Education Policy Analysis Archives

A peer-reviewed scholarly electronic journal.

Action Research and Social Movement:
A Challenge for Policy Research

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Abstract:

Large-scale policy research on topics of concern to teachers may assist in changing educational theory, policy and practice, as may educational action research. This article discusses different traditions of action research in relation to their views about the connection of research and social movement, touching on the so-called "macro-micro" problem which bedevils conceptualizations of this relationship.

Again, there is a renewed debate about the potential of educational action research for addressing educational problems and issues. Some hold that action research is the key to making research relevant to the concerns and needs of teachers and the education profession; some hold that large-scale policy research which connects more directly with professional concerns is what is needed - not necessarily action research. This way of putting the problem involves a troublesome distinction between the "micro" and the "macro" in educational research, to which I will return shortly. It also raises the question of the nature of the relationship between social research and social movement, which I will also touch on briefly. But the debate about the potential of educational action research also presumes a notion of what action research is - and this, too, is a matter of debate, as it has been for the fifty or so years of its history in social and educational research in the English-speaking world. In this period, there have been several waves of advocacy for educational action research, each, in one way or another, shaped by the climate of its times. There is now a variety of traditions of educational action research, each with its own potential and limitations, and, increasingly, with its

own literature. And each, one supposes, is more or less suited to the distinctive cultural and historial conditions under which it has evolved.

Kurt Lewin is usually asserted to be the "father" of action research, especially in social psychology and education (for example, Kemmis, 1988: 29). For most purposes, this is a reasonable attribution. However, Altrichter and Gstettner (forthcoming) have recently thrown a little light on Lewin's "paternity" of AR. When Lewin went to the US, he had been much influenced by Moreno, the inventor of group dynamics and sociodrama and psychodrama. Moreno had already developed a view of action research in which the "action" was about activism, not just about changing practice or behaviour understood in narrowly individualistic terms. Moreno was interested in research as a part of social movement.

In the US in the late '40s and early '50s these elements of action research were not well understood, and they were (of course) controversial. Concerns about Marxism and communism were already provoking self-censorship among leftist scholars. Thus, though there is plenty of evidence that Lewin saw the connections between action research and social movement (for example, in action research projects on desegregation), others exploring action research were more cautious about such connections, preferring to treat action research in methodological terms (for example, Chein, Cook and Harding,1948). Given the climate of the 1950s, it is hardly surprising that some advocates of action research would de-emphasize the link between action research and social justice movements; what is more surprising, perhaps, is the commitment of other advocates, like Stephen Corey of Teachers' College, Columbia (see, for example, Corey, 1953), or (even more) like the sociologist Abraham Shumsky, who continued to emphasize such connections (for example, Shumsky 1956, 1958).

If one takes the view that the "essential" nature of action research involved a connection with social movements, then one would conclude that the version of action research which filtered into education in the '50s, and in a later wave in the '70s, was somewhat "de-natured". It would be more accurate to say that the evolution of action research, especially in the USA, had emphasized certain elements of Lewin's and others' early conceptualizations, de-emphasized others, and added new elements (like the scientistic and rather technical attitude to research characteristic of the aspirations of educational psychology of the time). Thus, the version of action research that began to attract adherents in education in the '50s was shifting from one which connected easily with the progressive ideals of the first half of the century towards one which was more self-consciously "scientific" - as this was understood in terms of the positivist aspirations of the social and educational science of that time. Under such conditions, action research began to seem more like "amateur" or "poor man's" research, to be distinguished from the Real Thing. So understood, it was inevitable that it would lose the attractions it had both to the academy and to teacher-researchers: for the former group, any form of research that admitted and encouraged amateurs could not be sufficiently pioneering and high-status; for teachers, there could be no long-term credit in submitting to the condescension such a view implied.

Still, there is no keeping a good idea down. Since the '50s, there has been a great variety of strong advocacies for action research. They vary from advocacies, like that of Nevitt Sanford (1970), which represent the great progressive tradition of American liberalism, through to the more radical advocacies of such people as Paulo Freire (1982) and Orlando Fals Borda (1979) and others working in community development contexts in such places as Central and South America. Indeed, over the last four decades, it is possible to see waves of different groups in different places reviving, revitalising and refurbishing "the" idea of action research to meet different and changing needs and

circumstances.

Anyone who wants to confront the issues will soon enough begin to discover for themselves the complexities of the connections between ideas and life, theory and practice, and social theorists and ordinary folks living and working in the world. Sooner or later, anyone interested in these questions in the social and educational sciences will run across one variant or another of action research, or begin to "invent" something like it for themselves and those with whom they want to work. But there are sharp differences between variants of action research in the way they theorize the relationship between research and social (or educational) change: some see it as a technical (or instrumental) connection, some see it as a version of what Aristotle, and Schwab (1969) after him, described as practical reasoning, and others see it in terms of critical social science.

Some versions of action research - the one I favour (see Carr and Kemmis, 1986), and also associated with the work of people like Richard Winter (1987, 1989) in England, and Orlando Fals Borda (1990, 1991) in Colombia, and Cesar Cascante (1991) in Asturias, Spain - aim to make strong and explicit connections between action research and social movement. In past work, Shirley Grundy (1982) and I (see, for instance, Carr and Kemmis, 1986) have distinguished between (a) "technical" action research, which is frequently like amateur research conducted under the eye of university researchers; (b) "practical" action research, along the lines advocated by Donald Schon (1983) in the US, and John Elliott (1978, 1991) in Britain; and (c) "emancipatory" or "critical" action research, which Wilf Carr and I advocate (Carr and Kemmis, 1986). The latter view comprehends that social research is always (in one way or another) connected to social action and social movement. It sees the connection between social research and social life as intrinsic to research as an activity, not extrinsic, or instrumental, or as a question of the enlightenment of individuals who will later set about changing the world - though these things may give clues to important aspects of a deep critical understanding and practice of action research.

In my view, critical or emancipatory action research is always connected to social action: it always understands itself as a concrete and practical expression of the aspiration to change the social (or educational) world for the better through improving shared social practices, our shared understandings of these social practices, and the shared situations in which these practices are carried out. It is thus always critical, in the sense that it is about relentlessly trying to understand and improve the way things are in relation to how they could be better. But it is also critical in the sense that it is activist: it aims at creating a form of collaborative learning by doing (in which groups of participants set out to learn from change in a process of making changes, studying the process and consequences of these changes, and trying again). It aims to help people understand themselves as the agents, as well as the products, of history. In my view, action research is also committed to spreading involvement and participation in the research process.

Action research offers ways in which people can improve social life through research on the here and now, but also in relation to wider social structures and processes - as people whose interconnections constitute the wider webs of interaction which structure social life in discourses, in work, and in the organisational and interpersonal relationships in which we recognise relations of power.

One of the reasons so many people have trouble in understanding and dealing with the political face of social and educational research is that they fail to understand the relationships between the "micro" and the "macro" in social and educational life. (Hence the methodological and epistemological bent of some of the action research

literature, which allows such political issues to be adressed in the "neutral", "impartial" mode conventional in research writing.) They see these as different orders of events rather than as dialectically related (on this problem, see Giddens, 1984). If the "macro" is conceptualized as a different order from the micro - as unanalyzable in the same terms - then it will be impossible adequately to conceptualize the relations between local and global change, between research for the improvement of local practice and research for the development of universalizing theory. (A version of this problem bedevilled Stephen Corey, 1949, in his misguided attempt to distinguish the "horizontal generalizations" that he thought action research would permit from the "vertical generalizations" he associated with the "fundamental" - positivistic - educational research of the time.) This frequently occurs when theorists treat the macro as merely an aggregation of local micro-states, with the consequence that they are driven to see the macro as indeterminate and therefore as beyond the grasp of scientific treatment. More dialectical conceptualizations of macro-micro issues (like Giddens's theory of structuration) avoid these difficulties. We would be well advised, I think, to recognise that what we have learned to see as "the macro" and "the micro" are reflections of different traditions of social and educational analysis: on the one hand, macro research has been employed in the service of big bureaucracy and abstracted policy; on the other, micro research has been employed by those who want to look at ordinary folks in their own "home" settings. Alternative conceptualizations and research traditions which avoid the "macro-micro problem" are available, however. When we see individual and social action (and thought) as always socially-constructed, we are more ready to understand how research is a social act, and how, as a social practice, it is always and inevitably socially- and historically-constructed. We begin to see how the social practice which is research is a social practice which relates to (and has its meaning in a context of) other social practices like those involved in serving a bureaucracy, or participating in the practices which constitute a disciplinary field, or participating in social movements. One consequence of taking such a view of research is that some researchers will begin to make markedly different decisions about how they will participate in the research act, and on whose behalf - for example, on behalf of the social order and/or on behalf of social movements like the civil rights movement, one or another feminism, or the environmental movement (to name just a few). Alain Touraine's (1981) analysis of the relations between social order and social movement, or Jurgen Habermas's (1987) analysis of the relations between system and lifeworld can also help to illuminate such insights.

To return to my point: the connection between social research and social action is not resolved simply by changing to a different set of research sponsors (big unions instead of big bureaucracies, for example). Nor will it be achieved solely by improving research methods. It is achieved by doing different research, frequently with different purposes and substance and methodologies, with different people, in the service of different interests. A whole variety of kinds of research, and methodologies, is potentially relevant for such changed purposes. Moreover, part of the point of these different forms of research will be to connect up with different people and to work with them in the pursuit of shared social goals of which the primary ones are discovering and superseding those of our current ideas and ideals which are incoherent, contradictory and mistaken; eliminating those of our current ways of working which have turned out to be ineffective, inadequate or harmful; and overcoming the myriad forms of social injustice which are the necessary and inevitable accompaniment of the way our social lives are currently ordered. Instead of working quite so much with and for other professional researchers for the sake of our intellectual fields (and, it must be recognised, for the sake

of our self-interests as professional researchers), for example, we may wish to work more closely with and for teachers, students, parents or - even - with and for those educational administrators and policy-makers who understand their own social goals in these terms.

Some epistemological positions (e.g., Habermas's 1972 theory of knowledge-constitutive interests, and his 1987 theory of communicative action) comprehend these connections while some (like old-style positivism with its ideas about neutrality) do not. And some theories of action research comprehend these points while others do not. For those interested in changing educational theory, policy and practice as different aspects of a single endeavour in social and educational research, understanding such connections is an important task, and, if my argument is correct, this understanding is but one aspect of changing educational research practice and policy. Our task as educational researchers involves us in taking concrete and explicit steps towards changing the theory, policy and practice of educational research, as well as participating in the work of changing educational theory, educational policy and educational practice more broadly. To confront the challenges of this task may involve us not only in changing the kinds and the extent of the connections we make with other theorists, but also in changing the kinds and extent of our relationships with educational policy-makers, and with the educational practitioners whose work constitutes the social practice of education.

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