Some Reflections on the Nature of Educational Action Research

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Based on the author's presentation to a research seminar at the 1995 IASL conference in Worcester, England, this article reflects on the nature of action research and discusses some issues associated with action research in education. In particular, it addresses four qualities or characteristics that "tend to give action research its particular character and style." These are a concern for values, action that is workplace oriented; the role of reflection in the process; and a concern for the nature of the improvement or change that occurs as a result of the action research. In the context of school librarianship, action research is presented as a practical, principled, and systematic way to improve professional thinking about school librarianship, professional practice, and the library environment.

On July 19, 1995, I was asked to make a short presentation to the 24th International Association of School Librarianship conference called "Sustaining the Vision," held in Worcester, England. This article is a response to an invitation by Anne Clyde to elaborate on some of the issues raised in the presentation. It is, therefore, highly selective.

Arguably, the fundamental intention of action research for practitioners is to achieve educationally worthwhile improvements in curriculum and pedagogy. To be educational, action research has to address concerns about the quality of the learning experience and the milieu where learning takes place. Action research, then, is a way of linking action with understanding. This is an interactive relationship. Acting intentionally on the world leads to a better understanding of it, and a better understanding to wiser and more prudent educational action.

In this article I discuss four factors that give action research its particular character and style. These are concerns about:
1. Educational values;
2. Action that is workplace oriented;
3. The role of reflection;
4. The nature of improvement.

Educational Action Research and a Concern for Values
Values are inextricably linked to the judgments we make about what counts as practice being "educational." There are different points of view about this. Sometimes we make judgments in the light of standards and criteria. These may be drawn from what constitutes social science, aesthetics, ethics,
morality, and so on. We can perhaps make judgments about practice being educational in relation to:
1. the quality of the educational knowledge the practice (in this case action research) claims to have generated;
2. the quality of the (research) process, for example, in relation to it being undertaken deliberatively, deliberately, systematically, and rigorously;
3. the utility of the outcomes with regard to their potency to improve practice (e.g., school librarianship) and/or the context in which this practice takes place.

Action research is a value-laden form of enquiry (Lomax, 1996). The knowledge that it generates is values-based knowledge. The constituents of this knowledge are, for example, the librarian's professional values that give a shape, form, and purpose to what he or she does. This knowledge is not just linked to practice, but also tied to, and derived from, that practice. Values-based knowledge informs and constantly transforms practice. The problem is that we often do not know the values we have. It was Polanyi (1962) who argued that only by expressing our tacit knowledge can we ever hope to subject it to some analysis and, through scrutiny, erect a justification for it. In contemplating and conducting action research, it is important that the researcher clearly articulates the values that impinge on the enquiry process. For many, this is highly problematic. Goldhammer (1996) expresses this well.

The vast majority ... of values and assumptions from which our professional behavior is governed are implicit. They're inarticulate, they're nebulous, they're buried someplace in our guts and they're not always very accessible.... We can't always rationalize exactly what we're doing.... We can't always make explicit the justifications for the acts we perpetrate ... only after these things have been made explicit, have been brought to the point where you can enunciate the damn things, can we begin to value those that seem to have some integrity and disregard those that seem to be inane. (p. 49)

Values and action, in action research, are clearly connected. If our values influence almost every aspect of our lives (Scott, Jaffe, & Tohe, 1993) and have a fundamental effect on how we behave, it follows that if we wish to improve this "behavior," then we must first come to know our values. For example, to bring tacit knowledge of this kind to the fore, we can ask ourselves questions of the kind:
1. What is my professional practice like?
2. How has it come to be this way?
3. How might I justify it?
4. How might I improve it? and, most importantly for action researchers,
5. How far do I live my values out in my practice?

It is also worth noting the relationship between values, action, and the positioning of I in the questions above. In action research the centrality of the I or the we in the research question has to be carefully considered and
justified. An individual's claim to improve practice is, therefore, a claim to know its value-ladeness. Action research is concerned with enabling practitioners to reflect critically on the contradictions between their espoused values and their values-in-action. In this way, action research makes practices and the values they embody explicit and problematic.

**Educational Action Research and the Workplace**

In a stimulating article, Zeichner (1993) unpacks his concerns with regard to the extent to which action research can be counted on to contribute to the processes of improvement. In particular, he refers to the individual and the workplace and the capacity of action research to:

1. Promote individual practitioner development and a higher quality of human service work (teaching, nursing, social work, etc.).
2. Influence institutional change in the immediate settings in which practitioners work (schools, hospitals, social work agencies and so on). (p. 199)

Action research is not only about personal renewal and development, but also about tackling the structural influences and conditions that serve to constrain and shape individual and collective workplace action.

In the world of school librarianship, improvements might usefully be facilitated by a series of action plans. Here action is seen as a planned intervention where individual and group development and empowerment are linked strongly to organizational improvement. Planned interventions of this kind connect practitioner action and the workplace. The action researchers' skill is matching appropriate forms of planned action to the appropriate context, with all its routines, traditions, personalities, politics, and aspirations. Taken together, we might call this workplace culture. Whatever our view on the attributes of this, our improvement efforts are bound to affect the culture of the workplace in a transient, longer lasting, superficial, or more fundamental way. The impact may be more concrete or ephemeral, visible now or later.

Action research that manages to influence institutional change has to address what Egan (1994) calls the "shadow side." This is the unwritten culture, the office politics, and the counterproductive social systems that are naturally resistant to change. It is what Ball (1987) calls the micropolitical aspect of change: the behind-the-scenes talk, the lobbying that is often necessary to gain support, the off-the-record asides that help us to gauge what to say, who to say it to, when, and in what manner.

When Zeichner (1993) uses the phrase "the immediate settings in which practitioners work," he is alluding to a distinction between the organization (school, hospital) and the work environment. The latter is a subset of the former. In making a commitment to action research, practitioners need to sort out where they want to focus their improvement effort. For example, is it a focus on self or group (the I and the we) and personal/collective renewal,
or is their action research to focus on promoting improvement in their workplace or immediate work setting (library, classroom)? Alternatively, it may be designed to challenge aspects of organizational culture. These are not mutually exclusive categories. Nevertheless, they are worth disentangling if only to enable the action researcher to sort out the emphasis in their work.

In a work environment such as a school library, many things may be worthy of attention and further improvement. It is often difficult to be selective. In his studies of a variety of work environments, Moos (1994) helps us to find something that we might argue is professionally significant and worth researching. For example, he suggests that a work environment comprises three “dimensions” with each dimension having three “subscales.” These are shown in Table 1. With reference to this table, it might be excellent if the members of the International Association of School Librarianship asked themselves a question of the kind, “How can 1/we improve our work environment with regard to ———?” If the results were pooled, I wonder what we would come to know!

In an interesting piece of research Hart and Rotem (1995) help us appreciate some of the richness of the relationship between personal renewal (professional development) and the social context of work (work environ-

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<th>Table 1</th>
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<td><strong>Dimensions of a Work Environment</strong></td>
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<td>(Moos, 1994)</td>
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<th>Relationship Dimensions</th>
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<td>1. <strong>Involvement</strong></td>
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<td>2. <strong>Co-worker Cohesion</strong></td>
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<td>3. <strong>Supervisor Support</strong></td>
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<th>Personal Growth Dimensions</th>
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<td>4. <strong>Autonomy</strong></td>
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<td>5. <strong>Task Orientation</strong></td>
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<td>6. <strong>Work Pressure</strong></td>
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<th>System Maintenance and Change Dimensions</th>
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<td>7. <strong>Clarity</strong></td>
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<td>8. <strong>Managerial Control</strong></td>
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<td>9. <strong>Innovation</strong></td>
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<td>10. <strong>Physical Comfort</strong></td>
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ment). Drawing on the findings from 516 nurses, they identify six characteristics of the (clinical) work environment. These are shown in Table 2. To these six characteristics should be added the notion of well-being.

The school librarian as action researcher might usefully draw on the work of Hart and Rotem (1995) to help them complete a professionally significant question like, “How can 1/we improve the learning environment in the library?” More specific questions might focus on improvements in role clarity, autonomy and recognition, peer support, and so on.

**Educational Action Research and the Role of Reflection**

The work of Kemmis and McTaggart (1982), which has evolved from Lewin’s earlier work (1946), refer to the four “moments” of action research as:

1. **PLAN:** develop a plan of action to improve what is already happening.
2. **ACT:** act to implement the plan.
3. **OBSERVE:** observe the effects of the action in the context in which it occurs.
4. **REFLECT:** Reflect on these as a catalyst for further planning and subsequent action.

The four moments were set out in the form of a spiral of action-and-reflection. In an alternative conceptualization, Whitehead (1993) suggests that the improvement process might most usefully begin with a reflection on the negation of values in practice thus:

1. I experience a concern when some of my values are denied in my practice.
2. I imagine a solution to the concern.
3. I act in the direction of the solution.
4. I evaluate the solution.
5. I modify my practice in the light of the solution.

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<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Characteristics of the Clinical Work Environment</th>
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<td><strong>Autonomy and Recognition:</strong> the extent to which staff are valued, acknowledged, and encouraged to take responsibility for their own practice.</td>
<td><strong>Quality of Supervision:</strong> the extent to which supervision and staff interaction facilitates or impedes improved practice.</td>
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<td><strong>Job Satisfaction:</strong> the extent to which nurses enjoy their work and intend to pursue a career in nursing.</td>
<td><strong>Opportunities for Learning:</strong> the extent to which learning opportunities are restricted or unavailable.</td>
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<td><strong>Peer Support:</strong> the extent to which staff are friendly, caring, and supportive toward one another.</td>
<td><strong>Role Clarity:</strong> the extent to which staff understand and accept their roles and responsibilities.</td>
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I would suggest that the reflective moments in the action research process are given relatively scant attention. It is often caricatured as a private, solitary, introspective activity with the main cognitive process of “replay and rehearsal” helping the practitioner to make sense of practice. There is no definitive and correct way of doing action research. The same can be said of reflecting-on-practice. In a recent review of approaches to reflection, Ghaye and Lillyman (1997) identified four interests that reflection might serve. They are as follows.

A personal interest: Reflection on personal agendas, emotionality, self-study and enhancing feelings of self-worth and identity.

A learning through experience interest: Reflection on past actions. An active exploration on their own and others’ experiences. This requires practitioners to value their own experience and have an openness that enables them to learn from the experiences of others (Kolb, 1984).

A competency-based interest: Reflection focused on skill development, problem-solving, and improvements in the technical and practical domains of our work.

A transformative interest: Reflection that challenges the status quo, challenges the oppressive and disempowering influences on practice, and tackles the barriers to improvement.

The reflective moments in the ongoing action research process are critical. Reflection is like the glue that holds the research process together. It is misleading to think that it is “fourth-in-line” and “done at the end” before formulating a new, improved action plan. Reflection on action is a complex business. It is wise for action researchers to appreciate that there are a number of conceptualizations of reflection, some of which may be more appropriate and supportive of their intention to improve practice and the context in which it takes place than others. For example, some conceptualizations of reflection are:

- as a dichotomy of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983, 1987). The latter is a retrospective interrogation of practice to come to know the knowledge used and the feelings that accompanied action within a particular situation. The notion of reframing lies at the heart of this conceptualization. This is a process where data drawn from our practice is seen differently.

- as intentional activity (Ghaye, 1996) in that we reflect on purpose and with a purpose in mind. It is no accident that we reflect. Something usually triggers it.

- as for knowledge and skill development (Benner, 1984, English National Board, 1994, Steinmaker & Bell, 1979) where reflection is claimed to develop and enhance particular cognitive, affective, and psychomotor skills.

- as creating practitioner-derived knowledge (Smyth, 1991) that is worthy, valid, and relevant to particular educational situations.
• as resolving problematic situations and the basis for problem-based learning (Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1991; Woods, 1994) where systematic reflection enables us to think through and resolve educational situations that we perceive as being characterized by uncertainty, disorder, and indeterminacy.
• as a process of becoming different (Giroux, 1987) in which reflection helps to equip us with lenses to read the world critically in order to improve it. Having thought this through the action researcher might then be well advised to clarify which purpose(s) reflection is to serve. For example, the purpose of reflection might be:
  • to act as a bridge (Silcock, 1994) from tacit knowledge to considered action and from the practice world of school librarianship to the process of theory generation.
  • to enhance the quality of action (Olsen, 1992) in that it enables us to talk about our practice (critically reflective conversations with self and others) and to practice different things. Reflection without action is just wishful thinking (Freire, 1972)
  • to increase accountability (Diamond, 1991) because the principles of technocratic efficiency emphasize hierarchically structured, top-down models of accountability with an increasing burden for professional accountability residing with the individual practitioner.
  • as a much needed counterdiscourse (Smyth, 1991) to challenge the ensconced and pervasive technicist views of educational practice that marginalize and delegitimize the teaching experiences, histories, and practical wisdom practitioners use in mediating their lives.

Educational Action Research and Improvement
If, as I have argued, the fundamental purpose of action research is to improve the existing situation, then we must ask the question, “So what does improvement look like?” Improvements in individual and collective workplace competence are inextricably linked to changes in the quality of human interactions. Just as we need to question the notion and processes of change, so too do we need to question the slippery concept of improvement. Not all change may be considered to be improvement. Similarly, what is thought to be an improvement for a particular work environment, say in a library service, is not inevitably and always seen to be supportive of the interests of all those who work there.

Chaye (1995) argues that workplace improvement needs to be considered in relation to five questions.

The question of time. When are the most appropriate times for our improvement efforts to take place? When are the consequences of these improvements likely to be felt and noticed?

The question of scale. What is the scope of the improvement? How many people are involved, and what resources will it consume? What is the nature,
magnitude, and educative potency of the consequences of the envisioned improvement?

*The question of uncertainty.* For example, how far we can be sure that the new conditions, actions, motivations, and orientations are indeed an improvement? What does valid evidence of improvement look like? How far do we understand the links between perceived improvements and concrete and visible improvements in the quality of the educational interactions in the school library as a workplace? Are these improvements real or imagined?

*The question of micropolitics.* Institutional politics provoke questions that are central to any improvement effort. Improvement is a value-laden concept and process. It is, therefore, not surprising that people in an organization and in a particular work environment like a school library think differently and want to act differently in order to influence and shape their future and the futures of others. Understanding the politics of our improvement efforts is a recognition that, in the work environment, there is inevitably an interplay between competing interests. Action research for the improvement of school librarianship will raise political questions because improvement is concerned with "interests," "power," and "conflict."

*The question of penetration.* Sometimes, because of weak or misguided improvement efforts and external pressures, we pay too much attention to the impressionistic and the façade that decorates the surface of our work environments. This is at the expense of working at those things that are more fundamental and that give rise and tend to sustain these "surface" attributes. Perhaps we have grown accustomed to improving things without paying sufficient attention to the culture of our workplaces on which our improvement efforts are predicated. Workplace improvement is one thing. However, work environment transformation is what penetrates deeply and improves the quality of the educational relationships of all those in the organization.

In the context of school librarianship, I suggest that action research might be a practical, principled, and systematic way to improve:

1. thinking about school librarianship;
2. the practice of school librarianship;
3. the work environment.

Improvement cannot take place unless we learn from experience. Action research is intentional action. The intention is to improve education through a rigorous reflection of the learning that has accrued as a consequence of engaging in the research process. In an account of an action research enterprise the learning needs to be transparent. The reader should be able to see the professional landscape in which the writer is working. The reader should hear the way the dialogues have moved thinking and practice forward. The writer should also attend to the way his or her account helps the reader to feel and empathize with the action researcher’s workplace achievements and ongoing struggles.
Action research for improved school librarianship needs to take as its starting point the socially constructed, value-laden nature of practice. Action for improvement is a dialogical and reflective process. Action research is not only about learning—it is about knowledge production and about a commitment to improve practice. I believe that the principles and practices of action research can play a significant part in helping school librarians everywhere to establish, sustain, and nourish new and more meaningful work environments. If action research cannot promise to be empowering, liberating, and emancipatory, if it cannot promise to develop "enchanted" workplaces, what is the least that it could claim? I suggest that the most humble claim could be that it might give school librarians a greater sense of control of their own work and free them somewhat to increase their avenues for action. Perhaps for these reasons alone school librarians should give action research serious consideration.

References


