

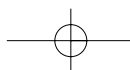
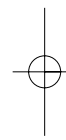
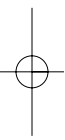
PART 1

Backgrounds and Contexts

In this part we make clear that we are writing an account of our own action research, and we set out the background and contexts. We explain our reasons for the research, and we outline our purposes. We identify specific research questions, and say how we intend to address those questions. Throughout we adopt a critically reflective stance to what we are saying.

This part contains the following chapters:

- 1 Background to our research: reasons and purposes**
What are our concerns?
- 2 Contexts of our research**
Why are we concerned?
- 3 Looking for data**
What experiences can we describe to show why we are concerned?



1 Background to our research: reasons and purposes

What are our concerns?

This chapter sets out the main issues in the current phase of our ongoing research programme. These issues are deep concerns about what is happening in educational research and educational theory, and how this is influencing thinking and practices in education and the professional education of teachers. We also set out our concerns about what is happening in action research, specifically in relation to how it is used in education. In setting out our concerns, we are giving the reasons for our research, and saying why we are doing it. We are also stating the purposes of our research, that is, what we hope to achieve.

The chapter is organized as two sections:

- 1 The current status and future of educational research
- 2 The current status and future of action research

1 The current status and future of educational research

Here is a story that sets out our concerns.

In May 2005 a seminar was organized by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) on 'The Future of Educational Research'. The seminar took place in Oxford, and was attended by delegates from around the world. Two strong themes emerged. The first was that educational research should continue to be approached via a traditional social sciences perspective. The second was about the status of practitioner action research. Delegates agreed that practitioner research was having a considerable influence in debates about the nature of pedagogy and the professional status of the teaching profession, and could indeed provide a credible alternative direction for the future of educational research. However the issue of identifying appropriate standards for judging quality was a sticking point. The social sciences had well-established procedures for identifying what counts as quality and validity, and its very credibility as a tried and

trusted research methodology made it attractive to policy makers. While practitioner research seemed to present exciting new departures, its procedures were not yet well developed, especially in terms of making judgements about quality. There was little doubt that practitioner research was a valuable form of professional development, and, since the 1990s, governments and other bodies had shown a keen interest in practice-based research in education. Two examples of initiatives that promoted practice-based research were first, the Best Practice Research Scholarship Scheme, whereby teachers in schools are funded to explore identified aspects of practice, and second, the networked learning communities supported by the National College of School Leadership, whereby groups of teachers are brought together to share ideas about good practice and learn from one another within a context of shared collegiality. Yet while the promise of practitioner research is generally widely acknowledged, it is still bedevilled by the particular issue of what counts as quality and what kinds of standards of judgement can be used in assessing quality (see Furlong and Oancea 2005).

This situation represents our concerns too. While we value contributions from social science approaches to educational research, for reasons which we set out in the next section, we are resistant to its hegemony; and while we promote the development of practitioner research, for reasons we articulate in Section 2, we are aware of the need to develop coherent standards of judgement for assessing the quality of practitioner research. For us, showing how and why we make judgements on our work, and justifying our reasons, is at the heart of quality scholarship. Agreement needs to be reached about standards of judgement, both by practitioners as they produce their research accounts, and also by the higher education research community as they assess the quality of practitioners' accounts. These concerns about the need for quality scholarship in action research, which include articulating its processes of demonstrating judgement, give us the reasons for our current research focus, and are the main themes of this book. We are interested in what kind of standards of judgement are appropriate in action research, how they can be agreed by the practitioner action researcher community and the higher education community, and what kinds of validation and legitimation processes are necessary for such agreement to be reached.

First, however, we need to clarify why we promote practitioner action research in the first place, and this means saying what we find in action research that we do not find in the social sciences.

Social science research and action research

We understand research as more than activity. Non-research activity is when we do things unreflectively, such as laughing or waking up, or do things in a routine manner, such as shopping. Research however is purposeful investigation, which involves gathering data and generating evidence in relation to articulated standards of judgement, in order to test an emergent theory. While research and shopping are both purposeful activities, the purposes are different. The purpose of shopping is to buy bread or milk, whereas we see the purpose of research as generating and testing new knowledge.

The main feature of social science research that distinguishes it from a living theory approach to action research is that a researcher aims to generate new knowledge (theory) about what other people are doing. They observe what other people are doing, and describe and explain those people's actions. They tend to maintain a spectator, outsider perspective

throughout (but see the section below on insider research). The theory generated is the researcher's theory about other people. The researcher also tells the research story, so it is the researcher's theory that goes into the public domain. This remains the state of affairs also in some action research contexts. Practitioners investigate their practice, observed by an external researcher. The researcher observes, describes and explains what they are doing, so the theory is generated and owned by the researcher, and is about other people.

In action research, the focus swings away from the spectator researcher and onto the practitioner researchers. Practitioners investigate their own practice, observe, describe and explain what they are doing in company with one another, and produce their own explanations for what they are doing and why they are doing it. Practitioner researchers already know what they are doing in their everyday lives in the sense that knowledge is embodied in what they do. Each person already has their own tacit theory within themselves about how they should live, and they work collaboratively to make sense of what they are doing by talking through their ideas, and monitoring the process. They monitor what they are learning, and how their learning influences their actions. Because they are doing research, they bear in mind that they need to explain how what they are doing counts as theory, so they produce their accounts of practice to show how their social activity can be seen as purposeful research activity. The theories they generate are their own theories, and they constantly test these theories against the critical responses of others to see if the theories can withstand criticism, in other words, have validity. To establish the validity of their theories, they articulate the standards of judgement they use, that is, the way they make judgements, in evaluating whether the theories they generate actually reflect the values that inform their practices.

We develop these ideas throughout. An important starting point is to establish what a social science perspective to educational research means, and to consider some of the possible implications for education.

The nature of the social sciences

The social sciences were originally modelled directly on the physical, or natural, sciences. The physical sciences were about studying the physical environment, at first to understand its nature, and later to understand how it works in order to control it. The objects of enquiry (what was being studied) were the phenomena of nature, and also the relationships of the phenomena to one another. Scientists studied nature; they described and explained it, in an empirical way, by maintaining an objective stance and studying what was 'out there'. For some, this empirical approach became an empiricist approach. This remains the dominant form of government-funded research in the United States. They studied nature in order to control it, often with the idea that, if they could control nature, they could also predict what would happen, and so control the future. This view of research is still very much alive today, as when, for example, an agriculturalist experiments with plant food on tomatoes in order to find the best way of increasing the yield.

This process may work well in relation to tomatoes, but the analogy breaks down when the assumptions and methods of the physical sciences are transferred to the social sciences, that is, when humans become the objects of inquiry and are regarded in the same way as tomatoes, and are also expected to behave in the same way. Humans of course have minds of their own, and do not always do what a scientist expects them to. They tend not to conform to the scientist's preconceived ideas about correct behaviour.

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However, many scientists, and their social scientist counterparts, do not accept this situation, because they tend to see their mental models as more important than the people whom they expect to fit into those mental models, and they often assume that so-called non-conforming people are the problem, rather than their own entrenched assumptions about the reified nature of mental models.

The social sciences have developed over recent centuries, and different people have developed different attitudes and methodologies. Some have continued to adopt the largely positivist methodologies of the natural sciences, while others have not (see below). Those who adopt positivist attitudes believe as follows:

- An object can be objectively and dispassionately studied by a social scientist, who remains outside the situation they are studying. The responsibility of the social scientist is to maintain a value-free perspective. This will ensure non-contamination and purity of results. This purity is the factor that qualifies the research findings to be applied to other situations.
- The social scientist will be able to provide descriptions and explanations for human behaviour in the same way that descriptions and explanations can be offered by natural scientists for, say, the growth of vegetables. Descriptions and explanations make up theories, so, in the same way that a physical scientist offers their theories about the nature, origin and workings of the physical environment, the social scientist also offers theories about the nature, origins and workings of human behaviour from their spectator stance.
- On the basis of these theories, the future behaviours of people can be predicted and controlled. The best way to ensure a good society, in terms of the positivist social scientist's vision, is to apply the theory, which involves moving people around, in the same way as a natural scientist arranges appropriate conditions, in terms of what the scientist thinks is the right way to test their own theory.

Other social scientists however do not share these views. The disciplines of anthropology and ethnomethodology are premised on the idea that a researcher observes people in their natural settings and respectfully offers descriptions and explanations (theories) for what the people are doing. Mitroff and Kilman (1978) made the point that four distinct approaches to social science methodologies exist. These are the methodologies of the analytic scientists, the conceptual theorists, the conceptual humanists, and the particular humanists. Each methodology is distinguished by its preferred logic of mode of inquiry. Carr and Kemmis (1986) also seriously critiqued positivist assumptions as rooted in technical rationality. Whatever their internal differences, however, the social sciences maintain an overall position that takes human behaviour as an object that can be studied from a spectator point of view.

Different social scientists also hold different views about knowledge (to do with epistemology) and forms of thinking (to do with logic). Some – not all – believe the following:

- Knowledge can be discovered. Like the external physical environment that the scientist is studying, knowledge is also 'out there', so it can be studied from outside. Again, the scientist stays out of the field of enquiry, so as not to contaminate their findings. Sometimes however researchers do get involved in the situation they are

studying. They then become insider researchers, working with the people they are investigating. However a difference in status in the relationship remains. The researcher is still in charge of the research process, and the researcher's account and theory, not the people's, go into the public domain. Occasionally, social scientist researchers get so drawn into participants' lives that they abandon their externalist perspective and begin to investigate their own practice and their relationships with their research participants, but then they transform themselves from social scientists into action researchers. For us, a distinguishing feature of our approach to action research is that practitioner researchers enquire into their own practice.

- Knowledge can be organized into laws, such as the laws of gravity or electricity. These laws apply universally, to humans as well as to physical phenomena such as tomatoes. Theories work in the same way as laws, so theories cannot be changed. They are established for all time.
- Knowledge can be applied in like-to-like situations. Physical objects should not break the laws. Apples should not fall upwards, and humans should not behave in aberrational ways (but of course they do).

The key point is that many social scientists, like physical scientists, believe that there is a correct view of knowledge, and that they know what it is. They also believe that theirs is a correct form of logic.

Some social scientists also use logics that are

- linear and one-dimensional, because they move towards a specific end point, to find the answer that is assumed to be there;
- mechanistic and functional, because they often force an answer even when no obvious answer is available;
- imperialistic, because they apply the answer to each and every situation, without regard for local contexts.

(Ideas about knowledge and logics are developed in Chapter 2.)

We said earlier that not all scientists assume this to be a view of knowledge or a form of logic that is appropriate for scientific enquiry. Scientists such as Sir Peter Medawar, Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend maintained that scientific inquiry involves disciplined episodes of empirical testing as well as creative episodes of imaginative thinking. Throughout his work, Popper (1959; 1963; 1972) also stressed the importance of being open to criticism. He advocated testing the validity of ideas through criticism rather than applying the answer to each and every situation. Most scientists would probably say they are testing the validity of their hypotheses rather than applying the answer to each and every situation. Many debates go on in the literatures of the social sciences about these different perspectives. Prasad has produced one of the most compelling accounts of different traditions in the social sciences with the unfortunate omission of action research:

This book has outlined what I believe to be the major traditions influencing much of qualitative research on work and organizations in contemporary society. This is not meant to indicate, however, that the book is a completely comprehensive treatment of the field. Entire scholarly traditions have been excluded (e.g. action research, cultural

studies, queer theory), and some traditions have only received partial treatment (e.g. institutional theory) under the rubric of structuration and praxeology. Obvious limitations of time, space and personal expertise have restricted the scope of the book in many ways. (2005: 283)

Our book may serve to remedy this exclusion to some extent.

Social science remains the grounding of dominant forms of educational research today. Furthermore, and to return to the concerns we are setting out, a clear recommendation from some researchers at the BERA conference mentioned above was that educational research should continue to pursue a social science perspective in the future. We believe that the ideological hegemony of social science researchers will find support in the 2005 BERA Presidential Address of Geoff Whitty on 'Education(al) research and education policy making: is conflict inevitable?' (Whitty 2005). This kind of support is deeply alarming, because of the links that are assumed to exist between educational research and educational practices, and specifically the professional education of teachers. Here are some of those implications.

Some implications of social science approaches to educational research

In some accounts of the history of educational research, authors such as Ellen Condliffe Lagemann (2000) explain how the predominant social sciences assumption that things could be studied from an externalist perspective began to be applied to education, and the professional education of teachers. The assumption was that education and teacher professional education could be studied and analysed by external researchers. Lagemann explains how the persistent search of the social sciences for universal laws often came to grief because of its flawed underpinning epistemological assumptions. She cites as an example the first issue of *Educational Review* in 1891, whose first article was by Harvard philosopher Josiah Royce:

Entitled 'Is There a Science of Education?' the essay suggested that teachers should have 'a scientific training for their calling', by which Royce meant opportunities to reflect on their craft. According to Royce, however, teachers should not be asked to master any formal pedagogical system, since none was or could be adequate. In Royce's opinion, there was 'no universally valid science of pedagogy ... capable of ... complete formulation and ... direct application to individual pupils and teachers'. (2000: ix)

In other words, while the professional education of teachers should be firmly grounded, this should be seen as a process that involved reflection, rather than be seen as an applied science. The professional education of teachers could not be systematized in terms of specific bodies of knowledge that would give direction to their work. Royce (1891) went on to describe his own 'unwillingness to apply so pretentious a name as "Science" to any exposition of the laborious and problematic art of the educator'. According to Lagemann, 'whether there is or can be a science of education remains controversial to this day. Despite [however] the persistence of the issue, education became a subject of university study at the end of the nineteenth century, and as that happened, a new domain of scholarship began to emerge' (2000: ix). This signifies an important development. Education was taken over by higher education, both the education of

young people in schools and other educational settings, and also the professional education of their teachers. The professional education of teachers therefore now became a new domain of scholarship. This is where the debates in this book are centred, around whether the professional education of teachers and other practitioners should continue to be seen as guided by the methods of the social sciences, and the systematic incorporation of those methods into educational studies, or by practitioners' own understandings of practice, as in action enquiry. How do practitioners understand their work? How do they show that their practices influence their own learning, the learning of others, and the learning of the members of a social formation (see page 00)?

The entire field is now in flux. However, educational research is not alone in this. Major shifts have taken place recently in the epistemological base of human enquiry, and these shifts are evident across the disciplines, such as in linguistics, the earth sciences, physics and economics. In education, the effort to turn the study of education into an exact science has moved towards new perspectives that regard education itself as the grounds for thoughtful investigative practice. Here is an example of how these shifts manifested in education in a British context.

Shifts in the epistemological base of professional education

In 1950s Britain, the systematic study of education developed into the study of the so-called 'foundational' disciplines of education, such as the philosophy, sociology, psychology and history of education. This became known as 'the disciplines approach'. Each discipline was seen as a freestanding body of knowledge. This view strongly influenced a view of schools curricula as the collation of subject knowledges, and pedagogical practices as the delivery of those subject knowledges. By extension, and largely associated with the writings of Peters and Hirst at the London Institute (see Peters 1966; Hirst and Peters 1970), the professional education of teachers also came to be informed by the disciplines approach, so teachers were expected to learn about the different disciplines and apply their acquired knowledge to their practice. Consequently, a linear relationship was assumed between bodies of knowledge, to be assimilated by teachers, which were in turn to be applied to practice. Much of the system appeared to stay true to the conventional epistemological bases of scientific inquiry, which were about demonstrating a relationship of cause and effect, and to a conventional logic of domination (Marcuse 1964), which sought to create neat boxes of practice and thinking, and which excluded the contradictory elements of the imaginative creation of possible new futures and the values base of educational practitioners. Many philosophers of education and many social scientists however understood the importance of analysing human action in terms of intentional rather than mechanistic forms of causal relationship, and pressed for a shift in the epistemological base of educational theory. The kind of epistemological shift needed in educational theory was demonstrated in 1983, when Hirst acknowledged a mistake in his thinking. He now acknowledged that much understanding of educational theory would be developed

in the context of immediate, practical experience and will be co-terminous with everyday understanding. In particular, many of its operational principles, both explicit and implicit, will be of their nature generalisations from practical experience and have as their justification the results of individual activities and practices.

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In many characterisations of educational theory, my own included, principles justified in this way have until recently been regarded as at best pragmatic maxims having a first crude and superficial justification in practice that in any rationally developed theory would be replaced by principles with more fundamental, theoretical justification. That now seems to me to be a mistake. Rationally defensible practical principles, I suggest, must of their nature stand up to such practical tests and without that are necessarily inadequate. (1983: 18)

However, in spite of generous acknowledgements such as Hirst's, traditional views remain, many still based on the methodologies of the social sciences, and, because there is as yet no alternative methodology that is strongly credible in terms of well-established methods for demonstrating validity and rigour, the methodologies of the social sciences are assumed to be the only correctly worked out ones and therefore the ones to be used.

Furthermore, the methodologies of the social sciences have influenced the nature of educational practices. A divisive kind of logic has remained dominant, and has led to the practical separation of policy makers, researchers and practitioners, as well as to a public perception of the discrete positioning of these people in debates and decisions about the real-life implementation of educational practices. Policy makers are assumed to make policy and arrange for its implementation by practitioners. These policies are based on the most important findings of educational research, which are created by identified educational researchers, usually in higher education settings. The responsibility of researchers therefore is to pursue research and generate evidence-based conclusions in the form of theories, which policy makers can use to inform their decisions. It is a truism to say that many higher education researchers complain about the fact that policy makers do not read their research findings, or, if and when they do, they take only those findings that support their own politically constituted interests. Whatever may be the case, a strong mutually beneficial relationship appears to exist between the communities of policy makers and higher education researchers (whose ranks are largely made up of social science researchers), which often manifests in ways that are beneficial to both parties, such as continued funding for specialist research centres and the increased prestige of policy makers.

Because many educational researchers continue to locate their work within the traditions of the social sciences, and because the methods of the social sciences are tried and trusted in terms of the established standards of judgement they use to assess the quality of research (unlike the emergent traditions of practitioner research, which, while promising much for improvements in teaching and learning, are still premised on standards of judgement that have not yet been fully endorsed by practitioners in the production of their research accounts or by the research community in the assessment of those accounts), the social sciences continue to be accepted as the dominant form. It seems to be a case of better the devil you know, rather than an angel who has not yet quite got their wings.

These then give us the reasons for the current phase of our research. Over the years we have contributed to the legitimisation of practitioner research by supervising practitioners' higher degree studies and supporting their validation by the higher education research community. We have succeeded in this, as attested to by the considerable number of masters dissertations and doctoral theses now in the public domain that clearly communicate the capacity of practitioners to show how they are contributing to new practices and new theories (see for example www.actionresearch.net). Our research focus

now changes. As well as continuing to support higher degree studies, and to intensify our activities in that regard, we also now turn our attention to how we can establish the kind of standards of judgement appropriate for assessing the quality of practitioners' research accounts, and how to get those kinds of standards accepted both by practitioners who produce their accounts of practice and by those who are responsible for assessing the quality of the accounts.

While setting out some of the reasons for our research (why we are doing it), we now also begin to clarify the purposes of the research (what we are doing it for).

2 The current status and future of action research

We begin by saying that we know what can be achieved through action research. We know from experience what can happen when practitioners intervene in and improve their own learning, in their attempts to influence the learning of others about how they in turn can improve their own learning and their own situations. We have first-hand experience of working with practitioners in practical contexts, and also of supporting them as they undertake their workplace and higher degree enquiries. These enquiries tend to take as their starting point the question, 'How do I improve my practice?' (Whitehead 1989), as practitioners systematically search for ways of influencing their own and others' learning. We know the kind of contributions that can be made to new practices and new theories through the production of practitioners' accounts as they create their living theories of practice.

Here are two examples to show what this looks like.

Beatriz Egus de Grandi

Beatriz Egus de Grandi works in Argentina. She writes in the abstract to her dissertation:

This dissertation is a self-study in the growth of awareness in the practice of my personal values that provide me with standards of judgment against which I test the influence I try to exercise on the development of motivation and empathy, to generate creativity and critical thinking in my students. In this process, the development of my own creativity and critical thinking kept pace with that of my students and co-researchers in an equal participation in the task of an action research project that carries throughout the aim of 'How can I improve my practice?'

I describe the birth of my pedagogical concern in child centred education that transformed me from source of knowledge to facilitator of resources to construct skills that allow the practice of discernment in learning. A central theme in my dissertation is the deconstruction of my pedagogy to highlight my manner in teaching, which is the vehicle of choice to transmit my values of honesty, integrity, freedom and justice.

The voices of my students guided this journey through my practice, presenting evidence of conflicts when I failed to live up to my values. These living

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contradictions impelled me to engage in the soundless dialogue of myself with myself to generate a living educational theory. This theory emerges from my manner in teaching that fostered in my students dispositions to reflect and open their minds and hearts to honesty through trust and compassion through acceptance of differences. These mature dispositions reflect the values that give purpose to my life and my practice, and allow me to claim them as standards of judgment to test the validity of my living educational theory. (Grandi 2004).

You can download Beatriz's entire dissertation from <http://www.bath.ac.uk/~edsajw/grandi.shtml>.

Daisy Walsh

Daisy Walsh works in the UK. She writes in the abstract to her dissertation:

This dissertation is concerned with showing how I, as a Programme Area Team Leader, for Vocational 'A' level, GNVQ and GCSE ICT, at a Further Education College in the United Kingdom, have focused on my commitment as an educator and team leader in an action enquiry research. Using a reflective journal I recorded my thoughts on significant events throughout my practice. Using narratives I constructed representations from the data gathered. I traced and explored my journey as a team leader in Further Education. My concern was to improve my understanding of my leadership practice for the benefit of my team and my students. In examining my self-development, I have extended my own professional knowledge. I aim to be a better team leader for the formation of a more effective team. This dissertation makes an important contribution to my personal, educational and professional development as a team leader. Vocational education, its leadership and management, is uncharted territory for many school and further education teachers who hold leadership positions. By putting the work of my dissertation in the public domain, I hope that other team leaders in a similar vocational education context can relate in part to some of my experiences. (Walsh 2004)

You can download Daisy's entire dissertation from <http://www.bath.ac.uk/~edsajw/walsh.shtml>.

However, while we vigorously support the development of communities of practitioners in pursuing their action enquiries, both for the improvement of workplace practices and also for their contributions to new theory, we also know that we are working within a global context where, in some quarters, action research is construed somewhat differently. This new construction is embraced by policy makers who also want to control education, especially in terms of eliminating public participation in policy debates and reduced access to education provision, within a broader policy of privatizing education.

Two things are going on in action research, which give us reasons for concern. One is perhaps more alarming than the other. A brief account of the history of action research, and how thinking has developed, provides a context for our first concern.

A brief history of action research

Throughout its development, different people have come to understand action research in different ways. From its beginnings in the 1930s, it was seen as an applied social science. Kurt Lewin, one of its acknowledged founding fathers, was himself a social scientist, who saw action research as a procedure that would allow workers to have a greater say in their work contexts. He promoted action research on the basis that workers' greater involvement would probably improve their productivity.

The idea of action research was taken up vigorously in education in 1950s America (see Corey 1953), but later went into decline (see McNiff and Whitehead 2005b: Chapter 4). In the 1970s it received a new impetus in the UK through the work of researchers such as John Elliott, Jack Whitehead, Wilf Carr and Stephen Kemmis.

John Elliott at the University of East Anglia, building on the legacy of Lawrence Stenhouse's Humanities Curriculum Project, developed action research as a form of professional development for teachers. Throughout, this took an interpretive approach, that is, an approach which allows for participation by practitioners, but which nevertheless remains grounded in the social sciences, because an external researcher is still seen as the one doing research into other people's practices. Elliott's views have been highly influential in establishing action research, but, from our perspective, the approach is still problematic in the assumption that, although practitioners do the research and gather data in order to generate new theory, the theory itself is generated by the spectator researcher. In other words, the power to interpret the data, establish the validity of the work, and disseminate it for legitimation within critical public forums still rests with the external researcher. Power has never been entirely devolved to practitioners.

At the same time as John Elliott was developing his work, Jack Whitehead at the University of Bath was also developing a new approach to action research. Unlike interpretive researchers making claims about the theories of other practitioners, he took the view that teachers were perfectly capable of generating their personal theories by systematically studying their practice. Their theories would contain the descriptions and explanations they offered for their practices as they asked, 'How do I improve what I am doing?' (Whitehead 1989). He maintained that the work of teachers should be supported (but not directed) by higher education personnel, who would in turn provide intellectual and emotional support to the teachers, as well as advice about further resources and pathways to accreditation. The relationship here was a democratic partnership, in which all participated in a dialogue of equals. The work of higher education personnel also was to study their practice, in collaboration with the teachers who were studying theirs, so that all could learn and grow together.

The work of Elliott and Whitehead has been profoundly influential over the years in presenting action research as a legitimate educational research methodology.

Back to our concerns

Our first concern therefore is about the continuing dominance of the social sciences and consequently the continuing dominance of interpretive approaches. Now a second concern has emerged, which in our opinion constitutes a threat to the democratic impulses of action research, and threatens to turn action research into a form of performance management. While maintaining a social science perspective, this new form also introduces a note of driving control, by insisting on the implementation of prescribed action plans, seasoned with an unspoken threat that unless you do action research in this particular way, you will fail as a teacher.

Certain epistemological and logical assumptions underpin this performance management form of action research. As noted in Section 1, the dominant forms of social science tend to assume that people will access knowledge in order to use it, and knowledge itself is assumed to exist as packages of information and theory that can somehow be downloaded from one person's mind (in this case, the researcher's) onto the blank slate of the other person's mind (in this case, the practitioner). It is precisely this technical rational approach that Carr and Kemmis critiqued in their text *Becoming Critical: Education, Knowledge and Action Research* (1986). In this text they did groundbreaking work, heightening awareness of the significance of Habermas's theory of a critical social science, in which 'one of Habermas's principal targets is the positivist belief in the logical and methodological unity of the natural and social sciences' and in which he shows that 'the symbolically structured domain of "communicative action" is not reducible to scientific knowledge' (1986: 134, 135). They also emphasize the importance of the economic and political relations that influence the lives of practitioners. We have drawn consistently on the work of Carr and Kemmis to strengthen our own insights as we exercise our creativity and critical judgements in generating and testing our own living educational theories. It is therefore out of this deepened awareness that we now express alarm at how action research is being turned into a process that aims for technical expertise through the implementation of prescribed action plans and defines itself in terms of targets and outcomes.

We continue to develop these themes shortly, but at this point it is important to consider some of the underpinning assumptions of the issues at stake, and this means engaging with some key terms, so that the arguments make sense. The terms are *ontology*, *epistemology*, *methodology* and *social purposes*.

Ontology, epistemology, methodology and social purposes

Ontology refers to a theory of being, which influences how we perceive ourselves in relation to our environment, including other people. Ontology is not the same as cosmology, which refers more to one's worldview.

Your ontological perspective tends to influence how you see other people, and also the kind of approach you adopt in research. If you see yourself as separate from other people, you may assume an outsider approach to research. This is the

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common spectator form in the social sciences. Your task would be to observe other people and offer descriptions and explanations for what they are doing. If however you see yourself as part of other people's lives, and they of yours, you may adopt an insider, participative approach, which would involve you offering descriptions and explanations for how you and they were involved in mutual relationships of influence.

Epistemology refers to a theory of knowledge, which involves two parts:

- a theory of knowledge (what is known);
- a theory of knowledge acquisition (how it comes to be known).

Your epistemological stance is inevitably influenced by your ontological stance. If you believe that the world and its inhabitants are 'out there', separate from you, you may regard knowledge in the same way. You may even reify knowledge (turn it into a thing), which you could study and analyse. If however you believed that you were part of the world and not a fly on the wall, you would probably see knowledge as something you create, in company with other people who are also creating their own knowledge. Because you would see yourself as interacting with others, you could see your own process of interaction as a process of testing and critiquing what you already know and transforming it into something better. Epistemologies usually contain (1) an understanding of the unit of appraisal, in the sense of what is being judged; (2) the standards of judgement in the sense of how valid judgements can be made; and (3) a logic in the sense of the form that the reasoning takes in understanding the real as rational (Marcuse 1964).

Methodology refers to a theory of how we do things. It should not be confused with 'methods', which are the specific techniques we develop for finding something out.

Your methodology will in turn be influenced by your ontological and epistemological assumptions. If you believe that the world and its inhabitants are 'out there', you would set about studying and analysing them, and also study artefacts such as books that contain explanations (theories) about what they do. You would aim for definitive answers, or closure. On the other hand, if you perceive yourself as a participant in the world, interacting with others, you may see your interactions as a process of creating new knowledge individually and collectively. You would test any provisional understandings against the critiques of your companions. This living process would require an openness to new possibilities, and a resistance to closure.

Social purposes refer to what we want to achieve in the social world, and why.

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A strong relationship exists between what you hope to achieve in terms of your existence as a human being, and your ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions, which can all influence each other and transform into the other. For example, if you perceive yourself as an island at the centre of your own universe, where people and knowledge are separate from you, you may come to see them as objects which you can use for your own purposes, from your position as centre. However, if you perceive yourself as in living interaction with the world, and also involved with others in processes of knowledge creation, you may come to see social purposes as finding ways of improving both your own processes of interaction and knowledge creation.

It is not difficult to see the differences in the underpinning assumptions of living action research and social science forms of action research, especially the technical forms of the new performance management kind of action research. In interpretive action research, the ontological assumptions of the researcher position the researcher as separate from their objects of inquiry, namely, the practitioners they are studying. This separation between researcher and researched is deepened in the new technical forms, where the researcher's responsibility is to create action plans for a practitioner to implement. The values base of control appears to give rise to a focus on passive consumerist learning, and the ignoring of the real-life vagaries of practice in the drive towards closure through the achievement of specific behaviours.

Compare these views with the underpinning assumptions of living action research approaches. Action researchers who work in a living theory tradition tend to espouse the humanitarian values of care and compassion, a concern with freedom and the right of all to make up their own minds about how to do their research and how to live their lives as they wish, in negotiation with others who wish to do the same. We, Jack and Jean, articulate our own values in these terms. For the purposes of this book, we identify those values to do with ontology, epistemology, methodology and social purpose.

- Our ontological values are that we value other people's capacity to come to know in their own way. We are thinking of ontological values as flows of life-affirming energy through which we give meaning and purpose to our lives. We do not believe that people have to be told what to think. We have faith in our own and in other people's intellectual capacities, so we avoid telling them what to do, confident in the grounding of our faith in the philosophies of Polanyi (1958), who says that all people possess a vast store of tacit knowledge already within themselves; of Plato (see de Botton 1999), who says that knowers are able to hold the one and the many together at the same time; and of Chomsky (1986), who speaks of the innate capacity of individuals to create language, an idea which we extend to the creation of their own knowledge in an infinitude of new forms. From the grounds of this faith, we value embodied knowledge, the nature of which practitioners come to understand as they work with their practice and create their own theories of education. We value enquiry learning, and we encourage all to engage with questions of the kind,

- ‘How do I improve what I am doing?’, which involves their imaginative responses to problematic questions.
- We value epistemology because of its connection with rationality and knowledge. We recognize knowledge as existing in different forms. We do not regard knowledge only as packages of information, although this may be one form of knowledge, nor do we see the creation of knowledge simply as the delivery of packages. We value the capacity of all people to create their own knowledge, to draw insights from the knowledge of others, and to show how they identify their unit of appraisal as the explanation they give for their educational influence in their learning and in the learning of others.
 - Our methodological values are of the kind that lend discipline and systematization to our enquiries. We encourage others to engage in their systematic enquiries as they ask how they can improve their understanding of their work, and exercise that understanding as educational influence. Some of these enquiries extend over a period of five or six years, and practitioners’ accounts show how they engaged with the processes of emergent understanding. Many exercise their methodological inventiveness (Dadds and Hart 2001) as they trace the growth of their own knowledge through the creative struggle of seeking to understand (see Glenn 2004; Moreland 2005).
 - We are committed to our identified social purposes of promoting equality and democratic practices. We reject imperialism as a set of power relations that distorts the potentials of social formations for their own healthy evolution. Our aim is to promote the idea of postcolonial practices as dismantling the ideas and practices of the deliberate exclusion and alienation of persons through the application of categories such as colour, ethnicity, gender, or any other ‘alterity’ that may be drawn upon to justify colonization. These social values transform into pedagogical values, as we encourage others to interrogate their own assumptions, and the normative assumptions of their cultures, in their search for more inclusive and relational ways of living.

The values we are setting out here are, we believe, the kind of values that can contribute to the sustainability of humanity and the planet we live on. Values of domination and control are the kind that devalue the planet and rob children of their inheritance. They are the kind that lead to the alienation of people, while the values we are endorsing are, in our view, of a kind that encourage inclusion and caring relationships. These values are especially important for action research, with its acknowledged potentials for emancipatory practices.

In setting out the reasons for our concerns, and our aims and purposes, we show how our values come to inform our practices. In Chapter 6 we shall explain how we judge our practices in terms of these values, so the values themselves come to act as the living standards by which we make judgements about the quality of our practices. At this point however we have outlined our values, and we now explain how the denial of these values acts as the starting point of our research.

The starting point of our research

We take as the starting point of our research the idea that we experience ourselves as living contradictions when our values are denied in our practice (Whitehead 1989). This idea was first put into the literature by Jack in 1976, when he wrote about how he observed a videotape of himself in a science lesson (Whitehead 1976). Like Feyerabend

(1975) and Medawar (1996), he believed that science was not a fixed body of knowledge but a creative process of investigation. However, the video showed him actively denying the values underpinning his ontological commitments to creative independent investigation, because he saw himself imposing his own ideas on his students and telling them what to do and think, rather than encouraging them to find things out for themselves and explore their own ideas. (The videoclips of supervision sessions with Jackie Delong (in Whitehead, 2004c, at <http://www.arexpeditions.montana.edu/articleviewer.php?AID=80>), and Je Kan Adler-Collins (see <http://www.bath.ac.uk/~edsajw/multimedia/jwjac.mov>) show how, over the last thirty years, Jack has systematically worked at improving his practice of enquiry learning by responding to people in a way that will encourage them to have faith in their own capacities to create their own knowledge.)

The practices of domination and control in all their forms actively deny our values of compassionate relationship. While we personally manage to realize our values in our practices for much of our working lives, we still sometimes find ourselves in contexts where we are not living our values as fully as we would like. However, while we are familiar through long experience with such situations, we are deeply concerned about how teachers and other practitioners are systematically bullied by dominant forms of research and theory, and are persuaded to think that they cannot think for themselves or participate in public debates about education and the future of professional endeavours. The fact that some people are actively prevented from participating, and actively discouraged to think of themselves as researchers and theorists, is for us a deep denial of our values. We develop these ideas in Chapter 2.

At this point therefore we are able to formulate specific research questions, including the following:

- How do we encourage educators to participate in public debates about the future of educational research?
- How do we enable practitioners to produce accounts that show the creative processes of their own living educational theories?
- What kind of resources do we produce to enable them to do so?
- What kind of practices do we personally need to engage in as we support their personal professional enquiries?
- How do we encourage practitioners to show that they understand the need to articulate the living critical standards by which they make judgements about their practices and their theories?
- How do we hold ourselves accountable as we do these things?

Addressing these and similar questions gives direction to our research and provides the reasons and purposes for writing our research account in the form of this book.

S U M M A R Y

In this chapter we have set out our research concerns and questions. These have been about the future of educational research, and action research in particular. We have explained that the social sciences are currently the dominant form in educational research, with their own tried and trusted methods

for assessing quality. These methods, which are often modelled on those of the physical and natural sciences, especially in the United States' government funding policy for research in education, position practitioners as capable of generating quality policy-informed practices but not so capable of generating quality theory. Practitioners need to remedy this situation if they are to participate in public debates about the future of evidence-based educational practices, by showing that their claims to be generating quality theory should be taken seriously. They can do this by demonstrating their competence in making scholarly judgements about their work, and by making the standards of judgement they use in assessing the quality of their own accounts available to peer action researchers and the wider educational research community. These matters need urgent attention, especially since the introduction of recent influential performance management orientations in some action research literatures that share the same epistemological values of domination and control as many of the social sciences. Our current research questions are therefore to do with how we can disrupt the epistemological hegemonies of the social sciences, accompanied as they are by performance-management-oriented action research literatures, by encouraging practitioners to show that they are focusing on matters of assessing the quality of their work, and making their findings available to their peer action researchers and the wider academic educational research community.