

Evaluation of Units Established for Curriculum Support: A Collaborative Action Research

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Abstract

The curriculum includes educational activities that determine the struggle for survival and sustainability of a university's departments. Approaches that seek more flexible solutions and have a post-positivist understanding are needed to manage this system. One of these approaches is action research, first used by Kurt Lewin (1946) to solve social problems. In this study, four offices were established to make the curriculum at a state university in Turkey more Support office operations, collaboration, consultation, continuous improvement cycle, and problem identification (needs assessment). This research, which lasted for two years, has provided important services to participants in addressing current difficulties in office operations.

Keywords: Curriculum, Collaborative action research, Higher education, Instruction

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Introduction

Curriculum refers to a comprehensive system of objectives, content, instructional activities and materials, measurement, and assessment elements to be achieved through university courses and educational activities. Curriculum studies and improving the quality of education in universities in Turkey are carried out with 'accreditation studies'. Accreditation of higher education institutions is a relatively new concept in Turkey (Özçiçek and Karaca, 2019). Efforts are underway to determine the curriculum goals of each department and to align instruction to those goals. At the international level, many projects and research are being carried out to solve problems on the sustainability of curriculum applications at universities (Babatunde and Ekundayo, 2019; Junyent and de Ciurana, 2008; Patterson et al., 2010; Stevenson and Robottom, 2013). This article aims to engage the entire departmental learning community in collaboration and deliberation to improve the quality of education by supporting curriculum implementation. It also focuses on providing a new model through action research and conducting collaborative action research (CAR) to solve problems. It is believed that this model can improve the quality of teaching and learning in all universities.

According to Taba (1962), the main elements of an educational programme are the objectives, the content, the learning and teaching process, and evaluation. As Varış (1994) stated, an educational programme covers all activities to achieve the goals set for the audience an educational institution wants to educate. Similarly, the language education programme is transferred to classes in three ways: forward-central-backward for objectives (Common European Framework). These approaches are related to which element is placed at the centre of the practices. Forward design keeps the content element; central design incorporates the process dimension in more methods and techniques. Backward design is an approach to learning outcomes and objectives (Richards, 2013). Regardless of all approaches, practices differ in implementation and problems in language learning always remain (Gursoy & Bag, 2019; Akyıldız & Çelik, 2020). Action research and collaborative problem-solving approaches are needed to create deep solutions to these problems.

This study reflects the efforts of a community providing preparatory services in foreign languages at a newly established college to improve the quality of education and the functioning of the offices established for this purpose. To this end, the Curriculum, Materials Development, Testing and Assessment Unit, and Professional Development Unit have been established in the institution and the relevant procedures put in place. The main purpose of all the offices is to support the learning process and improve the quality of education to achieve the objectives of the curriculum. However, it became apparent that the staff service was not being used efficiently and similar repetitions were frequently occurring after a while. As this is not a positivist view aimed at proving something, it was decided to follow an action research model based on equal participation, investigation, and interpretation of the process. Action research is a process that develops practices on its own, and since this change is based on its self-developing nature (Feldman, 1996), it has the power to change the work of office units by improving them.

Furthermore, action research is based on the tendency to constantly think and evolve and provides "a more systematic, rigorous and collaborative means of doing so" (Stevenson and Robottom, 2013:472). Thus, each participant seeks to improve their applications in the unique context they work while simultaneously interrogating and rebuilding information about their applications. Teachers working in offices first need to improve their practices to improve unit operation, and they need this input.

Upon examining the literature based on action research that prioritizes CAR, its contribution, which improves the quality of education, was discussed in two different respects. The first one is based on cooperation between teachers; the other is research-based. While Farrel (2021) argued CAR is beneficial for developing institutions and teachers, Parkhouse et al. (2021) discuss the positive effects of cooperation on school systems and equal educational opportunities. Junyent and Geli de Ciurana (2008), Greedy (2016) and Leask (2008) stated CAR offers an opportunity to develop a curriculum and make it sustainable. Another group of researchers (Stevenson and Robottom, 2013; Rock and Levin, 2002; Patterson et al., 2010) concluded CAR supports education quality, teacher development and sustainability. Many scientists benefit from their research-based contributions using CAR models in system functioning (Perry and Zuber-Skerritt, 1992; Cardno and Piggot-Irvine, 1996; Piggot-Irvine, 2002; Riel, 2019). The authors emphasize the success of the CAR model is changing and improving practice and thereby improving the quality of implementation of the work. Feldman (1996) and Platteel et al. (2010) discussed CAR's opportunity to develop teaching practices, whereas another group of researchers (Bleicher, 2014; Wang & Zhang, 2014) discussed CAR's contribution to support professional development and improve the quality of system functioning. concerns are successfully translated from theory to practice in offices (Mitchell et al., 2009; Levin & Rock, 2003; Rock & Levin, 2002), have allowed us to guide CAR in completing the problems and gaps in our business. Despite these contributions, no literature research or curriculum application model links the office system with action research to improve educational quality. Therefore, this study will contribute to the literature by providing an exemplary model for departments seeking to comprehensively study universities' educational quality or curriculum practices. Thus, based on CAR in the functioning of office unit systems based on elements

for curriculum life in our department that provides preparatory training for college students in language education, answers to the following questions are sought:

How is CAR's contribution to the functioning of offices supporting curriculum practices and its power to deal with challenges?

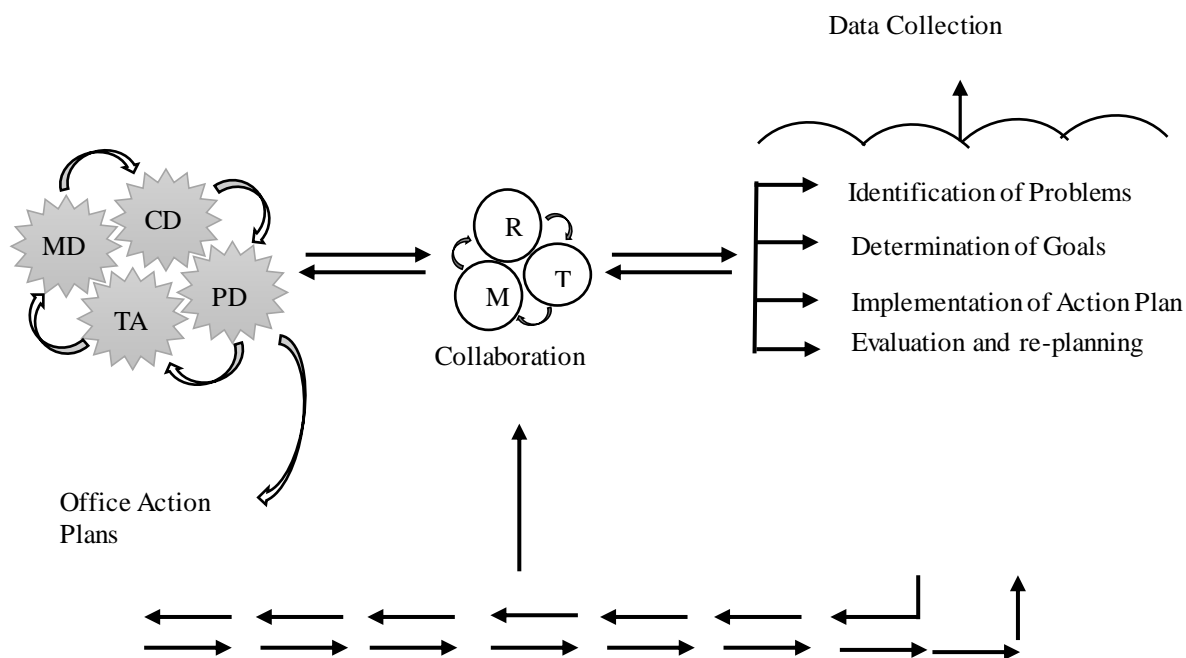
What is CAR? The benefits it provides to learning communities

The 'collaboration' within action research, which first started with the social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1946), emphasizes the movement in the social world (Dolapçioğlu, 2019). Because action research provides information sharing through interaction, there is no direct flow of information. Willis and Edwards (2014) state the interaction in action research is caused by the social order and is the main feature of action research. Authors presenting CAR models (Perry and Zuber-Skerritt, 1992; Cardno and Piggot-Irvine, 1996; Piggot-Irvine, 2002; Riel, 2019) focused on these power models to change and improve practice. CAR represents a Renaissance in educational research (Oja and Pine, 1987), and it may be argued what sets it apart from other studies is that it brings together various stakeholders who undertake collaborative research and collaborate to understand a social process (Messiou, 2019). CAR, where managers and educators within the institution are included as primary participants, and the researcher invites both the primary participants from the inside and from outside, is a kind of action research focusing on solving the problems it is involved in through cooperation (Stevenson and Robbottom, 2013). According to Feldman and Weiss (2010), the meaning of the word 'collaborative' refers to the attitude of teachers helping each other with individual action research, rather than collaboration between teachers and us, university researchers, because action research happens when people explore their practices to improve them and better understand practice situations. It is action because they act within the systems they are trying to develop and understand; it is research because it is systematic, and the research results are explained to the participants (Feldman and Weiss 2010:31).

Participants gain knowledge by improving their professional development with their own and other members' experiences. Teachers' knowledge of their teaching and educational status improves when they cooperate with other teachers who question their practices (Feldman, 1996:514). With the efforts of all parties, the CAR project is a highly participatory, interactive, collaborative, and educational process for both teachers and university researchers (Wang and Zhang, 2014:235). In his study, Bleicher (2014:802) highlighted the impact of CAR on professional development and listed the components of CAR as follows: Motivation—teacher orientation and self-influence; knowledge—disciplines related to the interests of teachers and information about students; action—change in perceived teaching practice to improve student success; and reflection—the cornerstone of the entire learning process that provides teachers with the time and support to connect new experiences with teaching practices. Similarly, according to Larsen et al. (2017), human interaction is important in shaping institutions, and this is the most important opportunity CAR provides to institutions. In addition, CAR creates a meaningful and open network of connections between research, theory and practice and a network of relationships to be drawn on. CAR's value lies in the ongoing development of educators' ability to make educational decisions and their orientation to research as a resource for educational decision-making. Because of these benefits, teachers become more qualified and more connected with their profession (Mitchell et al., 2009:348). According to Bruce et al. (2011), collaborative partnerships help overcome obstacles such as a lack of research aspects (process validity). The second benefit of collaborative research is that the relationship between researchers and teachers strengthens the evaluation of teachers as researchers and researchers as learners. The third benefit of collaborative research is the ability of those involved to develop and test the theoretical frameworks of collaborative partnerships against live research. The university teacher educator should be actively involved in the problem identification process during this process (Rock and Levin, 2002). All these contributions are made through ongoing planning, action and revision cycles, as in any action research. CAR begins with identifying the problem and consists of planning, implementing the action, collecting and analysing evidence and reflection (Riel, 2019).

Method

The research adopted the CAR model to identify obstacles to these offices' applications and requirements and create solutions through cooperation and equal participation to solve the identified problems. CAR model effectively solves organizational problems by improving the managerial practices of individuals and includes three cycles, mainly planning, action and reflection (Perry and Zuber-Skerritt, 1992; Piggot-Irvine, 1996; Riel, 2019). The developed model, based on the creation of CAR action plans of office units organized according to the elements of the curriculum and their implementation, is presented in Figure 1.



* R (Researchers) * M (Managers) * T (Teachers), * MDO (Materials Development Office), * CDO (Curriculum Development Office), * TAO (Testing and Assessment Office), * PDU (Professional Development Unit)

Figure 1: Collaborative Action Research Model for Curriculum

The first office established was Curriculum Development Office (CDO), and then Testing and Assessment Office (TAO), Material Development Office (MDO) and Professional Development Unit (PDU) started to function respectively. The purpose of the CDO is to identify targeted services and prepare the weekly course schedule by considering the level of English and the qualifications students will need when they begin the course. In addition, this unit identifies the need for materials appropriate to the targeted objectives and communicates those needs to the MDO. In addition, the unit works in coordination with TAO and provides feedback on the scope of the exams to be prepared and the services to be measured. TAO is responsible for the preparation, implementation, and monitoring of the examinations and, in collaboration with the CDO, determines the content and scope of the measurement and evaluation instruments carried out during the year. The MDO was established within the established programme to create and develop materials for student learning needs. In addition, they share the materials developed each week to facilitate learning or practise with their instructors. All lecturers can contribute to this office by sharing their materials. PDU supports faculty professional development through curriculum application workshops to identify professional development needs.

The region where the study was conducted and the study group

There are six public and three foundation universities that are often preferred by students in the region where the study is conducted. Established in 2016, the university had only one prep class with 24 students in 2018. In the following year, with the increase of the university’s departments providing education in English medium instruction, the number of students reached 380. In the 2019–2020 academic year, three more departments were opened. At the beginning of 2020–2021, training commenced with 18 staff and 490 students; the number of staff increased to 22 staff by the end of the academic year. Since the preparatory students get education with English medium instruction, they should understand academic subjects in a short period of eight months and gain the necessary language skills. Success in preparatory training is the basis of success in the department.

Data Collection Tools

Data were collected via minutes of departmental meetings and interviews. The development and problems that arose after each cycle were re-examined and initiated the new planning process.

- Meeting minutes: School of Foreign Languages meetings are held at least three times a year—at the beginning of the year, during the semester break and at the end of the year. In addition, meetings were sometimes held following the needs.
- Interview: A semi-structured interview form was conducted with teachers and managers. Members of each office, including managers, were interviewed, and focus group sessions were held. Questions were asked about the benefits of the units, changes in the system, the role of these units in supporting curriculum applications, problems encountered and the place of CAR in this sequence, and the situation of students and teachers using the office units. Interviews lasted an average of 45 minutes for each teacher and manager. Interviews were recorded and conducted face-to-face in the pre-pandemic period and then through the Microsoft Teams programme.

Data Analysis and Reliability

Content analysis was conducted using NVivo 12.

- Data were collected using three different methods and validity and reliability. Interrater agreement was 86%. In addition, each action plan was discussed after its implementation and progress were evaluated at the committee meetings.
- After each cycle, meeting minutes and interview records were evaluated. In particular, the PDU office reviewed teachers' video recordings, sent teachers evaluations on-course situations, and supported the curriculum's implementation by organising need-based training. The evaluations were conducted by members of the office, two managers and researchers, and an external researcher, with experts from various fields coming together to make the evaluation committee's decisions. Committee meetings are the most important factor supporting the validity and reliability of action studies.

Ethical Approval

Ethical permission (date:08.01.2021, no:2021/08) was obtained from the Izmir Demokrasi University Ethics Committee for this research.

Findings

Important contributions of the office units have emerged as the collaboration and planning of the teaching staff, the preparation of the curriculum in advance and the guidance of the teaching process, ensuring continuous development and the need to identify problems to analyse the needs. Difficulties have been considered in the ongoing action plans. These are sudden changes, lack of clear definitions of office unit tasks, inter-office communication, ongoing current density, inability to keep the standard in the developed materials and insufficient feedback on office applications. The findings are presented in Figure 2.

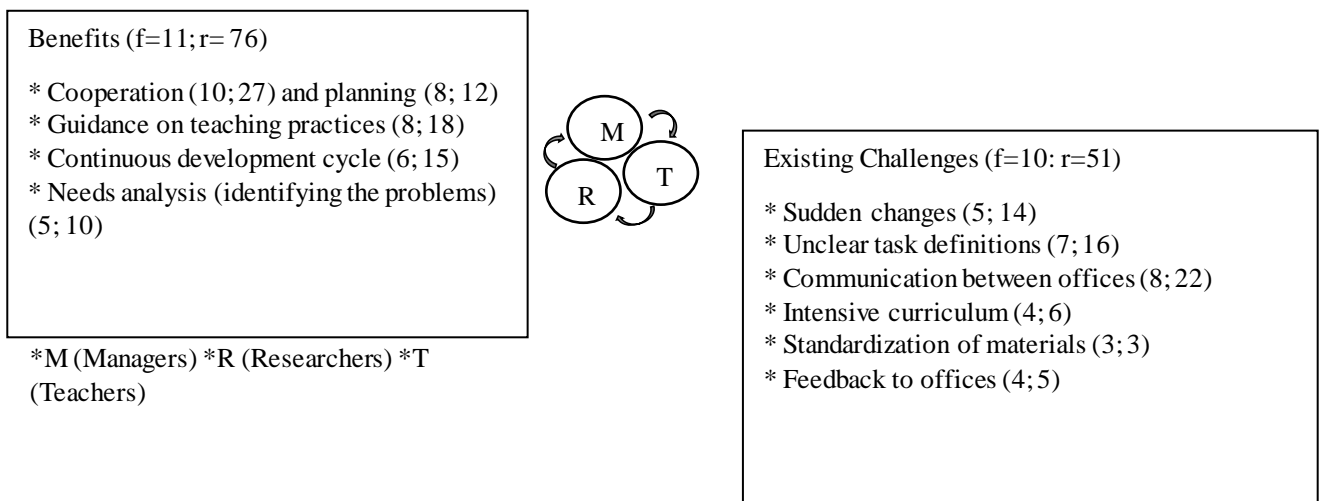


Figure 2: Findings on CAR Applications

The findings were gathered around two main themes: Challenges that arise during the operation of offices and the benefits of CAR in coping with these challenges

A. Benefits of CAR in coping with difficulties

All lecturers and office members have stated that CAR-oriented programme development office applications contribute to the planning of learning processes and directing the learning process by ensuring that teaching activities are carried out in cooperation:

The Curriculum Office was very helpful in planning before the semester began. They have a good team spirit; they work in a planned manner (individual interview, instructor).

We work well together in the office, so I feel very comfortable. We have good communication and collaboration. We support each other (CDO, focus group discussion).

The most important function of CAR is to identify problems and set goals. Participants indicated that this collaboration and planning guided classroom practices and made comparisons with the previous work system. Offices that implement action plans to achieve these goals guide instructional practices across all high school subject areas:

In the past, everyone was doing the same thing simultaneously, which reduced efficiency, so I felt like we were failing in most areas. We were working hard but getting nowhere... But now, every unit works in cooperation; offices are reserved; planning makes learning activities more useful (Individual Interview, teacher).

I shared my post-cycle analysis work with administrators and lecturers through interviews with teams, and I saw that their strongest point was the presence of their offices guiding their teaching practices (individual interview, researcher).

The objectives, content, learning-teaching processes (approach, strategy, method, technique, activity) and measurement and evaluation dimensions of an educational programme contain the fundamental elements for quality teaching. All of this is challenging work that requires collaboration and good planning. CAR has supported this difficult process and ensured continuous development in the institution:

...Indeed, I see a very important development, or rather progress, in learning activities. I think everyone is working selflessly (individual interview, teacher).

Our goal is to identify weaknesses, seek help from other offices, and evaluate ourselves and try to improve things every year. (CDO, focus group discussions).

The MDO worked with all units, especially the Programme Development Department, to assist in the selection of textbooks and the preparation and presentation of materials to teachers:

Our goal now, of course, is to prepare materials for our students to reinforce better the topics they have learned. Therefore, we are in close contact with the curriculum and testing departments because the curriculum tells us what to teach and the test tells us what to test. Therefore, we try to prepare material covering both sides (MDO, focus group meetings).

At least I know everyone is sincerely selfless and doing their best. The office of supplies works. I use the ingredients every week because I know what is being prepared. You know I want to use the materials with my students too and I try to do that (Individual interviews, teacher).

The purpose of the testing unit is to prepare exam questions and rubrics used in assessment to support curriculum development. The office staff has worked collaboratively to support teachers in assessing and evaluating instruction:

In this phase, we prepare and organize the questions and assist our other teachers in administering the exam. To this end, we work together to guide our teachers and help them or our students with the entire process before, during and after the exam (TAO, focus group meetings).

This unit, working especially with the Curriculum Office on communication between units, has contributed to the integrity of teaching:

There may be no problems, but their ideas should be considered in the studies, and I think testing and curriculum should be together at certain times (individual interviews, administrator).

The purpose of the PDU unit is to support the professional development of teachers. There have been no difficulties in the operation of the office. The main contribution of CAR is needs assessment. Since the PDU conducts its action research, a needs assessment was conducted to identify areas where teachers needed support. Teachers said that a training program tailored to their needs contributed to their professional development.

The PDU is still new, but it is an office, sorry, taster group. In this office, they make a serious effort to determine our needs, especially in the needs assessment process... (Individual interviews, teacher).

Based on the opinions, it can be said that CAR supports the professional development of teachers.

B. Monitoring the CAR in coping with challenges

The most important problem in office work is sudden changes. The pandemic may be the most important reason for these sudden changes. The other important factor is that the college is a newly opened institution. Therefore, they have to make new decisions. Change of administrators and hiring of new faculty members during two terms also resulted in losing the clarity of job description from time to time:

... we started and planned everything much earlier, but there were difficulties in doing so. Maybe it was because we could not meet in person because of the pandemic, but I think we have our system set up better than last year, so we are improving (face-to-face meetings, teachers).

.... we are constantly experiencing changes in preparing the program and for reasons beyond our control. It's a bit of a hassle, but the support of the program is due to these units. (CDO, Focus Group Discussions).

Regarding the lack of clarity of job descriptions,

Where does the curriculum end, where does the material begin, or how should it relate to the tests? Some things seem trivial. There is a need to clarify tasks and increase collaboration between units (CDO, Focus Group Discussions).

The teacher explained that MDO had three problems: not being able to standardize materials, not being able to get information about the usefulness of the material, and not being able to keep up with the intensive program-related work of the program office:

Meanwhile, there's a busy schedule going very fast. Secondly, we're going back to what we have talked about; we definitely need to cooperate with testing. We also need more information from teachers about the usefulness of materials (MDO, Focus group interview).

Regulations were made in office works based on CAR research results for the standard of material expressed by the teacher. The whole department uses some basic materials:

We have a listening event every week. We set the Thursday. Or we set the day and time for mock exams before the exams. If you are asking why we made the lists this way: At the end of last year, we sent students a questionnaire to evaluate the program, and the salient point was that the listening dates were fewer. This year we also found such a solution (one-to-one meetings, teachers).

Office members and managers noticed little feedback on office work. The main achievement of CAR in dealing with all these problems is to organize and strengthen the office system with cycles that support continuous improvement. In collaboration with researchers, administrators, and teachers, research findings are shared with units and action plans are created with emerging difficulties in mind. CAR led the process of creating action plans and identifying problems:

When the studies began to be based on collaborative research, it became confusing. Most importantly, sharing analyses with units provided change opportunities and new collaborative action plans. Specifically, for the distance education process, for clarifying their roles and simplifying the current program, the managers and faculty member made decisions about action plans in collaboration with the researcher (individual interview, researcher).

The second cycle begins with assessing the previous term's ongoing challenges. Who will do what this term, managers have been selected in each office for inter-office communication; job descriptions have been clarified. Thanks to these processes, the second term will go off without a hitch. Thanks to CAR, I was able to see how things were going. We saw that we needed to clarify job descriptions and renew action plans (Individual interview, Manager) and our continuous development was ensured.

Based on the opinions, it can be said that CAR significantly supports the teams in coping with the difficulties they encounter while carrying out curriculum-related activities.

Results and Discussion

This study concludes that a significant contribution of CAR (Collaborative Action Research) to office unit functions is the enhancement of teacher collaboration in curriculum application and the joint planning of learning activities. When educational researchers, university academics, and teachers work together to strengthen their abilities to identify and conceptualise problems, action research emerges (Pine, 1981). As Feldman (1996:513) stated, "...teachers' knowledge of teaching and their educational situation grows as they join with other teachers in examining their own practise. "In this context, we can express great support for the offices in the institution to work together and have a say in how business is conducted within the institution. Teachers are involved in every phase related to the functioning and structuring of the institution's identity acquisition process, and their collaboration may have facilitated its functioning. Salmon et al. (2021) found new learning opportunities emerge in teaching practices for university teachers when teaching becomes more democratic and collaborative. Mack (2012) stated many problems in the classroom can be solved by involving students in action research. This study made evaluations by frequently referring to student opinions during the action research process. Piggot-Irvine (2002), who also emphasized the importance of collaboration in action research, concluded the model provides experience-based practice via an in-depth exploration of problems in the system, applications, and evaluation of applications. Zuber-Skerritt (1992) emphasizes CAR participates more effectively in human resource development than traditional research, a model for management studies explained by developing.

Another finding of the study is that CAR drives instructional practice. Programme development is a very tedious and complex process. The lecturers in the office unit had to work extra overtime for this. Teaching is a job that requires many resources, including time. The roles of curriculum designer and evaluator were added to the role of teacher without changing the demands on teachers' time (Feldman & Weiss, 2010:42). Despite these challenges, teachers collaborated in the pedagogical activities and achieved development. While Farrel (2021) outlined the idea of developing a culture of thinking about collaboration in the individual, school or institution and concluded that this is positive for institutional and teacher development, Parkhouse et al (2021) discuss that some of the research projects have positive implications for schools and even school systems. Riel (2019) stated that collaboration allows for a deep understanding of participants to understand the complex process caused by social and environmental variables in action research, giving preference to collaborative work. In this study, CAR may have gained massive power in solving problems in application through the deeper understanding of knowledge gained by the participants.

Another finding that parallels this finding is that CAR provides for a continuous change in the functioning of office units. A group of researchers who have studied the topic (Stevenson and Robottom, 2013; Rock and Levin, 2002; Patterson et al. 2010) concluded that CAR supports instructional quality, teacher development, and sustainability. Stevenson and Robottom (2013) examined three studies of environmental education and preferred the CAR method in their research, as in this study, because it incorporates both sustainability and systems thinking. As a result of their research, they concluded that "institutional support and capacity both help facilitate action research and are facilitated by its practise" (p. 478). Rock and Levin (2002) used the CAR contribution to their professional development through a method consisting of five common steps, as did the PDU office in this study. According to the author, the CAR process allows teacher candidates to better understand themselves as individuals while clarifying their ideas about teaching (pp. 13-14). Patterson et al. (2010), who researched sustainability, referenced the importance of feedback but asserted that the Look, Think, and Act cycles lead to sustainability in systems.

The challenges were examined in light of the capabilities of CAR. Given that it's a recently established institution, issues arising from the pandemic have led to problems associated with abrupt changes. In combating these difficulties, CAR has championed the strength of collaboration. Efforts spearheaded by specialists in action research and curriculum development have enabled participants to acquire knowledge and devise innovative action plans to tackle these issues. Junyent and Geli de Ciurana (2008) in their study emphasise the importance of developing a sustainable programme. Although they believe that there is a general desire for a more flexible curriculum, they also recognised that it is difficult to overcome the traditional fragmentation of disciplines based on the autonomy and management of university departments. In terms of programme development challenges, they said that "implementing interdisciplinary and flexible curricula is still a challenge" (p. 778). They suggested that one way to overcome these challenges is to negotiate consensus among the groups involved. Babatunde and Ekundayo (2019) noted that curricula use is met with resistance from staff, lack of accreditation standards, and high cost of application. According to our research findings, it was found that the training programme implemented was very intensive. Therefore, a reduction of the content was made. For this purpose, a questionnaire was first sent

to all lecturers asking them to write for what reasons the programme's content could be reduced. Nine faculty members completed the voluntary questionnaire. These responses were then forwarded to the Office of Programme Development, and they made a decision among themselves. After the final decision was made, administrators and researchers met to revisit these decisions. 'The applicability of curriculum innovations requires a great deal of effort, often focused on a few faculty members' (Junyent & Geli de Ciurana, 2008:779). The CDO also demonstrated this commitment.

Conclusion

This study underscores the pivotal role of Collaborative Action Research (CAR) in enhancing teacher collaboration, curriculum application, and pedagogical innovation in educational settings. It demonstrates that CAR not only facilitates instructional quality and sustainability but also drives significant change in institutional practices and teacher development through shared knowledge and cooperative effort.

Recommendations

While CAR has successfully improved collaboration within School of Foreign Languages, expanding this model to include inter-departmental collaboration could yield even greater benefits. Facilitating joint curriculum development and shared teaching resources across different departments can lead to a more interdisciplinary approach to education, preparing students for the increasingly complex and interconnected world.

This study is limited to the practices of action plan in a college which provides preparation education to its students. The future studies can be carried out in a variety of departments (e.g. education, medicine, etc.) to search the contribution of CAR on the practice of curriculum and CAR's power to deal with the challenges. On the other hand, the interviews include the participants' views on the practices. Because these statements may not reflect the participants' students or their perceptions truly, it is important to analyse them deeply through class observation. In addition, a study can be conducted to analyse the students' views regarding the process.

Lastly, the participants in this study were Turkish students and were studying English. However, more research can be conducted with participants learning another foreign language (e.g., French). In this way, researches which feature the contributions of action study and collaboration strategies in the practice of curriculum in higher education can be planned.

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Author (s) Contribution Rate

All authors contributed equally to the planning of the research, implementation of action plans, data analysis, and discussion sections.

Ethical Approval

Ethical permission (date:08.01.2021, no:2021/08) was obtained from the Izmir Demokrasi University Ethics Committee for this research.

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