directly from the ground up about what works in actual Pakistani classrooms. It is hoped that educational reform from the bottom up will achieve natural and sustainable changes as it originates in local education practices rather than top-down policies/interventions.

However, the fact remains that, in Pakistan, the implementation of action research is without challenges. Educators could be under time pressure, unsupported by administrators, or need more evidence-based resources. Educators may also be required to enhance their research skills and adopt what is often referred to in the literature as an "action research way of thinking" (Eilertsen et al., 2008).

These are not insignificant, but the return to action research is worth it for Pakistan's education system. Action research lends itself to driving genuine educational reform by enabling educators, contextualizing theory, and finding concrete solutions. The inquiry cycle goes around systemically to promote better teaching practices that seriously affect the child's learning outcomes and overall quality of education.

To sum up, traditional research models are well-suited to answering predetermined questions in education. However, action research offers exceptional power for overcoming Pakistan's context-specific educational challenges. Bridging the gap between theory and practice, augmenting the role of the teacher, and creating localized knowledge could serve as a game changer in improving teaching-learning across a diverse educational spectrum within Pakistan.

5. Action Research in Pakistani Schools: Case Studies

Using three case studies in varied educational settings within the country, this paper demonstrates how action research can be employed to tackle Pakistan's current educational challenges.

Case Study 1: Introduction of School Based Teacher Professional Development in Northern Sindh, Pakistan

The action research study was carried out by a school principal of a higher secondary school in Northern Sindh, Pakistan where the principal aimed at initiating and maintaining school-based PD for 45 educators (Nawab, 2023).

5.1. The action research cycle involved

Planning: Document analysis, observation, and interview processes helped the principal in understanding educators' needs and characteristics of the school.

5.1.1. Acting

Three cycles of intervention were introduced by the principal, taking nearly eight months.

- 1) Two meetings in a week under the leadership of the principal with PD focus.
- 2) Planning and co-facilitating of volunteers and educators
- 3) Face-to-face professional development initiated and led by the educators

Observing: Therefore, data was gleaned from observations, natural conversations with educators, and the principal's log.

5.1.2. Reflecting

It has been discerned from the analysis that although there is a great deal of difficulty in starting the school-based PD activities in this context but yet it is not an impossible feat. Teacher incentives, responsibility, preparedness, and the principal's involvement were some of the most decisive success components.

This study provided the example of how action research by the school leadership might be employed to establish a conception for the school-based professional development for educators where the context is hardly favorable in Pakistan. It provides insights into the initiative as well as the opportunities, obstacles and consequences associated with it.

Case Study 2: The Transformation of Reflective Practices of Elementary School Educators

In a private secondary school in Lahore, the researchers implemented collaborative action research for enhancing the reflective practices of elementary school educators (Naseer et al., 2020). The target population of the study comprised 20 elementary educators who had at least one year of teaching experience. The job requirements include that the candidate should possess 5 years of teaching experience.

5.2. The action research cycle involved

5.2.1. Planning

The researchers arranged a set of five workshops explicitly for the educators to support their reflection concerning the cognition, affect, and behaviors of educators.

5.2.2. Acting

In a period of one week, researchers had a 2-hour workshop including activities, presentations and discussions about reflection in education, the types of reflection, and reflective writing. Educators then practiced reflective activities for two months.

Observing: The qualitative data was gathered using semi-structured interviews that were administered to the participants at the end of the two months intervention period.

5.2.3. Reflecting

In this regard, the study found that educators changed their perceptions and attitudes positively towards the reflective practices, and they enhanced the approaches of teaching, shifting towards the student-centered teaching-learning. However, some of them had time management issues when it came to reflection and little time was spent on group reflection.

In this case, it was illustrated how collaborative action research, and interactive workshops can contribute towards the formation of the reflective practices by the elementary educators in Pakistan and the researchers highlighted the advantage and the issues faced while opting for the reflection within the teaching procedures.

Case Study 3: Developing Reflective Practices of Elementary School Educators in Karachi

The study took place at a private boys' secondary school in Karachi Pakistan; in which the researchers implemented a collaborative action research to foster reflective practices among the elementary English language educators (Ashraf & Rarieya, 2008). The study enlisted two secondary female English educators, and a reflective coach.

5.3. The action research cycle involved

5.3.1. Planning

To familiarize the educators with the reflective practices the researcher developed a sequence of reflective conversation sessions.

5.3.2. Acting

During the next few months, the researcher engaged in several face-to-face reflective conversation sessions with the educators, in which they analyzed critical incidents in the educators' classrooms. There were also group sessions in this study.

5.3.3. Observing

For this study, data was obtained through classroom observations, reflective memos, field notes, interview transcripts of educators' reflexive conversations, and the teaching strategy books being used by the educators.

5.3.4. Reflecting

Considering the reflections, it was established that educators became progressively more thoughtful in their practice from nearly reflexive defensive response to critical analysis of their practice..

This case study demonstrated how reflective conversations could be applied as a teacher development approach in Pakistani context and also discussed the limitations such as time availability and the school climate. Thus, it offers information about how to work with reflective practice in such settings in which this approach is uncommon.

Action research based on a case study can effectively liaise with traditional teaching practices to improve student engagement and satisfaction, ultimately leading to improved learning outcomes.

6. Impact of Action Research on Educational Reform

Action research implementation at the school level in Pakistani schools can create a positive prospect of educational reform at the micro and macro levels.

On the one hand, action research leads to a change in teaching practices and student outcomes. By engaging in systemic inquiry and reflection, educators refine their pedagogical practices with evidence from within the four walls of their classrooms. The result is effective (and efficient) strategies specifically tailored to the needs of Pakistani students. Therefore, student achievement is enhanced, and this is applied to many aspects, like academic task performances, engagements, and critical thinking (Halai, 2011).

The practice of action research is also instrumental in policy decisions. In creating their own locally relevant knowledge, teacher-researchers contribute information that can help shape educational policymaking. For example, the findings from action research projects on multilingual education have also influenced language policy reforms in several Pakistani provinces (Manan et al., 2017). Taking this bottom-up approach to policy development ensures that ways of transforming education are grounded in classroom realities and are more likely to be effective and sustainable.

Therefore, action research is instrumental in promoting the culture of ongoing learning improvement in the field of education. The more educators engage in action research, more schools and districts improve their ability to make evidence-based decisions or conduct something that has not been tried before. Such culture of inquiry and reflection helps the educators be informed of current educational theories and to professionally grow continuously (Bashiruddin, 2011).

Thus, the impacts of action research trickle through the community levels of classrooms, schools, and nations. Individual practices are disseminated system wide in this model. Moreover, such change approaches as action research will help educators to become partners for change and have a voice in educational change and improvement processes, which can lead to raising of the professionals' status of these people (Shamim & Qureshi, 2013).

In conclusion, it can be stated that action research is a powerful activity which assists to perform educational reforms for Pakistan students by bridging practice and operation which work simultaneously to perform problems and execute change at workplace. As this approach becomes mainstream, it can completely revolutionize the structure of education in Pakistan and other developing nations for the better, promoting practices that are actually effective, fair and relevant to the respective context.

7. Challenges and Constraints for Action Research in Pakistan

Action research has the potential to contribute immensely towards educational reform in Pakistan, but specific challenges and limitations plague its implementation. This insight is pivotal in devising practical courses of action to embed action research at a grassroots level within the Pakistani education structure.

The time and resource constraints often found in these collaborative efforts make the full integration of action research challenging. Such an investigation is complex in the case of Pakistani educators, who are often burdened with small class sizes and more responsibilities combined with the teaching load (Halai, 2011). In addition, many schools need the appropriate resources for successful action research projects, including research materials and technology. These constraints may stop educators from conducting a fuller, wider-scope research.

Another big challenge is the lack of research skills in educators. Numerous Pakistani educators have limited exposure to research methodologies during their initial teacher (Bashiruddin, 2011). The gap could hinder attempts to architect robust research designs, gather and analyze data, or draw actual conclusions. Anyone who aims to conduct academic action research in education must recognize essential skills. Without proper research skills, educators may struggle to conduct action research that meets academic standards and produces reliable insights. Reluctance to change can prevent action research from being accepted. Due to the traditional hierarchical structures in schools, teacher-led initiatives can be seen as resistance toward authority (Shamim & Qureshi, 2013). Moreover, some educators may find it difficult to question the status quo and adopt new teaching strategies instead, preferring to do things in a way they have always done. This resistance can create an environment—not conducive to the reflective and innovative nature of action research.

8. Strategies for Integrating Action Research in Pakistani Education

Following strategies can be used to overcome these challenges and promote action research in Pakistani education. The first step must include action research in teacher education programs. Teacher training institutions can establish a base of research-oriented practice among pre-service educators by familiarizing them with the tenets and practices associated with action research (Mertler, 2019). This integration of action research should provide opportunities for theoretical and practical exposure through experience/immersion in conducting small-scale action research projects. Action research can be scaffolded to the higher education institutions' educators facilitated through organized professional development programs for those already teaching.

Following this, the institution of support mechanisms for teacher-researchers is critical to overcome time and resource constraints. School leaders can make a big difference by offering time for research and resources (Burns, 2010). Mentorship programs—experienced researchers guiding novice teacher-researchers—may be beneficial as

they can develop and sustain the skill set needed during action research. Education departments in universities could also provide access to expertise in conducting the necessary studies.

Developing venues for the dissemination of action research results will serve as a means to establish a community of practice and bring evidence regarding its benefits from teacher inquiry. For example, this can include school-based research symposiums, regional conferences, and online repositories for publishing of the reports (Halai & Durrani, 2018). These platforms can also help to disrupt the cycle of resistance and make more educators take their first steps into doing action research by seeing proper examples about how it could have an impact.

Furthermore, policy support for including action research could be realized where action research is acknowledged as a legitimate form of professional development and educators who take part in action research are given incentives. For example, embedding action research in teacher evaluation systems or creating pathways for career advancement depending on action research contributions can be beneficial (Kemmis et al., 2014) in promoting a culture of action research in schools.

9. Conclusion

From the discussion above, it can be concluded that action research has the capacity to introduce radical change in the education system of Pakistan by encouraging educators as researchers, contextualizing the knowledge and teaching practice with theory and putting forward pragmatic solutions.

Action research can make a difference based on the timely presence of noticeable local needs, as well as the impact on teaching and learning and student performance, together with policy decisions associated with best practices in the enhancement of remediating outcomes in urban schools and inclusion of ongoing quality improvement measures. Furthermore, action research can contribute to the promise of meaningful change in educational contexts, especially in resource-limited environments and students' motivation.

Achieving this potential, however, comes with a lot of challenges such as the shortage of time/resources, lack of research skills, and the resistance to change. This makes it imperative to bring such practices as action research in teacher education and support to teacher researchers and dissemination of findings through specially developed channels that would enable the nurturing of action research by culturing it in the educational environment of Pakistan.

Thus, this paper calls upon educators, administrators, and policymakers to embrace action research as the means of exerting educational change in Pakistan. If Pakistan learns to invest in teacher-led inquiry and create a more reflective practice culture, then the problem-solving education system that would result might better meet local needs and be higher performing. It remains a difficult path to follow because the journey to obtain change has been elusive though viable to schools and districts across our nation.

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