

Teachers' Opinions Regarding the Usage of Action Research in Professional Development

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Abstract

The aim of the study is to investigate the contribution of action research to teachers' professional development. In line with this goal, a group of teachers were asked their opinions. The working group of the study is comprised of six teachers working at a state primary and middle school. The study is an example of "Case Study", one of qualitative research methods. The content analysis technique was utilized in the analysis of the data. To sum up, the teachers expressed that action research had a positive impact on their professional development in various aspects.

Keywords: action research, professional development, case study

1. Introduction

1.1 Problem

Humanbeings have been in a quest of quality within their limits ranging from industry to education. Then, what is quality? Lexically, it is defined as "embodying the best-known qualities of a product" (TDK, 2015), "a quality that somebody or something possesses" (Merriam-Webster, 2015), "(in industry) lacking faults, mistakes and significant variations" (Business Dictionary, 2015) and "the degree to what extent internal characteristics satisfy needs" (Word Press, 2015).

Teachers have a vital role in helping people improve their skills, actualize their potential and acquire complicated information and skills that they need as citizens or employees. Teachers are those mediating between the swiftly-changing world and students about to enter it. Teaching profession is getting more and more sophisticated and demands expected from teachers are going up. Within the scope of the Bologna process, among the teaching competences and qualifications are "a high-quality profession", "a profession of people learning lifelong", "a mobile profession" and "a profession based on cooperation" (CEC, 2007).

Teachers' professional development is a significant factor in ensuring the effectiveness of reforms at any levels. Successful professional development opportunities for teachers have a positive bearing on students' performance and learning. Thus, teachers' professional should be regarded as a key factor if the aim is to enhance students' learning and performances (Villegas-Reimers, 2003).

The most outstanding teacher training approach is to combine scientific knowledge and theory from practice and train teachers as researchers (Ekiz, 2006). It is quite apparent that teachers' professional development is essential to make education more fruitful. Yet, it is stated that most of the professional development programs directed at teachers result in failure. Action Research, based on solving problems through research by teachers' following a certain process for a specific problem, stands as an alternative with regard to offering a solution to teachers' professional development. Action Research is of great significance as it enables teachers to solve their problems on their own to a great extent

Teachers focus on their practices and handle their problems directly in Action Research. Teachers themselves are also influenced by the changes and improvements they make. It is seen that participants involved in an action research consider themselves as more effective teachers and have a more positive attitude towards their profession (Atay, 2003; as cited in Kuzu, 2009).

Involved in a classroom or school-based action research, teachers can focus on their professional development primarily and divert their professional development to which direction they want. It can be adapted to the needs of the trainer(s) or the trainer team. Some specific fields needing improvement could be the focus of personalized or customized

professional development. Teachers regard such professional development as more meaningful as they have an opportunity to improve the areas they choose (Mertler, 2013).

Whether carried out as individually or as a team work, teacher research enables teachers to be involved in designing and implementing researches serving as productive professional development experiences. Teacher research is influential as it activates teachers, provides opportunities to be cooperative, handle real world problems and their own problems (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993; as cited in. Kim, 2008)

Action Research is a practical way of going over one's work to check whether it is in the desired way. It is mostly considered as practitioner-based research as it includes thinking and reflecting about one's work. Furthermore, it could be regarded as a kind of self-reflective practice (Ferguson, 2011).

A number of action research cycles could be found in the literature. Two new ones were created by Yigit (2016) as a result of literature survey and then action research workshops and practices (as it is said to be flexible in the literature) and one of these action research cycles could be seen in Figure 1 below:

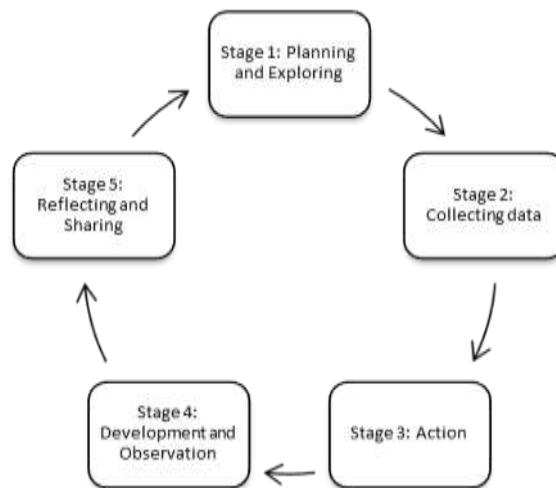


Figure 1. Action Research Cycle (Yigit, 2016)

Steps are briefly explained below:

Stage 1: Several tools are employed to specify the problem, set the goal and find necessary tools to active it.

Stage 2: Literature is surveyed and data are collected with respect to the problem.

Stage 3: Action is initiated after using several tools to solve the problem and drawing an action research proposal/plan.

Stage 4: Action plan is revised after missing points are determined and observation is made again regarding the problem.

Stage 5: Teachers reflect about the results of the action researches and inform their colleagues and/or sharholders (Yigit, 2016).

1.2 Explore Importance of the Problem

Most of the professional developments fail (Guskey, 2002). Courses or workshops serve different goals, whereas drawing a program, discussing evaluation data or sharing strategies serve some other goals (Avalos, 2011). Professional development activities which are short, temporary or split from practice have little influence. On the other hand, well-designed professional development may remediate the teaching practice and students' achievement (Wei, Darling-Hammond and Adamson, 2010).

2. Method

2.1 Identify Subsections

The research is of a qualitative design. The research as to Action Research in teachers' professional development is an example of Case Study, an approach facilitating the usage of the discovery of a phenomenon in its own context using data triangulation. What's common between Yin and Stake, using different methods in their case studies, is that the topic of interest is discovered well and the essence of the issue is uncovered (Baxter and Jack, 2008).

The working group of the study is comprised of six state school teachers who underwent an Action Research training. It

involved warm-up and ice-breaker activities, problem specification methods and techniques, literature survey, data collection, organization, analysis, reporting and effective presentation techniques.

The teacher-researchers were encouraged and supported to carry out their action researches in line with the definition of Ferguson (2011) and the action research cycle drawn by Yigit (2016). Some of the research topics handled by the teachers were “the impact of homework on students’ achievement”, “how to teach students effectively by overcoming difficulties”, “problems regarding the material usage in Turkish lessons”, “classroom management”, etc. To illustrate, the teacher addressing “homework” had a literature survey and collected data from her class using observation reports, homework check lists and self and peer-assessment techniques. She reported improvement in the quality of her students’ assignments. Then, the teacher who studied how to teach effectively made use of creative problem specification and solving techniques and interviewed her colleagues. She analyzed the data and reported the findings. Having found out the reasons for ineffective teaching, she made some changes. She met some other teachers and parents as well. She concluded that there were fewer distraction but she still had some problems. She also decided to get more help from the Guidance and Counselling Service.

The data were collected using a semi-structured interview form including question about their usage of Action Research. The responses to the interview were gathered using Google docs, e-mail, written report, etc. just to make the teachers feel comfortable to express their opinions.

2.4 Data Analysis

Firstly, teachers were coded as Teacher 1 to 6. Content analysis was utilized in the analysis of the data. The main goal of content analysis is to reach concepts and relations for which data are conceptualized. Afterwards, the data are re-organized and themes are determined. Thus, phenomena could be organized or understood better (Yildirim & Simsek, 2006).

According to Yin (1984), in order to make a research design more effective, its internal and external validity and reliability should be ensured. The objectivity is under risk as subject judgements could interfere in the process (as cited in Yildirim and Simsek, 2006). In the study, two experts in the field were consulted for the content analysis conducted and thus categorization and themes were confirmed.

3. Results

Table 1. Effect of Action Research on Professional Development in terms of “Knowledge of Field”

Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3	Teacher 4	Teacher 5	Teacher 6
<p>Cooperation “It enabled us to share with each other professionally.” “We started to develop a common plan.”</p> <p>Alternative Ways of Solution “We noticed that there is more than one solution to the problems and we could reach these by improving ourselves continuously.”</p> <p>Communication “It enhanced communication [among teachers].” “It enabled us to feel empathy with the students seeing their context while searching for the reasons for the problems in the class.”</p>	<p>Alternative Ways of Solution “Upon finding out the reasons for the problems in the class, I tried to look for alternative ways of solution. For this reason, I got help from the people around me (teachers, friends).”</p>		<p>Self-Criticism “Action research has enabled me to criticize myself by helping me see my weaknesses in my own field.”</p> <p>Gaining Awareness “I noticed once more that I need to improve myself because of my field (information technologies).”</p>	<p>Opportunity to Find Solutions “Thanks to the brainstorming activities, it taught us how to behave and get results and which stages to track.”</p>	<p>Gaining Awareness “It helped me be informed about to what extent I make use of materials in my lessons and how to concretize the Turkish lesson which is abstract.”</p> <p>Opportunity to Find Solutions “It canalized me to look for ways of solutions to make use of materials in the lessons.”</p>

The results regarding the first sub-dimension named “Knowledge of Field” are provided in Table 1 below:

As seen in Table 1, all the opinions regarding “Knowledge of Field” are positive from the point of view of Action Research. The opinions could be listed under the main themes “professional development, solutions and communications”. The teachers expressed that they had positive sharing among them, made plans and criticized

themselves noticing their weaknesses thanks to Action Research. It is understood that their level of awareness in different aspects such as teaching methodologies increased and it is stated that professional development should be continuous. Moreover, it is also striking that Action Research offers solutions to problems. Then, it is seen that teachers started looking for alternative ways of solutions. Finally, teachers express that their communication with the students improved.

The results regarding the second sub-dimension named “Pedagogy” are provided in Table 2 below.

As shown in Table 2, all the opinions concerning “Pedagogy” are also all positive. The opinions could be gathered under the themes “updating knowledge, learners’ developmental characteristics, gaining awareness, teaching methods and techniques and opportunity to find solutions”. The point focused more here is that teachers gain more information about learners’ developmental characteristics thanks to Action Research. Next, it is seen that they gain an opportunity to review their teaching methodologies. Thirdly, as mentioned in “Field of Knowledge”, Action Research contributes to teachers in terms of gaining awareness about finding solutions to classroom problems and developing solutions”.

Table 2. Effect of Action Research on Professional Development in terms of “Pedagogy”

Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3	Teacher 4	Teacher 5	Teacher 6
Update of Knowledge “As all the training contributed to us positively in terms of process-based and scientific thinking, it has provided us with new and up-to-date information” Learners’ Developmental Characteristics “It has given us clues about educational activities directed at learners’ developmental characteristics together with close follow-up these characteristics.”	Gaining Awareness “I saw that the problems in the classroom decreased the students’ motivation. These problems had to be minimized to increase their motivation. Therefore, I have thought about how to have my lessons in a fun and more active way.” Teaching Methods and Techniques “We have had our lessons in a fun way, creating games in line with the topics with the students.”	Teaching Methods and Techniques “Thanks to reviewing literature, I got more informed about teaching methods and techniques.”	Learners’ developmental characteristics “While searching about how I can be more helpful for my students, I learned more about their age group characteristics.” Teaching Methods and Techniques “... I had a chance to review the materials that I can use in my lessons.”	Opportunity to Find Solutions “It taught me how to evaluate a problem from different angles and how to emphasize.”	Learners’ developmental characteristics “... it has become useful in terms of getting individuals’ characteristics into account.” Opportunity to Find Solutions “It was useful for identifying problems regarding education and their reasons and finding solutions.”

As seen in Table 3, all the opinions of the teachers regarding “Gaining Knowledge Regarding Learners” are positive from the point of view of Action Research. The opinions could be gathered under the themes “positive impact upon learners, Gaining Knowledge, Lessons in a More Fun Way, gaining awareness and techniques and opportunity to find solutions”. The point focused most is that it had a positive impact upon learners. Then, they report that it had a positive impact on themselves as well as the learners. Having lessons in a more fun way and opportunity to find solutions, as mentioned in “Field of Knowledge” and “Pedagogy”, are two other benefits of Action Research for the teachers. As stated in the previous two sub-dimensions, it is seen that there is an increase in the awareness level of the students. Finally, it seems that the teachers appropriated the Action Research training.

The results regarding the second sub-dimension named “Gaining Knowledge Regarding Learners” are provided in Table 3 below:

Table 3. Effect of Action Research on Professional Development in terms of “Gaining Knowledge Regarding Learners”

Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3	Teacher 4	Teacher 5	Teacher 6
<p>Positive Impact upon Learners “Teachers made a program in line with the “action research plan” based on the training they got, which could be said to have provided positive feedback to learners” “The learners were involved in this plan and they appropriated the change in the classroom in a positive and curious way as the activities were different from usual. Gaining knowledge “They [Students] may be said to have increased their knowledge thanks to their original activities.” Appropriating training “They [Students] may be said to have appropriated the training to their original activities.”</p>	<p>Positive Impact upon Learners “It has had a positive impact on the students interest in lessons.” “It had a positive impact on some of the students who are not interested in lessons.” Lessons in a more fun way “Games appropriate for the topics (contests – puzzles) helped the lesson become more fun.”</p>	<p>Gaining Awareness “As a result of the deductions from parent and teacher interviews, I saw how the students acted in which conditions and I will be able to use it for the problems that may occur in the future.”</p>	<p>Gaining knowledge “I have got informed more about why students perform certain actions.” Gaining Awareness “I have noticed my mistakes about students’ mistakes in the lessons as a consequence of the researches I have carried out.”</p>	<p>Opportunity to Find Solutions “It has taught us how to define a problem, how to find solutions and how to act under which circumstances.”</p>	<p>Positive Impact upon Learners “It provided a more concrete learning setting for the students and facilitated internalizing concepts.”</p>

The results regarding the second sub-dimension named “Teaching Methodologies” are provided in Table 4 below:

Table 4. Effect of Action Research on Professional Development in terms of “Teaching Methodologies”

Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3	Teacher 4	Teacher 5	Teacher 6
<p>Various Solutions “We tried to contemplate about how to transfer the teaching methodologies we learned during this training and make use of different methods and techniques.”</p>	<p>Active Learning Environment “Active learning environment has been ensured by minimizing the problems about being uninterested in the lessons.”</p>	<p>Problem Solving “I noticed that most problems could be handled if the essence of the problem is uncovered using the methods we used to identify problems. Action Research helped me solve some of the problems in my class. I will make use of them when I encounter similar problems in the future.”</p>	<p>Review “I reviewed the teaching methods I used it to minimize negative student behaviours with this research. I researched more effective methods and put them into practice.”</p>	<p>Problem Solving “It taught me that a problem is not solved suddenly but gradually and step by step.”</p>	<p>Active Learning Environment “It contributed to learning by doing, concrete learning, active learning and individual-based learning in terms of teaching methodologies.”</p>

As seen in Table 4, all the opinions of the teachers regarding “Teaching Methodologies” are positive from the point of view of Action Research. The opinions could be gathered under the themes “different solutions, active learning environment, problem solving and review”. The teachers expressed that a more active learning environment was ensured and their problem solving skills got better. Additionally, they drew attention to the studies about differentiation and variation of teaching methodologies and they had a chance to review them.

The results regarding the second sub-dimension named “Teaching Methodologies” are provided in Table 5 below:

Table 5. Effect of Action Research on Professional Development in terms of “Curriculum”

Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3	Teacher 4	Teacher 5	Teacher 6
Variety of Activities “We had various activities where possible in the curriculum. For instance, we formed lesson objectives which could be achieved through various activities suitable for basic learning points of Turkish education in the Turkish lesson.”		Problem Solving “It enabled me to solve the problems in the lesson and focus on it better. It helps students understand lessons better.”	Detailed Review “I had a chance to go over the Information Technologies curricula and plans in a more detailed way and put them into practice by making them flexible when suitable.”	Problem Solving “What to do when problems occur is researched and reflected onto the program.”	Preparation of Course Materials “I paid attention to the principles of educational materials such as being economic, flexible, appropriate and clear and these principles were adhered while preparing materials.”

As seen in Table 5, all the opinions of the teachers regarding “Curriculum” are positive from the point of view of Action Research. The opinions could be gathered under the themes “variety of activities, problem solving, detailed review and preparation of course materials”. As stressed in the previous sub-dimensions, teachers point out the importance of Action Research in terms of problem solving. Also, the teachers state that they had a variation in their activities, a detailed review of the curricula and developed new course materials in line with the course material preparation principles.

The results regarding the second sub-dimension named “General Pedagogical Knowledge” are provided in Table 6 below:

Table 6. Effect of Action Research on Professional Development in terms of “General Pedagogical Knowledge”

Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3	Teacher 4	Teacher 5	Teacher 6
Becoming a Conscious Teacher “It helped us become more conscious and gave us an idea about updated knowledge and learner characteristics.” Continuous Professional Development “It made us more aware of developing ourselves professionally continuously.”	Teaching Methods and Techniques “I researched about short ways to solve operations in Mathematics. When the students considered them interesting, they started putting them into practice.”	Awareness “Dealing with the students’ problems helped me become aware of their needs and demands.”	Awareness “Science of Education is a science that a teacher needs to search about. In the research I have carried out, I understood that I needed pedagogic knowledge for classroom management.”		Teaching Methods and Techniques “Effort was made to maintain active learning and constructive approach and planning was made accordingly. Permanent understanding was sought.”

As seen in Table 6, all the opinions of the teachers regarding “General Pedagogical Knowledge” are positive from the point of view of Action Research. The opinions could be gathered under the themes “becoming a conscious teacher, continuous professional development, teaching methods and techniques and awareness”. It was expressed that they put

activities that make the students more active in the lessons. Then, the teachers stated that they gained awareness of professional development, dealing with the students' problems and classroom management.

The results regarding the second sub-dimension named "School Context" are provided in Table 7 below:

As seen in Table 7, all the opinions of the teachers regarding "School Context" are positive. The opinions could be gathered under the themes "problem solving, school problems, classroom management and material usage". Firstly, it is seen that Action Research was useful for them to find out solutions to their problems and formed a ground for the teachers for common problem solving. Then, classroom management seems to be one of the most serious problems and the lessons were interrupted. Yet, the usage of interesting visuals or materials appears to have made the lessons more interesting after the teachers' action researches.

Table 7. Effect of Action Research on Professional Development in terms of "School Context"

Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3	Teacher 4	Teacher 5	Teacher 6
Problem Solving "It helped us put forward solutions for the problems in the school context. Also, it was useful for us create solutions for the same school's basic problems as all the participants in the training worked for the same school. Besides, the fact that almost all teachers experience the same problems helped us find out common and more radical solutions directed at these problems."	School Problems "Our school context is terrible. While trying to manage the classroom, we are trying to struggle against the negative outside effects. While having our lessons, a few students may bust the school and disrupt the lesson. Or, the students may not attend the lesson and, instead, interrupt the lesson to ask for a sweeper or something else."	Classroom Management "We have a more effective lesson when the classroom is managed well."	Problem Solving "I realized that I could implement a solution that has worked in another classroom for a similar problem."	Research Not Solved "I haven't been able to get a definite solution at the end of my research so far. However, it could result in success with more effort and time."	Material Usage "Our school context is where the number of students with lack of attention and suffering from dyslexia. That the usage of materials that drew the attention of the students and exhibiting them inside the school made learning more enjoyable."

As seen in Table 8, all the opinions of the teachers regarding "Getting to Know Oneself" are positive from the point of view of Action Research. The opinions could be gathered under the themes "professional development, scientific process skills, personal development, teaching methods and techniques, problem solving and continuous development". It is seen that the teachers put great emphasis on the effect of Action Research in terms of professional, personal and continuous development. As seen in some other sub-dimensions, it helped the teachers about teaching methods and techniques. Finally, it was useful for the teachers to make a self-criticism and assessment.

The results regarding the second sub-dimension named "Getting to Know Oneself" are provided in Table 8 below:

Table 8. Effect of Action Research on Professional Development in terms of “Getting to Know Oneself”

Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3	Teacher 4	Teacher 5	Teacher 6
<p>Professional Development “The training we have had contributed to us in professional terms. A teacher developing himself/herself continuously will want to keep up with the changes in the daily life as well.”</p> <p>Scientific Process Skills “Making use of scientific methods will help the teachers gain scientific process skills, which will help us identify and observe people and events around us in a more objective way.”</p> <p>Personal Development “The training we had contributed to us in terms of professional development.”</p> <p>Continuous Development “A teacher developing himself/herself continuously will want to keep up with the changes in the daily life as well.”</p>	<p>Teaching Methods and Techniques “It helped us realize how to teach better using different methods.”</p> <p>Self-Assessment “... our school context and student profiles are terrible. I think I cannot improve myself enough in such an atmosphere.”</p>	<p>Problem Solving “This research helped me gain problem solving and managing skills.”</p>	<p>Continuous Development “... I have learned that I need to improve myself continuously, become more patient and flexible and show more empathy.”</p> <p>Self-Assessment “This research, first of all, helped me make self-criticism, notice my mistakes and know myself better.”</p>	<p>Self-Assessment “It has taught me see myself in a realistic way and make a true assessment as a result.”</p>	<p>Teaching Methods and Techniques “It was particularly influential as it helped us see our weaknesses in terms of teaching methods and techniques and learn how to improve ourselves.”</p>

4. Discussion

Reeves (2010) expresses that teachers should be provided with different knowledge and skills from those they had in the past if they are expected to enhance their professional practices and decision making (as cited in Hughes, 2016). Teachers involved in Action Research are encouraged to be reflective and analyze their practices to evaluate how strong their pedagogies are to improve student progress (Hughes, 2016). Based on the findings of the research, it could be stated that Action Research is useful for the teachers in several aspects of their professional and personal development. To begin with, as stated in the “Field of Knowledge” sub-dimension, it helped the teachers to make positive sharing, do common plans, offer an opportunity to make self-criticism, improve communication with students and increase their level of awareness. Also, Action Research is seen to increase teachers’ knowledge, ensure more active involvement of the students in the lessons and have positive impact upon students as mentioned in the “Gaining Knowledge Regarding Learners”, “General Pedagogical Knowledge” and “Teaching Methodologies” sub-dimensions. Similarly, Feldman

(1996:20-27) found that PTARG (Physics Teachers Action Research Group) produced and shared knowledge in his study. Next, he commented that teachers try new methods in their lessons and enhanced the lessons. The fact that the teachers share and criticize their experiences during their action research results in the growth of their knowledge. Likewise, the teachers had a chance to study together in their Collaborative Action Research (CAR), their understanding of the basic concepts got better, had a chance to reflect upon the activities, realized that they could grow professionally, and helped to notice the importance of working, studying, reflecting and making researches with the other teachers because it permitted them to uncover the significance of sharing their classroom activities and knowledge with their colleagues to keep developing professionally. (Garces and Granada, 2015)

Then, it is said to assist instructs about methodology, learner strategies and classroom materials (Johnson, 1992; McKay, 2009; as cited in Sakirgil, 2014). Sakirgil (2014) concludes in his study that being involved in an action research helps teachers get more conscious of their strong and weak sides as teachers. They are said to know their classes, communicate with the students better and minimize the problems in the classroom. Moreover, Brown (2002) states that the systematic structure of Action Research enables teachers to change their educational methodologies.

Furthermore, as mentioned in the “Curriculum”, “General Pedagogical Knowledge”, and “School Context” sub-dimensions, it is apparent that teachers improve their problem solving skills using Action Research. In line with that, Bentz and Shapiro (1998) discussed that early studies focused on transforming people’s or organizations’ behaviours more than Action Research’s role as a means of participant problem solving (as cited in Coats, 2005).

Next, Action Research could be said to help teachers about material development as well as stated in the “School Context” sub-dimension. Finally, it is seen that Action Research helps teachers make self-assessment and criticism, has positive impact on their professional, personal and continuous development. Similarly, Bissonnette and Caprino (2014) state that teachers become more reflective and intentional in their instruction and cooperate with their colleagues and advocate Action Research as a means of professional development. Then, Nelluru and Kanta (2016) states that Action Research serves for the goal to be reflective professionally because it combines the professional knowledge and wisdom of daily practice.

Also, Borg (2015) states that teacher (action) research is an option for teachers for their professional development to be continuous, cheap and integrated into their studies. He adds that Action Research should not be regarded as the only and right option for the whole teachers, yet when suitable, he claims that he has considerable transformative potential. Moreover, Coats (2005) report that Action Research is useful for teachers’ professional development with some quotations of the teachers involved in an action research and stating that their professional development was enhanced using Action Research.

Yigit (2016) mentions that action research has resulted in significant contributions to the teachers such as finding solutions to their problems on their own, acquisition of scientific research process knowledge, differentiation in methods and techniques, effective classroom management, etc. Yet, he also suggests carrying out researches about whether the teachers keep using Action Research later on.

As a conclusion, it could be stated that Action Research is helpful for the teachers’ professional development in several aspects. Therefore, it could be suggested that teachers be encouraged to initiate and be involved in such researches as such to develop themselves professionally and how permanent these Action Research skills are permanent could be studied.

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