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ACTION RESEARCH IN TEACHER EDUCATION: ENHANCING REFLECTIVE PRACTICE, PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE, AND EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION

Maia BOROZAN,
„Ion Creanga” State Pedagogical University from Chisinau

Tatiana BUSHNAQ,
Jordan

Lilia ȚURCAN,
„Ion Creanga” State Pedagogical University from Chisinau

This article explores the transformative role of pedagogical action research (PedAR) in teacher education, emphasizing its dual function as a tool for initial preparation and continuous professional development. Drawing on international scholarship and empirical evidence, it demonstrates how PedAR fosters critical reflection, strengthens professional autonomy, and enhances pedagogical competencies. By enabling teachers to address authentic classroom challenges, PedAR promotes collaboration, evidence-informed decision-making, and innovative teaching practices. Research findings indicate its positive impact on teaching quality, student learning outcomes, and professional confidence, while also advancing inclusive and context-responsive education. Furthermore, PedAR supports the creation of professional learning communities and bridges the persistent gap between theory and practice. Acknowledging challenges of implementation, such as fragmented curricula, limited mentorship, and resource constraints, this article proposes a strategic framework for systematically embedding PedAR in teacher education. The framework integrates curriculum design, mentorship structures, collaborative networks, and institutional policy, offering a practical roadmap to cultivate reflective, competent, and innovative educators prepared to meet contemporary educational demands.

Keywords: *pedagogical action research, teacher education, reflective practice, collaboration, professional competencies, professional development, educational innovation.*

CERCETAREA PEDAGOGICĂ ACȚIONALĂ ÎN FORMAREA CADRELOR DIDACTICE: DEZVOLTAREA PRACTICII REFLEXIVE, A COMPETENȚEI PROFESIONALE ȘI A INOVAȚIEI EDUCAȚIONALE

Articolul examinează rolul transformativ al cercetării pedagogice acționale (CPA) în formarea cadrelor didactice, subliniind funcția sa dublă de instrument pentru pregătirea inițială și pentru dezvoltarea profesională continuă. Valorificând literatura de specialitate internațională și evidențele empirice, se demonstrează modul în care CPA stimulează reflecția critică, consolidează autonomia profesională și dezvoltă competențele pedagogice. Prin oferirea de soluții la provocările autentice ale practicii didactice, CPA favorizează colaborarea, deciziile informate pe baza cercetării și inovarea în procesul de predare. Rezultatele cercetărilor evidențiază impactul pozitiv asupra calității activității didactice, asupra rezultatelor învățării elevilor/sudenților și asupra încrederii profesionale, contribuind totodată la promovarea unei educații incluzive și adaptate contextului. Mai mult, CPA sprijină constituirea comunităților de învățare profesională și atenuează decalajul persistent dintre teorie și practică. Recunoscând provocările implementării – precum fragmentarea curriculară, insuficiența mentoratului și constrângerile de resurse – articolul propune un cadru strategic pentru integrarea sistematică a CPA în formarea cadrelor didactice. Acest cadru integrează designul curricular, structurile de mentorat, rețelele colaborative și politica instituțională, configurând un traseu strategic pentru formarea unor cadre didactice reflexive, competente și inovatoare, capabile să răspundă în mod pertinent și adaptativ exigențelor educaționale contemporane.

Cuvinte-cheie: *cercetarea pedagogică acțională, formarea cadrelor didactice, practică reflexivă, colaborare, competențe profesionale, dezvoltare profesională, inovație educațională.*

Introduction

Contemporary teacher education faces complex challenges that arise from the effort to balance theoretical knowledge with the immediacy of classroom practice, while at the same time fostering educators who are reflective, innovative, and capable of adapting to shifting educational contexts. Rooted in the work of Kurt Lewin (1946) and later conceptualized in educational contexts by Schön (1983) through the notion of the reflective practitioner, and by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) with their emphasis on participatory and critical practice, action research (AR) has developed into a framework that interlaces systematic inquiry with professional action, enabling teachers to investigate their own practice while simultaneously transforming the conditions in which that practice is situated [36; 25; 35]. Within teacher education, this orientation has evolved into *Pedagogical Action Research*, a particular application of AR that positions teachers as reflective practitioners who construct knowledge in and through their own professional activity. While much of the literature continues to employ the general term AR, the present discussion adopts the designation *Pedagogical Action Research* (PedAR) in order to highlight its specific concern with pedagogy, professional learning, and the ongoing development of educators, while acknowledging that the two terms often intersect in educational discourse.

The central premise of AR is that teachers act as agents of change who generate practical knowledge that shapes their teaching while also influencing the wider educational environment [4]. Research indicates that engagement in PedAR *enhances professional competencies, encourages sustained critical reflection, nurtures collaboration and innovation, and contributes to the development of inclusive practices*. At the same time, it creates conditions for the integration of 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and self-directed learning [5; 9; 37; 28].

International organizations, including UNESCO, OECD, and the European Commission, recognize AR as a key mechanism for professional growth and educational improvement, highlighting its role in enhancing *teacher autonomy, reflective practice, and educational innovation* [34; 40; 17]. Despite its documented benefits, the successful integration of PedAR requires systematic curricular support, mentorship, and collaboration between universities and schools, ensuring that educators can apply the methodology effectively and sustainably.

This article synthesizes theoretical insights and empirical findings on PedAR, emphasizing its role in teacher professionalization, enhancement of teaching quality, and advancement of educational innovation. By examining both initial teacher training and continuous professional development, the discussion highlights the potential of PedAR to cultivate reflective, competent, and resilient educators capable of addressing contemporary challenges in diverse educational contexts.

Research Methodology

The article employs a comprehensive literature review and integrative synthesis, combining theoretical and empirical perspectives on PedAR in teacher education. The review draws on peer-reviewed studies, policy documents, meta-analyses, and reports from organizations such as UNESCO, OECD, and the European Commission. By examining diverse contexts, including initial teacher training and continuous professional development, the article identifies common themes, outcomes, and challenges associated with PedAR.

Contemporary Challenges of Universities in the Context of Educational Innovation

Contemporary universities confront multifaceted and interdependent challenges arising from the imperative to achieve excellence in teaching and learning while responding to increasingly diverse and mobile student populations. These dynamics necessitate adaptive curricular and pedagogical strategies and stimulate ongoing inquiry into innovative approaches to curriculum design, research, and community engagement, both locally and globally [3].

The quality and prestige of higher education institutions are closely tied to the professional development of their academic staff. This development encompasses knowledge creation, the systematic integration of research into teaching and scholarly activities, recognition through meaningful scholarly contributions, and

the strategic strengthening of institutional competitiveness. Universities fulfill core functions that define their academic identity: *promoting innovation through rigorous scientific inquiry, facilitating the transmission of culture and knowledge across both traditional and digital platforms, and providing comprehensive training that nurtures the next generation of research-oriented educators* [3].

Within this framework, the professionalization of didactic research assumes significant theoretical and practical relevance. PedAR operates not merely as a methodological instrument but as a conceptually informed framework for reflective practice, linking theoretical insights with the lived realities of classroom contexts. By positioning educators as active producers of knowledge, PedAR fosters pedagogical innovation, reinforces the integration of research and teaching, and supports sustainable enhancements in educational practice. Accordingly, PedAR contributes not only to the development of teaching quality but also to the broader socio-cultural and economic missions of higher education [13].

A review of the literature highlights four principal dimensions through which PedAR exerts its influence:

*1. Development of Professional Competencies***.** PedAR cultivates both metacognitive and methodological skills by prompting educators to critically interrogate their own practice and anchor decisions in empirical evidence. Schön (1983) underscores that reflective practitioners refine competencies through ongoing analysis of their actions, a position echoed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), who stress PedAR's capacity to enable educators to both understand and transform their professional practice.

*2. Improvement of Professional Attitudes***.** Engagement in PedAR fosters reflective, critical, and collaborative orientations that nurture openness toward pedagogical innovation. Elliott (1991) emphasizes that PedAR not only facilitates the resolution of practical educational problems but also consolidates the professional dispositions required for adaptive practice and effective collaboration.

*3. Innovation in Teaching Strategies***.** By providing a structured, inquiry-based framework, PedAR supports the design of empirically grounded and contextually relevant pedagogical interventions. As Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018) argue, the approach stimulates experimentation with innovative strategies, thereby strengthening their transferability and classroom applicability.

4. Enhancement of Educational Effectiveness. PedAR contributes to the advancement of student learning outcomes and the realization of broader educational goals. As reiterated by Schön (1983), Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), Elliott (1991), and Cohen et al. (2018), the iterative cycle of reflection, action, and validation underpins sustainable and cumulative improvements in teaching practice.

Pedagogical Action Research in Initial Teacher Education: Comprehensive Synthesis

Pedagogical Action research (PedAR) is widely recognized as a fundamental tool in initial teacher education, providing student-teachers with a structured framework to critically reflect on their practices and consolidate professional experience. Phillips and Carr (2010) emphasize that Action Research (AR) in teacher education is not designed to train student-teachers as academic researchers, but rather to cultivate autonomous, reflective practitioners. They conceptualize AR as a collaborative and critical process that enables student-teachers to iteratively develop practice-based knowledge, strengthen professional identity, and integrate the dual roles of educator and practitioner–researcher within a trajectory of continuous pedagogical improvement. Similarly, Ulvik, Riese, and Roness (2018) highlight that student-teachers employ theory to critically reflect on classroom realities, underscoring the central role of interplay between academic knowledge and professional practice in shaping professional identity.

Numerous international studies underscore the significance of PedAR in initial teacher education, highlighting its role as a powerful approach to promote reflective practice, professional growth, and collaborative inquiry among educators, enabling them to address authentic classroom challenges while fostering continuous professional development and innovative teaching strategies [5]. Ulvik and Riese (2016) emphasize its contribution to critical reflection and problem-solving in real-world contexts, while Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) underline its capacity to generate practice-based knowledge and bridge theory with application. Empirical evidence further demonstrates that AR provides teachers with a systematic, collaborative, and participatory process for addressing educational challenges [25; 22; 31, 2011). Its growing adoption in teacher education has stimulated interest in evaluating its pedagogical effectiveness, while also support-

ing professional development across educational levels by linking differentiated instruction, data-informed decision-making, and student progress monitoring [15; 23].

Flores (2018) conceptualizes AR as a formative framework equipping teachers to navigate the complexities of contemporary educational contexts. In parallel, UNESCO (2017) and the OECD (2020) frame AR as a transformative model of professional development, firmly grounded in contextualized classroom inquiry, reflective practice, and collaborative innovation. Building on this, Ceylan and Çomoğlu (2022), through a systematic review of twenty empirical studies employing hybrid thematic analysis, delineated both the opportunities and constraints associated with PedAR. Complementing this meta-analytical perspective, Ulvik et al. (2018) utilized qualitative case studies, drawing on interviews, reflective journals, and classroom observations, to investigate how student-teachers incorporate PedAR into their professional trajectories. Further, Ginsberg (2023) evidenced that PedAR nurtures a critical and investigative stance, enabling student-teachers to mediate between theoretical constructs and practical exigencies. Most recently, Kerimoğlu and Altun (2024) implemented a mixed-methods design that integrated pre- and post-intervention assessments with qualitative instruments, thereby capturing not only measurable performance gains but also the reflective dimensions of professional growth.

Empirical studies underscore the tangible impact of Action Research within teacher education. Kerimoğlu and Altun (2024), for instance, conducted an experimental study in Turkey with thirty-seven early childhood education students, demonstrating that an AR module designed according to Backward Design principles yielded significant gains in both curricular knowledge and task-related performance. Similarly, Hagevik, Aydeniz, and Rowell (2012), in their year-long study with twenty preservice middle school teachers, employed collaborative discussions, written assignments, presentations, and follow-up surveys to reveal how AR functions as a structured framework for inquiry, fostering systematic reflection on instructional change and stimulating critical engagement within collaborative contexts. Their findings indicate that sustained engagement in AR not only deepens critical reflection on teaching and learning but also advances professional growth by strengthening the interplay of reflection, collaboration, and inquiry.

Flornes (2007) identifies four fundamental dimensions of the value of AR in initial teacher education:

1. *Personal Contribution to Research* – AR enables prospective teachers to continuously evaluate and improve their practice through reflection and self-assessment.
2. *Development of Competence and Self-Confidence* – Drawing on Personal Construct and Positive Psychology, reflection on personal resources and limitations fosters self-confidence and strengthens professional identity.
3. *Role of Research in Educational Relationships* – AR promotes empathetic and authentic communication, cultivating trust and respect among teachers, mentors, and students.
4. *Impact on Emerging Teaching Practices* – Tools such as Learning Conversation (LC) support reflexive and metacognitive pedagogy, fostering professional formation aligned with educators' values and beliefs.

Empirical evidence also indicates that AR increases awareness of personal strengths, decision-making autonomy, and the capacity to establish authentic educational relationships [19]. It equips teachers with technical competencies and subject-specific knowledge to effect positive change in classrooms, schools, and communities [24]. Its solution-oriented, practitioner-centered, and adaptable nature positions AR as a highly effective form of professional development with broad applicability in daily teaching practice.

Despite these benefits, the literature reports several challenges in implementing AR. Common constraints include *students' lack of experience, time limitations, overlapping research and assessment requirements, and the limitations of schools as research sites.* AR is sometimes perceived as an academic obligation of limited authenticity, which can reduce its continued use in professional practice [23]. Additionally, using AR as an assessment tool can shift focus from reflection to grading, while insufficient theoretical knowledge or practical experience may create confusion regarding research cycles and data collection [23]. An exploratory study conducted across three Dutch teacher education programs revealed that, although action research supports professional development and reflective practice, its curricular integration remains fragmented, as students and faculty recognized its value but encountered difficulties in completing the full

research cycle, particularly with regard to collaboration, the translation of theory into practice, and sustained critical reflection, thereby underscoring the necessity of a clear pedagogical framework, systematic integration, and comprehensive practitioner preparation [1].

Recent studies confirm that integrating pedagogical action research into university programs enhances *prospective teachers' reflexivity, autonomy, problem-solving skills, and professional identity* [30; 9]. Effective implementation requires enabling conditions, including sufficient time and resources, specialized mentoring, and collaboration between universities and schools. Compared with traditional teacher training, participatory AR emphasizes reflection, autonomy, and the integration of practical experience with educational theory. This learner-centered, inquiry-based approach situates teacher learning within authentic classroom contexts and prepares prospective teachers to navigate the complexities of contemporary education while supporting ongoing professional growth.

Pedagogical Action Research in Continuous Teacher Professional Development

In professional learning, teachers can employ structured inquiry to examine and enhance their educational practice. Action research (AR) is recognized in European policy documents as an effective approach for professional development, emphasizing ongoing reflection on teaching [17]. The OECD (2025) describes AR as an iterative, collaborative, teacher-led inquiry in which educators refine pedagogy based on classroom-generated data.

AR involves the systematic study of teaching through rigorous collection and analysis of classroom data [15]. Unlike externally led professional development, AR provides teachers with autonomy and professional agency [5]. It generates tacit knowledge that is context-specific and difficult to articulate verbally, supporting changes grounded in classroom realities [8]. Practice-oriented research and collaboration with experienced educators foster mutual learning and joint efforts to enhance educational practice [23]. The European Commission (2019) notes the role of AR in strengthening reflection, autonomy, and professional competencies; the OECD (2025) emphasizes adaptive, data-driven improvements; UNESCO (2021) reports enhanced pedagogical, digital, and leadership skills; and case studies in Guatemala [14] highlight improvements in instructional quality, classroom management, and student achievement.

Mitchell, Reilly, and Logue (2009) examined Collaborative Action Research (CAR) with early-career teachers, identifying multiple benefits. Participation in CAR enhances self-confidence and professional efficacy, supports classroom management of individual differences and behavioral challenges, and develops reflective skills, critical analysis, and self-assessment. CAR also fosters supportive networks among students, mentors, and faculty, strengthening professional relationships and facilitating mutual understanding. Engagement in CAR produces tangible improvements in addressing practical teaching problems, demonstrating its applied value.

Li, Bliss, Henderson, and Clark (2024) emphasize AR as a key mechanism for continuous professional development, particularly in the early stages of teaching. AR promotes systematic reflection and practice-based learning, enabling teachers to identify context-specific challenges and implement effective solutions. Collaborative engagement within AR enhances professional identity, self-confidence, and a supportive work environment, fostering resilience and a sense of belonging. By cultivating autonomy and a reflective mindset, AR contributes to teacher motivation, retention, and overall teaching quality, even in contexts of professional instability, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Codina and Robinson (2024) highlight AR's role in ongoing teacher development, noting its capacity to support reflective practice, inclusion, and responsiveness to students with special needs or disabilities. Grounded in a constructivist epistemology, AR encourages democratic participation and amplifies student voices, promoting inclusive practices tailored to the experiences and contexts of each school.

AR fosters professional reflexivity and autonomy, encouraging critical analysis of practice and experimentation with innovative solutions [34; 40]. Participation strengthens pedagogical competencies, including adaptability, reflective skills, and professional decision-making [2; 7]. By applying practical solutions to real classroom challenges, AR contributes to improved teaching quality and positive student outcomes, supporting sustainable educational change [7].

Moreover, AR facilitates collaboration among teachers, enabling the exchange of best practices and positioning educators as agents of change, thereby contributing to educational innovation [34; 17]. Meta-analyses and longitudinal studies provide empirical evidence of consistent positive effects on both teachers and students [2]. McNiff (2002) emphasizes that AR supports deep, responsible, and collaborative professional growth, encouraging reflection on values and beliefs and aligning teaching practice with personal and social commitments. International evidence confirms AR's effectiveness in continuous professional development, prompting UNESCO, OECD, and the European Commission to advocate for AR-based programs and supportive communities of practice as central mechanisms for educational improvement (40).

A Strategic Framework for Implementing Action Research in Teacher Education: From Theory to Sustainable Practice

While the theoretical and empirical case for Action Research (AR) in teacher education is compelling, its successful integration into training programs remains a significant challenge. Research consistently highlights barriers such as fragmented curricula, insufficient mentorship, time constraints, and a perception of AR as an academic exercise rather than a core professional practice. To bridge this gap between the recognized potential of AR and its effective, sustainable application, a deliberate and multi-faceted implementation strategy is required.

The following series of strategies, derived from the synthesis of the article's findings, provides a concrete roadmap for teacher educators, program designers, and policymakers. These strategies are designed to be implemented across both Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programs (Table 1).

Table 1. A Strategic Framework for Pedagogical Action Research: Rationale, Implementation, and Context

Strategy	Rationale	Implementation	Target Group/ Context
1. Scaffolded, Spiral Curriculum Integration	A one-off course or practicum often leads to superficial understanding of AR; a spiral curriculum embeds AR progressively.	**Year 1:** Introduce AR cycle (Plan-Act-Observe-Reflect), case studies, small observations. **Year 2:** Mini-inquiry project with data collection and preliminary analysis. **Year 3:** Full AR capstone linked to a genuine classroom challenge, mentor supervision.	**ITE**
2. Cultivating a Robust Triadic Mentorship Model	AR requires guidance bridging theory and practice; a single supervisor may not suffice.	Establish University Supervisor + School Mentor + Student Teacher triad. Regular meetings to co-plan AR focus, troubleshoot data collection, and interpret findings.	**ITE**
3. Developing Communities of AR Practice (CARPs)	AR can be isolating; collaboration fosters support, idea exchange, and critical dialogue.	**ITE:** Collaborative AR student groups to share challenges, data, reflections. **CPD:** School-based or cross-school communities of action research practice for common teaching issues (e.g., literacy, technology integration).	**ITE & CPD**
4. Explicit Focus on Knowledge Mobilization and Sharing	Demonstrates AR's value beyond academic assignments, reinforces teachers as knowledge creators.	Share findings via posters, TED-style presentations, digital repository contributions, and Action Briefs summarizing problem, intervention, and recommendations.	**ITE & CPD**

5. Leveraging Technology and Digital Tools	Mitigates time and isolation challenges, supports data collection and reflection.	Digital platforms (LMS, Teams, Slack) for discussion and resource sharing. Tools for surveys, Flipgrid, digital portfolios. Video recording for self-reflection and peer observation.	**ITE & CPD**
6. Aligning Assessment with Reflective Process Over Product	Focus on reflection and professional growth rather than solely the final product.	Formative assessments: journals, blogs, mentorship logs. Portfolio-based assessment including AR proposal, instruments, analysis, reflection, and final shared product. Triadic mentorship team provides holistic evaluation.	**ITE**
7. Policy and Institutional Advocacy for AR Time and Resources	Sustainable implementation requires institutional support and resources; without this, AR remains an add-on.	Dedicated non-instructional time in CPD (monthly inquiry days). Protected practicum time in ITE. Funding or PD credits for AR projects.	**ITE & CPD**

This strategic framework offers a concrete, multi-level plan for integrating PedAR into professional practice. By focusing on practical implementation, it responds to documented challenges of fragmentation, limited support, and perceived irrelevance. In doing so, it equips educators to become reflective, competent, and innovative professionals who use action research as a sustained tool for lifelong learning and educational improvement. This is the essential next step in realizing the full potential of action research in education.

Conclusion

Pedagogical Action Research (PedAR) represents a strategic and transformative approach to teacher development. It benefits both initial teacher education and ongoing professional development by fostering reflective practice, strengthening professional identity, and advancing evidence-informed decision-making. The methodology enhances pedagogical competence, improves instructional quality, and promotes collaboration, innovation, and inclusive practices across diverse educational contexts. International scholarship, together with policy frameworks from the OECD, UNESCO, and the European Commission, highlight PedAR’s capacity to cultivate resilient, autonomous, and effective educators.

Realizing this potential requires systematic adoption and structural support. Persistent barriers, such as time constraints, curricular fragmentation, and limited mentorship, underscore the need for a coherent and sustainable implementation strategy. To address these challenges, this article advances a strategic framework that embeds PedAR across the teacher professional lifecycle. The framework integrates scaffolded curricula, triadic mentorship, communities of practice, knowledge mobilization, technological affordances, process-oriented assessment, and institutional advocacy, thereby establishing a concrete roadmap for bridging the gap between PedAR’s theoretical promise and its sustained application in practice. By moving beyond advocacy to propose a structured plan for implementation, the framework positions PedAR as a foundation for continuous professional growth, equipping student teachers with the strategic tools to critically engage with their practice, maximize their classroom impact (student outcomes), contribute to knowledge production, and advance systemic reform.

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Data about authors:
Maia BOROZAN, Dr. Habil., full professor, „Ion Creanga” State Pedagogical University from Chisinau
ORCID: 0000-0003-2704-0304
E-mail: mayacojocari@yahoo.com

Tatiana BUSHNAQ, Dr., associate professor, independent researcher, Jordan
ORCID: 0009-0006-0345-3197
E-mail: tatianaleahu81@gmail.com

Lilia ȚURCAN, Dr., associate professor, „Ion Creanga" State Pedagogical University from Chisinau
ORCID: 0000-0001-9515-9900
E-mail: lilianaturcan25@yahoo.com

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