# Chapter 7
# Action Research in Practice-Based Doctoral Programs

**Colleen Halupa**
*East Texas Baptist University, USA*

## ABSTRACT

*Action research is an accepted method that can be used effectively in practice-based doctoral programs to evaluate a multitude of questions and processes. This research method focuses on real-world problems and solutions, and is used in a variety of fields primarily in the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom. This chapter provides an overview of action research, approaches and models, ethical concerns, best practices, criticisms of this research method, its use in doctoral education including dissertations and other research projects, and provides examples of action research in practice-based doctoral education in business, education, and healthcare.*

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to present action research as a viable alternative for use in practice-based doctoral programs. Action research (AR) allows a doctoral student to conduct a research study in his workplace or community that is meaningful, as well as practical. This chapter provides a review of the current industry definitions, AR methods, criticisms, ethical concerns and best practices, views of AR in doctoral education, and addresses how AR is used across several disciplines including business, education, and the health sciences.

Zusman (2017) noted a significant increase in practice-based doctoral programs, particularly in health- related fields, and disciplines that never had doctorates before. There is diversity in the types of programs offered; however, in general,

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-6664-0.ch007

these doctorates are geared towards professional rather than academic careers. This phenomenon is occurring primarily in the United States (U.S.), the United Kingdom (U.K.), and Australia. Hawkes and Yerrabati (2018) reported the U.S. has the largest number of these types of doctoral programs with a total of 85 in 2018. Many are still research-based; however, this research tends to concentrate on practical rather than theoretical problems in the field. The credentials awarded for these degrees go beyond the traditional PhD credential. It has expanded into areas such as Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP), Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT), Doctor of Pharmacy (PharmD) and even Doctor of Audiology (AUD). In non-medical fields, it has expanded into degrees such as Doctor of Architecture (DArch), the Doctor of Information Technology (DIT), and Doctor of Business Administration (DBA).

Zusman noted these doctorate programs change the face of doctorate education in these countries, and the change is driven by three factors. The first is human capital and the need for highly educated workers in organizations who understand how to research and evaluate problems. The second factor is based on educational credentialism theory. Obtaining an advanced degree is a way for a worker to move up to a higher status in society. Practice-based programs offer an alternative for students who cannot pursue, or do not want to pursue, traditional academic doctorates, yet want to attain the highest credentials in their fields. The last reason is based on neo-institutional theories. This is a way for organizations to maintain legitimacy. The higher the level of the credentials of their employees, the more legitimate the organization. This is based on the premise that higher level credentials result in more job success and status for both individuals and companies (Zusman, 2017). However, the last two factors have resulted in a phenomenon called "degree creep" in many professions, particularly in the health care fields. While pharmacists used to only be required to have a bachelors' degree, a doctorate is now the standard. A graduate degree has also become the standard in other health fields, such as physician assistants, and physical therapists.

Drake and Heath (2011) noted the professional, or practice-based doctorate, is equivalent to a PhD because doctoral researchers are required to meet specific criteria. This was echoed by MacClennan, Pina and Gibbons (2018 in business doctorates, as well as Bamberger (2018) in education doctorates. These researchers noted there is a lack of understanding about what a professional doctorate actually is, both from potential students, as well as those in academia. Part of this reason is because of the wide variation in these types of degrees where the doctoral dissertation can range from a research project to portfolios of previous student work. In addition, the practice-based doctorate tends to be only used in what is considered the "soft sciences." The only professional doctorate which has come close to the perceived quality of a PhD is the doctorate in education which is considered more of a "hard science discipline," or the EdD, a practice-based doctorate degree which was first