

# EMBEDDING ACTION RESEARCH IN PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

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This section of the book highlights action research by teachers and education administrators in the field. The focus of this particular chapter, however, is on the need for such research to become part of the regular and continuing activities of a large number of teachers in a significant number of schools. There are formidable obstacles in the way of the teaching profession taking such a turn. Nevertheless, we believe, such a transformation is necessary if action research is to become a major force for educational improvement.

Right now, action research, in those places where it happens, is often impressive, energizing, and inspiring. It is attractive and appealing for many reasons, but one of the most important is that it garners warm endorsements from participating teachers. Action research also comports with a strong, emerging belief that increased teacher autonomy will be a major and necessary element in educational improvement.

However, the present scale of action research on the total education scene is tiny. Furthermore, it faces imposing barriers in a period like the present when standards, assessment, and accountability -- along with trying to cope with unprecedented budget pressures -- are the most- prominent features of policy debates in education. At the risk of sounding discordant in the pages of a volume that is largely celebratory, we believe that unless action research becomes part of the natural and regularized activities of the school, it will become an historic curiosity -- a phenomenon that seems to claim avid and affectionate attention every few decades, but then fades as quickly and as puzzlingly as it surfaced. In short, we believe that action research must be self-sustaining to have broad impact. But is it possible? What are the prospects and challenges?

## Our Style of Action Research

As with many expanding movements, action research is beginning to take a variety of forms as people adapt the basic concept of inquiry by teachers to their own views of desirable educational research or approaches to teacher education. It is best for us to try to be clear about our own orientation to the subject and how we characterize it.

First, it is collaborative. This collaboration is primarily among teachers, not between teachers and an outside researcher. Though we ourselves have been outsiders in the groups with which we have worked, we have tried to play a role that was peripheral to the group's own sense of itself. For example, we have not tried to influence the focus for the research. We have commented about research methods, but usually to point out that teachers need not use techniques that dominate educational research; they can be more personal since they are engaged in teaching, and they can use reporting styles that tell that personal story.

Our reasons for getting involved center, in part, on an ideological commitment to promote research by teachers on issues they consider salient because we believe they have special wisdom about such matters. We want, also, to do what we can to lead the research community to place higher value on the knowledge possessed by teachers. Unique knowledge is generated by teachers in their own practice-based inquiries; we want to understand more about it.

Thus, within the groups with which we have worked, we have tended to view ourselves as facilitators. A more-apt characterization might be fans, or even cheer leaders. We are impressed with

the wisdom of many teachers and irritated by the fact that it is so little understood and appreciated in attempts to "reform" the schools. So we try to make it easier for teachers to engage in research they themselves consider to be important. It follows then, that the collaboration we advocate is basically among teachers.

A second characteristic of the approach to action research that we favor is that the teachers focus on their own practice, not on others. The teachers can be thought of as being the "subjects" of their own research. The self-reflective nature of this process leads to the third characteristic: It is self-developmental. The expectation is that the teachers will improve their practice and come to a better understanding of their educational situations by doing so.

And finally, our expectation of improved practice suggests the fourth characteristic: that there is a significant moral component to the process. Since teachers determine how children will spend much of their time, decisions by the teacher regularly and unavoidably involve questions of worth and morality. A great deal of teacher conversation reflects moral dilemmas they face -- how this student or that one should be treated. Since action research focuses on teacher-identified issues, it must be amenable to the consideration of moral questions.

#### The relationship between university researchers and school teachers

A major concern that we have, as university researchers involved in action research, is the nature of this relationship with teachers and the ways that it influences teachers' research. This concern is salient because much of the action research being done by teachers at the present time is stimulated and supported by outsiders; little of it is undertaken on the teachers' own initiative. To compound the matter, the research in which teachers engage often reflects a circumstance in which they are under obligation to someone outside their own school. The most common pattern is for teachers, either pre- or in-service, to be required to engage in action research as part of course work for a credential or degree. In other instances, payment of some sort is offered, typically from the university (which, in turn, has secured the funds through a special one-time grant). Action research is also being seen increasingly as a tool for reform efforts in schooling. In these initiatives, teachers are often put in the position of doing action research as a means to implement changes in practice conceived by outsiders, such as state and national education officers and other policy makers.

At a more-indirect level, teachers, a generally isolated group, sometimes engage in action research because of their responsiveness, even gratitude, to those who seem to want to help. Some teachers act out of a sense of obligation when people of relatively high status, like professors, offer to work with them.

So what? As long as teachers engage in action research, one might ask, why is it important that the impetus does not come from the teacher herself? There is more than ample evidence that many teachers see their pre-service education as a rite- of-passage or set of ritual hurdles they must clear on their way to a credential, a requirement having little to do with the realities of schools. If action research is included as a required part of a credential-oriented program, then it might be viewed in the same way. When the stimulus for research comes from sources that are not part of the teacher's ongoing professional life, there is often little motivation to continue when the course is over or when the outsiders leave.

Furthermore, in much action research associated directly or indirectly with universities, the teacher operates within an intellectual framework established not by herself but by a professor. The university researchers may be interested in concept formation in children, and the teachers try to learn how such concepts develop in the classroom, thus enhancing the research program. Or the professor

has a theory about "authentic" assessment, and the teacher works with the research team to devise suitable exercises. In an important sense, the relationship can be collegial; both parties value each other's ideas. The basic, intellectual framework for the inquiry, however, comes from the academy.

In such efforts, there is seldom the inspiration to continue the research when the professors leave (as inevitably they do). The collaborative research enterprise between university researchers and school teachers may have provided the teacher with a valuable perspective, but it is unlikely to have provided her with the desire and confidence to identify issues that remain to be investigated, or, consequently, the disposition to continue research independently. She did not, after all, play a major role in selecting the topic of research with the professor.

Relationships in collaborative work involving teachers and professors usually mirror a status division that places the teacher in the position of trusted assistant or, worse, star pupil. Teachers have learned in many of these projects that the major source of ideas that are deemed worthy of investigation come from the university. The teacher is there to help with the implementation. Often (if unintentionally), the collaborative work with outside researchers serves to heighten feelings of intellectual dependency (Feldman, in press). Even if this is not the case, the ways of the university are dominant in educational research and tend to frame the norms by which educational research, even by teachers, is judged.

#### Some Fundamentals: Research to Expand a "Knowledge Base" or To Become Wiser?

What are some of the underlying characteristics of action research that may enhance chances of it becoming self-sustaining in the lives of teachers and less dependent on outsiders? In particular, what purposes might teachers see in action research that enhance their own feelings of accomplishment and satisfaction, and therefore motivate them to make action research part of their ongoing activities?

For five years, we have been working with pre-service and in-service teachers engaged in collaborative action research with one another. For the most part, the teachers have been working in small groups on a range of practical issues and dilemmas, trying to get smarter about and better at what they do. In the process, as is evident also in many of the other descriptions of action research in this volume, they have been wrestling with complex sets of political, moral, and practical problems as they have generated and shared knowledge with one another.

We engage in this activity with teachers for several reasons -- but none of them involves asking teachers to conduct research because we think the topic is important. Our primary motivation is a set of convictions about the nature of teachers' professional knowledge. First, we believe that action research is consequential in developing a deeper wisdom about the educational enterprise than is usually sought by researchers. In stating this opinion in such a manner, we make a distinction between expanding the "knowledge base" for teaching, which is the usual aim of well-established modes of educational inquiry, and becoming wiser about education practice, which we see as the goal of action research.

The notion of a knowledge base, which has gained currency in recent years (Shulman, 1987), is drawn mostly from an interpretation of the nature of professional work in fields other than education. Physicians, to use the quintessential and commonly cited case, are assumed to possess information about the biochemical effects of certain medications in combating disease, for example. They have a knowledge base derived from their study of chemistry and biology, augmented by information generated from clinical trials that have been conducted by medical researchers. Their knowledge is acquired through their own university education, through journals, and through pharmaceutical salespeople. Producing and disseminating such knowledge is a primary ingredient in the improvement of health care. With knowledge of the patient, the physician tailors the therapy prudently to the case at hand.

Putting aside the question of the accuracy or thoroughness of this characterization of the physician's professional knowledge and its use (and the sketch here is admittedly incomplete), the medical model is a powerful image for many of those engaged in educational research. Produce knowledge (the job of the researcher), convey it to the teacher (the job of the professor), then apply it in the classroom (the job of the teacher). Such a model clearly specifies the role (and priority) of research.

To be sure, the model when applied to education incorporates the fact that the teacher must understand research findings to make practical use of them. But we believe that much of the wisdom associated with the intelligent use of practical information lies in a particularized understanding of the circumstances in a specific classroom (and, indeed, of the particular teacher). It is that site-based and person-specific understanding that is often poorly grasped and undervalued as the medical-research model is usually applied in educational research.

Knowledge bases are treated by educational researchers as remote from context. But professional wisdom is all about particular events, people, and conditions. It is in the pursuit of professional wisdom that one realizes the singular potential of action research. Research by teachers is unlikely to become a significant element in their lives unless they see it as improving their own school-centered circumstances in ways they identify as salient.

Second, we believe that teachers engaging in action research will have a positive effect on the future of teaching in general by changing the perception that people have about the teacher's role. By participating in this process, teachers begin to see themselves -- and can be seen by others -- as more than implementors of policy, curriculum, and pedagogy devised by those who are usually considered authorities. Instead, teachers are recognized as the experts that they are in domains of their own experience. It is possible that such activity by teachers will lead to a redefinition of teaching that recognizes how teachers have the capability of taking the lead in obtaining the insights necessary to improve their own practice. Such recognition begins to create a climate of encouragement wherein teachers become initiators of educational change, not solely implementors of the ideas of others. It encourages them to continue to probe, to do research.

Third, when teachers engage in action research, they often illuminate aspects of teaching and learning that have not been of previous interest to educational researchers. Since research programs tend to be initiated by professors, the topics that are chosen reflect interests in the university. These topics do not necessarily correspond with the responsibilities and concerns of teachers or other education professionals. Professors gravitate toward generation of and contribution to theory. They want to identify general principles that explain human activity. Scholarly contributions in this domain bring the greatest academic rewards and the highest status.

The theories professors concentrate upon, in turn, tend to be those associated with the academic disciplines in the social and behavioral sciences: psychology, sociology, economics, political science, anthropology, and linguistics, for example. These disciplines often offer a window on practical and concrete matters, but their primary aim is to understand and articulate various regularities of human activity, not necessarily to do anything about them. Professors are usually pleased when their work seems to have practical payoff, but they do not have the responsibility for acting on the basis of their understanding in a way that affects other human beings (other than their researcher-peers). A teacher's life, on the other hand, is almost completely action-oriented and directed toward events in the present. The issues identified by teachers tend to be those associated with taking defensible action that has a direct and usually immediate impact on children.

Action research, research by teachers on topics they identify as important in better meeting their professional responsibilities, therefore adds essential topics to educational research -- topics not usually defined by the disciplines but by the proximate and unavoidable demands of serving children. Teachers are encouraged to continue their inquiries when they note the saliency, even the uniqueness, of their own perspective on the problems and challenges of teaching.

A fourth reason for encouraging collaborative action research relates to the benefits that teachers derive from meeting on a regular basis in a professional community. It has been clear in our experiences working with groups of teachers that the support they receive from one another in self-identified communities of mentor teachers, novice science teachers, and experienced physics teachers has been a primary reason for their continuing to gather on a regular basis. The teachers who constitute these small communities have taken the time to learn about one another. They have noted their shared values, and they have decided to work together to maximize them in their collaborative research. To reach this stage, they have had opportunities to develop shared meanings.

For example, most science teachers assert that they value laboratory work. When they describe what they have in mind, however, it is not always apparent that one teacher's view of the ideal laboratory easily matches another's. One may emphasize original investigation by students, another a particular sequence of problem-solving steps, and a third the creation of a certain kind of laboratory log.

Particularly in the discussions that precede collaborative action research, teachers in a coalescing group probe each other's goals and meanings. In the process, they may modify some of their ideas, but they always center on what they share. This type of community, wherein people are professionally (and, in many respects, personally) compatible in fundamental ways, seems to us essential in carrying out collaborative action research. In such a community, the group moves toward a common goal, but, because they have a great deal in common, deep analysis and criticism are acceptable. The group itself fosters commitment -- and therefore its own perpetuation.

### Sustaining Action Research

Teachers change what they do for many reasons. A new approach seems meritorious on its face, and thus worth trying. The school district, the legislature, or the state education agency mandates a change, so teachers must comply. Sometimes a particular innovation receives popular attention and acclaim in the media; teachers feel pressured by parents and administrators to implement it. It is sometimes prestigious to try something new that is advocated. Teachers also may change their practice because they appreciate the association (and sometimes the attention) of a dedicated educational innovator who advocates the change and also provides support; that person might be a professor from a nearby college or university the teacher has become acquainted with. Occasionally, teachers will try something new in response to incentives like released time or extra pay.

Each of these kinds of motivation to do things differently, however, tends to subside as the pressure or stimulus disappears. None of them is teacher-generated. For teachers to take possession of action research, for action research to be self-sustaining, several questions and challenges require concerted attention.

1. What basic conditions are necessary for action research to be embedded in teachers' practice?
2. How does action research begin to have the same sort of temporal and spatial flow as other aspects of teaching and professional life?
3. How is the methodology of action research tuned to the ongoing lives and work of teachers?

4. How does the focus of action research best match the actual concerns of teachers (as contrasted with the interests of outsiders)?
5. How does action research become intrinsic to a teacher's need to understand her own practices, to her own development as a professional?
6. How does action research continue to be collaborative among teachers so that they can profit not only from their own initiatives but also those of others?

None of these questions is trivial or easy. We will examine each of them in turn in an attempt to outline the issues and suggest some possible approaches.

With respect, first, to embedding action research in regular practice, the obstacles are particularly formidable. Teachers are busy people. In California, it is not unusual for secondary school teachers to meet with more than 150 students each day. The task of grading papers in itself can fill several hours a day. Additionally, teachers are continually devising their curriculum, or modifying existing ones. They are often involved in professional activities outside of the classroom, like coaching, advising student groups, and serving on restructuring committees. Many of them are active in professional societies and teachers' associations.

Some teachers also hold second jobs, are pursuing additional degrees, and are, of course, family members and parts of their communities. Action research can be and has been displaced by all of this. If action research can only exist as an addition to what teachers are already doing, ways must be found to release them from some of their other duties or to provide them with adequate compensation. The issue of identifying time is fundamental.

With respect to action research coming to match the temporal and spatial flow of teaching, our second point, the obstacles are also serious and complex. To clarify what we mean by this, we would like to suggest a distinction between the idea of context in the sense in which it is commonly used in educational research and what we prefer to call a teacher's "educational situation." The context for a teacher is the setting in which she teaches -- the conditions that shape her actions. To speak of the teaching context conjures up an image of teachers as malleable and reactive entities, separable from and not always aware of their surroundings, but shaped by those other entities that make up the context. Those entities include their students, other faculty, the school administration, and the organization of the school and school district.

These influences are profound, to be sure. But teachers bring much that is personal to the classroom, also. They find themselves propelled into an educational situation constituted by all that has occurred in the past and from which they project themselves into the future. In their acts of being a teacher, they are immersed in the totality of their educational situation, which is made up of all the elements that constitute their context, plus the past and possible future actions of other people (Heidegger, 1962).

For action research to match the temporal and spatial flow, teachers need to be engaged in that activity within the educational situations of their classrooms. When research takes on the methodology and other characteristics of traditional forms of research, it ceases to be timely. This can be seen most clearly in the requirement that traditional experimental research be reproducible. For example, students typically reproduce historical experiments in physics. There is the expectation that a replication of Michelson's experiment would not find that the speed of light is different for different observers, or that a repetition of Galileo's experiment would find that objects do not accelerate uniformly under gravity. The results of these experiments are identical whether they are done in the 17th, 19th, or 20th centuries. That is, its reproducibility depends upon the research being non-temporal, that it aspire to timelessness.

In most research, the object under study is the same at all times. The investigator can set up the experiment at any time and expect similar, if not identical, results.

On the other hand, the object of teacher's self-developmental research is both temporal and spatial. As the teacher engages in the research process and modifies activities in the classroom, she comes to a different understanding of her educational situation. The new insights often result instantly in her deciding to act in different ways. The educational situation that she was investigating no longer exists. She has modified it irreversibly.

This re-orientation might at first appear to be no different from what occurs in any sort of naturalistic inquiry. The community that the ethnographer is studying changes with time as people interact with one another. Geological processes continue and affect the understanding of the earth scientist. Ecosystems are always in a state of flux. But in each of those instances, the object of the research is outside of the professional situation of the researcher. The phenomena themselves are unaffected.

Not so for the teacher. The impetus for the research, some discrepancy or dilemma of practice might still be there (Altrichter and Posch, 1992), but the events that illuminated it for the teacher are in the past. By reflecting on those events and taking action, the teacher has gained insight, a new perspective, a different understanding of her educational situation. She knows more about teaching, as well as how and what she wants to teach. She has become wiser about her practice.

The outsider-researcher returns to the events of interest by examining documents and interviewing informants for different perspectives. By doing so, the researcher comes to an understanding that transcends the particular events under study. At least, that type of understanding is usually the goal. The researcher asks "What is this a case of? To what theory can I generalize this case?" The purpose of action research for the teacher, on the other hand, is to come to a better understanding of her educational situation, so that she can improve her practice. She wants to be wiser, and wisdom lies in action. Modification of practice has occurred during the course of the inquiry. New events, which upon reflection can further illuminate her educational situation, continue to happen. Her knowledge and understanding grows through reflections on those events and circumstances.

To do the sort of research that the ethnographer does is to focus on what has happened and not on what is happening. There is a trade-off of reflection-on-practice for reflection-in-practice (Schön, 1983). The result could be a net loss for the teacher in terms of the immediacy and efficacy of her practice.

Our first two questions lead to the third about methodology of research. Because action research must be embedded in what teachers are already doing and must match the temporal and spatial flow of teaching, it cannot rely on the methods of the sciences or the social sciences. These methods, whether those of the physicist, sociologist, or ethnographer, require teachers to step out of their function as teachers and to enter those other roles. At that point, the research is no longer embedded. The temporal flow stops. Of course, this is just what is expected when teachers are encouraged to be reflective practitioners. They step out of their roles so that they can reflect-on-action instead of doing the "monitor and adjust," or reflection-in-action, that is an ordinary part of good practice.

Our concern is that if the methods of action research do not allow for it to occur without the teacher stepping out of her everyday, professional role, it will not be self-sustaining. As soon as external support is removed, the teachers will return to their traditional roles and cease to be reflective practitioners. At this time in the history of educational action research, we are not proffering a view of the nature of this different approach to research, though many descriptions of action research, including some in this volume, comport well with what we have in mind. We feel that the form of self-sustaining

action research toward which we are trying to progress is something that will emerge as more teachers begin to engage in the activity apart from course work and externally inspired research projects.

Our final questions are intimately connected to the first three, and expand upon them. They are specifically related to ways in which teachers can see the fruits of action research as intrinsically desirable and not extrinsically inspired and utilized. First, and clearly related to the previous point, is that the action research agenda must be that of the teachers. If action research is to be a self-sustaining enterprise, teachers must know that their independently generated concerns are legitimate targets for research. As long as the agenda for teachers' research is established by outsiders, or if teachers consider only outsider research agendas as legitimate, the identification of topics of priority for teachers is unlikely, perhaps impossible. But unless the research agenda are the teachers' own, they have little reason to follow through.

In addition, the research must be self-developmental. An important intrinsic reward for engaging in this process is that the teachers get better at what they want to do, that it helps them move toward goals they value. This point highlights a fundamental issue. The chances of a teacher-based activity like action research becoming self-sustaining in the face of all the other demands on a teacher's time seem slim -- unless teachers see a particular kind of potential for improving their own practice. That special promise centers on the teacher's perception that any change might move the teacher toward goals that she herself identifies as worthy.

Teachers will continue to modify their work with children without external pressure or unusual rewards if the change in practice brings the teacher closer to her own conception of desirable teaching - if the change enhances a sense of personal and professional fulfillment. In essence, a requisite for continual self-improvement to be embedded in ongoing practice is that it be seen by the teacher as helping to make her more like the kind of professional she herself wants to become. The motivation is internal and the situation her own.

And finally, there must be mechanisms built into the process that allows for teachers to find out about the process itself, results of other teachers' research, and for criticism and praise of their own work. We see much of the opportunity for necessary feedback stimulated and facilitated by the collaborative aspect of the type of action research that we espouse. In addition, however, there is a need to include a wider community of teachers. This outreach probably would not take place through publication in the usual academic journals, presentations at professional gatherings of academic researchers, or through publications in books like this. Instead, consonant with our earlier points, we see this sharing and exchange of information and insights occurring through the avenues that teachers already employ: meetings of subject-based professional societies and other teachers' associations, district and school in-service programs, and the small number of newsletters and journals that are beginning to publish teachers' stories.

The professional satisfactions derived from association with an identifiable, active, inquiring, and supportive community add significantly to the self-sustaining potential of the kind of teacher-based inquiry we envision. This sense of belonging to a like-minded and respected group, when added to the self-developmental features of action research (and to the other benefits we have outlined), begin to provide the kinds of conditions we believe necessary for action research to become part of the ongoing professional lives of teachers.

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