

ACTION RESEARCH FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: INNOVATIONS IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Introduction

The nature of teaching and learning in the UK, as in many other countries, has been transformed in recent years, reflecting a sharpening of focus on ‘standards’ and measurable outcomes. There has been an apparent reduction in interest in studying the values, processes and practices involved in developing innovative curricula and pedagogy. The increasing emphasis on the products of education, as measured and compared by test results, league tables and public reporting on standards in education, has developed alongside increasing preoccupation at government level with reaching international standards and competing successfully in a highly competitive global market economy (Poppleton & Williamson, 2004). What has come to count as ‘education’ is expressed in statistical information about levels of attainment and numbers of students reaching the required standards in public examinations. The ‘curriculum’ has been gradually moulded into pre-determined and circumscribed bodies of knowledge in different subject areas. The creation of opportunities for recognising and celebrating the knowledge, cultures and experiences of students as a central part of teaching and learning have become increasingly rare.

Another expression of the ‘outcomes’ agenda in education is the apparent decline in interest in theories of learning and curriculum studies in departments of education in Higher Education institutions. Theoretical work and debate around critical pedagogy are marginalised and are perceived as being the domain of academics and of no use or interest to practicing teachers. In the 1970s many PGCE courses in England included as a major element in the course the study of theories of teaching and learning to which a range of disciplines made key contributions, including sociology, philosophy, psychology and the history of education. Different perspectives and theoretical analyses were hotly debated by students, academic staff and teachers. There was a concern to draw on ideas which were illuminating and provocative and values were

openly discussed and fought over. Some will remember the dazzling discovery of the work of Vygotsky, of sociologists, philosophers and practitioners debating and working together in education as a political and social project. They may have been permanently influenced in their personal-professional lives by the experience of developing approaches to teaching and learning based on collaborative, cross-curricular exploration in which *listening* to children's accounts of their daily lives and concerns, their individual cultures and autobiographies was at the heart of pedagogy.

There are other profound changes in the climate of education which are less discernible than the regimenting effects of the market on education. For Mahony and Hestell (2001) the 'ideology of standards' raises a number of issues relating to values and principles which operate

‘... both at the personal level of those deemed successful in meeting the standards and at the level of delivery in terms of the values communicated or instilled in those who are being taught. In both cases the standards construct a world within which people are meant to act and they define ways of acting within that world. The struggles which take place over standards are then conflicts over definitions of the nature of the world and society and what is important within them. The denial of a space within which disagreement is allowed about the ‘facts’ of effective teaching becomes an exercise in domination and exclusion; and the placing of firm boundaries around the scope for debate or disagreement becomes an exercise in limitation or consensus management.’

(Mahoney and Hestell, 2001, 185)

This statement is important for what follow in this article, particular in terms of making connections between ‘definitions of the world and society and what is important in them’ for learners, and the way in which such definitions mediate, and are mediated by, power relations in teaching and learning. In these processes ‘curriculum’ and ‘pedagogy’ are inseparable, dual concepts. Freire’s exasperation with the idea, which began to become so powerful by the end of the 1980s, that curriculum and learning is concerned with narrow definitions of knowledge which can be pre-packaged, measured, and controlled by ‘professionals’, is evident,

‘For us, curriculum reform could never be something made, elaborated, thought by a dozen “experts” whose final results end up in the form of curriculum “packages” to be executed according to instructions and guidelines equally elaborated by the “experts”. Curriculum reform is always a political-pedagogical process and, for us, substantially democratic.’ (Freire, 1993, 19)

Teachers have to work, at least to a large extent, within the limitations and constraints imposed by a product driven professional culture which is often internalised and which, on the surface, appears to offer little opportunity for resistance, creative exploration or the establishment of democratic relationships and practices in teaching and learning. Yet this should not imply an inevitable acceptance of either the *product* itself or the *mode of production*. Teacher-researchers have the power to interpret policies in ways which can be imaginative and transgressive of dominant values and purposes in education systems. One way of working to achieve this is through the development of radical action research.

In the following sections we discuss ways in which teaching and learning relationships can be reconfigured, based on understanding about what kinds of knowledge are important to different people in different contexts. We review some of the starting points for our work on practitioner research based on collaborative action to provide spaces in which very different conceptions of teaching and learning can emerge. This is followed by a section reflecting on action research and teaching and learning in the context of an MA in Inclusive Education (by Felicity Armstrong) and examples of two very different kinds of research action, both of which are premised on ideas of collaborative exploration and democracy as part of the process of teaching and learning. One is about the early stages of a project in a college of Further Education in the UK in which learning is relocated as part of the collaborative research process itself (by Orlane Russell). The other focuses on an action research project with a group of primary school teachers in Brazil which was concerned with developing emancipatory action and environmental education (Edina Schimanski).

The kind of work we are describing has many starting points, drawing on different disciplinary and epistemological sources as a means of examining dominant assumptions and practices and challenging discriminatory values and practices in education. For Orlane Russell, Disability Studies has contributed to a critical understanding of the limits and possibilities of emancipatory research and the role of the social model and the medical model of disability (Moore, et al, 1998). Barnes (2003) describes the rationale for emancipatory research as

‘...the production of research that has some meaningful practical outcome for disabled people. After all, emancipation is about empowerment...’

(Barnes, 2003, 12)

‘...empowerment is not something that can be given, it is something that people can do for themselves. The salient point here relates to ownership.’ (Barnes, 2003, 13)

Although much of the work relating to what is called ‘emancipatory research’ in recent years relates to disabled people, the term is extended here to refer to its potential in terms of involving any individual or social group who want to change their situation through their own, collaborative work and critical reflection. Radical action research involves negotiation over the ownership of the research purposes and processes.

However, Swain and French (1998) emphasise the importance of the wider context in negotiations over ownership and power:

‘Basically, it is our experience that the power-relations in the production of research go well beyond the actual participants, including researchers. Research is produced within the social and historical context of the participants’ intentions and endeavours. The terms ‘participatory’ and ‘emancipatory’ cannot be defined solely by power-relations internal to the research. Research production is a process of negotiation in which interests are played out both between

participants and between participants and other interested parties. Participation and emancipation are not categories of research, but processes constructed within negotiated constraints.'

(Swain and French, in Clough and Barton, 1998, 52)

In her work Edina Schimanski focuses on questions of emancipation and democracy. The approach to action research described involves creating opportunities to reflect and identify how power-correlations operate in the context of the research and, through these opportunities, to (re)construct research production as involving scenarios of dialogue and contestation (Jennings and Graham, 1996). In this context, participation turns out to be more than an aspiration in critical research to become a *sine qua non* condition to produce emancipation.

Discourse as representation

Another starting point is the work, in different disciplines, that has been done around labelling and the creation of identities which come to be seen as 'natural', or marginalisations which appear rationale and inevitable (Armstrong, 2003, Corker and French, 1999, Priestly, 1999). This occurs through the emergence of discourses which normalise *and* abnormalise - or rather, we could say, that discourses which construct 'the other', simultaneously construct 'the normal'. As Potts (1998) explains,

'A social category like 'emotionally and behaviourally disturbed', as well as purporting to describe those contained within its boundaries, functions to confirm a polarised 'not like us' value-judgement.'

(Potts, 1998, 19)

Discourse plays an integral part in defining the nature and meaning of the research itself. As Jennings and Graham (1996) observe:

'If the action researcher is prepared to accept that the process itself is constituted through its own discourse then the 'objects' of study themselves are so constituted. That is, the boundaries of the action

research ‘problem’ or ‘question’ are not given but are constructed and constituted through discourse.’

(Jennings and Graham, 1996,173)

Crucial to this process of construction are the perspectives and *ways of seeing* of the different participants involved. As important, of course, are the silences, the voices which are missing from discussion, the non participants who are excluded from the research. This raises difficult ethical and organisational questions which may bring values concerned with democracy into conflict with those of expediency.

Voice and autobiography

Insider accounts have come to play an increasing, if varied, role in research into social practice and policymaking. Swain and French (1998) describe the confusing array of possible interpretations of the notion of voice: it can be used to refer to the voice of individuals or groups; for the purposes of ‘representation’ or as a key source in oral history research. It can be concerned with ‘having a say’ in decision making, or simply being listened to. In working with practitioners carrying out their own research the question of voice and its possible meanings are frequently discussed, involving reflection on how little space is given to the voices of students and teachers in discussions of teaching and learning. We have talked about the dilemma of interviewing people in the belief we are ‘giving them a voice’ but then muffling their voices or using them manipulatively in our own writing; we have explored questions about whether it is possible to take into account the views of all concerned in a particular situation and set of relationships. ‘Voice’ is not something added on, but has to mean many voices, discussing, describing, questioning and putting forward different perspectives in order to shape the research as it develops. In this, there are risks involved in terms of managing the direction, and completion of the research – but ‘completion’ should not always be regarded as the successful outcome. As important as completion are the understandings and questions and explorations which emerge along the way. These should be seen as the production of knowledge, and hence concerned with forms of learning, and the reconfiguration of issues and perspectives.

In the following sections we write as individuals about our own involvement in democratic action research.

Working with teachers on an MA in inclusive education (Felicity Armstrong)

There is sometimes a failure to make connections between theoretical interests and the daily practice of teachers – or rather, the two arenas are kept apart. This is demonstrated in a certain kind of literature in which there seems to be an obsession with the questions: is research carried out by teachers *real*? What is its value? How can we be *sure* it is ‘real research’? And so on. There is sometimes a lack of understanding that theory is *in practice*, and that theory and practice play a symbiotic role in generating ideas and different vantage points from which to reflect on familiar contexts and situations.

It has been practicing teachers studying on a part-time MA in Inclusive Education at the Institute of Education who have drawn this to my attention most powerfully. On this programme we explore the intersection between the history of education, and responses to difference, policymaking, professional lives and autobiography. As part of the teaching, we use paintings, maps, literature and architecture as means of exploring identities and spatialising processes in the construction of difference. The idea of this is not to ‘teach’ but to explore, to unleash the imagination and to learn in possibly unexpected ways. We want to make connections between our own internal lives and experiences – our autobiographies - and what is *out there*. Rather than ‘studying’ others, and the ways policies and practices affect *them*, rather than seeking to analyse and comment on a presumed ‘oppression’ of others in a detached way, we have tried to engage with the contexts, values and processes which produce marginalisation. We also need to ask: who speaks for whom about oppression and exclusion? Who assumes the right to categorise other people as ‘excluded’, and on what criteria? To what extent could the identification of ‘excluded others’ contribute to that exclusion and the affirmation of dominant values and life styles, and to the sustaining of stereotypes? To what extent are schools detached from communities, or do they truly belong to their local populations and cultures? In asking these questions we have attempted to develop

a more reflexive approach in which we challenge our own assumptions as well as those of others.

All of these ideas have been drawn into practitioner research projects which seek to develop an approach based on experience and rights, rather than one whose purpose is to impose technical and bureaucratic ‘solutions’ and procedures on people – a practice based on a deficit model in which the recipients of change are seen as needy and voiceless. The example below highlights some of the consequences and issues involved in attempting to adopt such an approach.

Co-researchers in a college of further education (Orlane Russell)

I work in a large Further Education college in London where I am a lecturer on a ‘discrete’ programme for students labelled as ‘having learning difficulties’ and also a support co-ordinator for students accessing main programme courses. My study on the MA in Inclusive Education, has led me to consider a range of models of ‘inclusive’ education, evaluating what is called ‘discrete’ provision, considering the reality of a group of students who are visible and participating in the cultural and educational life of a college as opposed to a hypothetical ‘inclusive college’. My initial aim was to consult students and, to a lesser degree, staff concerning their views and experiences of both types of provision. Through this research student participants could be involved in the debate concerning the ‘evolving model of inclusive education’ within the college, and in the longer term this could inform the ways that students are offered support and the identification of areas for development.

I had concerns that the term ‘people with learning difficulties’ was the chosen term by this group and the UK self advocacy movement, but that in some ways it failed to address the debate regarding the social versus medical model of disability. However from talking with students as a teacher or a facilitator of meetings, I have developed a strong sense of my students’ understanding of barriers to learning and participation, and many have experienced a lifetime of marginalization. They choose to own a label that lacks the harshness of historical labels such as ‘imbecile’ or ‘mentally handicapped’ (while the UK government are still amending their ‘Mental Incapacity Bill’). The issue

of identity is part of a lesson for me in terms of not imposing my own value system, and one which prompts me to consult these experienced and aware individuals. As Stalker (1998) states, the role of researcher as expert would be totally inappropriate and inequitable in research of this nature.

‘... conventional research relationships, whereby the researcher is the ‘expert’ and the researched merely the object of investigation, are inequitable; secondly, (that) people have a right to be consulted about and involved in research which is concerned with issues affecting their lives; and thirdly, (that) the quality and relevance of research is improved when disabled people are closely involved in the process.’ (Stalker, 1998, 6)

Considering the direction of my research project, it was clear that the involvement of the students needed to be as full as possible, which has lead me to recruit a research group made up of students with learning difficulties, who are currently involved in designing the research methodology and agenda . The degree to which people with learning difficulties can be fully included in the research process has been questioned by Riddell, Wilkinson and Ball (1998) :

‘The expertise of the researcher (presumably the warrant for any research activity) is not transmissible to some people with cognitive impairments; the involvement of people with learning difficulties in the process of the research may similarly be limited; current models of consultation and involvement of people with learning difficulties in issues involving their lives suggest that the pulls either to the trivial or the professionally stage-managed are hard to resist.’

(Riddell, Wilinon & Baron 1998, 82)

The absence of people with learning difficulties as researchers is closely linked to barriers created in terms of their full participation in the spheres of work and education and the attributes of valued western lifestyles. As a teacher my commitment is to opening up a full range of learning opportunities; as a researcher it would be to make the research process inclusive. Riddell states that current practices are not adequately accessible, and we need to reflect on what we can take from the strategies used to open up education

As a research team we aim to explore the possibilities of involvement for the co-researchers and their peers. Would it be possible through methods including the use of video and open discussion supported by use of symbol and signing, to widen participation to open up the process to normally excluded voices? Similarly the question of dissemination needs to be addressed. The production of my research will serve an academic purpose, as well as being concerned with bringing about change in my own institution. But it is important that these agendas, which are 'external' to the research process and dynamic, do not have the effect of excluding my co-researchers in terms of leading to a tangible outcome and means of dissemination which they have ownership of. These pressures must not compromise the integrity of the project, and we aim to produce a form of text that will be widely accessible in terms of language and use of images and symbol. For the students this is a priority; many can give examples of the damaging power of professional language and their negative experience of the power that others have assumed over their lives. This is exemplified in Humphries' (1994) models of 'accumulation, accommodation and appropriation' of knowledge through the research process, described as:

'...accumulation of information about the lives of oppressed group, communicated through a specific language which in turn results in surveillance and regulation rather than empowerment.'

(Humphries, 1994, 198)

Therefore their involvement in the research production can challenge the abuse of power in language that has historically compounded the oppression of certain groups. If the students present our findings in an accessible format, it will be an act of empowerment.

The power differentials between the researcher and the 'researched' are an issue for myself and the research team, as students and self-advocates they have an understanding and level of sensitivity in group discussion that will be reflected in their work, an awareness of the balance between speaking up and taking turns that informs their attitude to research, and this informs our discussions about the power of the research and what it means to be empowered. At this stage there are still concerns

about the degree to which we will all be respectively empowered or other wise by the process, for me as a lecturer I am inevitably in a position where I my position may be enhanced by my study for an MA, for the students the benefits are more likely to be in terms of self knowledge but involvement in the research process will give the experience of involvement in a project of new breadth and scope and to have the ownership and use of the report within their own hands.

Co-researchers in environmental education in Brazil (Edina Schimanski)

When in 1999 I concluded my Masters degree in Sociology a particular matter arising from the outcomes of my research and the meaning of the findings for the participants lead me to reflect on the practical implications of the study. The research based on qualitative methods examined strategies of social organisation used by Brazilian peasants to construct a libertarian social movement shaped to face economic and political exploitation in rural areas in Brazil. Despite the valuable data which contributed to a widening of sociological interpretations concerning strategies of resistance on the part of marginalised groups in confronting political oppression, a disquieting question emerged at end of the research regarding subjects' participation, namely: to what extent did the research really contribute to the lives of those peasants in terms of the usefulness to them of the research outcomes? The answer could be: a small contribution in giving voice to the subjects and engaging them in self-conscious critique and, out of this, bringing about changes in their environment in which marginalisation is generated.

As a development from this work, I became engaged with the idea of envisaging subjects as generators of knowledge to oppose social exploitation and injustice through my doctoral thesis (Schimanski, 2005) which was focused on the process of teaching environmental education. Rather than analysing others and how social and political practices impinge on them, and more than examining causes and consequences of oppression on the others, I attempted to become part of the environment of those most crucially involved, and affected by the issues concerned in the research, and to reflect with them on the social conditions in which social exclusion is materialised. The results obtained through a piece of participatory action research brought about important

insights in terms of participants' realisation of their role as active subjects to transform their social environment. The research based on the premise that teachers are key agents for change and have the capacity to contribute to develop emancipatory environment education in which the oppressive environmental conditions experienced by children and their communities become a part of the environmental education curriculum.

The action research was developed with 36 primary teachers from four state schools in Ponta Grossa, Parana, Brazil. The goal was to provide teachers with an opportunity to reflect on their practices and to encourage changes regarding the development of their students' critical thinking and emancipatory actions towards environmental problem-solving. The analysis of the findings gathered from distinct phases of the research – teachers' planning, taking actions, evaluation and (re)planning – indicated important progress in changing pedagogical practice of environmental education.

I chose action research as providing a conduit, a framework, for 'praxis-oriented' research which would support teachers in reflecting on their practice which was predominantly conceptualised through the notion of 'shaping' pupils' behaviours' to protect nature. In developing critical thinking with their students, involving emancipatory action for change in the local environment and in social practices and aspirations in the local community, teachers assumed a different way of carrying out their everyday teaching. The project was fundamentally concerned with issues of participation and social justice, and sought to enhance life experience and positive community action. The majority of the schools involved in the research are located in an area of extreme social and economic deprivation. One issue which emerged during the research was that while the teachers were trained in environmental education as a subject crossing disciplines such as geography and biology, they were unaware of the environmental realities of the daily lives of the communities in which they worked.

The action research opened up discussion between teachers, primary school students and their communities in which roles were exchanged and reversed. Adult members of the community, who reportedly did not value the education provided by the school, became involved as commentators and informants, who were able to identify the most

urgent environmental problems faced by their communities on a daily basis. Children explained issues to teachers, and in turn, explained to their families ways in which the environment and health could be improved by their own actions. The project brought schools and communities close together in a democratic process of self-empowerment, critical reflection and change. As a result of the action research, most of the participating teachers were able to move from reductionist conceptions about the environmental education curriculum and the children who came to their schools, to more complex understandings of environmental problems and local communities. The findings endorsed the importance of promoting environmental education connected with real problems experienced by children in terms of developing skills to critically analyse and implement solutions to environmental problems.

The participation of teachers as collaborative agents in the research has taken on a particular aspect: for the first time they have been involved in reflecting on their intentions, and analysing their assumptions about their pedagogical practice. The action research was designed to extend forms of teaching practices and transform teachers' perceptions of themselves and their students – a transformation in which they came to understand themselves and their students as being essential components of the solution of their problems. The cooperation and participatory spirit developed during different phases of the research enabled them to realise the importance of reflecting and sharing experiences to construct creative practices at schools. The inclusive and innovative character of action research allowed participants to gain voice and explore diverse practices to construct 'the difference' at schools environment to face marginalisation experienced by students and community.

Conclusion

I will write a brief conclusion over the weekend. Is there anything you would like me to emphasise particularly?

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