A FIELD GUIDE TO EXPLORATORY ACTION RESEARCH: METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

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Abstract. This article analyzes the theoretical foundations, practical applications, and role of Exploratory Action Research (EAR) in the scientific research process. The EAR approach is characterized by strengthening collaboration between researchers and practitioners and focusing on step-by-step resolution of real-world problems. The article highlights the key principles of this method, its advantages in scientific inquiry, and its applications in education and social sciences.

Keywords. Action research, exploratory research, pedagogical innovation, reflective practice, scientific methodology

INTRODUCTION

In modern scientific research systems, integrating theory with practice has become increasingly important. In particular, in education, social sciences, and management fields, there is a growing need to address problems not only theoretically but also through real practical approaches. From this perspective, the Exploratory Action Research (EAR) approach provides a more flexible and effective framework for the research process.

EAR is considered both a research and practical activity simultaneously. Through this method, the researcher identifies a problem, analyzes it, and tests solutions in real conditions. This process is iterative in nature, where each stage serves as a basis for further improvement.

Unlike classical scientific approaches, EAR allows rapid adaptation to changes occurring in real environments. Therefore, it is widely used in educational innovation, improving learning processes, and solving social problems. [1]

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of Exploratory Action Research originates from Kurt Lewin’s foundational ideas of “action research.” In his work Action Research and Minority Problems, Lewin emphasizes the unity of research and action in solving social problems and argues that “nothing is as practical as a good theory,” highlighting the importance of practical change in scientific work. [1]

Later, Kemmis and McTaggart, in The Action Research Planner, conceptualized action research as a cyclical process consisting of planning, action, observation, and reflection stages. According to their perspective, the researcher must actively participate in the process, which became a core principle of EAR methodology. [2]

John Elliott views action research as an essential tool for teachers’ professional development. He argues that teachers can significantly improve educational quality by systematically analyzing their own practice. [3]

Richard Sagor, in Guiding School Improvement with Action Research, describes action research as a tool for school reform and improving student outcomes. He emphasizes its focus on practical results as its main advantage. [4]

Sara Coughlan and Jean McNiff connect EAR with reflective practice, emphasizing the need for continuous analysis and reconstruction of one’s own professional actions. Their approach positions EAR as a tool for both personal and professional development. [5]

METHODOLOGY

This study employed the Exploratory Action Research approach as the main methodology. The research process included sequential stages of problem identification, data collection, practical intervention, and reflection. Data were collected through observation, interviews, and document analysis. The results were analyzed using qualitative methods. Each stage contributed to the improvement of the subsequent phase of the research process.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The Exploratory Action Research (EAR) approach is considered an interactive model in modern scientific methodology that integrates practice and theory. Its key feature is that it does not limit itself to theoretical analysis of a problem but establishes a system of step-by-step interventions tested in real environments. Therefore, EAR functions as a cyclical model based on continuous improvement.

Research findings indicate that EAR significantly accelerates the process of identifying and solving problems while improving overall effectiveness. In education, this method enhances interaction between teachers and students and allows the learning process to be aligned with real needs. As a result, educational quality improves significantly, and students' knowledge acquisition levels increase.

The EAR process typically consists of five main stages, each forming the basis for the next. These stages are: problem identification, planning, action, observation, and reflection. Each stage functions not only as an independent activity but also as an integrated component of the overall system.

The table below presents the stages of EAR, their descriptions, and expected outcomes:

Table 1.

Stages of the Exploratory Action Research (EAR) Process and Their Outcomes

Stage	Description	Outcome and Effectiveness
Problem identification	Identifying practical problems, needs, or deficiencies and formulating them scientifically	The main direction of research is defined; problem boundaries are clarified
Planning	Developing strategies, methods, and tools to solve the problem	A clear step-by-step action plan is created
Action	Implementing the planned intervention in a real environment	Practical changes occur; new approaches are tested
Observation	Systematic collection and recording of results	Qualitative and quantitative data are generated for analysis
Reflection	Deep analysis of outcomes, identifying strengths and weaknesses	A refined model is developed for the next cycle

Analysis shows that EAR is not only results-oriented but also a system focused on continuous optimization of the process. Each cycle is not considered a final outcome but a starting point for the next stage of research. This makes it fundamentally different from traditional linear research methods.

EAR enhances teachers' reflective practice in education. By continuously analyzing their teaching process, educators make more informed and effective pedagogical decisions. At the same time, learners develop more adaptive learning experiences, improving individual learning quality.

Furthermore, EAR accelerates innovation in decision-making processes. Since each stage is informed by newly generated data, strategies are continuously revised and optimized. This

improves flexibility in both educational and administrative systems and ensures more efficient use of resources.

One of the most important advantages of EAR is its flexibility. Depending on the results obtained, each stage can be revised. For example, if expected outcomes are not achieved during observation, the process returns to the planning stage for redesign. This iterative mechanism improves research quality and reduces errors.

Another important aspect is that EAR transforms participants into active subjects of the research process. The researcher is not only an observer but also a direct participant. This increases the practical relevance of the findings and facilitates their real-world application.

Overall, EAR is a systematic, flexible, and highly practical research methodology that demonstrates strong effectiveness. It serves as an important tool for fostering innovation in education, social sciences, and management systems.

CONCLUSION

Exploratory Action Research (EAR) is one of the most effective approaches in modern scientific research paradigms, integrating practical experience with theoretical knowledge. Its main value lies in addressing real-world problems not only through theoretical explanation but through a dynamic system of step-by-step practical interventions. Therefore, EAR shifts scientific inquiry from static analysis to an action-based research model.

The findings show that EAR plays a significant role in developing reflective thinking. Researchers and practitioners continuously analyze their actions at each stage, which not only leads to problem-solving but also enhances their professional competencies. This transforms scientific inquiry into a continuous development cycle rather than a one-time outcome.

EAR is particularly effective in education. Teachers using this approach analyze their teaching processes in real contexts, identify problems, and immediately test practical solutions. As a result, the learning process becomes more flexible, interactive, and learner-centered, improving students’ critical thinking and analytical skills.

Additionally, EAR can be widely applied in social, economic, and management fields, as it enables rapid optimization of decision-making based on real data. Each cycle’s results serve as a foundation for the next, ensuring continuous system improvement.

Another key feature of EAR is its flexibility and iterative nature. Unlike traditional linear research, EAR allows continuous revision and modification of each stage, improving adaptability to real conditions and reducing potential errors.

In conclusion, Exploratory Action Research is a methodological approach that bridges the gap between theory and practice, promotes innovative thinking, and ensures effective decision-making. It plays a crucial role in improving the quality of scientific research, modernizing education systems, and driving innovation across various sectors.

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