



AN INSIGHT INTO ACTION RESEARCH SCHOOLS

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The approach to action research differs in various contexts. So do the definitions, goals and expected outcomes. Some see it as the potential for professional and curriculum development, some for good social order, some for managing organisational change. The aim of this article is not to portray the entire action research scene, nor would it be possible, but to give an insight into the work of the most prominent action research theorists and educational researchers who appear to represent different action research schools. The criteria that allow me to describe the differences between the schools in this article are different approaches to action research, influenced by hermeneutic school of thought or the critical social theory.

Key words: action research, critical theory, hermeneutics, living educational theories, moral science

Action research means different things to different people. Carr (1994:429), for example, points out that some see action research

- primarily as a way of deepening teacher's understanding,
- while others stress its role in stimulating practical improvement and change,
- others see it as a way of communicating research findings to teachers,
- for some it is a way of making teachers' professional knowledge more explicit.

Action research emerged in the United States in the 1940s with the work of Kurt Lewin, a German social psychologist, who highlighted the importance of democratic collaboration and participation. His primary focuses were social issues followed by educational context. Lewin focused his interests on participative group processes for addressing conflicts and changes within organisations. He was the first to coin the term 'action research' in 'Action Research and Minority Problems' (1946) cha-

racterising it as a comparative research on conditions and effects of various forms of social action and research leading to social action. Lewin went on to describe action research as a spiral of steps where each step had four stages: planning, acting, observing and reflecting, emphasising direct professional-client collaboration and affirming the role of group relations as basis for problem solving later on. According to Lewin there seemed no use enquiring on one's own.

HERMENEUTICS AND ACTION RESEARCH

When action research appeared in Britain in the 1970s, the context was quite different from the original American. Positivism was being rejected for its lack of interest in practical problems of social life, for its distinction between research and action, theory and practice. Consequently educational action research was introduced as a form of enquiry that enabled teachers to understand and develop their practi-



ce through systematic reflection. At the time when Lawrence Stenhouse moved to the University of East Anglia, educational research was within the scope and authority of external experts. Stenhouse, who directed the Humanities Curriculum Project, advocated the idea of the teacher as researcher and focussed his attention (1975:144) on a practitioner who had:

- the commitment to systematic questioning of one's own teaching as a basis for development;
- the commitment and the skills to study one's own-teaching;
- the concern to question and to test theory in practice by the use of those skills.

He believed that 'curriculum research and development ought to belong to the teacher' and argued that only if teachers were centrally involved in research, would it be possible to develop the curriculum in a meaningful way. Stenhouse intended to introduce a discursive element into classrooms now closely compared to Habermas's *ideal-speech situation* (ISS) (Young 1989). In an *ideal-speech situation* all participants must have an equal opportunity to participate. They must have the right to defend or question any claim. And most importantly the participants must be motivated by the desire to reach a consensus about the truth of statements and the validity of norms. To realise an *ideal-speech situation* participants must also have *communicative competence*, the second of Habermas's key concepts for rhetoric. Habermas (1979) claims that the task of *universal pragmatics* is to identify and reconstruct the universal conditions of possible understanding.

John Elliott, at the University of East Anglia, put his vision in life. When he published his 'What is action research in schools?' (1978), positivism still dominated the British educational research. Elliott's action research interpreted teaching as ineradicably theoretical and defined research as a *self-reflective* process in which teachers examined the theories implicit in their own everyday practice. Defined in this way, action research promised a reunification of theory and practice that would eliminate the

segregation of teaching and research which positivism has created and sustained. (Carr 1994:429)

Later Elliott (1994:133) says that 'the rationale for involving teachers as researchers of their own practice is ... to give them control over what is to count as knowledge about practice.' In another work Elliott (1991) claims that teachers' self-understanding of their practices cannot emancipate them from ideological control. They are emancipated through the *dialogue* with educational theorists. He acknowledges his debt to Gadamer and his theories of hermeneutics as well as to Gadamer's strong advocacy of dialogue.

■ THE LIVING EDUCATIONAL THEORIES

McNiff (1997), close to the University of Bath, approaches action research as a methodological issue, rather than a philosophical view of the nature of educational knowledge. Elliott may call it 'therapeutic', as the point of telling is to share it with others, to have the view of the self-constructed affirmed by the others and not to debate its credibility or validity. While McNiff claims that the schemes of Kemmis, Elliott and Ebbutt may be accused of prescriptivism, asking teachers to apply systems in their classrooms and not inviting teachers to explain their own personal involvement, Elliott (1991:47) believes that 'dependence', on academic teacher educators, 'is based on the need for a counter-culture to the traditional craft culture in schools.' McNiff (1997:37) refers to Whitehead who also argues that the schemes of Kemmis, Elliott and Ebbutt are moving away from the reality of educational practice. Even though the context is educational, the schemes do not encourage teachers to provide account for their own professional development. He continues that unless we keep the teacher-practitioner at the centre of the enquiry, action research may become an academic exercise. Further on McNiff cites Whitehead who claims that: 'the

strength of the action research approach to professional development rests upon a creative and *critical dialogue* between members of a community which includes teachers, academics, parents, students, industrialists and politicians.'

Whitehead, from the Bath centre, advocates a *dialectical approach* to educational action research and attempts to synthesise a process of personal development with a process of social evolution. He (1993:1) characterises the dialectical approach 'as a process of question and answer in which an individual 'I' exists as a living contradiction in questions of the kind, 'How do I improve my practice?' The inclusion of 'I' in the claim to educational knowledge establishes a non-conceptual form within the account. He sees his philosophy of action research in terms of first person rather than from the perspective of second person participant or of a third person – neutral observer. Whitehead has introduced the concept of *living educational theories* 'that are living in the sense that they emerge from the experience of 'I' existing as a living contradiction and are constituted by the descriptions and explanations that individuals give for their own learning in their educational practices.' (Whitehead 2003)

Elliott refers back to the form of *collaboration* between teachers and academics and different forms of research into teachers' knowledge in educational research. In post-modernism meaning is a personal construct, thus texts and experiences can be read and interpreted in different ways. He contemplates if telling of stories and having them affirmed by researchers is transformative of practice. This is what he says (1994:134):

'By representing teachers' knowledge as a story, researchers attempt to resolve the dilemma between making a contribution to theory generation in the academy and affirming teachers as knowledgeable professionals. The theory of teacher knowledge as story legitimates research as a particular kind of teacher development enterprise. ... researchers need to be more reflexive about the context of interests

and motivations in which they construct their representations of teachers' knowledge.

On the other side is action research where teacher knowledge is embedded in concrete practices. Understanding the actions comes through the analysis of evidence about the practice and the generation of new knowledge comes with testing of action steps and hypotheses in the light of analysis. Such knowledge can be questioned and challenged by theorists.

■ EDUCATIONAL ACTION RESEARCH AS A MORAL SCIENCE

Elliott (2000) and some other action research theorists now interpret educational action research as a *moral/practical science*. He challenges academic culture and argues that not only is action research a practical science but moral too, and that educational research is best viewed as a form of action research directed towards moral and practical ends of education, rather than the discovery of disinterested facts about education. Elliott (2000:82–83) characterises the main features of educational action research:

- Its major purpose is to realise an educationally worthwhile process of teaching and learning.
- What counts as an educational worthwhile activity should be defined in terms of value-concepts ... which are not to be confused with specifications of specific, concrete, and tangible learning objectives or targets.
- What makes the learning of specific facts and skills educationally, as opposed to simply socially or economically, worthwhile is the manner in which they are acquired.
- An activity should be evaluated as educationally worthwhile ... by virtue of the extent to which it embodies in itself criteria and standards which are implicit in the educational ends to which it is directed.





- Enquiry into how to realise educational values in the process of teaching and learning (enquiries into means), cannot be separated from philosophical enquiry into what these values mean and their implications for practice (enquiries into ends). It cannot be reduced to studies of the instrumental effectiveness of particular teaching and learning methods in the light of fixed, unambiguous, and tangible/measurable ends.
- Enquiry into how to realise educational values in action, involves treating actions as experimental hypotheses, to be systematically tested in particular contexts of practice, as a basis for evaluating their adequacy as interpretations of the educational ends they are directed towards. Hence, educational action research is both a science, and a form of philosophical enquiry.

Elliott wants to challenge the academic culture that is characterised by the professionalism, specialisation and fragmentation of enquiries and the exclusion of questions about moral from the academic arena. But he is aware that the challenge has not gone well. He points out that he did not want to privilege practice over theory. Neither did he want to attempt to make practice subservient to theory. Curiously, he cites Couture's (1994:128-129) qualification of action research as the work of Dracula where 'The university, for its part, acts as the apparition that invites its clients (victims) to join the project of reflective practice – in search of the transcendental signifier of (salvation) teacher identity.' But Elliott admits that he wanted to challenge and deconstruct some academic discourse about action research.

ACTION RESEARCH AND POSTMODERNISM

In MacLure's (1995) vision a postmodern reading may be interested in how the claims of action research rest on an opposition between theory and practice, focusing and favouring the latter. It favours experience, au-

thenticity, naturalness, directness, relevance, life-as-it-is-lived as opposed to the remoteness and abstraction of research, theory, policy, and positivism. Postmodern action research may ask what is happening to self-reflection when the 'self' is no longer a comfortable category in the centre of theoretical framework but a struggle between different discourses. MacLure, based at the University of East Anglia, argues that theories of action research tend to be concerned with resolving the theory-practice dichotomy, and in doing so to provide a rationalisation for exits from the field of practice into the academy. From Elliott's (2000) perspective MacLure distorts some theories of action research to fit certain unquestioned assumptions. She is led to conclusion that the search for a unifying theory about the relation of theory and practice masks the intention to colonise the field of practice by reconstructing it as a form of science. For Elliott the task is to explicate the theory of theory and practice tacitly embedded in practices initiated by teachers. In doing so Elliott (2000:88) saw himself, and some other action research theorists, 'to be articulating a unifying theory which 'dissolved' the binary opposition between theory and practice.' For MacLure, however, it seems to be impossible to construct such a theory.

CRITICAL THEORY AND ACTION RESEARCH

Australian educational action research has developed through 'initiatives in school-based curriculum development, school-level evaluation, in-service education and participatory decision-making in schools. ... It has also developed an epistemology, rooted in critical social science.' (Kemmis and Grundy 1997:40). Kemmis is highly influenced by Habermas's critical theory and thus advocates *emancipatory* or *critical action research*. Terry (1997:275–276) claims that the possibilities for a critical social science of education derived from Habermas's notion of technical, practical and emancipatory interests would offer

the possibility for an attack on ideology and on the sources of power which employ it as a non-threatening way of exerting its influence, the evolving of educational processes aimed at enlightenment and the encouragement of actions intended to bring about global improvements to society in the areas of both justice and freedom.

In Kemmis's view, and he shares it with Carr and Kemmis (1991), action research is always connected to social action, social change, that is – it always understands itself as a concrete and practical expression of intention to change the social and educational world through improvement of practices, the understanding of the practices, and shared context of the practices. It is always critical in the sense that it is trying to understand and improve the practice and the situation. Kemmis's action research is critical in the sense that it is *collaborative* and *cooperative* and *collective* – groups of participants learn from change in the process of change, analyse and contemplate on the results and try again. His action research is 'only *collaborative*, though it is important to realise that the action research of the group is achieved through the *critically examined action* of individual group members.' (1990:5) He continues (1990:16):

'Action research is concerned equally with changing individuals, on the one hand, and, on the other, the culture of the groups, institutions and societies to which they belong. The culture of a group can be defined in terms of the characteristics substance and forms of the language and discourses, activities and practices, and social relationships and organisations which constitute the interactions of the group.'

He is thus trying to approximate the 'micro' and 'macro' (Barnhart 1994) in social and educational life. Kemmis and McTaggart (1990:16) also say:

'The individual is a bearer of language, but 'comes' to language, as it were, finding it preformed as an aspect of the culture of a group or society; language 'contains' expressive and communicative potential, and the way we use

language can only be changed by also changing social 'agreements' about how language is used – patterns of language use which are a first aspect of the culture of the group.'

Kemmis and McTaggart go on to say that language has potential, discourse has power. Brown (2000:33), when interpreting Foucault, argues that we must think about the functions of discourse in the production of truth. And Barnhart (1994:2) writes that: 'the postmodern construction of power deviates from the Marxist viewpoint through a definition of 'truth' as an exertion of power, attempting to restrict and/or subvert the 'plurality of discourses' existing in society, identifying 'truth' in the same light as the Marxist conceptualisation of 'ideology'.'

Kemmis's action research also attempts to help the participants understand themselves as doers. Although Kemmis claims that his view of social research is not instrumental, it still radiates Marxist aspiration of a group attacking and changing the society. Since he sees the research as a gathering of different groups of people who work together in the pursuit of shared social goals whose primary aims are to discover and replace contradictory, mistaken, or inadequate ideas or actions and overcome forms of social injustice. When Elliott (1991:116) refers to Carr and Kemmis (1983) *Becoming Critical: Knowing through Action Research*, he criticises their denial of the possibility that teachers' self-understanding of their practices can alone constitute a source of critical self-reflection and emancipatory action. They thus do not acknowledge the possibility of a self-generating, reflexive and critical pedagogy emerging as a form of action research. It is a possibility which makes false the distinction Carr and Kemmis draw between a 'practical' and 'emancipatory' paradigm of action research. Elliott argues that a self-generating critical pedagogy is possible as a form of creative resistance to the hegemony of the state. Elliott's stand can be underpinned by Gadamer (1975) who claims that in confronting a view reflecting a different set of horizons, the interpre-





ter (teachers in educational context, my brackets) can find his or her own horizons highlighted and reach self-consciousness. He follows to say that in seeking the key question, the interpreter repeatedly transcends his or her horizons while pulling the text (the problem, my brackets) beyond its original horizons until a fusion of the two occurs. Gadamer does not deny the importance of either scientific understanding or critical interpretations. He rather emphasises the need for repeated attempts at critical understanding, through which one gains the insight needed to correct prejudices (practice in educational context, my brackets). Young (1989:160) also sees a limitation in Carr and Kemmis's approach. The process of action and enquiry need not to be so external and political. Practitioners need to

understand themselves and one another, they need to grow up and develop greater ego strength, he says.

■ CONCLUSION

To sum up, many assert and accept that action research is a philosophy, theory and methodology. With all the current similarities and differences between schools, if there is a single and homogeneous school, we still lack a generally accepted definition of action research. What is important, however, is that action research integrates action and research, theory and practice. It creates new knowledge, not for its own sake but for the improvement of practice. And it advocates the involvement of all voices in educational and social world.

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UVID U ŠKOLE AKCIJSKOG ISTRAŽIVANJA

Sažetak

Pristup akcijskom istraživanju različit je u različitim kontekstima. Različite su definicije, ciljevi i očekivani rezultati. Neki ga vide kao potencijal za profesionalno usavršavanje i razvoj kurikuluma, neki za novi društveni poredak, a neki za promjene u organizaciji ustanove. Namjena ovog članka nije predstaviti sve škole akcijskog istraživanja, niti bi to bilo moguće, nego dati uvid u rad najistaknutijih pedagoga i teoretičara akcijskog istraživanja koji predstavljaju određene škole. Kriterij različitosti škola u ovom članku su različiti pristupi akcijskom istraživanju – pod utjecajem hermeneutike ili kritičke teorije.

Ključne riječi: akcijsko istraživanje, kritička teorija, hermeneutika, etika