

**ACTION RESEARCH PROMOTION OF ACCESS QUALITY AND EQUITY IN  
EDUCATION FOR DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA**

**Patrick A. Kafu**

*School of Education  
University of Eldoret*

**Genvieve N. Simwelo**

*School of Education  
Moi University*

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**ABSTRACT :** *The quest for Action Research is not a new phenomenon in Africa. Examination of the works and documented speeches of the founding fathers of independent Africa reveal that the desire for this type of research has always been there. These African leaders identified three main obstacles to development in Africa namely, ignorance, diseases and poverty. Although these were huge problems, education was thought to be the best means of managing them. This could only be possible when there was access, quality and equity in education. These are specific issues that must be efficiently invested in if the appropriate solutions to the stated problems are to be provided. The most appropriate solution is the action research which focuses on dealing with specific established issue that requires urgent attention. This paper discusses how Action Research can facilitate access, quality and equity in education to serve as software in development in Africa.*

**KEYWORDS:** Action Research, Development, Issues, Potential and Soft-ware

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Research, and especially Action Research, is a formidable tool for establishing a strong base for development in the society. It is the best venue for determining the nature of the existing problems in the society and investing in suitable solutions to them. All research are problem-based and their purpose is to seek solutions to the established and emerging issues in the society.

From the early years of independence, Africa has experienced and continues to experience a wide range of problems. Most of these problems have been casually handled and more often through political means. Political decisions are made and directives are given to implement them. This practice has adversely affected development in this continent. Normally, casual and political decisions lack proper information regarding the activity to be undertaken. Research fills this gap. A well designed and conducted research avails the essential information required for efficient operation of the planned activity/task.

Founding fathers of independent Africa had noble ideals concerning development and transformation of the continent ((Nkurumah, 1963; Kenyatta, 1963; Nyerere, 1967; Obote, 1969). According to them, the continent had the potential for development though there were many challenges that needed urgent and proper management. This involved understanding the nature of these challenges and the appropriate approaches adopted for dealing with them. One of the strategies that the founding fathers of independent Africa had in mind was education, and especially research. This explains why during the early stages of independence, countries in Africa committed large proportions of their national budgets to education. For example, Kenya progressively increased the budget allocation to education sector from paltry 15% in 1964 to 45% by 1975 (GoK, 1975). As if to emphasize or underscore the importance of research in national development, many governments including Kenya initiated and encouraged collaborative research between government ministries/departments and national research institutions and local universities (UG, 1969; GoK, 1965). These collaborations facilitated sharing of research information and other experiences that did promote development. This practice contributed to the rapid development that was witnessed in Africa between 1965 and 1980 – the era memorably referred to as the age of “Glorious Experience of Africa” in the history for the continent (Mazrui, 1969)

The research conducted during the early years of independence in Africa focused on specific identified problems. The results of the research was aptly picked up by individual governments and adopted and more or less implemented immediately (Kafu, 1977). This motivated individual national and corporate researchers to conduct a large volume varied studies targeting specific national issues. It became the norm in government practice that no project/programme could be undertaken without being informed by research. This remained so until the early eighties (1980’s) when political decisions/directives replaced research as a tool of initiating development. The consequences have been disastrous for Africa. Many projects/programmes have either stalled or collapsed because governments no longer prioritise research as a component of national development. The budgetary allocations for research have dwindled so much to the detriment of quality national development all over continent. Hence, the present widespread underdevelopment on the continent as demonstrated by shameful material and intellectual poverty.

The rapid development in education and society worldwide demand that there should be a paradigm shift in the manner research is conducted. The preferred type of research for Africa and indeed the whole world to-day is Action Research. This type of research can serve as a guideline to managing developmental issues occasioned by unexpected changes in education and the society respectively. It is ideal for the emerging needs in the African continent and can be used to establish specific problems of the continent and also provide relevant strategies for managing them. Furthermore, this form of research is utilised in capacity-building process for strategic aspects of life in Africa since it is based on homegrown experiences. Therefore, Action Research in education is the best way to go in this respect in Africa. Once aspirations of access, quality and equity in education are embraced, the rest of the related issues of peace, justice and equality in Africa will

fall in place. It is the elusive nature of the latter that underly the persistent political strife and unnecessary, costly conflicts that are observed in the Africa.

The main areas discussed in this paper in relation to Action Research in higher Education and Development in Africa are dimensions and practices of Action Research in education in Africa, Action Research and development in Africa occasioned by access, quality and equity in education and the challenges of Action Research in education in this continent. These aspects are hereunder presented.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Dimensions of Action Research in Education**

This refers to a number of closely related aspects of Action Research. These include the concept, philosophy, origin and purpose of this type of research. There is need to understand these aspects of Action Research if the present theme is to be meaningfully discussed. Without this, any argument for this type of research in Africa will be flawed.

Action Research is a specialized form of research. It is a problem-based investigation in specific established problems in the society. Normally, it focuses on emerging issues in the society that need urgent treatment and solutions. In Africa, the urgent issues that are of great interest are ignorance, diseases and poverty as identified by the founding fathers of independent Africa (ibid). King (1961) pointed out that education is the main solution to these ills in the Africa continent. This implies that education in Africa must be properly designed and harnessed to address these burning issues. The main attention today in Africa is on specific issues in education that can be used make the content competitive international affairs, to solve the problems of ignorance, diseases and poverty. These are specifically access, quality and equity related in education (Sifuna, 2003). In the African context, Action Research in education should focus on these issues that can be panacea to the many and frighteningly worrying problems that face the continent today.

The argument behind Action Research in education in Africa is that it is the best means of promoting and accelerating development in this continent (Kafu, 2003). This is because it deals with relevant issues that face the continent today and account for the widespread underdevelopment. Further, since this type of research is focused, limited, to as it were, on specific problems, it is possible to utilize its results in the identified political programmes of the country. Hence, it facilitates proper investment in these programmes. Of greater importance is the fact that Action Research is cost-effective to manage since it is limited in scope to specified issues. A country does not have to grope in the dark when investing in development programmes as the case is today. The present practice is wasteful! The priorities will be always set by the Action Research activities.

Generally, Action Research has its origin in the needs of the society. It is easy to identify and deal with the needs of a society. Societies have always had critical issues to grapple

with on their existence (Kafu, 2003). These issues are of predictable or non-predictable nature. Examination of ancient as well as modern education systems clearly demonstrates these features. Therefore, Action Research cannot be limited to a given generation or region of the world. It has been a component of ancient and modern education systems and it is a cross cultural phenomenon (Sifuna, 1974). It has been and still it is the main tool for setting the agenda for development in a society.

Another dimension in Action Research is that it is interdisciplinary. In order to design and conduct an efficient Action Research in education for an established purpose, reference must be to all aspects of education and social dynamics. That is, due consideration should be given to the factors that interplay in the problem being investigated. This is because any social issue, including education, has political, economic and social implications. Since Action Research focuses on issues that influence development in the society, there is need to bear this fact in mind when conducting this form of research. This is the case of access, quality and equity in education in Africa that transcend human life. It is a cross-cutting tool for development. That is the core of the society. To realize these aspirations in education in this continent, they require decisive political, economic and social support if they have to influence the expected development and transformation of the continent. Developed regions like the United States of America, the “tigers of Asia” and Western Europe have established proper policies and invested heavily in education that have seen them experience advanced development and sophisticated transformation in all spheres of life. Therefore, for Africa to promote access, quality and equity in education, there must be political will to do so and economic muscle as well as social support for this effort. The continent has to adopt the developed countries’ model of promoting development through reforms and innovations in education. The most urgent reforms and innovations in African education systems to-day are promotion of access, quality and equity in education (Kafu & Simwelo, 2012). These cover the scope of education for all, gender issues in education relevancy of the education to Africa, setting and provision of special needs education. This is the only assurance that all the people of Africa are properly prepared to participate in the designed political, economic and social programmes on the continent; hence, the emergence of the wished for development across the content.

The other important dimension is that Action Research, like education per se, is dynamic. It is influenced by the emerging issues in education and society. This fact influences the design and administration of this form of research since it is determined by changes in the society and education. Therefore, there is need to have a clear understanding of the philosophy of and practices in political systems, education and social changes if Action Research is to serve the intended purpose in Africa. This is likely to facilitate the aspired rapid development on the continent.

All these dimensions in Action Research are crucial in administering this form of research. They inform and ensure that Action research is broad, inclusive, current and efficient enough. This realization makes Action Research a purposeful feature that Africa needs for its expected development. In effect, this fact is the drive behind the preference

for Action Research not only in Africa but all over the world since it is the force behind meaningful development hence, the focus on this type of research as the main software in development in Africa today.

### **Action Research and Development in Africa**

This section of the paper focuses on the role of Action Research in development in Africa. Generally, education is a recognized soft-ware in development (Jung, 2007). But there are specific aspects of education that are drivers of development. Specifically, these are access, quality and equity in education. The role of each of these aspects of education in the development process in the society is in no dispute. They normally lead to general literacy, cohesion and integration in the society and justice and peace as virtues of human co-existence. Hence, these are the driving force behind acceleration of development. Therefore, the discussion that follows focuses on the contributions of Action Research in education to anticipated development.

Action Research in access, quality and equity in education is fundamental to global development in Africa. This type of research reveals the nature of these important features of education, their relation to the development programmes of the society and the challenges these features pose to education, individual development and the desired general development in the society. From the results of Action Research, the answers to the challenges of administering these aspects of education in the society are likely not only to enhance the development of the society but also accelerate the processes of development and transformation of the society for the benefit of the African inhabitants.

The relationship between research in access, quality and equity on one hand and general development on the other cannot be over-emphasized. Apart from what has already been discussed elsewhere above, Action Research in these aspects of education serve as a guide to planning for general national development. That is, this form of research paves way for promoting development in the society and points out the potential hurdles of undertaking this task. In addition, it provides the best strategies of employing the three features of education (access, quality and equity) in the national strategic development programmes. This process may lead to cost-effectiveness in national development hence, assisting the African continent to realize the initially set but quite elusive goals of meaningful development. Consequently, enabling the continent compete with other regions of the world in development.

However, when conducting Action Research in educational issues, there are many challenges some of which are surmountable while others are not. The section that follows discusses the potential challenges to the process of conducting Action Research in education for development in Africa.

### **Challenges of Conducting Action Research in Education in Africa**

This section of the paper focuses on the problems and issues related to conducting action research in education. These include the nature of educational issues, rapid changes in education and society, the attitude towards research in Africa, investment in research and, especially, Action Research and expertise in research.

Educational issues are complex and more often than not tricky to handle. This is because they are broad and inclusive. Generally, these issues are closely inter-related, inter-dependent and occasionally amorphous. Therefore, conducting research in any issue in education cannot be restricted to a single issue as such. That is, it cannot be directional but both inter-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary. There will be need to consider education in its entirety in general and other related issues in education in particular. For example research in access to education has to deal with environment, enrolment, availability of learning facilities and resources, quality in/of education and equity in education among others. The same approach is adopted when conducting research in either quality of education or equity in education as emerging issues. This means that a person who intends to conduct Action Research in education must understand the nature of education thoroughly. That is one must be a specialist in education. This is a challenge for many researchers in education. Normally, many of the researchers in education tend to focus on a narrow/limited scope of education to the detriment of promoting quality in education that could spur development in the society.

Besides the challenge of the nature of educational issues, there is the issue of rapid changes in education and society. These changes/developments are a reflection of the dynamic nature of education and the society. This means that the operation of Action Research must be a country's evolutionary process if the emerging changes in Africa have to be managed effectively and efficiently. Therefore, there is need to be keen and observant about the emerging developments in the society and education and note their relationship to anticipated development in the society. In most cases, these in changes, if properly managed and researched in, can lead to acceptable reforms and innovations in education in particular and the society in general for the purpose of accelerated development in Africa.

Another related challenge to Action Research in Africa is the attitude of the society towards research in general and Action Research in particular. Generally, there is a negative attitude towards research work in Africa. This is because of the nature of the practiced education systems on the continent. Most of these systems of education are essentially academic and theoretical in nature. Little attention is given to the practical components of education that are the genesis of action research practices, development of critical thinking and inquisitive minds. A large proportion of research being conducted in Africa is basic research and purely academic in purpose. Indeed, very little research is being carried out in the continent for use in national development. That is, most research being conducted today is mainly basic and NOT applied, action and/or evaluation forms of research which is for development (Nsubuga, 2000). This is because the present focus is on achievement of academic qualifications rather than conducting research for the



purpose of generating life skills as a basis of development. The consequence has been the failure for the continent to utilize Action Research to establish the emerging issues in education in particular and society in general that could result in comparable and competitive development in Africa. This is the form of research that lends itself to development process in any society hence, impacting negatively on the administration of education in Africa and, consequently, affecting critical development in Africa.

As alluded to above, the systems of education in Africa do not prepare the beneficiaries for research pursuit. They don't lend themselves to research work: in fact, they have little or no interest in this activity. In other regions of the world, learners are introduced to research work as early as in pre-school education sectors. They are involved in "nature walks, collection, sorting and arrangements of items and, observation and discussion activities" among other learning activities. By the time these learners complete high school, they have perfected their skills in conducting research however simple in nature this may be and, interestingly, they also develop interest in this field. This practice explains why the developed regions of the world account for the largest proportion of research conducted and recorded in various fields in the world annually. Therefore, one of the biggest challenges of conducting action research in education in Africa is actually limited expertise. There are very few experienced and well trained researchers on the continent. This fact has adversely affected the promotion of specific educational issues that have strong bearing on the general development of the continent. Some of the issues that need to be studied include access, quality and equity in education which could accelerate and promote development in the content. These are the burning issues Africa as a continent must address today.

In conclusion, the main challenge of Action Research in relation to promotion of emerging issues in education and general development in Africa can be summed up as failure to conceptualize research in education as a tool for development and poor concept of education as the key for development soft-ware. The entire discussed challenges hinge on this lack of/poor concept or research and the practices adopted administration of in research, especially Action Research, in Africa. Some effort should be made by relevant authorities to address these anomalies.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has attempted to tackle a very important yet very much misunderstood issue in Africa – Action Research and development in Africa. The value of Action Research in education has been competently discussed as is the relationship between this activity and the process of development in Africa. It has also been demonstrated that failure to embrace research in education is the cause of under-development in Africa. Further, the challenges of conducting Action Research in education in the continent are real and are adequately discussed. Most of these challenges are manageable provided there is good will from the stake-holders in education research and development in Africa, adequate investment in it and institutional of concerted effort by all to utilise this important tool in development process in Africa.

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