
Title	Action Research (AR) and excellence in education
Author(s)	Eng Soo Peck
Source	3 rd Annual Conference of the Educational Research Association, 23 – 24 June 1989, Singapore

Copyright © 1989 The Author

This document may be used for private study or research purpose only. This document or any part of it may not be duplicated and/or distributed without permission of the copyright owner.

The Singapore Copyright Act applies to the use of this document.

Citation: Eng, S. P. (1989, June). *Action Research (AR) and excellence in education*. Paper presented at the 3rd Annual Conference of the Educational Research Association, Singapore.

This document was archived with permission from the copyright holder.

ACTION RESEARCH (AR) AND EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION

A PAPER PRESENTED BY

DR ENG SOO PECK

AT THE 3RD ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE

EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

HELD FROM 23 - 24 JUNE 1989

ACTION RESEARCH (AR) AND EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION

The movement towards excellence in education carries with it a rag-tag baggage of definitions and redefinitions of what is constitutive of excellence. Peddled around are bundles of miracle cures for all sorts of education shortcomings and perceived shortcomings. Some of these miracle cures are cure-alls not unlike snake oil. Claims and counter-claims tend to cloud the core issues of excellence in education. The result may be similar to what is expressed as the operation is successful but the patient died: reforms have been successfully installed but the education system is in total disarray.

In recent years, related to the movement towards educational excellence is the claim that scientific research in education has very little, if any, impact at all on educational practices in schools (Corey, 1949; Fullan, 1982, Day, 1988). Apparently true or self-evident, such claims lead to dissatisfaction with research in education and the search for other strategies which can have an impact on educational practices. Many of the claims, however, cannot bear up to close scrutiny. Like research in other fields of endeavour, educational research seeks to add on to our understanding of the complex world of schooling (descriptive research) and our knowledge of causal relationships (conditional research). The impact is indirect and not direct (educational researchers do not see it their role to apply what they have discovered in practice) via texts which encapsulate significant theoretical schemas and causal relationships of phenomena which exist in the class/school context. Prospective teachers are initiated into this body of research literature and their practices reflect by and large what research has to offer. Classroom groupings, instructional design and methodology, teacher-pupil relationship, assessment and a whole host of other practices have been influenced by the available literature. For example

providing valuable insights and of direct relevance to practitioners are Jackson's (1968) and Snyder's (1971) hidden curriculum, Yinger's (1979) teaching routines, Barnes and Todd's (1977) classroom discourse, Bennett's (1981) teaching and learning styles, Barker-Lunn's (1984) classroom organization and Clark and Peterson's (1985) classroom teacher thinking.

If the above argument is true, then how does one account for the dissatisfaction with the performance of schools, the cyclic crisis of confidence in education, the pressure towards reform to improve what goes on in schools? Has scientific research in education gone off the track and has become irrelevant to education practice? Have the theoretical schemas, "laws" and principles, generalisation been pitched at too abstract a level so that what is said has little or no bearing on the realities of the school world? The apparently non-bridgeable gap between theory/research and educational practices may be attributable to ignorance of site-specific variables or unique configurations which are not the specific focus of the theoretical schemas which of necessity must reduce the complex world into orderly uniformities for understanding the whole without being distracted by complex details.

The theoretical constructs, laws, generalisations should work if the condition of everything being equal obtains. But in the real life world nothing is equal and it is for this reason that applied scientists have an extremely important role to play in translating the fruits of research into "products", "activities" or "processes" of the real world.

It is in the context of practitioner as applied researcher that action research can justify a claim on the teachers' time but not on the claim that scientific (fundamental) research is irrelevant to the practitioner, that it is exploitation or that it is couched in a language that is non-comprehensible to the practitioner. Action Research (AR), useful as it may be in its limited way, cannot replace scientific research, for what it does is to make things work in situ and simply not able by virtue of the methodologies employed in AR to generate "universal" truths applicable beyond the sample or population in which AR has been used. It would certainly be an over-exaggeration to claim that AR is a miracle tool or approach that can bring about improvement or excellence in education by itself. AR, however, has great potential in bringing about a more reflective teacher (Schon, 87) one who critically analyses on-going activities and events in classrooms and schools to ensure their goals set are reached and that clients (pupils) receive the best possible experiences consonant with the goals of education. AR is what all true professionals engage in all the time to ensure that the job is done professionally.

This paper will not enter into the controversial issue of the appropriateness or otherwise of forcibly marrying AR to the philosophy or ideology of critical social theory (Neo-Marxism). AR can be justified on a purely professional ideology or on the basis of practical philosophy (Toulmin, 1988). To situate AR in neo-Marxist orientations, as Carr and Kemmis (1983) is to have done, alienate teachers who do not share in the same political beliefs and thereby negate the very purpose for which AR is capable of doing, that is, improve educational practices.

Aligning AR to critical society theory merely invites devastating attacks from non neo-Marxists (Rex Gibson's review article on *Becoming Critical: Knowing through Action Research* by Wilfred Carr and Stephen Kemmis, Deakin University, 1983 is precisely the kind of review likely to influence teachers' perception of AR as a neo-Marxist tool) and rejection of its philosophical base may also lead to the rejection of AR which has potential in professionalising educational practices, potential in the sense that, if certain pre-conditions exist, it can enable teachers to grow to full professional stature whilst on the job.

Action research is research on action or research that affects action (Corey, 1949). Briefly, it means that practitioners "research" on on-going events (teaching, learning, social arrangements in classes and schools, etc) to ascertain the efficacy of those events in relationship to the goals specified and subsequently taking whatever action necessary to re-order those on-going events. Put in another way, the main motivating force behind action research is to do a better professional job.

In terms of procedures, Kurt Lewin's *modus operandi* has often been used as a model: reconnaissance (fact-finding phase), planning, execution (carrying out the activity as planned), evaluation (second fact-finding phase) followed by a repeat of the whole cycle again (Lewin, 1946). Hilda Taba's six-step approach to AR bears close resemblance to Lewin's model: identifying problems, analysing problems and determining some pertinent causal factors, formulating tentative ideas about the crucial factors, gathering and interpreting data to develop action hypothesis, formulating

action and evaluating the results of action. AR casts in this mould is not some mishmash research that anyone and everyone are capable of embarking on it. Properly carried out AR can be as rigorous as fundamental research and yields knowledge, procedural and propositional, of specific situations so necessary for successful teaching when applying the "laws" or theoretical constructs derived from fundamental research.

As described by Lewin (1946), "to act correctly, it does not suffice...if the engineer or the surgeon knows the general laws of physics or physiology. He has to know too the specific character of the situation at hand. The character is determined by a scientific fact-finding called diagnosis. For any field of action both types of scientific research are needed". In brief, the knowledge derived from AR complements that of fundamental research. AR has to be viewed in this perspective if it is to be used as a potent tool in helping to achieve excellence in teaching and not in the perspective that AR generates theory from practice and therefore has greater validity for practice, that it produces "authentic critiques of practice", that theory developed in fundamental research is not the appropriate "basis for the principled development and justification of practice" or that research with too "technical a flavour" is not a sine qua non of critical social science (Kemmis, 1984). Here it is necessary to stress once again the ideology of critical social science is not central to the concept of AR. Indeed, AR as an approach or a strategy is a neutral tool which can be used to achieve ends other than those favoured by the neo-marxist's conception of socio-political and economic relationships.

AR is not a new innovation to be hoisted onto teachers. AR as an activity is something that comes naturally to the best of professionals as well as those engaged in non-professional activities. At the mundane level, a carpenter or even a chef engages in AR (albeit informally) at each cycle of activities to ensure that the job is done better the next time round. The best of teachers engage in AR albeit without that label in constantly improving their professional practices over the years. Indeed, all thinking and reflective people do ARs to satisfy a personal or professional pride in whatever they are engaged in. The operative words are "thinking" and "reflective". Hence, there is a need to introduce AR to those practitioners who have over the years settle down to a comfortable routine and whose practices fall short of certain standards. What AR can do is to raise the consciousness of teachers and school administrators vis-a-vis their professional practices by engaging them in critically thinking about and reflecting on their practices and thereby seek out practices that are educationally sound for the benefit of their pupils.

At this juncture it may be appropriate to discuss briefly the aspiration of nations to attain excellence in education and the role AR can play to push education towards excellence. Excellent implies the superlative; to excel is to go well beyond the good, to be better than practically all. Donaldson (1985) is of the view that

"Excellence isn't a state of being but a process of becoming. Teachers become excellent by studying their students, creating tailored learning experiences, and evaluating the long term effects of those experiences."

The notion of excellence implies that good schools can become better and better schools could be bettered over time. Even the so-called superior schools do not represent the ultimate in the notion of excellence. Such a notion is often overlooked as manifested in calls for a return to the basics in the USA in response to the massive problems of illiteracy and numeracy. The attainment of literacy and numeracy for all represents the minimum society can expect of schools but certainly underserving of the label "excellence". Some talk of raising SAT scores as if excellence and SAT scores are identical. Excellence implies the rigorous pursuit of academic subjects, the traditional disciplines which represent certain ways of looking at the world and understanding how things fit together and work, the development of the social and emotional maturity level of students under the school's care and good physical health.

The main key to excellence in education must surely be a corps of professionally well-educated and well-trained teachers committed to continuous professional growth to ensure excellence in teaching.

If excellent teachers is a precondition for excellence in education, then it is necessary to face up to a number of problems inherent in the teaching profession. The status of the profession is such that, by and large, the intellectually gifted would avoid the profession. The nature of a teacher's job requires that he operates in isolation from others, thereby being denied the support both morally and professionally from his colleagues. The nature of the training itself is short and often not as rigorous as that in other professions. Teachers often have difficulty

understanding the research literature in education and over time tend to settle down to a comfortable routine.

Traditional and conventional approaches aimed at staff development have produced very little significant visible impact. Conventional in-service courses, school-based workshops, short one-shot seminars, etc seem to show that teachers are impervious to all attempts to bring about excellence in teaching. The teflon syndrome seems to operate in the case of courses for teachers. The virus theory does not operate in the ubiquitous short seminars. It does seem to indicate that conventional strategies to bring about professional development do not work and it could well be that vital characteristics of teacher learning and value change have been overlooked.

It has been argued, with some justification, that AR as a strategy for upgrading teacher professional performances in working towards excellence in education has embedded within it certain features and characteristics consonant with adult learning. AR when properly installed in schools requires teacher participation and involvement which represents teacher's investment of time and energy resources giving teachers a sense of ownership and empowerment, a strong sense of efficacy and of being in control of things. The very process of AR, particularly when it is collaborative research amongst teachers, is professionally enriching when teachers draw upon their own experiences and knowledge, refer to literature sources for a possible solution, reflect on issues of methodology, content and dynamics of human interaction and finally act on their own collective decisions. The whole cycle of events in AR and subsequent cycles provide rich

learning experiences. It is group and individual problem-solving in the best tradition of discovery learning in which the distinction between the teacher and learner is blurred and learning is not seen as a commodity delivered by the expert, but as a process in which the learners, helped by one another and the "teacher", generate their own meanings (Oldroyd and Tiller, 1987). Through the process of AR, practitioners (teachers) internalise the reflex of reflection-in-action, increasing the possibility of teachers bringing to bear their competence and artistry to teaching situations that may be uncertain, unique and conflictual (Schon, 1987). In the process of AR, teachers discover "theories of practice" or local theories, as Schibeci (1987) puts it, which though not universal theories in education or nomological frameworks that are invariant across cases are nevertheless generalisable across time in one place than across places.

Theoretically, AR can become a powerful tool in the professionalisation of teachers as teachers are habituated to a critical approach to teaching, drawing upon the available literature for solutions where possible and working out other *modus operandi* to cope with problems which are unique or specific to particular teaching-learning context. But a number of problematic areas need to be addressed. The first pertains to willingness: teachers could be "compelled" to participate but participation without involvement would reduce the benefits of AR. The second pertains to teacher's ability to participate meaningfully and that is predicated upon the repertoire of professional knowledge the teacher has acquired. The third pertains to teacher personality: teacher's cognitive-developmental stage is a determinant of the extent

of participation and involvement; those at the "lower" stage (self-protective stage) tend to view AR perspectives from the reference point of self and tend to become alienated from the group engaged in the AR processes (Oja and Ham, 1984). The fourth pertains to the tendency for any teacher development programmes to be non-sustainable; the lack of long-term commitment necessary for any strategy to have an impact on such a complex task as teacher professional development.

The problematic areas identified above can be severe enough to cripple any effort to introduce AR into schools. The prediction is that AR, despite its inherent strength in bringing about excellence in teaching in the long run, will go the way of the other innovative attempts to improve teaching and learning. The literature is full of derelicts of past endeavours either because they had been poorly conceptualised and implemented or they had not taken into account some of the concomitants that must be present to ensure success. It is quite clear that for the initial period assistance from an outside researcher, a facilitator, would be necessary to help conceptualise, plan and execute, showing the way so to speak, and demonstrate the benefits of AR. The choice of the researcher is critical in ultimate acceptance or rejection of AR, probably someone who understands teacher concerns, the regimen of teaching in schools, the time pressure on teachers, the dynamics of leadership in the school setting and a team leader who can both educate and guide and yet make the team members feel that they are the central players. Next the choice of teacher concern for AR could be a decisive factor in the acceptance of AR; it should be manageable within a short time frame for completion so that benefits become manifest but not too trivial as to render AR as a frivolous tool in coming up with obvious solutions.

Apart from commitment and support, both moral and material resources, teacher education has to examine and incorporate AR as part of the training programme, both pre- and in-service to ensure continuity between what teachers are expected to do and the skills and knowledge that teacher training equips its prospective and in-service teachers.

REFERENCES

- Barker-Lunn, J. Junior School Teachers: their methods and practices, Educational Research, Vol 26, No 3, 1984.
- Barnes, D & Todd, C. Communication and Learning in Small Groups. London Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977.
- Bennett, N et al. The Quality of Pupil Learning Experiences. Lancaster, Center for Educational Research and Development, Univ of Lancaster, 1981.
- Carr, Wilfrid and Kemmis, Stephen. Becoming Critical: Knowing through Action Research. Deakin Univ, 1983.
- Clark, C M & Peterson, P L. Teachers' thought processes, in M Wittrock (Ed). Handbook of Research on Teaching, London, Collier Macmillan, 1986.
- Corey, Stephen M. Action Research, Fundamental Research and Education Practices in Teachers College Record, N Y, 1949, 50, pp 509-14.
- Day, Christopher. The Relevance and Use of Classroom Research Literature to the Appraisal of Teachers in Classrooms: issues of teacher learning and change. Cambridge Journal of Education, Vol 18, No 3, 1988.
- Donaldson, Gordon A, Jr. Sisyphus and School Improvement: Fulfilling the Promise of Excellence. Educational Leadership, March 85.
- Fullan, M. The Meaning of Educational Change, N Y Teachers College, 1982.
- Jackson, P H: Life in Classrooms, London Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1968.

Kemmis, S. Action Research in Retrospect and Prospect in The Action Research Reader, Deakin University, 1984.

Lewin, Kurt. Action Research and minority problems in Stephen Kemmis et al (Eds) The Action Research Reader, Deakin University, 1984.

Oja, Sharon Nodie & Ham, Maryellen C. A Cognitive-Developmental Approach to Collaborative Action Research with Teachers. Teachers' College Record, Vol 86, No 1, 1984.

Oldroyd, David & Tiller, Tom. Change from Within: an account of school-based collaborate action research in an English secondary school. Journal of Education for Teaching, Vol 12, No 3, 1987.

Schon, Donald A. Educating the Reflective Practitioner. S F Jossey-Bars Publishers, 1987.

Synder, B. The Hidden Curriculum. N Y Knopf, 1971.

Toulmin, Stephen. The Recovery of Practical Philosophy in The American Scholar, Summer, 1988.

Yinger, R. Routines in Teacher Planing, Theory in Practice, 1979.