

## Action Research: Fruitful Collaborations

### Part 2

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*“Collaborative action research should be viewed as a tool for the empowerment of those groups with limited access to good data and to the methods that produce such data” (Schensul & Schensul).*

The benefits of action research are often seen as flowing in one direction—from expert researchers to teachers and school administrators. Teachers develop as reflective practitioners, and acquire skills in instruction and classroom management. Administrators become more proficient in running their schools. The university is considered the principal benefactor in the research process, which shares its more profound knowledge through outreach programmes.

In fact, many academics even fear that action research is not “real” research. When it is conducted, therefore, it is often assumed that the main role of institutions of tertiary education is to help keep the research “honest”—something that may possibly come close to being the real thing. However, there is an uncomfortable feeling that it is not the real thing, and that it probably never will be. Ironically, in an age that demands relevance, too much “groundedness” may be branded as “too subjective.”

However, times are changing. The ivory tower is no longer a safe place for teacher educators. More and more, institutions of teacher education are being held accountable to provide evidence of the types of improvements that have occurred in schools and classrooms as a result of their efforts. Collaborative action research is one way to help ensure that positive change will occur.

Teachers and schools, too, are facing increasing demands for accountability. Enormous sums have been spent on education in this country, and the message, more and more, is that it is necessary to prove that the money has been well spent.

It is also expected that policy formulation and implementation will be constantly informed by reliable and current data. Recent attempts to generate such data are laudable, but data collected amount, virtually, to small droplets in deep seas of ignorance about what works in schools and classrooms, and why, and under what conditions.

Collaborative action research addresses the needs and interests of all participants in the process, but many challenges and constraints face the collaborators. De La Luna (2003) reports that teachers often find the process too time-consuming, and as taking away from time they feel would be better spent in instruction.

My own research suggests that conversations about the value and outcomes of such research are not part of the professional discourse of many practitioners. Many teachers I have interviewed suggest that their colleagues want ready-made, one-size-fits-all solutions to their problems. Far from longing to become empowered as creators of

solutions to their classroom problems, such teachers want access to narratives about tried and proven techniques. They do not necessarily want to submit such methods to critique; they want to use them right away to address a host of problems they see as urgent and compelling.

Many academics also, recognising that action research is not held in the same high esteem as other forms of research, grudge the time spent doing and reporting on action research, since this may decrease the time they can spend doing research that will be more respected by their colleagues. Moreover, academics often believe that teachers and school administrators are inadequately trained in research methodologies; they are thus unwilling to carry the weight of ensuring that action research is indeed of high quality.

Certain arrangements must therefore be put in place to ensure fruitful collaboration in action research. Gordon and Fraser (1995) recommend that all parties need to be part of a discourse that makes the needs and interests of each clear, and that establishes the terms for a more equitable allocation of benefits and responsibilities in the process.

Problems to be researched must be derived from situated practice, and identified by teachers. They should not be problems that academics identify as being of primarily theoretical value. The time allocated for such research must not infringe on teachers' and schools' instructional commitments.

Institutions of tertiary education have to acknowledge action research as having true value. Such research must therefore be fully recognised and rewarded within these institutions.

Furthermore, institutional structures must promote teamwork within all institutions, and should ensure that participants in action research are comfortable with collaborative practices of all kinds.

Schools and school districts should schedule time and establish structures to support not only the actual research activities, but also the planning and reflection stages. Provision must be made, too, for discussion and critique of the process and the findings of action research.

Under such conditions, collaborative action research can be very fruitful and gain respect. Without such provision, however, collaboration may well come to be regarded as demanding more effort than it deserves.

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