

Research Article

The Teacher as Researcher - Big Idea and Reality of Education

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Abstract

Since the initiation of action research in the 1940s, it has aroused growing interest on a global scale, gradually gaining an increasing group of supporters among teachers interested in improving their professional activity and their own professional development, and among university teacher trainers preparing candidates for teaching. A teacher who undertakes the role of a researcher of his or her own educational activity performs his or her profession as a special obligation and, therefore, not only by contract, but also by vocation, orientating himself or herself towards a research approach to his or her work, by passionately engaging in the process of his or her own professional development and enriching his or her professional knowledge. In this article, I refer to the many years of experience I have gained in the course of conducting action research. It shows that the theory forming the basis for educational practice in the course of reflective professional practice may prove and validate itself, or be questioned and, *summa summarum*, constitute the basis for introducing changes, improving and developing also the sphere of *praxis*, and constructing premises for scientific knowledge (theory). This reciprocity of circulation of both spheres owing to, on the one hand, a specific theoretical orientation and brightening of educational practice and, on the other hand, making the arena of practice available, not only for demonstrating, but also for verifying the validity of the theoretical foundations, constitutes a constantly open space for action research.

Keywords

Education, Teacher-Researcher, Action Research, Professionalism, Theory, Educational Practice

1. Preliminary Remarks

The teaching profession, one of the oldest professions in the world, is traditionally assigned one of the most responsible and noblest roles in society, for the people practising this profession are entrusted with the education of the next generations, who during their adulthood decide about the future of the world. Hence, it is no wonder that from time immemorial to the present day, much attention has been paid to a profession with such a high degree of social trust. This interest has both a fundamental and universal dimension, especially

because it concerns the entirety of the stages of life of all people who, playing the role of *homo educandus*, from the beginning of their rational existence until the end of life, participate to a varying degree and scope in various configurations of formal, informal, and non-formal educational processes [3].

In the entirety of these educational processes, it is the teacher that, *conditio sine qua non*, plays a key role, also in the sense that these results are variously inscribed as permanent

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Received: 15 August 2025; **Accepted:** 25 August 2025; **Published:** 15 September 2025



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"in the treasury" of a person's life-path and in his or her entire existence, significantly modelling its form and meaning [16].

Contemporary teachers of education at all levels are expected to have a high degree of substantive and methodological competences, which constitute a constitutive indicator of the level of professionalism of people working in this profession. On the other hand, the issue of the teacher's role of researcher, who explores educational reality which he or she himself or herself is an integral part of, is usually not commonly taken into account in the processes of training candidates as teachers and in the evaluation of teachers' professional work. Nevertheless, ambitious teachers who feel the need to thoroughly study their own professional sphere often make attempts to study it from a variety of problematic perspectives and place their undertakings in various contexts in order to improve the education process carried out on a daily basis, as well as themselves by joining the trend of undertakings defines as *action research*. Sometimes, in the literature on the subject, this approach is also referred to as *participative research*, *collaborative research*, *dialogical research*, and *experimental research* [8].

The taking up of this role by the teacher is by all means useful and desirable. However, it turns out to be extremely absorbing for him or her, especially because in addition to his or her basic professional duties, such as educating and training, he or she also finds fulfilment in the performing of the role of a researcher into his or her own educational practice. Nevertheless, a teacher who undertakes the role of a researcher clearly meets the expectations formulated for this profession, especially regarding continuous professional development, which is possible to improve precisely in the course of performing the professional role by him or her.

2. Action Research in Education

Since the dawn of time, people have wanted to enrich their knowledge about the surrounding reality in the course of trying to understand it thoroughly and improve it in order to better understand the world and make it more useful and friendly to people. This has been done in various ways since antiquity, considering that method and methodology determine the results of scientific cognition. This is where methodological terminology derives from, i.e. from the ancient Greek word μέθοδος - *methodos*, originally meaning overcoming the road (from *meta* - on/following, and *hodos* - road) - which in a composite means following a road, following the marked road. In the case of academic research, this term means the road that a researcher follows in an orderly manner in order to solve theoretical and practical problems that make possible the acquisition of new knowledge and the expansion or deepening of existing knowledge resources, as well as enriching the methodological experience.

Among the functioning types of human knowledge, the knowledge obtained in an academic way is considered to be the best in terms of cognition, the most adequately describing

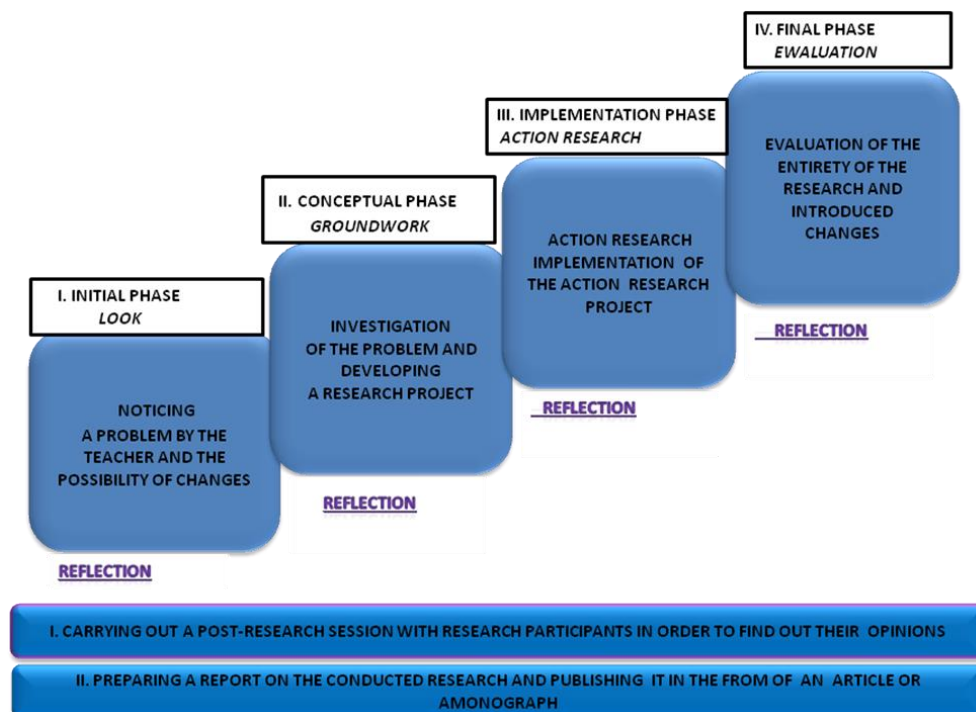
reality owing to the academic methods used in its cultivation and the use of academic language, as well as the application of appropriate procedures to it, including such rigours as intersubjective communicability and intersubjective verifiability, and practising other forms typical of academic life in the form of publications, reviews, debates, conferences, seminars, polemics, discourses, etc. Among the methods of achieving academic knowledge in the field of various academic disciplines developed by the research methodology, action research has been arousing particular interest for several decades. It has gained its supporters mainly owing to the specificity of projects arising primarily from the sphere of *praxis* in the adopted procedure, from reflection, through criticism, to action, consisting in the use of various research procedures by members of a given institutional community, investigating the essence of its functioning by combining thoughts and activities, including theory and practice, in order to improve professional activity as well as to acquire higher professional competences [21, 20].

The literature on the subject highlights the decades-old tradition of action research, the origins of which date back to the 1940s in the United States. It is with the figure of Kurt Lewin and the United States that the first stage of development in the history of this type of research in Western science (the years 1920-1950) is associated. On the other hand, the second phase of action research in the Western tradition is mainly located in Great Britain, where since the 1970s, its revival and spread around the world, in connection with research on the educational programmes of schools of various levels, has taken place. Kurt Lewin (1890-1947), a German-American psychologist, one of the pioneers of modern applied social psychology, who was born in Mogilno, ranks first among the world's most famous representatives of action research. In 1905, he and his family moved first to Germany, then in the 1930s to Geneva, and finally to the United States. As a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), he was the first to introduce in 1944 the term action research. The originator of the spiral of several steps used in action research in various configurations, which is constructed by the cycle of planning, action, and establishing facts about the results of action, also dealt with the issue of applied research and group communication [9]. Apart from Kurt Lewin, most frequently mentioned is Donald Alan Schön (1930 - 1997), a philosopher and professor of urban planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who developed the concept of reflective practice which is important for action research, and made a significant contribution to the theory of organizational learning. Based on the theories of John Dewey (1859-1952), an American pragmatist philosopher and educator and the leading representative of American progressivism, as well as the creator of the concept of the functionalist school in Chicago, Schön, seeing reflection in action as the core of "professional artistry," was one of the first to describe reflective practice using research into the experience, interaction, and reflection of researchers [22, 23]. In addition,

various sources mention the Brazilian pedagogue, a representative of radical emancipation pedagogy, Paulo Freire (1921 - 1997), as well as Davydd Greenwood (1999) [6], a professor of anthropology and the director of the Institute for European Studies at Cornell University, who for many years has been dealing with the anthropology of organizations, with particular emphasis on the reform of higher education. Nowadays, on a global scale, an increasing number of outstanding researchers representing various academic disciplines are dealing with the issues of action research, successively enriching the resources of literature in this field and significantly expanding knowledge on this subject.

However, owing to the currently limited space, it is not my intention to analyse these valuable academic achievements, which are extremely impressive and will probably continue to inspire the attention of numerous researchers contributing to the evident advancement of knowledge about action research, especially regarding the preparation, course, and results of these undertakings. On the other hand, I can see the need to devote more attention and place to the issues concerning the teacher-researcher in the literature, as it is in the literature that his or her figure is sometimes placed somehow in the "background" of investigations sometimes carried out from his or her perspective, which may give the impression that he or she is assigned less importance than the projects carried out by him or her. Meanwhile, it is the teacher-researcher who is the

originator, executor, and the main successor of the results of action research. He or she is *conditio sine qua non* a key figure for these undertakings. It is for this reason that in this text I focus mainly on the teacher-researcher, referring, inter alia, to the many years of experience of an academic teacher at several universities, resulting from the education of trainee teachers in them, as well as related to education at doctoral studies and postgraduate studies for academic staff (assistant lecturers). Moreover, an important source for the discussed considerations is the research carried out by students of several universities in the field of academic education. The outcomes of this research resulted in publications in the form of original monographs [12-14, 18, 19] and chapters in collective works [10, 11], as well as articles in magazines [15-17]. I presented some of the results of these studies during my presentations at academic conferences. In addition, an important place in this source is occupied by the experience connected with the action research conducted by doctoral students under my guidance, which were crowned with their obtaining doctoral degrees in the field of the humanities and doctoral degrees in the field of social sciences in the years 2005 - 2017. ^[i]In my own research, an original research procedure was used, consisting of four phases and two post-phases, which is illustrated by the graphical representation featured in Figure 1, the content of which is presented below.



Source: the author's own study.

Figure 1. Phases and post-phases of action research.

- 1) INITIAL PHASE LOOK - looking at the surrounding reality in an exploratory way as penetratingly and re-

vealingly as possible, so as to be able to notice a research problem and the possibility of introducing

changes in education on the basis of the identified reasons for improving practice;

- 2) *CONCEPTUAL PHASE GROUNDWORK* - thorough investigation of the problem and development of an action research project to be implemented in the next phase;
- 3) *IMPLEMENTATION PHASE ACTION RESEARCH* - the assuming by the researcher of several roles, such as an integral member of the examined segment of educational reality; observer; playing the role of an "outside expert"; reflective practitioner cultivating reflection and judgement; dialogue/discourse moderator; Socratic dialogist (elenctic and maieutic method); verifier of results of research in progress;
- 4) *FINAL PHASE EVALUATION* - evaluation of the entire completed action research process and, based on the experience gained, planning the next test cycle.

The formal closure of the completed action research took place by the organizing and chairing of a post-research session with research participants in order to find out their opinions. On the other hand, the culmination of the entirety of the implemented projects was the preparation of a report on the conducted research and its publication in the form of an article or a monograph.

Since the initiation of action research in the 1940s, it has aroused growing interest on a global scale, successively gaining an increasing number of supporters, especially among teachers interested in improving their professional activity and their own professional development, and among the employees of universities educating candidates for teachers. In the face of accusations formulated against teachers, such as, for example, a lack of inclination towards a creative attitude to their profession, which is often proved by everyday educational practice limited to duplicating observed or tested patterns, which are repeated in an unchanged form from year to year, developing interest in action research, especially one that carried out in cooperation and under the patronage of academic staff of universities educating trainee teachers, clearly meets the need to address the emerging key doubts and difficulties in this respect, in particular those focusing on the teacher-researcher.

In the literature on the subject, issues concerning the teacher-researcher are signalled from various problem perspectives. The British sociologist Martyn Hammersley (b. 1949), whose main publications concern the methodology of social research and philosophical issues in social sciences, while outlining the development of the idea of action research, attributed usefulness to teacher research, but at the same time stated that the integration of the role of the teacher and the researcher is not desirable, as in this extremely absorbing profession there is less and less time for research. Moreover, he stipulated that research conducted by teachers cannot replace conventional research in the form of educational studies. He also stated that, although systematic and effective reflection and exploration of the relationship between theory

and practice are not yet a guarantee of progress, it was absolutely not his intention to discourage teachers from action research, but he intended to point out that not everything in terms of improvement should be achieved exclusively in this way [7].

In fact, probably every teacher who has played the role of a researcher of his or her own educational activity has experienced more than once that it is neither an easy undertaking, nor a straight path leading to the goal. Therefore, the barriers and obstacles faced by the teacher-researcher are one of the main reasons for discouragement from and abandoning of ambitious research plans. In addition, the doubts accompanying a teacher who intends to take on the role of a researcher are not without significance regarding the uncertainty as to whether his or her own professional experience and the reflections related to it can be considered academically justified and credible enough to constitute the basic guarantee of the implementation of the undertaken plans. It is precisely this state of affairs that undoubtedly justifies the necessity of organizing support for these teachers in the form of academic patronage by university employees who are experienced methodologists and academic authorities in this respect. This type of bilateral cooperation between academics from universities and teachers-researchers from lower-level schools provides an extremely valuable basis for obtaining benefits that serve both cooperating parties in many ways.

First of all, the support of the teacher-researcher in the form of academic patronage contributes to the elimination of possible errors, irregularities, and other methodological deficiencies in the design and implementation of action research, giving teachers-researchers a sense of greater certainty and meaningfulness for these undertakings. On the other hand, academic teachers from universities educating teacher trainees, by providing academic patronage over teachers of non-academic schools who play the role of researchers into their own educational activities, and supporting them, have the opportunity to directly acquire a more in-depth understanding of the determinants of the sphere of educational practice. Moreover, by helping teachers-researchers to investigate the basics of their own professional development, they have a chance to be directly knowledgeable about the current trends in educational practice and to explore them from the perspective of the assumptions of educational theories. Apart from that, they can find out about the quality of their graduates' work and obtain premises for improving the process of educating candidates for teachers in the universities they work for.

The values of this type of cooperation are noticed, appreciated, and exposed in the literature on the subject, including the justification of the purposefulness of involving, in an atmosphere of mutual trust, a "critical friend" sharing experience, knowledge, and skills in the interpersonal relationships of people pursuing common interests in order to achieve positive outcomes, resulting in the development of the professionalism of teachers and improvement of the quality of

education [4, 5].

Referring to their own experiences in the field of action research, researchers justify in the literature of the subject the purposefulness of introducing appropriate institutional and organizational solutions in the field of combining action and reflection, the theory and practice of cooperating teachers-researchers and academic teachers exercising their support of them in order to increase the possibilities of enhancing competences critical of both cooperating entities enriching knowledge and improving their professional experience [1, 2].

3. Final Remarks

A teacher who undertakes the role of a researcher into his or her own educational activity performs his or her profession as a special obligation and, therefore, not only as a result of an agreement, but also of a vocation that results from and directs him or her towards a research approach to his or her work, thanks to a passionate involvement in the process of his or her own professional development. By adopting such a style of work, the teacher evidently performs the function of a subjective, reflective practitioner, originator-researcher-creator. The teaching profession is inherently characterized by a fairly high degree of individuality and, in fact, is very close to academic, literary, and artistic activity. For it is academics, writers, artists, painters, or musicians who, apart from their knowledge, abilities, and talent, have at their disposal the same material resources as scientific facts, language, colours, or sounds, and owing to their selection, interpretation, location, and context, they create highly different works in their creative vision. Likewise, teachers who have at their disposal the same "educational materials" as methods, techniques, principles, teaching aids, etc. are the creators of a "unique" *en bloc* educational process that, like academic, literary, or artistic works, can be assessed as outstanding, distinguished, great, average, routine, or even commonplace, and sometimes even fruitless or harmful.

The relationship between theory and practice turns out to be extremely complex and conditioned in many ways. First of all, the theory of education *en bloc* never has been, and probably never will be a reliable prescription for teachers-practitioners. Moreover, not every theory somehow "keeps up" with the intense pace of socio-economic and cultural changes sweeping through the world in which the educational process is situated, or for which these changes constitute an important problematic context. And also not every educational practice can claim to be a reliable source inspiring theory or constitute an unquestionable basis for implementing theoretical premises.

Many years of my own research conducted among students of several universities confirm the belief that a simple "passing or moving" from one sphere to another is not possible, because in the course of travelling along this path from the

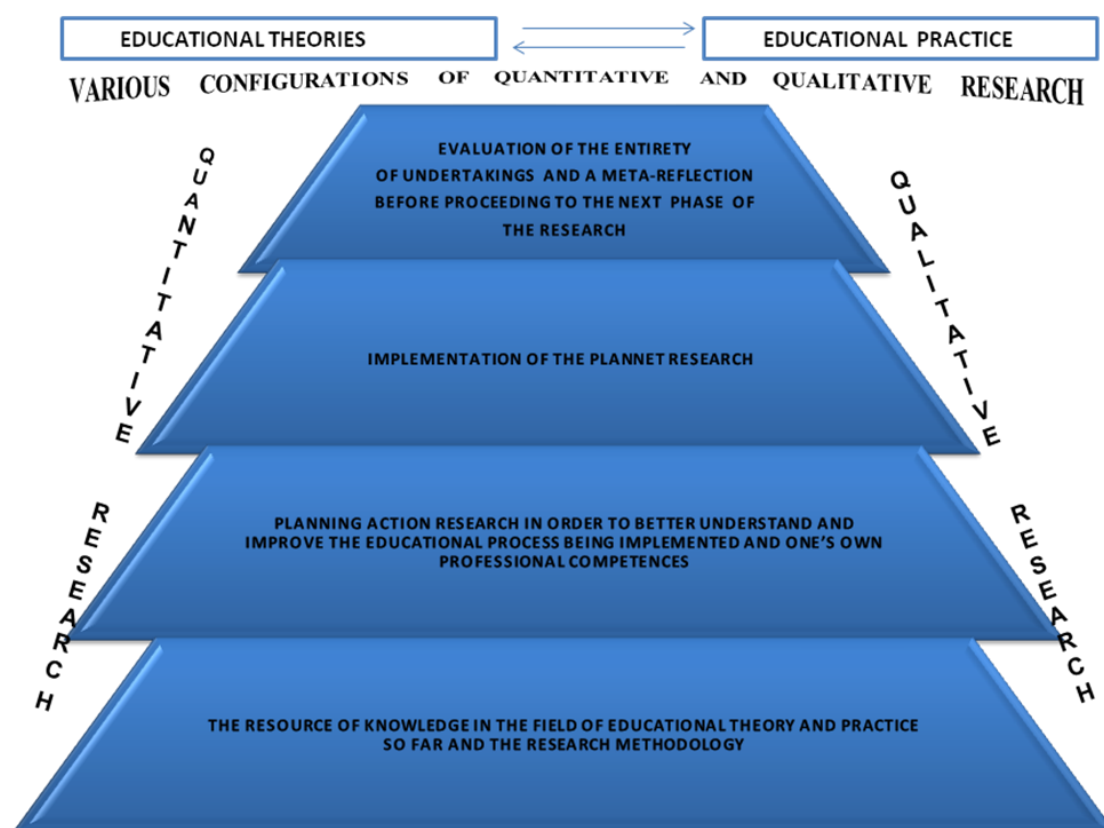
theoretical to the practical sphere, and *vice versa*, the imperativeness of reflection, judgement, consideration, and the perspective of the problem horizon drawing on the interpenetrating experience, i.e. practice, on the one hand, and academic knowledge, i.e. theory, on the other, is always encountered to a varying degree.

It can, therefore, be concluded that from the perspective of consciously engaging in the process of action research, the teacher-researcher, asking himself or herself inspiring questions such as what?, how?, when?, why?, or on what basis to do? situates himself or herself between the theoretical and practical flow of mutually conditioning, complementing, and verifying actions constituting a permanent stream.

Thus, in designing action research that is situated between theory and practice and arises from the realm of *praxis*, it is important to take into account the stages illustrated in Figure 2. The broadest scope was assigned to the initial stage concerning the knowledge of the existing resource of knowledge in the field of educational theory and practice as well as research methodology. It constitutes a basis for the planning of action research by the teacher in order to better understand and improve the education process and his or her own professional competences. The next stage, i.e. proceeding to implement the research process, makes it possible to use a quantitative or qualitative approach in the conducted research, as well as to combine various configurations of both these research approaches. The whole thing ends with the evaluation of all the stages and designing another research cycle.

Action research is most often undertaken by academics-employees of universities, whose interests focus especially on the subdiscipline of pedagogy, referred to as university pedagogy. This state of affairs is undoubtedly a result of the fact that academic teachers who have achieved the status of academic independence are better prepared to perform the role of a researcher, and moreover, they are obligatorily assessed in terms of their research achievements and publication output.

It follows from the above considerations that the theory that lies at the basis of educational practice in the course of reflective professional practice can prove itself, validate, or be questioned, and *summa summarum* constitute the basis for introducing changes, improving and developing both the practical sphere and constructing premises for academic knowledge (theory). This reciprocity of circulation of both spheres, owing to, on the one hand, a specific theoretical orientation and brightening of educational practice and, on the other hand, providing its space for demonstrating the progress of the theory and verifying the legitimacy of the theoretical foundations, extends the ever-open space for action research. The long history of science proves that theories pass and that education and its problems permanently remain to be solved.



Source: the author's own concept.

Figure 2. Constitutive stages of educational action research in terms of the relationship between educational theory and practice.

Appendix

The doctoral dissertations in which action research was used are presented in the following chronological order doctoral dissertation supervisor full professor Urszula Ostrowska:

- 1) Urszula Ostrowska, a PhD student at Dorota Bartnicka: *Projection of the future of children covered by care and educational assistance in day care centres* (2005). The doctoral student conducted programme classes in several care and educational institutions and solved research problems formulated in the research procedure of the doctoral dissertation. The doctoral dissertation was carried out as part of a research project of the Scientific Research Committee of the Ministry of Science and Information Technology.
- 2) Urszula Ostrowska, a PhD student at Agnieszka Dąbrowska: *Students and euthanasia as a socio-moral and pedagogical issue* (2006). The doctoral student conducted programme classes with students of pedagogy and solved research problems formulated in the research procedure of the doctoral dissertation.
- 3) Urszula Ostrowska, a PhD student at Karolina Goede: *The axiological dimension of supervision exercised by a social probation officer* (2017). The doctoral student, acting as a social probation officer, conducted partici-

pative research in this professional group in order to solve the research problems formulated in the research procedure of the doctoral dissertation. The dissertation was distinguished.

- 4) Urszula Ostrowska, a PhD student at Katarzyna Grzeziak: *Experiencing success in studying by PhD students* (2017). The dissertation was distinguished. In the course of implementing the research, a research grant financed by the European Union was obtained from the European Social Fund and the State Budget of the Republic of Poland under the Integrated Operational Programme for Regional Development of NN Voivodeship for the years 2008/2009. As a scholarship holder of the Erasmus Programme, the PhD student participated in the exchange of doctoral students by completing doctoral studies at the NN, Finland, where she conducted research on experiencing success in studying by PhD students, PhD students in education. The dissertation was awarded the Grand Prix in the national competition of the Polish Pedagogical Society for the best doctoral dissertation in pedagogy in 2018.

Author Contributions

Urszula Ostrowska is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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