

## CHAPTER ONE

# What Is Action Research?

Most researchers attempt to study social reality either by decontextualizing variables or by being a fly-on-the-wall observer of a natural setting. These are the hallmarks of objectivity in quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. Action researchers, on the other hand, study social reality by acting within it and studying the effects of their actions. All three of these approaches to research have their particular strengths and limitations, but what sets action research apart is that it generates knowledge out of ongoing problem solving in social settings. Action researchers can be outsiders to the setting who collaborate with insiders, or they can be insiders working alone or in collaboration with others. In schools, action researchers tend to be teachers or other school professionals doing what is often called practitioner, teacher, or action research.

While *action research* remains the most common term across most disciplines, variations of this type of research go by terms such as *action science*, *participatory action research (PAR)*, *community-based action research*, *cooperative inquiry*, *self-study*, *emancipatory praxis*, *autoethnography*, and, as is more commonly the case in education, *teacher*, *practitioner*, or *action researcher*. As we make clear in Chapter 2, each of these terms connotes a different emphasis. In many cases, each represents different research traditions that grew out of very different social contexts.

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In the first edition of the book, we used the term *practitioner research* because we wanted to place practitioners at the center of the enterprise and because we thought it was emerging as the term of choice in education. However, the term *action research* seems to have held up among educators, and placing school practitioners at the center of the enterprise can sometimes obscure the centrality of action as well as displace other participants, such as students, parents, and community members. Therefore, we have used *practitioner action research* in the book title, although in the text of this edition we tend to shorten it to *action research* for the sake of brevity.

Although the plethora of terms used to describe this research also reflects wide disagreement on many key issues, we provide below a working definition of practitioner action research, as well as a few of our working assumptions, that are used throughout the book. Action research is a living, growing movement that is in the process of evolving; it is this evolution that we describe in subsequent chapters.

### DEFINING ACTION RESEARCH

In attempting to provide a working definition of practitioner action research, we want to make it clear that every point in the following definition is hotly debated in the burgeoning literature on action research. Thus, we attempt to provide a snapshot of how the definition is taking shape.

In the field of education, the term *action research* connotes “insider” research done by practitioners using their own site (classroom, institution, school district, community) as the focus of their study. It is a reflective process but is different from isolated, spontaneous reflection in that it is deliberately and systematically undertaken and generally requires that some form of evidence be presented to support assertions. What constitutes “evidence” or, in more traditional terms, “data,” is still being debated. This is particularly the case in self-study forms of action research that rely to a greater extent on experience and narrative.

As mentioned above, action research is oriented to some action or cycles of actions that practitioners wish to take to address a particular situation. For this reason, the term *action research* has traditionally been used for this type of research.

Action research is sometimes described as an ongoing series of cycles that involve moments of planning actions, acting, observing the effects, and reflecting on one's observations. These cycles form a spiral that results in refinements of research questions, resolution of problems, and transformations in the perspectives of researchers and participants.

Some, including the authors, argue that action research is best done in collaboration with others who have a stake in the problem under investigation, such as other educational practitioners in the setting, students, parents, or other members of the community. Sometimes collaboration involves outsiders (e.g., university faculty, consultants, evaluators) who have relevant skills or resources.

Like all forms of inquiry, action research is value-laden. Although most practitioners hope that action research will improve their practice, what constitutes "improvement" is not self-evident. It is particularly problematic in a field such as education, where there is no consensus on basic educational aims. Action research takes place in educational settings that reflect a society characterized by conflicting values and an unequal distribution of resources and power. Currently, most educators are working with imposed accountability systems based on standardized test scores that may or may not reflect school achievement or improvement from a practitioner's point of view.

More concise definitions exist in the growing body of literature on practitioner action research. For example, McKernan (1991) describes practitioner action research as "a form of self-reflective problem solving which enables practitioners to better understand and solve pressing problems in social settings" (p. 6).

McCutcheon and Jung (1990) provide the following definition: "Systematic inquiry that is collective, collaborative, self-reflective, critical, and undertaken by the participants of the inquiry. The goals of such research are the understanding of practice and the articulation of a rationale or philosophy of practice in order to improve practice" (p. 148).

Kemmis and McTaggart (1982) provide a definition with social justice at its center:

[A] form of *collective*, self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational

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practices, as well as their understanding of the practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out. Groups of participants can be teachers, students, principals, parents, and other community members—any group with a shared concern. The approach is only action research when it is *collaborative*, though it is important to realize that the action research of the group is achieved through the *critically examined action* of the individual group members. (p. 6)

While we prefer to remain as eclectic as possible with regard to a definition, we would also like to lay out a few assumptions that form the foundation for this book.

### WORKING ASSUMPTIONS

Following are a few assumptions that we share about action research. We feel that these assumptions are also widely shared within the action research community. Throughout this book, we use *action research* to denote insiders doing research in their own settings, though we realize the term is also used more broadly. For a more complete discussion of insider and outsider action research, see Herr and Anderson (2005) and Noffke (1997).

#### **Action Research Differs From Traditional Academic Research Without Necessarily Being Less Rigorous**

Although action research can borrow appropriate methods from university-based research, it is different from academic research in that it represents insider or local knowledge about a setting. There is no way an outsider, even an ethnographer who spends years as an observer, can acquire the tacit knowledge of a setting that those who must act within it daily possess. This creates obvious advantages for the insider action researcher, but it also makes it harder for the practitioner doing research to step back and take a dispassionate look at the setting. This subjectivity is one of the reasons some recommend that practitioners do research in collaboration with outsiders or with a *critical friend*. This critical friend may be another insider who plays a devil's

advocate role. The implications of the differences between insider and outsider research are continuing to be discussed. We review these epistemological (how we acquire and share knowledge) issues in more detail in Chapter 2. It is important to add that action research is not less rigorous than traditional academic research but rather defines rigor differently.

### **Action Research Is Political**

In fact, any research that makes knowledge claims is necessarily political, but action research is political in a double sense. It is political in the obvious sense that asking critical questions about one's practice, classroom, and school can offend those with a stake in maintaining the status quo. But it is also political in the sense that practitioners creating knowledge about their own practice challenge those who view practitioners as passive recipients of knowledge created in universities. As school practitioners find their voice, they are in a position to challenge reformers who view them as scapegoats for low student achievement.

As mentioned in our definition, we believe that no research is neutral; therefore, researchers should not be naive about how their research will be received within their setting. Although action researchers need techniques for gathering and analyzing data, they also need an understanding of the ways in which action research often threatens the vested interests and ideological commitments of some groups and individuals. Chapter 2 addresses in more detail the "politics" of doing action research.

In Chapter 2, our goal is to discuss epistemological and political issues in a straightforward and clear manner. Many books that deal with these issues, although excellent accounts that are valuable resources for academics, tend to turn practitioners off because their discourse is pitched at academics rather than practitioners (e.g., Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Kincheloe, 1991; Winter, 1987). We want language to serve as an aid rather than an obstacle to understanding for practitioners.

On the other hand, we are disturbed by a growing anti-intellectualism on the part of some who assume that educational practitioners only want a nuts-and-bolts, "what-I-can-do-on-Monday" recipe for answering "safe" and narrow questions limited to the four walls of a classroom or school. We find this trend

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toward “deskilling” insulting to educational practitioners, who, in our experience, desire a better understanding of their practice and its social effects. We also understand, thanks to Argyris and Schön (1974), that there is no such thing as practice that is nontheoretical. Many of the recipes and tips for teachers that appear in practitioner journals are dripping with theoretical and ideological assumptions of which even their authors often seem unaware. Part of the task of action research is to strip away the unexamined theoretical baggage that has accumulated around almost everything we do in schools. To do this, we must make the familiar seem strange, a task enhanced by both ethnographic and action research.

### **There Are Many Valid Ways to Do Action Research**

Many practitioners have difficulty imagining themselves as researchers, because they have a particular image of research acquired from a research course they took during their undergraduate or graduate studies. This course work may have exposed them to both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies, but our experience indicates that quantitative research is more commonly required for virtually all graduate students. In this approach, representative samples, significance levels, and confounding variables were the order of the day, framing how quality research was considered. Only in recent years have introductory courses presented students with a fuller range of research traditions, and even in these cases, action research may or may not be included. It is hard for most practitioners to imagine doing quantitative, statistical research in their own settings. Although much research in education is of this kind, it represents only one of many options available to action researchers. Some questions may be best pursued with statistical research, and there are books available that address this approach to action research (e.g., Brause & Mayher, 1991; Myers, 1985; Rowntree, 1981). However, the emphasis in this book is on qualitative and narrative methodologies, which tend to be appropriated from anthropology, sociology, history, linguistics, and the humanities. Our current sense is that just as educators appropriated qualitative research from these various areas, we are now in the ongoing process of appropriating

and adapting qualitative methods for use in the realities of action research.

By qualitative research, we mean anything from ethnographic methods to journals and essays. We have no interest in policing what “counts” as research and what does not. Our sense is that practitioners themselves are beginning to develop criteria for distinguishing rigor from sloppiness in action research. In Chapter 2, we discuss in more detail how action research challenges traditional criteria for the validity or trustworthiness of research studies.

### **Action Research Can Empower and Include a Greater Number of Voices**

Action research has the potential for empowerment and the inclusion of a greater diversity of voices in educational policy and social change. We see action research as an opportunity to make the voices of those who work closest to the classroom heard. This includes not only those practitioners who work at school sites but also the students who study there and the people who live in the school’s community. In Chapter 2, we refer to this as democratic validity/trustworthiness.

We see action research not merely as individual practitioners trying to improve their practice but as part of a larger social movement that challenges dominant research and development approaches that emphasize an outside-in, top-down approach to educational change. In other words, we believe that empowerment begins with a group of educational practitioners who view themselves not merely as consumers of someone else’s knowledge but as knowledge creators in their own right. Unless educational practitioners who are committed to empowering themselves and their students insist on a greater voice in school reform movements, action research will be co-opted by those very movements, which are led by special interests more concerned with “national competitiveness” than with the welfare of children. Although these goals are not inherently incompatible, too many children are currently viewed as socially expendable from a purely economic perspective. We personally know and work with many practitioners with a commitment to social justice working at school sites. These practitioners, through their research, are beginning to challenge the mythologies and institutional and social arrangements that lead to

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school failure for a disproportionate number of poor and minority students.

### **Action Research Is Best Done Collaboratively**

We believe that action research is best done as part of a collaborative effort. Ideally, collaboration is done with others who have a stake in the problem under study; however, it may also be done with a group of other practitioners who are also engaged in research. These other practitioners may or may not work at the same site, but they provide the action researcher with an emotional support group, a group of critical friends who can critique the researcher's work within a context of support.

Although we do not wish to discourage isolated practitioners—many of whom may have limited access to other action researchers—from engaging in research, the many advantages of collaboration are becoming increasingly apparent. In fact, many action research projects have emerged unexpectedly from teacher study and support groups (Saavedra, 1994; Short et al., 1993).

### **THE MULTIPLE POSITIONALITIES OF THE RESEARCHER(S) IN ACTION RESEARCH**

Most academic researchers assume that they are doing research *on* someone. That someone is generally referred to as the “subject,” “informant,” “interviewee,” or “participant.” What makes practitioner action research unique is that practitioners/researchers are their own subjects or informants. They are insiders, not outsiders, to the setting under study. “Insider” may seem self-explanatory, and one's position with regard to one's professional setting and relationships with colleagues, students, and community may, at first glance, seem straightforward. However, positionality often becomes a source of confusion for many practitioner action researchers.

Before practitioners began doing their own research, action researchers were seen exclusively as outside change agents who worked closely with their insider participants, often practitioners. We discuss the history and roots of action research in Chapter 2, but here, suffice it to observe that it was often assumed that action



research was initiated by an outsider. The central issue for outsider action researchers was how to involve insiders in the research to a greater extent than was the case with traditional research. Much of this research was—and continues to be—contract or evaluation research and usually was funded to solve a particular problem or evaluate a particular program. Such research is still often undertaken in fields like international development, public health, and community psychology. At its most collaborative, it represents what Bartunek and Louis (1996) call insider/outsider teams.

In education, and increasingly in fields like nursing and social work, action research is more often done by organizational insiders, such as teachers, administrators, counselors, or school social workers and psychologists who see it as a way to deepen their own reflection on practice toward problem posing, problem solving, and professional development. In such cases the researcher and the practitioner are one and the same. The practitioner action researcher may be working alone on his or her research or as part of a larger team of people conducting the study. At the same time, it is not unusual to have university people in the schools guiding student teachers through action research projects (e.g., Green & Brown, 2006) or involved in study/inquiry groups with teachers that may also earn university credits (e.g., Luna et al., 2004). Or perhaps the school is a Professional Development School (PDS) site, and both university and school professionals are conducting action research about the professional development taking place on-site (e.g., Levin & Rock, 2003). As we think through who “owns” the research and how multiple players and positionalities impact the research process, the simple insider-outsider distinctions begin to blur.

While action research in education tends to be defined by its insider position vis-à-vis outsiders, issues of positionality don't end there. As an insider to the setting, the practitioner occupies a complex set of roles and relationships. Schools are hierarchical organizations. Administrators have formal power over teachers; teachers have formal power over students; more senior teachers may have formal or informal power over more junior teachers. Carefully thinking through one's positionality within an organization is important in understanding how it may impact the trustworthiness of the findings and the ethics of the research process.

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If I am a principal doing action research to improve my professional development program for teachers, interviewing teachers to obtain data is problematic from a trustworthiness or validity standpoint and possibly from an ethical one as well. In terms of the trustworthiness of the findings, it is unlikely that teachers will be frank and honest when being interviewed by "the boss." Thus, the quality of the data will be questionable. From an ethical standpoint, teachers may feel coerced into participating, even if they are invited to volunteer (see Anderson & Jones, 2000, for more on this). There are ways around these problems, of course. Using anonymous surveys or having another teacher do the interviews might give a principal better-quality data, and making the research more participatory and collaborative might make coercion less of an issue as teachers see some benefit in participating in a process that is likely to improve their professional development. Many of these ethical problems are attenuated to the extent that the research is participatory from its inception.

We also occupy multiple positions related to our social class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, ability/disability, religion, political beliefs, and so forth. Our position as male or female, Caucasian or African American, Jewish or Muslim influences what we see in our classrooms and what remains invisible to us. Even within our own school settings, we may be outsiders. The complexity of the notion of inside/outside is captured by Collins's (1990) discussion of being an "outsider-within." She suggests that one's location in an organization or community makes for varying vantage points and differing lenses of "reality." Some people are "outsiders-within," residing in the margins and observing "the contradictions between the dominant group's actions and ideologies" (p. 11). Collins maintains that outsiders-within offer a specialized, subjugated knowledge, a "peculiar marginality," that provides a unique standpoint on self and society. For example, nonwhites in a white-dominated organization may become expert observers of white culture as they navigate their day-to-day interactions with colleagues. Meanwhile, many white administrators and teachers may be totally unaware of this knowledge and in fact even deny that it exists. As we can see, being an action researcher requires not only reflecting on the research question at hand but also reflecting deeply about how our positionality becomes a lens through which we view reality.

## **“MEASURING UP” OR RECLAIMING OUR KNOWLEDGE?**

The logistical problems that school practitioners face and the lack of a reward system for doing research in schools can make doing action research a daunting task. On the other hand, many educators claim that doing research in their own sites has changed their professional lives and has offered a welcome alternative to other imposed forms of professional development. We find that many educators, with a little practice, find learning the qualitative and ethnographic research methods described in Chapter 6 relatively easy. The real problem is adapting them to the realities of the real world of schools and classrooms.

Pearson (1993), one of our former students, was attempting to begin a study of classroom discipline. She confessed to us the following: “As I began my observations, I realized that I had not yet learned the ‘tricks of the trade’” (p. 6). She described her harried day and her inability to take notes in class while she taught. Nor could she find the time to do sociograms or transcribe videotaped classroom data. She ended up blaming herself by internalizing her “failure” and concluded that trying “to solve this problem has given me a new insight into myself. I always thought of myself as organized. . . . I think there are levels of being organized, something like the levels of thinking skills. I’m still at the factual level. I’m obsessed with doing it, but haven’t the understanding of it yet” (p. 6).

This tendency to blame oneself for not measuring up or for not learning the tricks of the trade is all too common among beginning practitioner action researchers. Part of the problem may be that practitioners are learning tricks for the wrong trade. Academic qualitative researchers do not have to juggle data gathering with teaching or administering a school. Juggling these multiple demanding roles will necessitate the ongoing development of user-friendly data-gathering methods.

One of the themes of this book is the gap between the call for teachers to be researchers in their schools and classrooms and the lack of discussion about how one manages to perform two full-time jobs simultaneously: the job of a practitioner with that of a researcher. This situation seems like a lose-lose situation for practitioners. To do the work as thoroughly as outsider research demands, they may have to sacrifice time with students or family,

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and yet if they do not do research like academic researchers, their work is labeled second class by the criteria of the university. Practitioners doing site-based dissertations may be willing to sacrifice for a year or two, but what about the practitioner who wants to do research as part of being a professional educator or to improve and problematize his or her own practice?

Few practitioners working in school settings currently get release time for research. Although this is a fairly standard perk in academe, it is seldom provided in elementary and secondary school settings. Writing, publishing, and gaining tenure reward a university scholar's desire to do research. Many school practitioners labor to do research despite the fact that it is seldom a part of their job description, although increasingly it can be included in professional development plans.

What do practitioners gain in adding a research component to their roles as educators that helps offset the demands in time and energy? How can qualitative methods be appropriated and adapted to work in the real world of practitioners and schools? In other words: Why do action research?

When coauthor Herr worked in a middle school, she often worked with teachers to improve their teaching. On one occasion, a teacher's chairperson, the teacher, and Herr sat in the teacher's classroom, reviewing her latest round of student evaluations. The results were devastating, and all three struggled to understand the negative feedback from the students. The teacher was a ready learner, eager for and quick to try suggestions that others offered. The hoped-for results still seemed out of reach.

The chairperson, a supportive ally in working with his department member, was visibly discouraged and worried. The teacher became teary and wondered whether she had what it took to succeed in this profession. Herr suggested that this teacher might be a good candidate to do some action research. The opportunity for the teacher to observe her own classroom in some systematic way might help her reflect and gain insight into her own practice. The chairperson, worrying about adding the burden of research to an already overburdened and discouraged teacher, wondered out loud if this might not be "too much" in addition to daily classroom preparations and other school obligations. The teacher replied that what was "too much" was the constant drain of living with unsolved practice problems. The thought of a systematic inquiry

that might shed light on classroom problems felt like a lifeline, to which she eagerly grabbed hold.

There is no miracle end to the story. Now the teacher is embarking on her own inquiry of her classroom with the support of her chairperson and with consultation from Herr. The hope is that her self-discovery process will help unravel the mysteries of her teaching and improve her practice.

Accounts like Richards's (1987) in Chapter 3 also speak to the potential benefits of action research. Richards was discouraged by her underachieving eighth-grade class that she taught during the last period of the school day. The possibility of some insight and positive problem solving where "hopeless" practice issues are concerned can be a solid motivator for beginning some form of action research. Her action research transformed her hopelessness into an exciting adventure with her students.

Action research can also be a vehicle for sharing practices that work with other teachers. This happens when teachers are excited that through the trial and error of refining their own practices, they may have hit upon something that really works. In this case, the thought of systematizing informal observations of one's practice and then disseminating the results to a wider audience can be an attractive option. An example of this comes from Herr's (1993) experience in a school in which she worked as a counselor and teacher.

I remember a conversation I had with a math teacher regarding a student I was concerned about; although academically able, the student was doing miserably in every class—except for math. I had approached the math teacher, hoping she could give me some insight into what "works" with this student. As we talked together, the teacher recounted that she had been doing some experimenting with her classroom setup, weaving more cooperative learning experiences into her math classes. She had noticed that her female students in particular seemed to enjoy the times the class worked in cooperative groupings; grades of the girls previously struggling seemed to be on their way up, and the teacher felt convinced that cooperative learning had something to do with it. As someone acquainted with the research literature showing that middle school is a particularly trying time for female adolescents, that self-esteem plummets, and grades, particularly

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in math and science, drop, I can remember feeling exhilarated by this teacher's observations. I would be excited for her to consider doing some action research as a means to systematically record and test her hunch regarding what was happening in her classroom.

We need this teacher's findings as well as those of other practitioners as we work to understand how to create better learning environments for and with our students.

The importance of investigating and recording what works is particularly important in light of the difficult problems facing educators and the public discourse highlighting what does not work in our schools. As insiders in the system, practitioners have a unique vantage point from which to problem solve. In fact, in this age of mandating evidence-based practices, who better than school insiders to produce evidence about what works for diverse groups of students. And what better way to communicate this evidence than through educators narrating their findings through their research. The challenge is to create ways to do action research without overwhelming ourselves in the process, to make research an integral part of what we already do, rather than merely an add-on.

## CONCLUSION

These are exciting times for action research. It has the potential to bring to light important theories about practice that have been too long discredited as informal theory or teacher lore. It can empower school practitioners by helping them discover their voices and resist attempts at deskilling. It can build collegiality and a common community of learning among practitioners, which in turn will provide a model of inquiry for students. On the other hand, it can also become one more teacher inservice scheme that can be packaged and taken on the road—another implementation strategy cooked up by management to build ownership in schools for the latest centrally mandated reform. Or perhaps it is one more requirement for education majors. It can become just one more expectation—one more thing teachers and prospective teachers are expected to do.

However, practitioners are beginning to build their own research networks. When they invite so-called experts to participate, it is increasingly on their own terms. While it remains to be seen whether this movement will lead to empowerment or be co-opted by a top-down reform movement, we remain convinced of its potential for individual as well as schoolwide growth and development.