



Action research teaching strategy for enhanced student teacher performance in post COVID-19 higher education: A lecturer perspective

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Abstract

Action research has emerged as one of the main strategies adopted to improve the provision of education all over the world. The purpose of this study was to explore the perspective of lecturers on the use of action research teaching strategy for enhanced student teacher performance in post COVID-19 Zimbabwe. A qualitative case study design was employed in this investigation. This design allows for the study of an entity within its real-life context and to use multiple sources of evidence. Purposive sampling technique was used to select 9 heads of departments, and this number was considered adequate to provide useful information regarding the application of action research teaching strategy in higher education. The selected participants were exposed to face-to-face interviews to generate data for the study. Data was analysed and interpreted thematically. It was revealed that student teachers are not reflective thinkers, have weak communication skills and fail to convert classroom problems into researchable statements that assist to remedy nagging situations. The study concluded that successful conduct of action research enhances a deeper understanding of problems that affect teaching and learning and informs appropriate actions to resolve identified setbacks. This study has implication for policy makers and administrators who are expected to craft decisions on action research strategy that are informed by the findings of this study. The study recommends that lecturers be equipped with skills to employ participative methods which encourage student teachers to improve their ability to transform their teaching experiences for enhanced practice.

Keywords: action research, enhanced student teacher performance, higher education, student teacher, teacher education, teaching strategy

Introduction

Action research is an imperative that permeates practices in most educational discourses and professional practice. This stems from the realisation that action research principles largely drive the whole process of teaching and learning (Lufungulo, Mambwe & Kalinde, 2021) ^[22]. Action research is an organised procedure that involves participants working together on planned issues that seek to improve their understanding and quality of life (Kulcu, 2014). This is done through critical reflection and interrogation. Reason and Bradbury (2008) ^[35] present action research as a set of practices that respond to people's desire to act in a novel way to address practical situations in communities and organisations.

According to Burns (2015) ^[6], action research is an important tool that allows educational leaders to reflect upon their practices. In this perspective, teachers can think critically about their classroom activities and instructional practices to improve the quality of student outcomes. The efforts to improve practices are best done with the active involvement of those people who are engaged in that practice. This helps to access first-hand knowledge which is critical in endeavours to devise suitable intervention strategies.

Reason (2006) avers that people can only be better understood if they are studied as persons with a capacity to act in their life processes and to generate meanings from that participation. In action research, people have a right to participate and contribute to decisions that affect them. They have to converse as a collective to share knowledge about the issue under investigation ((Lufungulo *et al.*, 2021) ^[22]. Jugar and Cortes (2022) ^[19] posit that people should be empowered toward their democratic participation and voice, and to envision a more humane world.

The practice of action research invokes challenges that have always existed in areas of power, politics and control. In fact, it has been viewed as a radical route to locate student teachers' voices in research (Bulunuz, Gursoy, Kesner & Salihoglu, 2014; Bell & Aldridge, 2014) ^[5, 2]. The collaborative stance of action research demands free and open communication that is not restricted by concerns of power and status. The communication should encourage expression of ideas, feelings and the thinking around a shared goal (Babonea & Mantea, 2012) ^[1]. The research participants need to collaborate to identify and prioritise actions for the modification of practices.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic caused huge disruptions to educational trajectories globally (Daniels, 2020). The official declaration of COVID-19 as a pandemic on 11 March 2020, from the first detected case on 31 March, 2019, and the subsequent spread and recognition in Africa on 14 February, 2020 signalled a turning point in the history of educational practice (Tadesse & Muluyi, 2020; Thomas, 2020) ^[38]. This resulted in school closures owing to lockdowns that were instituted variously across countries. The COVID-19 protocols which ensued to mitigate the effects of the pandemic radically transformed the education systems from being basically face-to-face to online and virtual (Niranjan, 2020) ^[27]. The "new normal" learning environment effectively altered student active participation, collaboration, interaction and effective communication which characterised the physical posture of classrooms pre-COVID-19 spread. This influence of the technology-based instruction deeply impacted action research practice which favours human active participation to collectively address nagging real social and educational problems (Burns, 2015) ^[6].

Action research encourages practitioners to think about their own practice in a process of continuous improvement. Reflective practice also develops independent performance in teachers as they think through the process to improve performance (Bell & Aldridge, 2014) ^[2]. This fosters the spirit of creativity and innovation. A reflective person has a clearer conception of practices and procedures as these will be regularly critiqued and improved (Helyer, 2015; Christodoulou, 2010) ^[15, 8]. Action research requires practitioners to exhibit skills to manage working relations among participants and to draw useful knowledge from relevant theories (Reason, 2006). Reason (2006) highlights the importance of theoretical knowledge in action research practice and underscores that success in this process results not only from hands-on involvement but minds-on as well.

Access to relevant data is central to action research practice. This comes mainly from seeing, listening and recording. The collected information is used to prepare for an instructional discourse that is informed by the real situation in the classroom (Milkova, 2012) ^[26]. The ensuing teaching and learning endeavour serves as an intervention to a problem

observed as impacting on learners' educational attainment (Nwike & Catherine, 2013) ^[29]. In addition, the use of demonstration, appropriate methods, resource materials and micro-teaching techniques can help to facilitate effective teaching and learning (Topping, 2010; Mills, Dalleywater & Tischler, 2014; Ferguson, 2014) ^[40, 11]. It is therefore, the purpose of this study to explore lecturer perspectives on the use of action research teaching strategy for enhanced student teacher performance in post COVID-19 higher education.

Theoretical Framework of study

This study is couched within the democratic participatory theoretical frame (Lewis & Naidoo, 2021) ^[31]. Salmons (2019) ^[37] states that a theoretical framework relates to the research literature and design which helps to situate the study in a preferred methodological and epistemological position. Participatory theory was considered suitable for this study because of its ability to generate knowledge about social relations through democratic and dialogical means. It assumes that strategies to address problematic human situations are derived from collaborative and collegial interactions (Kemmis, 2021) ^[20]. Fine, Torre, Oswald and Avory (2020) maintain that participatory assumptions amplify the importance of human experiences and voice in shaping the community of practice. This is critical in action research practice in higher education, which tapes on the views, beliefs and perspectives of practitioners in the development of unique solutions to real problems. Action research practice flourishes in contexts of open dialogues and engagement, which, while conducive to improve instructional performance and student teacher outcomes, has clearly borne the brunt of the post COVID-19 educational settings.

Research Methodology

The study used a qualitative case study design. A case study was considered suitable as it is intended to study an entity within its real-life context and to use multiple sources of evidence (Haradhan, 2018) ^[14]. The case study was appropriate for this action research study because it offers richness and depth of information not usually offered by other methods (Njie & Asimiran, 2014) ^[28]. The population of study consisted of lecturers at a college of primary teacher education in Zimbabwe. Participants were chosen because of the wealth of experience they possessed from teaching during and in post covid-19 contexts, as well as in supervising student teachers at the college. Purposive sampling technique was used to select 9 heads of departments to participate in the study. This sampling technique was considered suitable as it conformed to the judgement of the researcher regarding the worthiness of selected participants on the use of action research teaching strategy in post Covid-19 higher education. A semi-structured interview schedule was utilised to collect data from the sampled group. This allowed similar questions to be provided to participants to increase content validity. Interviews are recognised to offer an opportunity to understand the lived worlds of the participants (Ryan, Coughlan & Cronin, 2016) ^[36]. Interviews were pre-arranged with selected participants to facilitate data collection. Participants were provided with forms to sign as proof of their voluntary assent to participate in the study. This was a response to a debriefing session where participants were informed about the purpose of the study, that data would be used solely for the study and that it would be preserved in the cupboard under lock and key. Interviews lasted between 15

to 20 minutes for each participant and were conducted in their offices either during lunch break or after work. This was done to avoid interfering with normal business schedules and to conform to COVID-19 protocols.

Data were analysed based on the lens proposed by Laws, Harper and Marcus (2003) ^[30], wherein significant themes were identified in response to the research questions and the purpose of the study. This framework for analysis has well-articulated step-by-step processes for a detailed analysis of the collected data. Data from interviews were transcribed and categorized into various themes, exposing the lived realities of participants regarding the use of action research as a teaching strategy. Trustworthiness of data was ensured through member checking. This involved sending the findings of the study back to participants so that they confirm the resonance of the research information with their experiences (Gunawan, 2015) ^[13]. The Heads of Departments who participated in the study were numbered per the sequence in which they were interviewed in the process. These were numbered from HOD1 to HOD9.

Findings of the study

This section focused on the perspectives of lecturers on the use of action research as a teaching strategy in colleges of teacher education. These encompass the methodological, content and implementation aspects that combine to shape the level at which action research is used in real educational spaces post Covid-19.

Theoretical and content aspects of action research

The participants in the study revealed that student teachers tend to benefit immensely from exposure to theory and content aspects of action research. Empowered with action research information, student teachers are enabled to develop professionally and to locate trajectories (challenges) that hinder socio-economic and educational development of communities. This is attested to by HOD 3, who said that *“student teachers acquire knowledge on how to improve practices and to resolve real problems in classrooms and outside school”*. The theoretical underpinnings of action research are a deeply cognitive schemata which, when mastered provide practitioners with the needed tools to identify and unravel nagging social and education issues. HOD 5 noted that *“action research improves mental stamina or cognitive acumen which is good for learning and improvement of performance in assigned activities”*. On another note, the study revealed that student teachers have difficulties in identifying problems that impede their effective teaching and learning. Bobrakov (2014) states that inability to reflect in and on teaching hinders constant review of an instructional discourse, which is a quality for spotting learning gaps. The implication is that student teachers are not reflective in their practice which contributes negatively in their capacity to recognise anomalous classroom or school practices. One participant said that: *I think the most difficult thing for student teachers here is problem identification. When they are teaching in the classroom they fail to realise the existing gaps which they should solve using action research* (HOD3).

Capacity to translate learning difficulties into research problems

Inability of student teachers to identify precise problems in their teaching and learning contexts compounds the challenge

of using action research teaching strategy in higher education. Only a few participants were said to have the skill to articulate problems in ways that facilitate investigation. HOD9 said *“only a few student teachers can articulate classroom problems in a researchable manner, the rest produce statements that are inadequate to yield comprehensive research”*. This correlates with Burns’s (2015) ^[6] view that problematizing teaching issues presents the most demanding aspect of action research. Inappropriately stated topics tend to be difficult to work on, owing either to a lack of context specificity, loose boundary or unclear variables. This mars the quest to conduct research within specific time frames. Participants pointed out that some student teachers struggle to distinguish between a research problem and a topic, to the extent that these are used interchangeable as to cause confusion. Middlewood, Parker and Piper-Gale (2011) ^[26] advise that any member wishing to do research should be trained in the art to do it well. Any deficiency in regard to this art is further evidence of challenges that student teachers face in crafting researchable topics. HOD7 confirmed that *“[student teachers] find it very difficult to frame researchable topics regarding action research practice”*. Furthermore, HOD3 added that *“By failing to identify a clear problem, in the long run, student teachers fail to come up with an appropriate research topic”*.

Delivering on activities that constitute action research practice

This entails the actual implementation of actions for change to address issues of interest to teachers and teaching. The study established the existence of a group of student teachers that were quite conversant with the implementation of action research plans and proposed actions. HOD1 said that *“I have no doubt, from the lessons that I have observed and student reports that I have seen, that there are student teachers with a rich art of putting action research activities into action”*. There are student teachers that are able to select and implement options to improve the education performance of learners. The most striking outcome involved student teachers experiencing difficulty in selecting options for change and implementing such changes, whenever identified successfully. The challenge emanated from the negative effects of social distancing brought by COVID-19, the fact that some student teachers are not actively involved in action research practice and fail to make it a shared engagement. Mavhundutse (2019) avers that lecturers, student teachers and learners in schools need to establish joint collaborations to address teaching and learning challenges. The teaching methods which are selected, the nature of interactions, type of tasks given and materials used to solve an identified problem are all critical issues in using the action research teaching strategy. HOD4 said *“clarity on the way to go about solving the identified problem affects many student teachers. This involves such issues as the actual teaching methods used, exercises and tests given, instruments and exercise books used and the marking of the work”*. HOD5 concurred, noting that *“student teachers should articulate clearly the interventions they would have come up with. They should tell in detail what strategies they were using, the media, how learners were interacting, and being critical as to why the situation happened the way it did. HOD7 however, noted that the continued observation of the COVID-19 protocols hindered the close and vibrant interaction that is desired in typical action research activities”*.

Issues of data collection and reporting of outcomes

The study established that data collection and the presentation of findings were areas of concern regarding the use of action research teaching strategy in teacher education. The normal procedure is for research practitioners to synchronize collaborative work with data gathering (Kemmis, 2021) ^[20]. This implies that information has to be collected as participants interact with others as well as the activities that are designed to mitigate an identified challenge. The study showed that choosing appropriate instruments for collecting the required information is an issue that puzzled many student teachers. They tend to experience obstacles in distinguishing instruments for gathering qualitative and quantitative information (Jugar & Cortes (2022) ^[19]. In gathering data for use in action research, several methods are available for use. These include questionnaires, observation, interviews, checklists and documentary analysis, where the written exercise books, progress records and biographical information records can be accessed. The use of these methods is critical to provide data for diagnosis of teaching and learning problems as well as exposing the results of performed activities. HOD6 said that student teachers “*still cannot decide on which instrument to use, how many instruments to use, and to justify the choice of an instrument*”. Action research demands that detailed descriptions should be made regarding actions to be adopted to remedy a problem and the subsequent results of performed actions. This was presented as a challenge to student teachers in this study. The results of the action research process need to be given in thick descriptions that reflect the actual situation as derived from the activities that were conducted (Burns, 2015) ^[6]. HOD8 said “*they [student teachers] are not able to give detailed narrations of that which they come up with in implementing actions to improve situations*”. In the same manner, HOD7 noted that student teachers “*have a habit of presenting their own minds or subjective views of situations rather than articulating responses of participants or their meanings*”. Furthermore, HOD6 stated that student teachers “*start to write what they believe they know away from the actual data gathered*”.

Contributing factors to the use of action research teaching strategy

The effective use of action research teaching strategy is anchored on the degree to which student teachers engage with their lecturers to access the requisite knowledge and skills. The opportunity for such sharing of experiences normally occurs during contact sessions when student teachers are on campus and as they travel from their schools of practice teaching to consult with tutors. HOD2 hinted that “*the virtual and face-to-face deliberations of student teachers and lecturers are critical in the development of action research competencies of student teachers*”. HOD7 added that “*the teachings that lecturers provide to student teachers on action research offers essential tools for student teachers to use in their daily classroom routines*”. On this regard, however, the study reported that school principals denied student teachers opportunities to visit college supervisors for action research consultations. School principals are naturally concerned that student teachers should engage fully in activities that drive forward the mission and vision of schools as derived from the responsible Ministry (Mavhundutse, 2019). HOD1 revealed that “*school administrators would want to see student teachers working on their teaching practice documents,*

teaching, marking and participating in core-curricular activities more intensely than committing themselves to research practice”. Ideally, student teachers are supposed to regularly visit their colleges of education to consult and use libraries for strategic review of literature or to access the internet. HOD8 concurred that “[student teachers] *need to visit libraries and get to places where there is internet connectivity so that they read widely on what they want to research on*”. This, according to HOD5, “*is especially critical as most schools of student practice are located in remote areas with poor library facilities and Information and Communication Technology*”. This contradicts the view by Marshall, Willson, de Salas and McKay (2010) that research requires wide reading to situate the study and to help to achieve convincing results.

Class size

The size of the class appeared on the list of issues that affect student teachers in using action research teaching strategy. Class sizes in most schools are so large that the conduct of research is hampered (Chisaka & Kurasha, 2012) ^[7]. This is especially so for the novice practitioners who will still be grappling with mastering the nuts and bolts of the trade. While learners can be placed into smaller groups for strategic instruction, action research demands active participation from each member of the group (Jugar & Cortes, 2022) ^[19]. HOD5 noted that “*action research needs active participation of those involved so that they can identify themselves with the process and claim ownership of outcomes*”. To achieve this feat, teachers should maintain closer supervision to ensure active involvement of all learners in the group. Regarding this issue, HOD3 added that “*action research needs to be done with fewer learners than the large classes that are witnessed in most schools*”. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has demanded that even smaller groups be formed in the practice of action research to reduce the spread of the virus, and this has further crippled the social character of this teaching strategy (Onyema, Eucheria, obafemi, Sen, Atonye, Sharma & Alsayed, 2020) ^[33].

Originality of research

Originality in action research practice is one aspect which is topical in student research. The study revealed that some student teachers have a tendency to avoid thorough problem diagnosis, which then affects efforts to arrive at sound resolutions to stated concerns. HOD4 indicated that “*some student teachers exchange topics or copy the works of their predecessors*”. Similarly, HOD2 added that “*at times, it is possible to find certain issues characterizing the focus of an entire group of student teachers*”. This suggests that student teachers experience challenges in identifying problems affecting learners in their classes, and this may cause them to copy from others. HOD6 said “*friends that have qualified give student teachers complete projects, carried out in different contexts, and which they adopt as their own*” It is therefore, crucial that student teachers should be capacitated with reflective and creative skills that would enable them to apply a critical eye in the teaching and learning discourse to locate anomalies in the learning process (Johnson, 2012; Zireva, 2017) ^[18, 42]. Reflective student teachers are empowered to discern and specify learning gaps in their teaching, and translate them into research topics.

Opportunity for practice

The most ideal way of teaching student teachers to use action research needs to be one in which they get exposed to theory lessons and proceed to participate in practical sessions. Student teachers should be taught action research theory while on campus and be provided opportunities to relate that theory to practical actions to enable them to fully comprehend the strategy (Chisaka & Kurasha, 2012) ^[7]. All participants appreciated the need to offer student teachers the chance to 'train' in action research practice. HODs 2, 6 & 8 mentioned that "*micro teaching sessions need to be used as effective methods to give student teachers a chance to engage in action research*". However, this was lacking in the training of student teachers prior to deployment to schools of practice. In regard to the provision of peer teaching programme, HOD2 said "*No, we don't do that. We have never done that*". The obtaining situation worsened the plight of student teachers in mastering hands-on skills in action research, especially considering that lecturers experience challenges of time in effectively teaching the methodology and applying it in lecture rooms. Engaging student teachers in micro teaching provides them with the opportunity to teach in typical classroom situations, to practice skills, build confidence and to review and be reviewed by peers (Feldman, 2017) ^[10]. HOD8 concurred that "*it would be ideal for student teachers to be given practical work to do before they go out to schools*". Practice in this regard would further inculcate in student teachers the values of cooperation and social integration which are also fundamental in successful conduct of action research. However, Onyema *et al.* (2020) contend that such social values are difficult to build in the context of COVID-19, whose restrictive measures of human interaction render real collaborative practices difficult.

Communication skills

Communication emerged as another contributor to effective use of action research teaching strategy. Essentially, action research requires participants to be able to communicate with each other on the problem to be resolved, in the collection of the needed data, making of decisions on plans to be implemented and in presenting findings to the audience (Feldman, 2017; Johnson, 2012) ^[10, 18]. HOD1 indicated that "*participants in action research need to communicate clearly the problem as well as with each other as they collaborate to address that problem*". This study, however, established that student teachers experienced language challenges which impaired engagement in action research. This particularly related to a weak command of English language, which is the official medium of instruction. On this aspect, HOD 4 said "*most student teachers do not communicate well, both in oral and written forms, and this mars effective conduct and use of action research*". This finding does not resonate with the view by Reason and Bradbury (2008) ^[35] that the best thing in action research is to open forums for communication and dialogue. The presenting situation however, does not encourage the enactment of platforms for dialogue as student teachers are not endowed with adequate communicative skills to facilitate the process of action research. Sound communication is required to build collaboration and team work in instances where action research teaching strategy is used to deal with problematic situations (Lufungulo, *et al.*, 2021) ^[22]. The inability of student teachers to communicate effectively hampers action research delivery as discussion and debate, which are central to action research, are curtailed

in the process. This is exacerbated by the dragging negative legacy of COVID-19 which advocates for social distancing and home schooling that stifles active participation of participants in efforts to solve practical problems.

Implications of the Study

This study is critical in that it is directed at informing stakeholders on the aspects of action research that require attention to enhance its vitality as a teaching and learning strategy in teacher education institutions. The study provides a platform to assess the veracity of the democratic participatory theory in mediating the use of action research teaching strategy in post COVID-19 higher education. It strives to encourage lecturers to focus on areas that hinder effective student action research practice, inclusive of problem diagnosis, topic formulation, student participation, effective communication, and reflection. This desired awareness of lecturers regarding pertinent aspects of action research is expected to cascade down to student teachers who are subsequently expected to work hard to mitigate their negative impacts in schools. Policy makers and administrators are also likely to craft decisions that are informed by the findings of this study.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that the use of action research teaching strategy has benefits despite the challenges that seek to curtail the process. Successful conduct of action research enhances a deeper understanding of problems that affect teaching and learning and informs appropriate actions to resolve identified setbacks. Student teachers experience difficulty to identify teaching and learning problems and to convert them into researchable questions. Action research demands active participation from those involved in its activities to realise outcomes that are shared and owned by the collective. However, in practice, active participation is hampered by the effects of measures that are meant to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the society and education system. Lecturers need to employ teaching methods that are effective to help student teachers to master principles of action research and to subsequently apply them in their schools of practice. Student teachers are also overloaded with work while on teaching practice which stifles effective engagement in action research practices. However, they need to be reflective in their thinking to enable them to be adaptive and creative in instructional delivery. Micro teaching sessions which provide platforms for confidence boosting and communication improvement are needed in the training curriculum of student teachers.

The study recommends that lecturers should be empowered with critical skills in action research principles and methods so that they can subsequently impart those skills to student teachers. This would enable student teachers to discern teaching and learning problems in their settings and convert them into researchable questions. Lecturers need to encourage active participation of student teachers in action research activities to both master the art and to achieve the democratic orientation inherent in the strategy. Institutions of teacher education and principals of schools need to expose student teachers to increased access to resources for use in action research in the context of COVID-19 virus. This can be achieved through the construction of well-resourced institution libraries, supply of COVID-19 kits, efficient internet connections and encouraging student teachers to

utilise available information centres. Teacher education institutions in partnership with schools, must ensure that the workload of student teachers is reduced to enhance their effective engagement in action research practices.

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Declaration of Conflict of Interest

We declare no conflict of interest in the study.

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