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Revisiting the Professional, Personal, and Political Dimensions of Action Research

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Let us confess that the schools have never built a new social order, but have always in all times and in all lands been the instruments through which social forces were perpetuated. If our new curriculum revision is to do better, it must undertake an acceptance of the profound social and economic changes which are now taking place in the world. (Horace Mann Bond, 'The curriculum and the Negro child', 1935: 68)

This quote comes out of a tradition that seems quite disconnected from many common understandings of action research. Yet for me it raises issues that are at the core of action research practices. It demands recognition of the essentially 'conserving' function of schooling, and highlights the need for educational responses to profound structural changes in society. It also comes out of a long-standing tradition of African American academic literature that has refuted the dominant narrative of educational history which claimed education as a major vehicle for social advancement of disempowered peoples. It also embodies major questions that have haunted me for many years, as to what extent and in what ways action research in educational work can play a role in building a 'new social order' (Counts, 1932/1978) – one in which economic and social justice are central aims. A major part of

this chapter addresses these issues, by examining the multiple practices of action research, both historically and conceptually.

Action research has long been part of research in education, as well as in multiple social science fields. But even a brief look at the literature reveals important differences in the processes as well as the purposes of the research. Some forms highlight new strategies for data collection and analysis which correspond to varied theoretical frameworks underpinning the research, while others look remarkably similar to 'traditional' forms of empirical/analytic or interpretive research. Some focus on relatively narrow aspects of classroom work, while others seek connections to larger social visions and social movements. In much of my work over the past 20 years, I have sought to understand these varied meanings and practices dimensionally, in terms of their histories and in terms of their underlying assumptions. In this effort, Sandra Harding's (1987) definitions of 'method', 'methodology', and 'epistemology' have been very useful. In her distinctions, a 'method' is a technique or process by which evidence is gathered. In contrast, a 'methodology', encompasses both the role of theory and the means of analysis that outline how we should proceed as

researchers in addressing the data we collect via our varied 'methods'. The theories we use and the data analysis strategies we employ are not neutral means; they embody our relations to power through the arenas they center.

'Epistemology', in Harding's depiction, includes the usual interpretation of a 'theory of knowledge' (1987: 3), yet it takes us much further in ways very useful to understanding action research. She invokes the sociological sense of epistemologies as differing 'strategies for justifying beliefs'(p. 3), which in turn reminds us that all social research is a social construction, made possible through existing power relations. Harding's further emphasis on epistemology pushes toward examining assumptions about 'who can be a "knower"'?, about what strategies count as 'means to be legitimated as knowledge'?, and about 'what kinds of things can be known'? (p. 3). The varied forms of action research address these questions quite distinctly. Some assert a 'grassroots' form of knowledge production and challenge existing research methodologies while others reinscribe them and the existing power relations from which they emanate.

Over the past two decades, I have worked on field-based efforts as well as on conceptual research involving careful readings of both the literature on educational action research and various strands of relevant social research. The historical part of this research led to identifying 'professional, personal, and political' dimensions to action research. These dimensions, which I used in an extensive review of the action research literature more than ten years ago (Noffke, 1997a), have formed, at my co-editor's suggestion, the framework for this book. An important caveat was noted then:

> These three areas – the professional, the personal, and the political – form the frames for this review of the literature on action research. They may seem to be distinct emphases; within the context of action research, however, all clearly deal with issues of power and control. In that sense, the public sphere of professionalism and the domain of the personal are also particular manifestations of the political. (Noffke, 1997a: 306)

As I worked through these dimensions, the long-standing feminist argument that 'The ersonal is political' (Hanish, 1970/2000) played a role. Also important was the recognition that

the professional dimension, too, is an important part of the power structures of education, and as such, it, too, is political.

In what follows, I first trace out the dimensions and their various meanings. Especially important in this is the understanding that these 'dimensions' are not discrete categories, but reflect differing emphases. As I noted then, and reaffirm now: All forms of action research embody a political dimension. As action research works towards change towards improvement of educational practice (the action part of the dual term's meaning), it does so with a vision of what might make the lives of children and those with whom they work, and indeed the larger society, 'better'. Such visions of change embody the political, in that they all work through, and often against existing lines of power.

I next look at what has transpired in the past decade. A prominent characteristic of this era of action research is tremendous growth, both in its conceptual and practical understandings and in the visibility of action research in prominent journals and texts emanating from the academy. But alongside that growth, in terms of the growing acceptance of action research in educational settings, has been increased visibility of action research in educational work in non-school settings.

Finally, I address work in action research in the current context. Part of this section addresses the impact of globalization alongside the growing recognition of action research as an international phenomenon, or social movement. Here too there are tensions, as work moves forward to recognize the local and often cultural needs of keeping action research flexible and responsive to differing contexts. The contradictory context of the huge growth in neo-liberal constructions of education alongside the growth in a form of research that emphasizes 'grassroots' knowledge will be explored.

UNDERSTANDING ACTION RESEARCH DIMENSIONALLY

The dimensions of 'professional, personal, and political' were derived from historical study of the field of action research (Noffke, 1997b).

My primary concern in using the 'dimensions' construct was to find a way to explore the multiple layers of assumptions, purposes, and practices without creating an implicitly hierarchical set of categories which could be used to prioritize or even dismiss some forms of action research in comparison to others. Instead, I sought a way to see the complexities and interconnectedness across the dimensions. While all forms of action research (and indeed all research) embody the political, I felt that what was needed was a way to see the complexities of work in action research, rather than to find the form that is 'just right'.

THE PROFESSIONAL

From its early emergence in the early part of the 20th century, action research was part of an overall context of struggle in the social sciences over the nature of research. At the same time, feminists and scholars such as W.E.B. DuBois were working at creating a form of social research that was deeply connected to social struggles. In Europe and the U.S. scholars such as J.L. Moreno (Altrichter and Gstettner, 1993), John Collier, and Kurt Lewin worked at developing forms of research that were aimed at solving social problems. In emergent fields like education, action research was articulated in terms of its potential to enhance the 'science of education' as well as the status of the professionals who work in schools and colleges. Developing a 'knowledge base' for teaching has been tantalizing educational academics since the beginnings of their move into universities in the early 20th century. Research by and with teachers has been one way to advance that agenda, and clearly highlights action research as a 'knowledge generating' activity.

Action research projects have varied greatly in this area, though, ranging from some which have focused on technical skills to those which include teachers in the process of theorizing, through their research, on the intended ends as well as means of educational work. In the U.S., the work of Stephen Corey in the early 1950s was clearly directed towards the latter. In the 1970s, the work of Lawrence Stenhouse (1975), and John Elliott in the U.K., developed a contrasting and conscious effort to reframe the nature of teaching as in itself a form of research, and to extend the concept of the professional to highlight careful deliberation over both the ends and means of educational work. Through projects such as the Humanities Curriculum Project and the Ford Teaching Project, they built not just a body of knowledge about educational practice, but also a conception of teaching that focuses on careful reflection on data from one's own practice as the basis for subsequent theorizing and actions. This work formed the foundation for the development of the Classroom (later Collaborative) Action Research Network and later on to the establishment of the journal *Educational Action Research* in 1993.

Action research in Australia was also developing in the late 1970s, partly influenced by the ideas of Lawrence Stenhouse, but also enhanced by a political context in which much curriculum work was being done around issues of educational equity. Many scholars at Deakin University, and elsewhere in Australia, worked on projects that were school-based and used action research to improve educational understanding and practice, as well as their context. The work used the Lewinian 'spiral' of planning, taking action, observing and reflecting as core elements to the action research process, typified in *The Action Research Planner* (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1981). Carr and Kemmis (1983) later developed some of the ideas into an important book, *Becoming Critical*, which richly explored the transformation of educational research in a way that embodied a new construction of the relationship between theory and practice, and also contributed to the professional development of teachers.

Action research in the U.S. also experienced a 'rebirth' during this same era. Beginning with federally funded projects aimed at familiarizing teachers with research methods and at building stronger university–school collaborations, there was a clear emphasis on enhancing the status of the profession of teaching, through recognition of the knowledge producing

potential of teachers. The 'teacher research movement', advanced through the efforts of many teacher education researchers such as Marilyn Cochran-Smith, Susan Lytle, Ann Lieberman, Marian Mohr, and Dixie Goswami, forms an important strand to the professional dimension of action research. Beginning in the early 1990s, their work led to an increased visibility of knowledge produced by teachers and a growing recognition of the importance of the teacher's voice in generating knowledge for educational practice.

An important point to considering the professional dimension of action research has to do with thinking through whether action research produces not only knowledge to add to a changing understanding of a 'knowledge base' for teaching, but whether it comprises a different 'way of knowing', one that can bridge theory and practice, but also thereby generate new ways of understanding practice. Action research has been seen as a means of adding to knowledge generated in the academy via traditional methods, but it has also been seen as a distinctive way of knowing. This point is directly related to whether action research is seen as producing knowledge for others to use, or whether it is primarily a means for professional development. Whether part of meeting the needs of changing demands for qualified teachers for an increasingly migratory world population, or part of a response to policy changes affecting the work lives of teachers, action research has been seen as one way to enhance the professional quality and status of the profession.

THE PERSONAL

The personal dimension, too, has had several distinct aspects. One part deals with the idea that action research has an impact on the personal growth and development of those who engage in it, another emphasizes the individual versus collaborative nature of the work, and a third addresses the involvement of individual university faculty in the action research process. First, much of action research work

has been conceived of as a collaborative process. The early work of Corey and others at the Horace Mann Institute in New York involved a collaborative effort among university and school personnel. The goal was for teachers to learn about, and participate in, the knowledge generating process.

At the same time, others were developing other perspectives on the purposes for engaging in action research. One is best noted in the work of Abraham Shumsky who (also in the 1950s) developed action research as a form of self-development, a way for teachers to understand themselves and their work better. At around the same time, Hilda Taba, perhaps in response to a then salient teacher shortage, found that action research not only could have an impact on professional problem solving, but it was also a way for teachers to become more skilful. While the context for learning to do action research was a group, the focus of attention was the individual teacher-learner. The role of university faculty changed as well, with attention to their expertise in the process of guiding the teachers.

In more recent years, the personal dimension has taken the form of working with teachers to explore closer connections between their personal beliefs about teaching and learning and their practice. This can be seen in the works supported by John Elliott in the 1970s, but is also salient in the subsequent work in the U.K. and Ireland supported by Jack Whitehead and Jean McNiff. In both, the strong theme is working toward making personal beliefs more congruent with practices, often involving ideals of social justice at the level of individual beliefs. The growth of the 'self study' in teacher education group in the early 1990s embodies the struggle for congruence between goals and actions. In many cases, it used life history and personal narratives of individual growth around teaching strategies or philosophical orientations, but in some instances engaged directly with political issues, such as the social relations of race, class and gender. Personal belief systems play into this, and issues of 'development' take on new aspects in looking at how individual teachers take into account their own life experiences as they explore these

in relation to working with children whose experiences are different from their own. The professional is also salient, in that much of the work around individual growth and learning is aimed at furthering the status of teachers and teacher educators through educational action research.

THE POLITICAL

The political dimension, which is also embedded in the previous two dimensions, highlights a different purpose for action research work in education. As with the other dimensions, the political has many differing manifestations. In the 1930s–1950s, there was a strong concern with creating democratic processes in schools. The search for solutions to social problems, the development of collaborative processes, locally developed curriculum, and more socially conscious schooling processes represented a 'democratic impulse' in action research of that era.

Yet action research has other origins that speak to a different understanding of the role of research in politics, one that represents the struggles of marginalized peoples to use research methods to leverage social change. The works of W.E.B. Du Bois, Ida B. Wells, and Carter G. Woodson, for just a few examples, represent a tradition of various explorations of the uses of research methods to inform social actions, particularly ones directed at the redress of social inequalities. Work of early 20th century feminists also shows this tendency to see research as aimed at making changes directly, rather than waiting for someone else (a research consumer) to implement changes based on reading of research. Likewise, the work of Myles Horton and others at the Highlander Center in the Appalachian region of the U.S. gave birth to another 'stream' of work that shows the ways in which the generation and analysis of information were seen as deeply connected to work for social and economic justice in local communities. In this stream of work, action research was always deeply tied to work by, for and with marginalized peoples.

In that sense, action research has always been deeply connected to social struggle.

The works of Paulo Freire and Orlando Fals Borda, and a large number of participatory researchers have also been important influences for action research in education. First appearing in the literature in the 1970s, these works present a challenge to the political economy of knowledge production similar to the earlier work of the Highlander Center. Knowledge generation, in these works, is not solely a tool of professional researchers; it is a tool for social struggle. Working in diverse communities in Asia, the U.S., Canada, Latin America, and Africa, participatory research projects emerged which highlighted the important role that knowledge generation plays in social and economic struggles (Park et al., 1993). In the 1980s, when action research was becoming increasingly visible in education, important connections were formed between the participatory research advocates who had been working for a decade with marginalized peoples around popular knowledge issues in Canada, Africa and South America, and action researchers in education in the Northern Hemisphere and Australia.

During the 1980s and 1990s, educational action research work in the political dimension included efforts developed around issues such as gender equity, or less frequently around racial equity, but showed few signs of connection to social struggles. In addition, beyond Carr and Kemmis's work in using the writings of Habermas to highlight the potential to transform understandings of professional practice, or Richard Winter's work on social inquiry (1987), there was scant attention to the ways in which newer social theories, especially those from feminist or post-colonial work, might inform the growth of action research in education. This is an important issue, as I move to considering the last decade of action research work. The local and communitarian processes often embodied in action research as a 'democratic impulse' still may be enhanced through the use of a wider body of social theory, one that has embraced a social justice agenda that takes into account both local and global manifestations of oppression.

UNDERSTANDING ACTION RESEARCH DEVELOPMENTS IN THE PAST DECADE

In the past decade, there has been a remarkable growth in the acceptance of action research. This can easily be seen in the publication of over two dozen textbooks aimed clearly at a market of university further development programs for teachers. In addition, action research has gained credibility through its inclusion in prominent texts and handbooks of research methodology, as well as through the publication of the *Handbook of Action Research* (Reason and Bradbury, 2001). It has achieved greater visibility in existing journals, as well as the host of new journals in education. In addition to the journal, *Educational Action Research*, noted earlier, another journal, *Action Research*, emanating from the handbook's authors, began publication in 2003 and continues to offer articles on action research from a wide variety of disciplines. Action research is recognized widely in the funding of projects by state agencies and in many places plays a significant role in teacher education. It has also become increasingly accepted as a legitimate research strategy for the doctoral degree. What is presented here is not a thorough review of the recent literature, but rather my 'reading', as a student of action research, of the noticeable changes. Many of the varied 'streams' of action research have flourished, with rich bodies of associated literature developed. Other areas have opened up, offering new ways to see salient issues in the field, especially those addressing equity and justice issues. Although the literature on the latter is smaller in growth than that of the overall new literature, it is nonetheless salient and important.

THE PROFESSIONAL

In the professional dimension, the dimension focused directly on issues related to developing the practices of schooling and the enhancement of the teaching profession, the growth has been very large. Action research has gained acceptance in prominent educational research venues, with active special interest groups in many national and international groups and their publications. There are many on-going national and international organizations with conferences and publications, and these are growing as more associations use the internet for connections. Within traditional academic venues, journals, book series, and many textbooks aimed at guiding educators in their action research work have brought in new audiences for this kind of educational research, and play a role in many post-graduate certification programs for teachers. All of these show a very healthy 'market' for educational action research in the new information economy.

There has also been growth in parallel areas such as narrative inquiry and lesson study, which foreground the professional, but also show connections to the personal and political dimensions, and which highlight the 'educator's voice'. This is particularly important, given this era of global reliance on standardized tests to measure educational progress, and thereby professional quality. This salience of action research, as part of professional development, could be seen as aimed at ways to reinforce educational institutions, to justify current practices. Prominent professional organizations highlight action research as part of their professional development 'products', and many universities and ministries of education (e.g. Singapore and Hong Kong) have employed action research as part of their further education and 'improvement' strategies. Several electronic journals have sustained work in making the research of teachers available (e.g. *Networks*, and *Action Research Expeditions*), and teachers' unions (e.g. the British Columbia Teachers Federation) have promoted its use. There has been growth in the use of action research to create new interpretations of justice-oriented practice. One good example of this is the Teachers College Press 'Practitioner Research' series. Since 1996, it now has published more than 30 volumes, showing educators taking on many socially critical issues.

Action research has been increasingly invoked in terms of work in teacher education

(e.g., Hui and Grossman, 2008). Although this idea has long been part of the literature on action research, newer work has emphasized the role of action research in teacher education in developing nations and in terms of challenging notions of 'race' and gender. Although focused on the education of the professional, these efforts also clearly emphasize political dimensions. For example, much work has been done in several African nations, most notably in Namibia (Zeichner et al., 1998; Dahlström, 2003) but also in other areas. One prominent feature in this work is the conscious effort to not 'export' particular understandings of action research to these contexts, but rather to develop a form of research which addressed the specific context, namely one in which issues of the legacies of colonization and apartheid could be addressed in the process of developing educational programs (Dahlström and Mannberg, 2006).

Another area of teacher education in which action research is playing an important role is exemplified by the work of Alice McIntyre. Since her dissertation work, she has been using action research to work with preservice teachers (who are often primarily 'white') to explore the meaning of 'whiteness' within the context of a course in multicultural education (2002). Particularly noteworthy in this work is her use of innovative methods, drawn both from feminist and participatory research traditions. She has also applied this approach to looking at the whole of the teacher preparation process, arguing that improving teacher education, especially the ability of teachers to work with populations that are different from themselves, can be enhanced through the integration of action research strategies (McIntyre, 2003).

These works are rich in their implications for action research in the profession of education in many ways. First, they show the rich possibilities that can emerge when the 'methodologies' of action research, along with its underlying 'epistemologies' are also not seen as fixed. Rather, these respond to the cultural contexts of the participants. In addition, these works are examples of how, in the process of action research, the 'facilitators' of teacher learning also problematize their own assumptions.

Finally, they show ways in which concepts around 'the professional' are not taken for granted, but rather must be examined and redefined in relation to their cultural, and indeed, global contexts.

THE PERSONAL

In the personal dimension, too, there have been many substantive developments. As noted in the previous section, Alice McIntyre's work has focused attention to issues of whiteness in relation to teachers' identities (2002). That same sense of the personal as interconnected to issues of the self and identity is also evident in several of the Practitioner Inquiry series books. For example, in *'Is this English?': Race, Language, and Culture in the Classroom*, Bob Fecho (2004) documents not only how the learning of his students of color changed, but how he, too, changed through his inquiry process. In *Because of the Kids: Facing Racial and Cultural Differences in Schools*, Jennifer Obidah and Karen Teel (2000) example the roles their own differing identities play in working in urban classroom settings.

Another body of work I associate primarily with the personal dimension is that of Jack Whitehead and Jean NcNiff (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006; McNiff and Whitehead, 2006). In their work over the past two decades, attention to all three dimensions is evident. The profession of teaching is central to the work in two ways. First, Whitehead's work has continually highlighted the 'living educational theories' that are generated from practice, and change through the cycles of action research. Second, his work at developing masters and doctoral level programs for educators can also been seen as a contribution to the professional dimension. Both McNiff and Whitehead have contributed greatly to the availability of information about action research for educators through their many texts, but also through the internet. Whitehead's website (actionresearch.net), one of the earliest such resources on action research, contains a wealth of information and examples, and is regularly maintained.

The position that teachers are generators of knowledge carries with it a sense of the political dimension, in that such a stance challenges hierarchies of knowledge production and the power relations they maintain.

But it is in the personal dimension that McNiff and Whitehead's strongest contribution continues to be made. The individual process of examining one's own practice is the core of this form of action research. Questions around individual actions, how one might do things differently to improve one's practice, initiate research with a central emphasis on the value of the teacher's own voice. Individual accountability, in the form of 'giving an account' of one's practice, is seen as crucial, along with being 'accountable' (in that same sense) to others. Appropriately, the most common form of these rich 'accounts' of practice is the personal narrative.

Another area of overall growth in the literature has been the work around 'self-study'. Scholars, including Tom Russell, John Loughran, Vicki LaBoskey, Allan Feldman, and others have worked hard to promote this area of educational research. The self-study Special Interest Group within the American Educational Research Association has been an international organization from its beginning in 1993, drawing members not only from North America, but also from the U.K., The Netherlands, Austria, Australia, New Zealand, and elsewhere. Self-study researchers have produced a Handbook (Loughran et al., 2004), a journal *Studying Teacher Education*, as well as five volumes in a 'Self Study of Teaching and Teacher Education Practices' series. Tom Russell's chapter in the second volume of the series (2005) provides rich insights in the progress of the work. He recounts his long experiences working in teacher education, as well as working through self-study to change his teaching.

Loughran (2007) has pushed for understanding self-study as an individual experience, but argues that moving beyond the explorations of the 'self', to a process of 'reframing' through greater inclusion of alternative perspectives and more visible documentation is needed. Such efforts move self-study towards the capacity to create a knowledge base for teacher education, and are a strong manifestation of the professional dimension. One of the major agendas of self-study has been working to help others in education and in policy circles understand the complex and important work of teacher educators.

Work by Wade et al., (2008) seems to exemplify this approach to research. Their work focused on the examination of teachers' 'critically reflective problem solving' in pedagogical discussions in an on-line environment. One of the members of the research team was the teacher educator, while the other two participated in a 'self-study dialogue' and in the data analysis process (discourse analysis). In this article, another dimension is visible, that of the political. The work addresses issues around English Language Learners, with the expressed goal of furthering sociopolitical thinking in the problem solving process. The intersections with the political dimension, including consideration of issues of cultural identity, language, gender, and race are also evident in several chapters of the book, *Just Who Do We Think We Are?* (Mitchell et al., 2005). Within the context of their self-studies, researchers take on issues of marginalization, queer identity, and whiteness. In another article Milner (2007) documents his work in the use of personal narrative as a means to address the importance of the consideration of race and racism in curriculum deliberations. Taken together, these works show the very personal nature of the work, as well as its inherently political qualities; they also point to the maturity of the field.

THE POLITICAL

As was evident in the previous two sections, the political is in many ways evident even in action research that emphasizes the professional or personal dimension. Issues of inequities around race and gender matters are more frequently part of the literature than earlier, both in individual articles and chapters, and in whole books (e.g. Edelsky, 1999; Caro-Bruce et al., 2007). At least one text, aimed at

pre-service teachers (Phillips and Carr, 2006) takes an explicitly 'critical' stance. In the sense of having a central commitment to exposing and working as part of a social movement against structural inequalities in power relations as a central aim, the political dimension in action research seems at best mixed. Mostly absent are serious considerations of theoretical resources emanating from outside of 'white' academicians, including epistemologies that have their origins in people of color or from women. By this I mean that these resources and 'standpoints' alter not just the topic of research or even the analytic framework; they alter fundamentally understandings of the 'methodology' itself.

Yet if we broaden the definition of education to include venues outside of schools and school personal, we see much work that shares assumptions and even points of origin with some forms of action research, even when not always using the term. Although much of the work I will describe is in some ways connected to universities or individual academics, it is often not centered in the academy.

There have been several long-term, effective projects aimed at school reform, where the impetus for reform has come from the community rather than the school authorities. In fact, the community groups are organizing research as a means to leverage change from the authorities. These local efforts emanate from the idea that action research is about local knowledge production for civic purposes, an idea not always seen as part of educational action research work, but very common in the forms of action research that have developed in health, human services, and the social sciences. Although some of this work is reported in the academic literature (e.g. Baum, 2003; Shirley, 1997), it is more widely available through the websites of the groups sponsoring the work, such as Research for Action (www.research-foraction.org), Justice Matters (www.justice-matters.org), DC Voice (www.dcvoice.org) and Californians for Justice (www.caljustice.org). These groups bring together parents, and often students, in work that is directed at gathering information needed to provide evidence to be used to work towards change efforts. All of

these projects serve communities of color and/or economically oppressed groups.

Another strand to this strategy of using research in the cause of social justice issues involves working with youth groups, assisting them in learning the skills of research, so that they can apply them to working for change in areas they identify as needs. Here, too, some of the works are available in the academic literature, through alliances with individual faculty members or university groups, while others are not. Some focused on gender issues, reflecting working with girls on body weight and shape (e.g., Piran, 2001), while others (e.g., McIntyre, 2000) attended to issues of violence, and still others involved youth who were in 'Government Care' programs (Rutman et al., 2005). Some work specifically engaged students within the context of specific courses in their high schools (e.g., Cammarota, 2007), while others have created curriculum to teach research skills that students can use to address their concerns but exist outside of conventional educational settings, for example the work of the Institute for Community Research (www.incommunity-research.org). Still others are connected with university's graduate programs, but work for similar ends (e.g. Cahill, 2007; Cammarota and Fine, 2008).

All of these works share the sense that learning the skills of research provides not only means to deal with current issues, but also develops a sense of agency in dealing with life issues over the long haul. There is often also a sense that these efforts are part of the development of a sense of civic participation in the building of more democratic social and political relations. All address youth groups who are endangered by existing structures of inequality. These examples push beyond thinking about action research as within classrooms and schools, to connecting with the communities they are intended to serve, as well as the students whose lives are deeply affected by the education they do (and do not) 'receive' and might instead 'construct'. They also push beyond constructions of action research in relation to usual notions of the professional, instead recognizing the wealth of knowledge in communities that can be used to educate

young people. Collaboration, seen by many as central to action research methodologies, is not only within schools, but a process of both reaching out and allowing others in to work toward change. Finally, the projects show not only the power of popular knowledge production, but also the power of taking on the political dimension as a central aspect to action research efforts in educational work. Taken together, they show what Jean Anyon (2005) has called 'Radical Possibilities', ones which if fully articulated (as opposed to commodified and marketed) could contribute to a cohesive, and resistant social movement.

UNDERSTANDING ACTION RESEARCH CONTEXTUALLY

The past decade has been one of substantive changes in educational policy in many locations in response to changing global economic conditions. These have had severe effects on the professional and personal dimensions of action research. Accountability processes, the role of the teacher in educational practice, as well as identity issues around teachers and students have been changing. Important among these has been the widespread influence of neo-liberal policies which have resulted in a culture of 'performativity' (Ball, 2003). One prominent example is the attempt to reduce the parameters of educational work to doing only that which results in gains in the narrow band of standardized achievement test, and the 'mapping' of curriculum and instructional strategies against that which is tested (Blackmore, 2007; Hursh, 2008).

The change in educational policy can be seen as an indication of a move toward a market discourse in which notions of education for the public good are reduced to a focus on individual and sub-group achievement. What students learn in schools is thereby positioned solely in terms of their preparation for a fluid and internationally competitive labour market, rather than in relation to some sense of their participation in building more socially and economically just global societies.

Educational decisions seem to be increasingly based on goals of preparing students for a changing economy, rather than on debate over what might best be done 'in the public interest' (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 2006). The current professional context seems inconsistent with the remarkable growth in the breadth and depth of literature on action research described in this book.

Action research most often appears to be an inherently local activity – it derives its primary impulse from the needs of people in a locality (whether educators, community members, or students), and highlights the abilities of people within these contexts to use research to address local educational and social issues. Localities are always diverse in terms of 'race', gender, and social class, and a whole range of 'differences'. Those who seem to be absent physically are always present, nonetheless. This is more evident recently because of the interconnections of the global economy and culture. For example, gender issues may be hidden under local cultural norms, but are always a factor in human interactions. Regardless of whether 'difference' is the focus of local educational work, it is always an element of action research because diversity, rather than homogeneity, is the global norm (Rizvi, 1994). For example, even if there is scant attention to social class in a particular action research project, defined in terms of the huge gaps between the 'haves' and the ''have nots', local and global economics are influences on the issues addressed in the research.

The local intersects with both the professional and the personal dimensions. Action research is part of the process of constructing what it means to be an educator, and involves interconnections between the identities of the researcher and the researched. Some action research work directly addresses issues such as racial identity and how that works through school practices. There are examples of this in this Handbook and elsewhere (Peter Murrell, Chapter 34 this volume; Cahill and Collard, 2003). Most of the work around identity in action research is done within the framework of nation-states, rather than in relation to shifting global economies of the dispossessed.

By highlighting the overarching political dimension, action research can be better seen in its global context, one in which the production of local knowledge is viewed alongside the emergence of global knowledge economies. Professional knowledge and the processes of teaching and learning are transformed through action research, but they are also transformed through transnational policies driven by the growing emphasis on the knowledge industry. Professional knowledge is in a state of flux, along with the identities of those who are educators and those who are to be educated in the skills of 'life-long learning'. All of these changes are in relation to global shifts and 'flows' of people and discourses (Appadurai, 2006).

Given this context, it seemed appropriate to look at that literature for analyses that could juxtapose the 'local' nature of knowledge in action research within global issues. One useful work toward this end is Arjun Appadurai's (2006) argument for 'The right to research'. Appadurai defines research as 'a specialised name for a generalised capacity, the capacity to make disciplined inquiries into those things we need to know, but do not know yet' (p. 167). Historically, action research has provided a means by which those involved in education can investigate their practice in order to improve it. To many, it asserts research as 'systematic inquiry, made public' (Stenhouse, 1975). Both Appadurai and action research emphasize the capacity of those outside the academy to come to understand practices and their contexts, and to direct those understandings toward actions that will improve what Melanie Walker (Chapter 24 this volume) outlines as 'human flourishing'.

Appadurai emphasizes the global context: '... a world of rapid change, where markets, media, and migration have destabilised secure knowledge niches and have rapidly made it less possible for ordinary citizens to rely on knowledge drawn from traditional, customary or local sources' (pp. 167–8). He sees research as integrally connected not to the production of knowledge for the knowledge industry, but to what he calls 'the capacity to aspire': 'the social and cultural capacity to plan, hope, desire, and achieve socially valuable goals' (p. 176).

Importantly, he also conceives of research as a 'right' and links it to citizenship. Speaking about work with youth in India, he argues '... that developing the capacity to document, to inquire, to analyze and to communicate results has a powerful effect on their capacity to speak up as active citizens on matters that are shaping their city and their world' (p. 175).

Remarkably resonant with the emerging youth-oriented action research reported on in this chapter and elsewhere in the Handbook (Thomson and Gunter, Chapter 33; Murrell Chapter 34, this volume), what Appadurai invokes has long been part of the participatory action research (PAR) tradition. Information, and the processes by which forms of knowledge are legitimated (its epistemology), have long been linked to social struggle. The project that he notes is directly related to works that this volume highlights (e.g. Brydon-Miller et al., Chapter 40). What the PAR tradition emphasizes is that the gathering of 'information' can be dangerous. Myles Horton was once arrested for 'coming here and getting information and teaching it' (Lewis, 2001: 357). The links between action research and learning to become active citizens are clear. What is not clear is whether the furthering of the skills of democratic engagement are prerequisites for education action research efforts, or outcomes (see Robinson and Soudien, Chapter 38 this volume).

It seems to me vital that those using the term action research (and indeed those who use other terms for similar ideas) are clear in their assumptions about the kinds of knowledge(s) they seek to enhance, the traditions they feel are part of their work, the ends towards which their research efforts are aimed, and the social movements with which they articulate. This may be especially important for those who don't see ideology and politics as embodied in their professional and personal agendas, but is equally true for those who highlight the political dimension. Action research, unproblematized in terms of its goals, can act to reinscribe existing practices rather than create new forms which focus on social justice. In this current context we need to look for ways to create convergences

(Fals Borda, 1992) in action research, rather than ways to legitimate it. When viewed as an accepted 'method' within the academy, the work is positioned as an iconoclastic commodity rather than something capable of sustained group work as part of a social movement.

In this chapter and in the overall book, we've worked to create an 'ecumenical' representation of action research, including research that not only highlights the different dimensions. It seems to me that rather than work solely within the academic norms of identifying, owning, and marketing the idea of action research, we need to be constantly looking for our 'fellow travellers', our allies, our comrades with whom we can form coalitions around our shared interests. Appadurai (2006) notes that 'Research-produced knowledge is everywhere, doing battle with other kinds of knowledge (produced by personal testimony, opinion, revelation, or rumor) and with other pieces of research-produced knowledge' (p. 12). That battle needs to keep in mind the importance of locally produced knowledge, often narrative in style, which frequently exists in forms not recognized in traditional forms of research. Folks outside and inside of the action research tradition need to look at what has been done and not 'reinvent' action research, but rather look for coalitions for new forms of knowledge that allow for challenges, as well as additions, to the knowledge economy.

The dimensional analysis of action research offers a way to understand and thereby use action research as a means not solely for knowledge generation (which as a form of research it entails), but for personal and professional development (for which as a form of learning it is used), and for contributions to social justice (which its articulation to social movements and social change demonstrates). Across its varied forms, action research is a set of commitments (a methodology, in Harding's (1987) sense of the term), rather than a set of techniques for research (a method). It also embodies various epistemologies, varied ways of establishing its knowledge claims. While the strategies for data collection and the ideas that guide data analysis (method and methodology) across the various forms of action research vary, they share an epistemology that sees knowledge as essentially connected to practice. As such, the dimensional analysis is also a way to get beyond definitional struggles toward thinking about action research as embodied in many forms and looking toward more just educational practice.

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