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ACTION RESEARCH IN SCHOOL: OPPORTUNITIES AND PERSPECTIVES OF CONDUCTING ¹

Educational process is characterized by constant changing, redefining, innovating, and flexibility. The work of school 'actors' is directed towards students and their achievements. The vocation of a teacher, although not valued enough, is of great significance since a teacher is the model and support in the lives of students. He is the one that recognizes, encourages, directs and nurtures student's dispositions and shapes them into achievements. In order for school to be of high-quality, it has to be permeated with actions that have definite outcomes, on which changes will be based, in teaching, as well as in entire school.

In order for school to be action competent, it cannot rely on external initiators of changes, or the results of other researchers. According to all the achievements that science has reached, all the results of research conducted on representative samples and in accordance with its own needs, it has to recognize critical areas and work with action, encourage changes on the basis of reactions and reflections. Action research is a postulate of changes and improvement of the quality of educational process. With cooperation and professional development of employees, the leadership position of school is achieved.

¹ Note: The article is the result of work on the project "Pedagogical pluralism as the basis of the education strategy", number 179036 (2011-2018), which is financed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

Action-competent school

Striving towards the leadership's position of school requires action-competent individuals. Action-competent educators will be able to influence greater students and parents' satisfaction with school, and better educational achievement of students. Action competence implies self-awareness, realizing own mistakes, realizing reality, planning, acting, evaluating, reflectiveness, innovating. Action research is a method of encouraging and developing action competence.

It is wrong to force changes from the outside, since such an initiation often leads to teachers' resistance. Teachers, according to their own experience, need to explore what needs to be changed and why, but that requires a broad outlook on education and self-criticism.

Every successful organization is aware that it has to have a dedicated cadre that will encourage its development. In that way school has to have goals, dedication and purpose (Deal & Peterson, 2016). The goal of every school is to bring up and educate, and in that it must be dedicated. Its purpose is to achieve knowledge and develop skills and capabilities. School leaders should know that those who are satisfied with themselves and their job will contribute to school's successfulness. In order for school to become more successful and to be a place desirable to go to, not a place to which one has to go, each teacher has to give their best. Their work is measured through students' achievements.

The reform of the school system required bigger action competence of school 'actors'. At the beginning of regular implementation in schools, action research was often encouraged from 'the top', from education authorities, outside school. Later, with raising teachers' awareness, its implementation began 'underneath', within a school's collective (Bognar, 2006). The reforms in education are implemented by carrying out action research (Grundy, 1994). It is necessary to start actions with the view to innovating and speeding success, whether they come from outside or from school. Schools evaluated as unsuccessful require professional help outside the collective.

Action research is guided by critical paradigm and paradigm of understanding, not by paradigm of interpreting (Bandur & Maksimović, 2013). It implies knowing how things function, not only an explanation of what happens (Stringer, 2014). It is qualitative and quantitative, except that the emphasis is placed on descriptions,

understanding, not on facts that we presented quantitatively (Costello, 2003). Asking questions can lead to better understanding phenomena than simply giving answers (McNiff & Whitehead, 2005). Interpreting phenomena and processes' functioning is important, but more important is to understand their essence, why they happen and what we can do if they do not contribute to the successfulness of teaching. With critical approach and reflection, interfering factors are found that need to be eliminated and corrected in teaching. It is always necessary to start from current issues in school, and their diapason is broad: absence from school, relationship among students, teachers' relationship towards students, students' relationship towards teachers, teaching contents and methods of work, extracurricular activities, types of assessment, cooperation among teachers, inclusive education, discipline, parents' involvement in school life.

Principals give teams of people, whose task is to successfully fulfil their mission, the power of decision, that is, to organize and control activities, since 'the characteristic of contemporary life is the concentration of power in the hands of a group of people' (Stringer, 2014: 31). The enthusiasm of all the employees is triggered by team work of action-competent people. Action competence implies: ability to initiate changes, motivation for innovation and initiative, persistence, cooperation, team spirit, objectivity, self-criticism, ability of realizing problems, capability of planning, capability of evaluation, capability of evaluation, capability of critical consideration, flexibility, accepting constructive advice, changing our own implicit theories by which we are guided in work.

Action research stems from the evaluation process of the entire school, which can be external and internal. Elliott (1993) cites that the initiators of research are principals. The aim of research is to comprehend how the system functions. The purpose of research is an organizational reform. Evaluation standards are the goals that are desired, which are agreed upon by consensus and with which all school 'actors' are acquainted. The results of evaluation lead to the creation of development plan of a facility. Carrying out an evaluation process is followed by periodic reviews of school functioning.

Teachers in Serbia evaluated their action competence. It was indicated that action research is insufficiently represented in practice. Teachers do not know whether they

are action competent enough, but they have positive attitudes towards action research. What teachers lack is autonomy and flexibility (Maksimović, 2017).

Stages and characteristics of action research in school

Each research requires a good realization plan. Participants of action research can be all the participants of educational process: students, teachers, parents, principals, professional associates, assistants, external associates. Identifying problems is a starting point of any change, and in order for that to happen, self-awareness, objectivity and critical consideration are necessary. When a problem is identified, action is being planned. Before any action happens in school, it is necessary to gather teams and distribute roles. In action research anyone can be both a researcher and a participant. Costello (2003) cites the significance of researchers' openness and focus on the goal, without prejudice and criticism, as well as respecting the ethics of research, the secrecy of data and the knowledge of participants of research that research will be conducted. With action, teachers improve faith in their professionalism.

Action research implies joint work of more people, competent enough to recognize problems in practice and to introduce changes, gather data on the application of innovation, process obtained data and evaluate them, conduct actions in accordance with the results, they are reflective, and they consider what they have reached with joint work. Action research implies empowering participants, cooperation, acquiring knowledge and changes in educational process (Ferrance, 2000). Action research is based on reflection and action. Reflection implies researcher's awareness of what action research is, and what its advantages are, considering the place of work and problems that often happen, the selection of a burning issue on which it will be worked for several weeks, or the selection of a small problem for beginner researchers, contemplating whether a teacher has to change their way of interaction with people in order for research to be conducted. Once the problem is singled out from the pile of problems, action implies starting discussion with colleagues about the ways of solving the problem, disassembling problems into constituents, overviewing the context in which it appears, developing strategies, their implementation and evaluation (Stringer, 2014).

The matrix of action research consists of a series of elements: why it is being researched, that is, what characterizes research; a built outline, that is, plan of the realization of the activity; the analysis of data and communicating the obtained results (Maksimović, 2012). Although planned in advance, action research does not imply adherence to the plan, but represents the draft only, which can vary as necessary. The realization of actions implies the following: Plan 1, acting, observing, reflection; Plan 2, acting, observing, reflection; Plan 3... (Costello, 2003). Action research has a spiral course and therefore it 'is never fully finished' (Bandur & Maksimović, 2013:49). This is not to say that the initial plan will not be realized, but that if necessary, one can depart from the planned since the practice has proven it necessary.

Before there is the need for actions, teachers conduct some of their implicit theories in managing class. A teacher should test their theories in action research, to create new or modify the existing ones and this is why action research exists. By confronting the changes that they encounter with actions, if teachers are objective enough, new approaches in work are created and thus work is improved (Maksimović & Cenić, 2013).

'Changing of the situation of research' happens in action research (Halimi, 2005:278). A researcher does not know in advance what the results of research will be like. This does not mean that it is not possible to set hypotheses what might happen and what the results might be. The starting base in research is certainly a problem which exists in practice, and which one wants to solve, or introducing something which has not been there before, with the aim of increasing successfulness. Such hypotheses are not relevant, since a researcher in action can change them, and that is expected from him. A researcher makes a draft, and it is susceptible to corrections.

Action researcher can be individual, cooperative, at the level of the entire school and local or district (Ferrance, 2000; Lesha, 2014; Mertler, 2008). An individual conducting actions refers to a particular teacher who wants to innovate their work, is self-critical enough and aspires towards creating conditions that will lead to students' better achievements. Cooperative action work implies cooperation of several teachers, it takes place in several classes. Action research at the level of the entire school implies overall checking of the quality of work. Local or district research encompasses several schools at the level of local community, or a district and its aim is to improve the school system in the region.

The methods with which data can be gathered can be manifold, in order to achieve objectivity of results' assessment. Some of the methods are: interviews, diaries, students and teachers' portfolio, pictures, audio and video records, questionnaires, surveys, assessment scales, focus groups, anecdotal notes, case studies (Ferrance, 2000).

The problematics we explore decides what method we will choose. Evaluation of action is possible to conduct in more ways. Group discussions, supervision, feedback, formative evaluation, are some of the aspects of evaluation (Lasha, 2014). Evaluation should not happen at the end of all actions, but in the course of their conducting as well.

Through various statistical procedures we come to data which are necessary to interpret. Plenty of computer softwares, among which are SPSS and SYSTAT, enable the data analysis (Mertler, 2008). Five methods of data processing are: individual, for each person; group; according to categories, problems; processing according to research tasks, where data from different sources (interview, questionnaire, observing) are processed together; and the fifth method is processing according to the instruments of research, where the results of each instrument used in research are presented (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). The key role is here taken by computer science teachers, and the computer literacy of other teachers is an important factor of successful data processing. When it comes to evaluation of data, aside from quantitative, qualitative analysis is necessary. Qualitative analysis requires description of what we discovered with this research.

Action research is conducted even when there is not an obvious problem. This does not mean that everything is perfect, and it is self-evaluation and evaluation of others that are key in order for teachers to check the efficiency of their work.

Action researchers can also be students, under the mentorship of teachers. A teacher helps students discover a problem and together with them makes the plan of activity how to solve a problem and how to evaluate results. Topics can be related to extracurricular context (Bognar, 2009a). In that way, relationships student-teacher and student-student, student-parent, teacher-parent, are improved. Huxtable (2011) indicates the significance of research- and methodological literacy and encouraging creativity with which the sense of usefulness is created and experience is gained.

Methodology of action research in school

The pluralism of methods enables us to observe states in practice more objectively and diversely. What method we will use in conducting research in school depends on the very problematics that we have identified and the activity that we have chosen in order to implement changes into the teaching process.

Strategies in the realization of research are triangulation (using more methods, more observers of the research or critical friends, qualitative and quantitative analysis), enough time to implement change, to start working and show the results, ability of teachers to question the existing theories which dominated, plenty of instruments with which the data will be gathered (Costello, 2003). The success of the implementation of innovations in the teaching process does not happen in the end (Elliott, 1933), when the action plan with the report has been made, but it happens in the course of the research. Once the report of the research has been made, it is implied that the innovation has already been successfully implemented.

The very beginning of the action refers to thorough literature research which deals with certain issues, as well as with every action research. This enables better insight into the form of the action plan itself. The next step is a minute making of the plan: in what way the data will be gathered, how they will be processed, how we will present the results, what the form of the report on conducted research will be like. When we mark a problem, we select particular participants of research, we select activities that we realize through certain methods and instruments. The information can be gathered from different sources. These are interviews, questionnaires, observing, tests made by teachers, standardized tests, existing artefacts such as different types of documentation, reports, the examples of students' works, portfolio. These are qualitative data that we gather, and the way of their recording is, besides from written clues, a more objective recording, audio-video recording. Quantitative data require detailed statistical processing (Stringer, 2007).

It is necessary to wisely use time. Better construction of the instruments of research enables more versatile and credible data that we gather. This makes the research 'more rigorous', and thus, the results that we obtain, our conclusions and suggestions will be more significant (Costello, 2003:57). Prior to gathering data, each researcher should ask themselves the following questions: What are the objectives of my

research?; What am I focused on?; What is the evidence necessary in order for me to reach my objectives?; What is realistic and feasible?; How will I film, save the data? (Koshy, 2005:85-86). Prior to conducting actions, it is necessary to gather information so as we could know what activities are adequate for certain problematics. When we have realized an activity, we also have to gather feedback, to evaluate the achieved. Sources of information, techniques and instrumentarium used are versatile, and what will be selected depends on creativity and problematics. In the school environment, the most adequate are: observing with anticipation, review of documentation and portfolios, interviewing, surveying, focus groups, case studies, questionnaires, diaries, check lists, photographs, audio and video materials, analysis of different types of documents, tests, role play, sociometry (Bandur & Potkonjak, 1999; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007; Koshy, 2005; Kundačina & Bandur, 2004; Maksimović, 2012; McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead, 1996). Content analysis is a method that enables research and gathering data from multiple sources, which are in the form of documents. These are books of educational work and the other pedagogical documentation, but expert literature as well. Questionnaires and surveys enable gathering of data that can be our starting base, since we explore attitudes on specific problematics. Furthermore, they can be a starting base for designing an individual interview. In the survey, close or open questions can be represented. Surveys and questionnaires encourage contemplating about certain topics, and initiate interest for correct answers. The method of question construction is very important. Interviews enable a direct link between respondents and examiners. This enables giving more honest, or on the other hand, less honest answers. It is desirable to record the very course of an interview. Questions in an interview should be well thought out in advance, but new ideas might emerge during the interview. Conducting an interview requires possessing skills of active listening and asking questions. The place of conducting the interview is also important. Interviewing is conducted within focus groups that meet for discussions on certain problematics and experiences. Photographs and video recordings enable more objective observing of the situation, since everything is recorded, so that the possibility an observer misses something is reduced. They inspire participants of research to recall what happened in the given situations. The most important thing is to get participants' consent, since otherwise the rules of ethics are violated. Check lists are useful because they serve as reminders

what needs to be done, observed, evaluated, or what has been done in practice. Observing with participation must be well designed. Its time period should allow for phenomena and processes to be objectively overviewed. While a teacher as a researcher observes students, a critical friend observes both students and teachers. When observing, it is important to focus on the particular activity for more complete overviewing, and the number of hours of observing depends on the context. What is most commonly observed is reactions and interactions of students. Sociometry can lead to knowledge on the functioning of mutual relationships in small groups. It is unavoidable to keep a research diary. It contains observations on what has happened and how we and others felt about it, anecdotal notes, short notes and theses from which ideas stem. The diary should be kept regularly, not only during the conducting of actions. Diaries can be individual and collaborative. Students should be encouraged to keep their own diaries on what happens in the course of conducting actions. Case studies imply focusing attention on the particular case, the entity. Role plays enable changing positions of participants of educational process and overviewing phenomena from different perspective (Ibid).

When we have conducted all the actions, gathered data, evaluated them, reached conclusions, written the report, overlooked all the interfering elements and all the positive that we have reached, we assess creating an action plan whose goal is a long-term application with constant evaluations and modifications as necessary, that is, one strategy of improving the quality of school's work. 'An action plan is an action part of action research' (Mertler, 2008:190). The making of an action plan requires reflection of a researcher and asking questions whether the research was conducted in an adequate way or it is necessary to implement some changes the next time, that is, what methods, techniques and instruments are the most adequate for the given problem.

Classroom as the center of action and reaction

Action research implies students' participation as well. A classroom is a place of discovery, changing, action and reaction. Research does not begin and end in a classroom. When the action plan is made, its realization takes place in a central place of learning, classroom. Students' motivation for implementing innovations is of great

significance for the innovation of teaching and school. In order for them to be encouraged to change their routines, they have to build a relationship of trust with school 'actors' at all levels, from principals to assistant workers. Deal and Peterson (2016) indicate the significance of cooperation through programs 'Caring adults' whose foundation is for a student to feel accepted. School has to be a place that is pleasant and where there is understanding of other people. This is achieved when each school 'actor' dedicates enough attention to a student to whom it is necessary, but also to all students equally.

A longer time period for conducting action gives room for improving relationships between participants of the research, and most importantly, between teachers and students (Costello, 2003). It is assumed that their relationship is the relationship of trust and cooperation, but it does not always have to be like that. Perhaps this is precisely the problem that needs to be overcome.

Action research is conducted with students and not on students. It enables teachers to really improve their practice, to introduce change, to realize what changes can bring. Each research requires a plan, but also tangible evidence of realized activities on the basis of which reflection is achieved. By using computer technologies in conducting actions, tangible evidence is obtained, and teachers themselves can realize where they make mistakes, and what is positive about their work. Video evidence enables teachers to watch all students, since it is often impossible to do that in class (Bognar, 2004).

In the classroom, active participants of action research are teachers and students (Bognar, 2009a; Kundačina & Bandur, 2004; Maksimović, 2012). Other teachers, expert associates, principals, experts in the field of education may appear in the role of an observer, critical friend.

The existence of a critical friend is very important in conducting changes. Their role is to constructively suggest what is of good quality and efficient, and what needs to be corrected. They are observers of introducing innovation. Teachers often do not realize mistakes that they make, so the role of a critical friend is inasmuch more significant (Bognar, 2004). Critical friends should be looked upon as associates whose goal is to objectively enlighten procedures for teachers, guides of research in the classroom, and to help find the best solution. Their relationship should be a relationship of understanding and heartiness (McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead, 1996). The existence of

a greater number of critical friends who can be teachers, expert associates, principals, is more advantageous since objectivity is then better. It is important that critical friends have enough experience in practice, so that they could assess and direct their colleague to the right way.

The evaluation of introducing innovations is not only conducted by teachers and critical friends, but by students as 'actors' of action as well. After realization of actions, students should assess introducing innovation through surveys, questionnaires or orally. In order for actions to be successful, and students encouraged to be creative, fear has to be eradicated, and that role is taken over by a teacher, who builds a positive social and emotional climate in the class. Students may be insufficiently motivated in the beginning, but if action is really a desirable innovation, motivation will grow (Bognar, 2004).

All the actions conducted have the basis of improving the quality of teaching process. The results should be molded into teaching strategies that provide a high level of students' educational achievement, since that is the basic task of school.

Postulates of leadership, cooperation and starting changes in school

In order to become leaders, participants in educational process should be action motivated initiators of innovations. Action research is innovation, but not all innovations are action research. Action research is controlled innovation (Maksimović, 2012:45). Leadership in education is innovation of future. Educated leaders create new leaders. In order for school 'actors' to be leaders and school an example for other people, it is necessary to be guided by humane principles in conducting actions.

Humanistic orientation in research requires humane approach to phenomena and individuals. Humanistic approach is characterized by 'being interested in human', which requires research of individuals within social groups which implies new methodology that deals with human existence. Changes appear with active work on introducing changes, not only with their description (Halimi, 2005), that are not only at the level of abstract but they are particular. Humanistic-oriented school requires changes in the relationships of student-teacher, cooperation at all levels, action for the freedom of thought, respect for rights, changes in the ways of cognition in the

teaching process (Stanisavljević Petrović, Cvetković & Jovanović, 2012), and that relationship directly changes in action research.

School leadership must be useful, directed towards values, and promote active method of learning. It must be based on efficient strategies. School leaders can be all school 'actors'. School is a community of learning guided by leaders. School and school leadership develop with experimental and innovative pedagogical methodology. (Harris et al., 2003). Leadership is under supervision of principals who, by listening to the state in their school, can contribute to directing school climate and organization. Instructive leadership of principals reflects in the direct instructions to which everybody abides, and transformative leadership of principals enables guiding teachers and encouraging their and school's transformation through improving. A principal is no longer an authority, but a friend and associate who guides the employees in the direction of reaching a goal (Hallinger, 2003).

In order to provide a leader role of school, cooperation of professional researchers and theorists with schools is necessary. School principals must be open to cooperation. In action research, knowledge can be created, but it can be used as well. Leadership in education is enlarging with cooperation of experts in the field of education and practitioners in school. Knowledge is directly created in practice, new theories are formulated and the existing are being tested. 'Practice develops theory and theory develops practice' (Robertson, 2000: 309).

Action research should lead to particular changes in school, teaching. It requires changing of values which have dominated up to then. Acquiring new values should be accepted by the entire school collective, so that the values could survive and contribute to improving the quality of work. Pedagogues are the initiators of nurturing certain values in the collective (Bognar, 2009b). They are the guides and initiators of action research (Kundačina & Bandur, 2004). Principals also have a major role in school's innovation. Skills that they need to possess are: setting clear goals, making action plans, managing time, observing skills, active listening, reflectiveness and criticism, giving understandable feedback on the results of evaluation (Robertson, 2000). Pedagogues and psychologists, with their consulting work, and in cooperation with principals as supervisors, provide professional help to teachers who would like to be researchers, influence the nurture of emancipatory culture which should dominate

in the collective, to which everybody abides, and which should be questioned from time to time with new actions.

Cooperation in action research is based on work principles such as: communication, interpersonal relationships, participation, involving other extracurricular 'actors' (Springer, 2014). The culture of learning is characterized by the existence of network of cooperation of teachers, expert associates and principles, expert debates and the support of local community. Improving one school is not enough, it is necessary to spread the examples of good practice (Bognar, 2009b). The open critical discourse leads to rational consensus on pedagogical practice that is founded on democratic values, freedom, equality and justice (Elliott, 1993:180). Two-way communication and coordination are the basis of good results. Communication should be oral, at organized meetings, and written, in the form of notes and reminders. Often, there is a 'toxic' climate in school, where only things that need to be changed are emphasized, but nobody works on changes. Each school needs a 'hero' with élan and enthusiasm, who will encourage changes (Deal & Peterson, 2016). If there are more such 'heroes', the success of school is bigger. The communication circle should encompass all the employees. Each should know what is happening in school and what is supposed to happen. School's success should be displayed publicly, shared with colleagues within the collective. Team work encourages action spirit, but it requires the ability of an individual to work as a team. According to Elliott (1993), teachers cannot test their professionalism unless they work as a team. Kundačina & Bandur (2004) emphasize equality of the participants of research, as well as the absence of secrets, feedback available to everyone, work in stages so that research would be more successful. The seriousness of approach to research and revealing causes of some problems, but also an attempt to shed light on them, contribute to greater engagement of students and parents, who, very often, look upon research with distrust, even though they and their children participate in it. The very fact that nobody works under the pressure and that students are informed why we want to research something, liberates students and parents to access the research, since the objective is everyone's wellbeing.

Research and developing theory in action research contribute to professional development of teachers. Action research is conducted with the aim of exploring practice, introducing innovation, but also with the emphasis on teacher's emancipation (Robertson, 2000). Principles of action research are autonomy and

responsibility (Grundy, 1994). Emancipation implies teacher's awareness that practice should be changed, but that they should also change themselves through professional development. The autonomy of teachers is developed with professional improvement and testing their competence in activities. In that way, initiativeness is encouraged that transfers to students, which leads to the increasing in efficiency of the school itself. Vujisić Živković (2007) emphasizes the significance of professionalization of teacher's calling, changes in the initial education of teachers, innovative methodology and research techniques and instruments. A teacher should be a researcher, but they should be enabled for that.

A more-detailed acquainting of future teachers with the significance of action research and great enthusiasm of all the participants in educational process are a foundation of innovation with the aim of increasing successfulness (Bognar, 2006). With adequate initial education, research spirit can be encouraged. Keeping one's own portfolio, vocational practice in schools during studies, methodological education that enables teachers and expert associates to independently make a draft of research and make instrumentarium with which a certain problem will be explored, knowing statistics so that the results of research can be statistically processed (Maksimović & Osmanović, 2016), are some of the assumptions of future action researchers in schools.

Concluding considerations

As long as enthusiasm and autonomy dominate in school, changes can be encouraged and introduced, which will contribute to better achievement of students. Professional development requires constant action, improving, and critical consideration. Good school organization stems from a principal as a supervisor who generates teachers' work in cooperation with expert associates as the creators of a school climate. If there is a positive climate in school, it will transfer to students and their achievements. A leadership role of school reflects in encouraging students to have achievements in accordance with their capabilities, to develop and prepare for life.

Action research contributes to raising awareness of the importance of professional skills and roles in education, increasing teachers' reflectiveness, self-confidence and faith in self, broadening horizons about society and education, viewing problems that

appear in practice, finding link between theory and practice through testing (Maksimović, 2012). Involving students in action research contributes to encouraging creativity, equal rights, respecting opinion and students' satisfaction with school. With constant evaluation and self-evaluation, we know who we are and where we want to be, and pluralism of methods, techniques and instruments enable us that. By developing action competence, we contribute to ourselves and the society we live in.

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Abstract

The concept of lifelong learning is a concept of contemporary society. Action research is the basis of the innovation of education. The objective of this paper is to portray the basic postulates on which action research in school is based. Action activity changes the role of a teacher and students and reveals new horizons. The process of introducing new methods of work and changing traditional theories and practices in education is a long-term one, and requires an in-depth planning and a certain time period of implementation. Through permanent improving and critical consideration of educational practice, the enlightening school 'actors' and improving education are achieved. This paper portrays the significance of action research in the school context. The school's development is ensured with continuous evaluation and self-evaluation. School organization can be altered through certain stages in the realization of an action plan and with the use of adequate methodology of research.

Strategies that contribute to school leadership are created with mutual work of school 'actors'.

Key words: Action research, methodology, leadership, cooperation, changes, school.