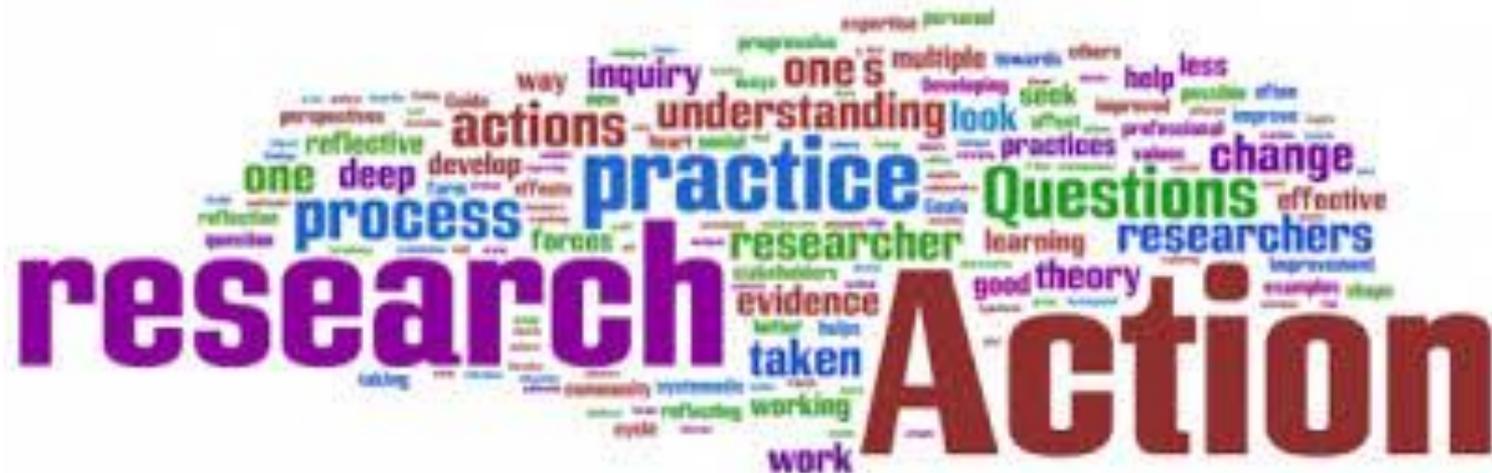


# UNIT 1: INTRODUCTION TO ACTION RESEARCH



# Introduction

- In this unit we will introduce you to action research.
- First we will examine the concept of action research.
- Next we focus on the action research cycle, the action research model, and the action research process.
- Finally, we will highlight the general format of an action research project.



## **Expected learning outcomes**

**Upon completion of this unit, you will be able to:**

- (a).** Explain the concept of action research
- (b).** Discuss the action research cycle
- (c).** Apply the action research model
- (d).** Explain the action research process
- (e).** State the general format of an action research project



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## What is action research

- Action research is an approach commonly used to solve current practical problems while expanding scientific knowledge.
- It is a process of actively participating in an organization change situation whilst conducting research.
- Action research stems from the belief that educational problems and issues are best identified and investigated where the action is.
- It focuses on generating practical solutions to problems and empowers practitioners by enabling them to engage with research and subsequently, to develop or implement activities.



**Kurt Lewin**  
(1890-1947)

- Kurt Lewin is considered to be the ‘father of action research’.
- He was a German psychologist who was concerned with social problems especially in addressing conflicts, crisis and bringing about change within organizations.
- He first invented the term —action research in his 1946 paper *Action Research and Minority Problems*.
- He was interested in using action research to investigate conditions in organizations that would lead to social action.
- He proposed a process which was a spiral of steps involving planning, action and fact-finding about the result of the action.



- i. Based on the definition given, provide your definition of action research.
- ii. State one problem in your institution that could be subjected to action research.

## Is action research the same as problem solving?

- Action research is *not* problem-solving or consulting in the sense that you are trying to find out what is wrong, but rather a quest for knowledge about how to improve.
- It involves people working to improve skills, techniques, or strategies, to improve practice.
- Action research is *not* about learning why we do certain things, but rather how we can do things better.



## The focus of action research

Action research focuses on:

- CHANGE – improve practice.
- REFLECTION- thinks about your practice.
- INCLUSION- all affected by the problem.
- SHARING- share perspectives with others.
- REPETITION- repeat cycles.
- PRACTICE- test emerging understanding.
- COMMUNITY- builds learning community.
- UNDERSTANDING- achieves clarity of different perspectives.

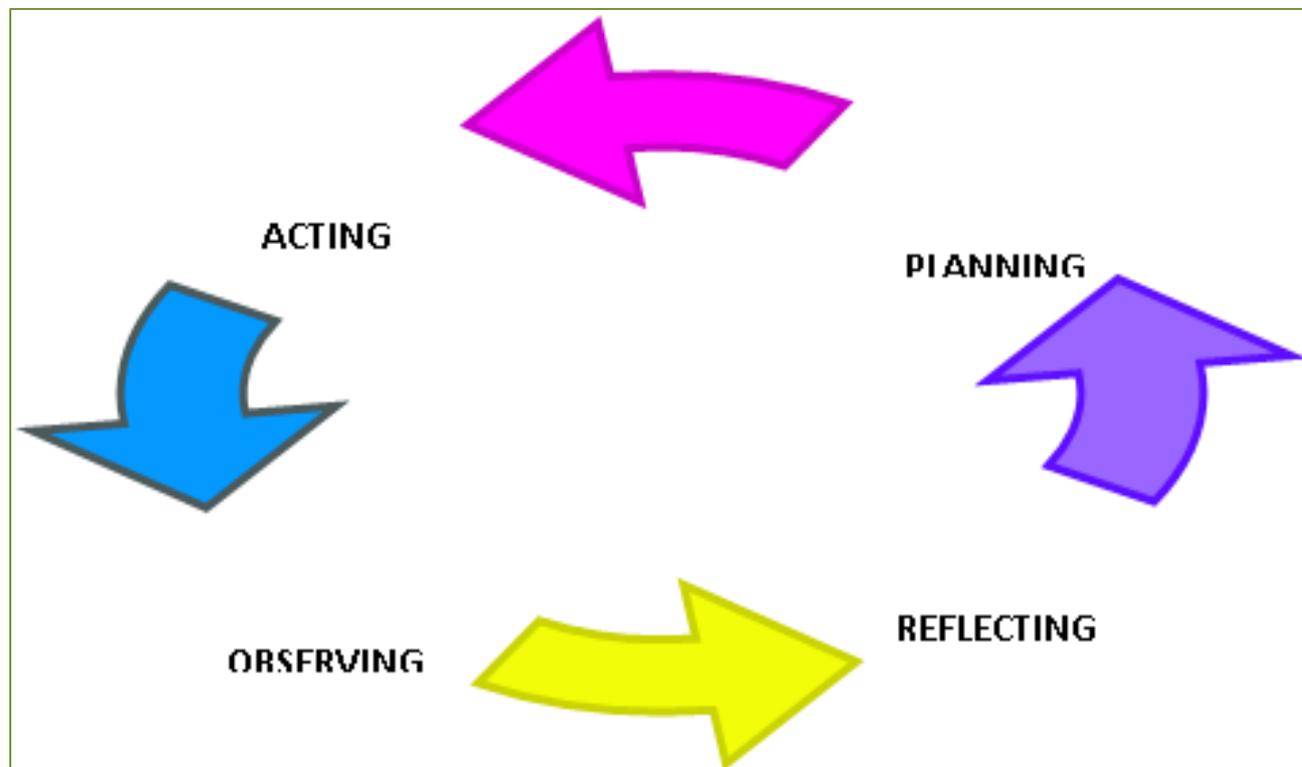


## Characteristics of action research

- Action research is a method used for improving practice.
- Action research is participative and collaborative; it is undertaken by individuals with a common purpose.
- It is situation-based and context specific.
- It develops reflection based on interpretations made by the participants.
- Knowledge is created through action and at the point of application.
- Action research can involve problem solving, if the solution to the problem leads to the improvement of practice.
- In action research findings will emerge as action develops, but these are not conclusive or absolute.

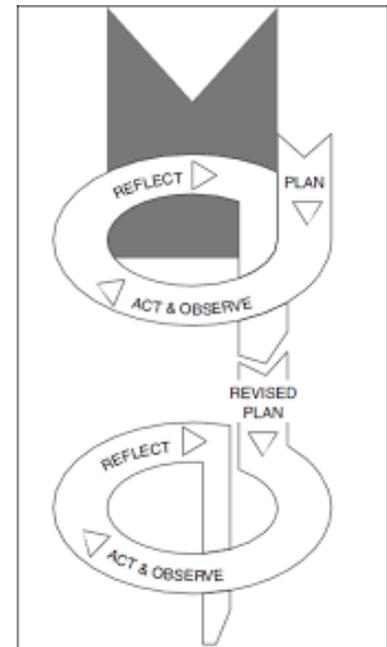


# Action research Cycle



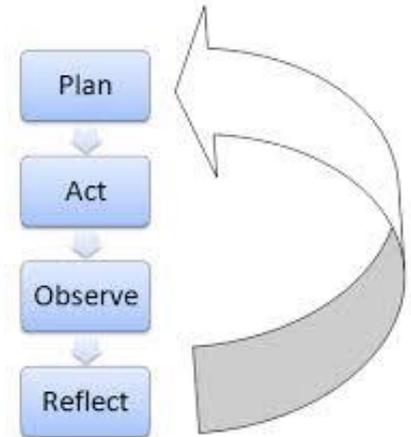
- a) **Observe:** The issue is monitored and described. Useful data is recorded and kept.
  - b) **Reflect:** Observations are interpreted and shared so that the issue or problem can be better understood.
  - c) **Plan:** Actions are proposed to address the issue or problem.
  - d) **Act:** The plan is implemented and the cycle starts again as outcomes are observed, recorded and shared.
- Although the processes are presented in a cycle, the stages may not always follow each other in a cyclic format.
  - For a start, you may not start with planning; there may be much monitoring and observation of existing practice before you are ready to plan and implement a change.
  - As you become more involved with your research, you may find it hard to detach one element of the process from another. You may find yourself reflecting as you are acting.
  - However, once that first change is implemented the action research cycle proceeds generally in a cyclic manner.

- Emphasizing the individual nature of action research, Jack Whitehead (1985) puts forward a simple representation of how the process feels:
  - I experience a problem when some of my educational values are negated in my practice;
  - I imagine a solution to my problem;
  - I act in the direction of the solution;
  - I evaluate the outcomes of my actions;
  - I modify my problems, ideas and actions in the light of my evaluations.

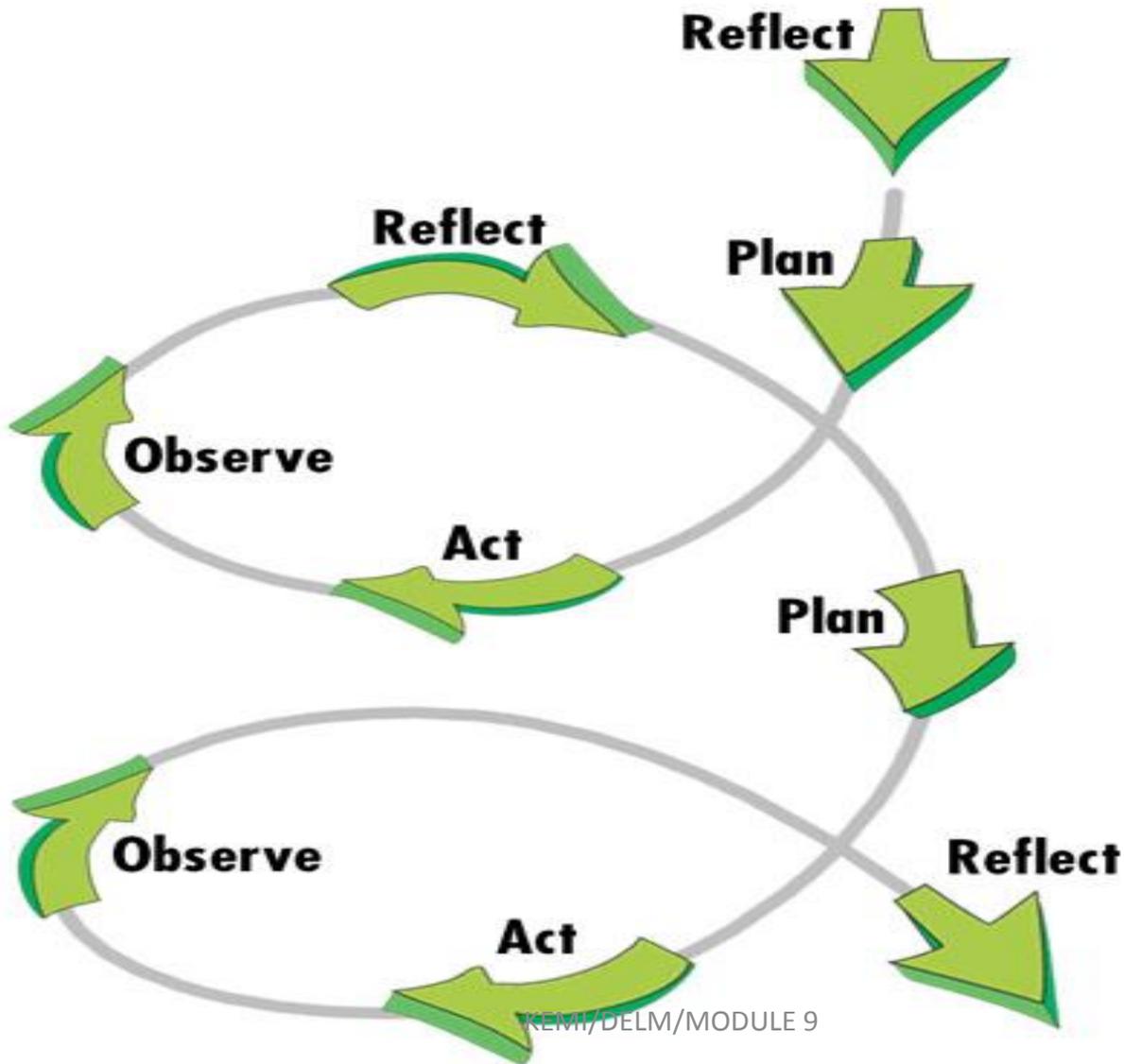


## Action research spiral model

- The action research model developed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) is essentially a spiral model comprising four steps: planning, acting, observing and reflecting (see figure in the section that follows).
- The diagram shows the four steps in action.
- It shows how one moves from one step to another and how these steps flow through the system.



# Action research spiral model





- **Planning:** I am not happy with the performance of the learners in this institution. What can I do about it? I should change my leadership approach? Perhaps I should try performance targets.
- **Acting:** I show the teachers how to set baselines and performance targets. We try out this technique in the institution.
- **Observing:** I join various teachers and listen to their conversations. I keep my own notes.
- **Reflecting:** The activity is taken positively, but some teachers are not sure about the process. I want to make it easier for them to understand the process.
- **Planning:** Perhaps I could ask KEMI to train the teachers on performance target setting. Will that make it easier to understand?
- **Acting:** The teachers take notes. At the end of the training session, setting of performance targets becomes clearer.
- **Observing:** The teachers really enjoy this. They are implementing the system of setting performance targets.
- **Reflecting:** Is using performance targets improving performance? I am worried about the adverse effects of competition. How can i tackle this problem?



*Action Research requires you to question your present practice*

- 1. *What is your concern?*** – Is there something disturbing you? Is there something that you are not happy about? Are students performing well in the national examinations?
- 2. *Where are you?*** Are these students equipped with knowledge and skills to pass the examination?
- 3. *What do you think you could do about it?*** Is there anything you can do about it? Are there innovative instructional techniques that could be introduced?

## Action research process

### STEP 1: Identifying the research problem ( what do I want to do?)

- Investigate practical, every day issues
- Everyday problems experienced in schools
- You need a general idea of something that needs improvement
- **Guiding questions**
  - What is your concern?
  - Why are you concerned?
  - What so you think you could do about it?
  - What kind of evidence do you think you need to help you make some judgment about what is happening?
  - How would you collect that evidence?
  - How would you ensure that your judgment of what happened is reasonable, fair and accurate?

## Golden rules for selecting a topic

- Keep it manageable – keep the focus small scale.
- It should be interesting to you – you may need some perseverance to see the inquiry through!
- It should be workable – you are not stumped for ideas, but can identify ways in which you might have a go at addressing your question.
- It is not too disruptive of normal routines.



## **Writing down your topic:**

- During this time, you may also employ other strategies to help you refine your focus. Winter (1989) suggests a range of writing strategies that may help you:
  - Brainstorming ideas – looking for patterns, recurring ideas;
  - Keeping an interest log/diary;
  - Writing a story about the situation;
  - Whichever method you employ, writing is frequently the most powerful way for helping you make sense of a situation.

## **Examples of problems:**

- Better results for your school
- Students do not engage in discussions
- Implementing a discipline program in your school that will enhance performance
- Making staff meetings more productive

## **Step 2: Gathering Information**

- After identifying and limiting the topic, the next step is preliminary information gathering, a process that Mills (2011) refers to as reconnaissance.
- Information gathering can be as simple as talking with other teachers, counsellors, or administrators in your school or district in order to gauge their perceptions of your proposed research problem and perhaps to query them for ideas.
- You may skim education documents or other types of curricular guides, again looking for ideas, suggestions, and the like that may inform your topic.

### **Step 3. Reviewing the related literature**

- Literature review includes any existing source of information that can shed light on the topic selected for investigation.
- These sources of information might include professional books, research journals, complete websites or individual web pages, teacher resource manuals, school or district documents, and even discussions with colleagues.

## **Step 4: Developing a research plan**

- Once the research problem or topic has been identified and focused, it is then appropriate to state one or more research questions and possibly to develop from those questions specific hypotheses.
- The research question provides the guiding structure to the study itself.
- Every part of the action research study should be done so as to facilitate finding an answer to the research question.
- It is typically best to try to keep the study as simple as possible by stating only one research question.
- A research hypothesis is simply a specification of the expected answer—or a prediction, of sorts—to the research question.

## **Step 5: Implementing the plan and collecting data**

- The next step in the process of conducting action research is the determination of the specific data to be collected and how to *actually* collect them.
- Action researchers can use any method of data gathering, as long as it gives useful and reliable evidence of the impact of your action.
- You should plan to use more than one means of data gathering to ensure triangulation.
- As you start to explore different methods of data gathering, you will become more familiar with them and be able to use them more efficiently.

- Some important considerations to bear in mind:
  - Does the method give a form of data which relates to my question?
  - Is it feasible in the available time?
  - Have I made myself aware of its strengths and limitations?
  - Will it be an acceptable method for the other people involved?
  - Will it disrupt normal routines? (If the data gathering method presents as much change as the planned action, then how will I know what is having an effect?!)



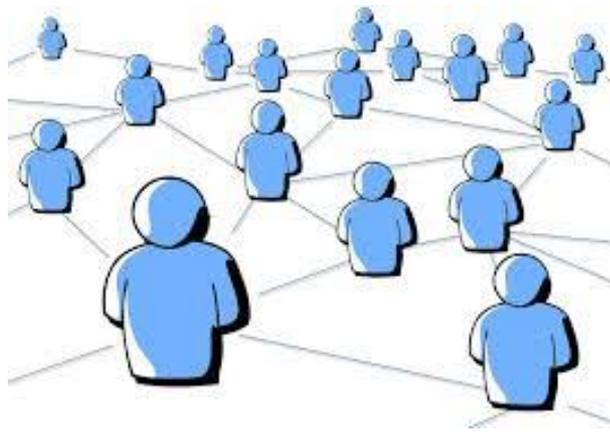
## Step 6: Analysing the data

- Action researchers need to look at their practice *dialectically*.
- Within a dialectical perspective, nothing stands alone; there is no such thing as a simple unity.
- Any phenomenon, be it an object, a person, a practice or a social situation, is only understood by taking account of the sets of relationships which comprise it:
- The relationship between the elements of which the phenomenon is constituted and the relationship between the phenomenon and the context within which it exists.
- A book is a book, yet it is also made up of words, paper, pages and cover and it gains meaning as a book because it is a book amongst other books of the same kind, within the milieu of ideas which inform them.
- A school is an entity, yet it is made of a manager and individual children and it lies within a school and the political structures which govern them.
- The word dialectics comes from a Greek root meaning the art of discussion. To understand a phenomenon dialectically involves the exploration of these relationships.



## Step 7: Developing an action plan

- Once the data have been analysed and the results of the analysis interpreted, the next step in the action research process is the development of an action plan.
- This is really the ultimate goal of any action research study—it is the —action part of action research.
- The important outcome from the development of an action plan is the existence of a specific and tangible approach to trying out some new ideas as a means to solve the original problem.
- The action plan is essentially a proposed strategy for implementing the results of your action research project.
- As the action plan is implemented, its effectiveness must continually be monitored, evaluated, and revised, thus perpetuating the cyclical nature of action research.



## **Step 8: Sharing and communicating the results**

- An important part of any research study is the reporting or sharing of results with others in the educational community at large.
- Action research should be no different.
- Simply because you have undertaken this project in order to help you solve a problem does not mean that no one else will be interested in the results that you have obtained.
- The vast majority of educators are constantly looking for ways to improve their practice.

## Stage 9: Reflecting on the process

- Action research is primarily about critical examination of one's own practice.
- In order for someone to critically examine her or his practice, that person must engage after the implementation of the action plan, one must engage in systematic reflection of that practice.
- Reflection is something that must be done at the end of a particular action cycle.





- The steps outlined are only guidelines; they do not necessarily have to follow each other in that order; where appropriate, you may skip some steps or rearrange them.

## **Ethical considerations in action research**

- Any research which involves other people in some way has ethical implications.
- Action research in education is deeply embedded in the social world of the school within which it takes place.
- Because education is a social action, data gathering and analysis within action research will inevitably impact on the lives of others in those institutions, be they pupils, students or colleagues.
- Remember that the children or students in your school are worthy of the same consideration as adults and fellow professionals.
- Ensure that individual rights are not infringed and to promote fairness in the interpretation of data.





## Conclusion

- In this unit, we have looked at the concept of action research.
- We have looked at the cyclic nature of action research and the process of conducting research.
- We have concluded the unit by looking at the general format of an action research project.
- This takes us to the next unit where we shall learn about the leadership challenge model.