

UNIVERSITY OF LETHBRIDGE

An Introduction to Action Research in Alberta

Dr. David Townsend

3/1/2000

An Introduction To Action Research In Alberta

David Townsend, The University of Lethbridge. March, 2000

Many current authors (see, for example, Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Calhoun, 1994; Sagor, 1992) contend that the term "action research" can be traced back to the work of social psychologist, Kurt Lewin. Richard Schmuck, in his text entitled *Practical Action Research For Change* (Schmuck, 1998) states that Lewin coined the term and was the first to use it generally in his social science publications. Sagor (1992) observes simply that Lewin was the father of action research. In contrast to the certainty expressed by these writers, McKernan (1996) suggests there is evidence of the use of action research in the United States prior to Lewin's conceptualization of the term, particularly in the work of Collier (1945). Whatever its true origins, however, there is little dispute about the extent of Lewin's influence in the development of action research, world-wide, over the last fifty years.

In the public school system of Alberta in the last forty years, action research has enjoyed only a few brief moments of currency and attention. For example, it could be argued that the sparse curricula of the early-1970s were a provincial reaction to the teacher-as-curriculum-developer and teacher-as-researcher experiments happening around the same time in the U.K. These were the British initiatives, based in part on the work of Lawrence Stenhouse (1975), that first attracted some of the world's most resilient action researchers into the field. Among them were John Elliott and Clem Adelman, whose works and influence have been recognized internationally for more than 25 years.

Some other examples of Alberta teachers exploring the value of action research occurred in those jurisdictions that got deeply involved in Objective-Based Education (OBE), again in the 1970s. Teams of educators spent hundreds of extra hours trying to create learning objectives for the core courses of the curriculum, particularly in Mathematics and Language Arts. They became co-learners in their own and others' classrooms as they sought to transform curriculum into learning through new instructional strategies. Almost simultaneously, many of them had their first taste of what writers such as Stephen Kemmis and Robin MacTaggart (from Deakin University in Australia) have described as the political dimensions of action research, as they found their efforts were not always understood or appreciated by their colleagues. Still, those introductory Alberta experiences were typically short-lived and only marginally successful. They did not succeed in generating general interest in, or even much awareness of, action research as a way for educators to organize important parts of their professional lives.

In the early-1980s, the massive implementation of an inquiry-based social studies curriculum once again gave relatively larger numbers of educators a compelling reason to try some of the "new" practices that were just then emerging into the broader public domain. Alternative forms of inquiry and narrative were being encouraged in faculties of Education all across North America, and increasing numbers of graduate students were wanting to learn more about them. Many of these educators took back into their schools an interest in action research, among other things.

Even so, such efforts caused only a small ripple, largely unnoticed by the great majority of teachers. In 1988, for example, when I was engaged by four Alberta jurisdictions to help initiate action research activities in a total of 34 schools, I found that only a handful of the more than two hundred teachers with whom I started to work had even heard of action research. Three years later, when the projects were winding down, it was as though action research had had its moment in the sun and it was now time to move on to the next big, new idea which, I recall, was outcomes-based education in several jurisdictions, and inclusion of children with special needs in a lot of others.

Of course, action research did not fade completely away. As more and more of Alberta's teachers and administrators got involved in their graduate studies, both in Canada and the United States, more of them were attracted to action research and became progressively more successful in taking the theory and practice of action research back into their schools.

By the early-1990s there were pockets of action research functioning in many school districts. Texts had been published and conferences sponsored by Alberta academics, most notably Dr. Terry Carson of the University of Alberta. Within a few years, all the regional educational consortia were offering teachers financial incentives to start their own action research projects in their own schools. Some of the large jurisdictions were beginning to use action research as a key strategy in promoting teacher professional development and the publication of action research "results" was beginning to move out of the universities and into the school system. Professors such as Dr. Carson and Dr. Hans Smits at the University of Calgary were teaching regular graduate courses in action research and several of our courses at The University of Lethbridge had action research components.

The introduction into the Alberta school system of a new teacher growth, supervision and evaluation policy in 1997, with its strong emphasis on teachers as reflective practitioners, lent credibility and impetus to many different ways for teachers to engage in professional growth, and action research was one that received its fair share of attention.

Let me state here, it was not a "perfect world." In 1997 and in 1998, one Consortium Director had a very difficult time attracting teachers to an action research initiative she was promoting, even though there was a \$500 grant available for every successful application. In another region, one school principal was the only applicant for a grant and, in the end, was able to secure all the funding for her own school project.

The concerns did not end there, either. As I had found in the late-1980s and in subsequent projects in the field, so the consortium leaders found with their initiatives. Most teachers were not fully ready for the discipline of action research. Teachers enjoy the collaboration, and the opportunities to get together with colleagues when those meetings do not interfere too greatly with their work in the classroom. They also enjoy the new learning they are exposed to, and the feelings of satisfaction that come from honest effort, the solving of real problems, and apparent success in the interests of improving educational opportunities for their students. However, teachers generally do not like writing down what they have done, analyzing their work and the work of their colleagues, asking and being asked tough questions about things that are happening, and why. As a group, Alberta teachers, in my experience, are not used to engaging in

what John Elliott, in his introduction to the 1997 Collaborative Action Research Network (CARN) Annual Conference, has called evidence-based practice, and they are typically uncomfortable when trying to share evidence of their practice with their peers, especially their immediate peers. Moreover, they are often uncomfortable with "language" and "theory" as it applies to the work they do. Sometimes it seems teachers do not want to know more of the language of their profession, lest they be expected to accept greater responsibility for the successes and failures of their own practice.

Yet, as teachers become more confident with the theory and practice of action research, they do share their craft knowledge and they do begin to make their contributions to the dissemination of professional knowledge. So often, the challenge seems to be one of making different practices less of an add-on to the work that teachers must do.

If there is one aspect of action research that continues to defy easy implementation it is the link between the process and student learning. Of more than fifty school-based action research projects I have supervised, facilitated or participated in over the past three years, only a relative few were able to show how student learning was directly affected by teachers' purposeful efforts. Too many of the projects ended with teachers feeling good, students and parents supposedly feeling good, and everyone agreeing that good things happened, but few participants wanting to take their investigations to the next level, or wanting to continue to work together in the same ways, or wanting to form new groups. The projects were mostly for a specific purpose and, when that purpose was supposedly achieved, the projects ceased to have a reason to exist. They were organized from the beginning to be episodic and terminal and, as a result, were never fully integrated into the culture of the workplace. They were add-ons.

Why does this happen? One serious weakness I have noticed with my own approach to action research is that too often I have not been careful enough in challenging participants to find out exactly what students knew and could do before beginning the cycle of action research. In a companion way, I have often been too willing to accept more of the good news about a project while not encouraging participants strongly enough to look critically at all the other evidence. In sum, I have not been sufficiently concerned about all the other knowledge that could have been learned from a closer examination of those things that did not "work," and so the record of productive and useful results has been diminished accordingly.

In working with teachers, I sometimes encounter resistance when I ask them to explain why they intend to use a particular strategy, or text, or piece of software and, again, when they are asked by fellow participants such things as the basis for their certainty about the effectiveness of their plan. Quite obviously, if teachers are not adequately forewarned that such discussions should be an integral part of the process, they may not be fully prepared to engage in them, they may feel threatened, and they may want to withdraw. Clearly, a process of negotiation and re-negotiation needs to be an explicit component of action research engagement. Furthermore, if the mechanisms and strategies for resolving potential conflict are not discussed, practiced and refined as part of the process of action research, success may prove elusive.

So much of what is done in action research, as with most forms of collaboration, depends for its greater success on trust. When teachers are first trying to share their knowledge about their

teaching practice they are typically uncomfortable, often worried that what they say will reveal to their colleagues levels of ignorance or deficiencies in practice that will make others think less of them. Yet, if educators are to enjoy a professional discourse that is based in reality and possibility, they must have accurate information about where they are when they start, or the veracity and value of everything that flows from any ensuing dialogue will be suspect, at best. More successful action research initiatives seem to start with a general understanding that "wherever we start, we will be starting in the middle of some things and near the end of others."

Another reason for teacher resistance and reluctance in collaboration may have to do with the examples most teachers have been exposed to during their careers. Too many of the models purporting to show teachers how effective professional development has occurred in the past seem to have emphasized perfection at the expense of reality. Far too frequently, examples of best practices have left all but a special few teachers feeling inadequate, if not incompetent. Worse, when ordinary teachers have tried to take back to their own classrooms sure-fire strategies for professional improvement, too often they have found that those methods do not work in other than near-to-ideal conditions, or they cannot be implemented without the help of substantial additional resources. One result of this, I believe, is a lot of uncertainty about the wisdom of teachers showing others the truth about how they really do their work.

Action research offers teachers a chance to address this concern. It's not without risk, but it can give teachers greater control over the agenda of their working lives, greater opportunity to find and express their individual and collective voices, greater professional support and greater hope that their successes and their failures will be honoured, along with their intellectual contributions to a professional dialogue based on the "real" at least as much as the "ideal."

In the education system in Alberta in the year 2000, action research has once again been moved into the spotlight. A recent issue of the Alberta Teachers' Association News (ATA News, vol.13, No.11) features comments by the Minister of Learning, Dr. Lyle Oberg, the President of the ATA, Larry Booi, and the Chancellor of the University of Alberta and CEO of Syncrude Canada, Eric Newell, all speaking strongly in favour of an action research approach to staff development and, more particularly, linking action research and the new Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI).

This time funding, readiness, expertise and commitment may all be on the same side, perhaps for the first time in two generations. Certainly, there has never been a time of greater professional and financial support for Alberta teachers if they choose to engage in action research, either as part of their own professional growth plans, or through AISI, or both. The level of awareness within the system, specific to action research, has never been higher, while the potential for successful collaboration among members of the ATA, faculties of education, Ministry of Learning staff, and school district educators continues to expand.

It is one of my goals, in starting this network, that it should grow in harmony with and in response to the growth of action research initiatives in Alberta's public education system. I encourage educators to use this site for letting others know about their efforts, their discoveries, their successes and their concerns. In the next few weeks I will begin to describe the various ways in which educators' work can be posted on this site. I'll be asking for help in determining

how action research activity can be verified and reported, quickly and accurately. As well, I'll be encouraging Alberta educators to share new knowledge and old wisdom in ways that will promote professional learning that is accessible to all.

References

Calhoun, E. (1994). How to use action research in the self-renewing school. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Carr, W., & Kemmis, S. (1986). *Becoming critical*. London: Falmer.

Collier, J. (1945) United States Indian administration as a laboratory of ethnic relations. *Social Research*, 12, (May).

McKernan, J. (1996). *Curriculum action research*. London: Kogan Page.

Sagor, R. (1992). How to conduct collaborative action research. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Schmuck, R. (1998). *Practical action research for change*. IL: Skylight.

Stenhouse, L. (1975). *Introduction to curriculum research and development*. London: Heinemann.