Editorial
Action Research: Its Transformative Potential

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This inaugural issue of the Educational Research for Social Change Journal aims to tap into research which draws on participatory and emancipatory paradigms and methodologies in engaging communities in research towards social change. This special issue on action research, with the theme, Action Research: Its transformative potential, arose out of a conference that was held at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in August 2010, with the above title as its theme. The conference was organised to bring together South African and international educational researchers to share their learning around action research. It was hoped that such networking would provide expanded opportunities for researchers, students and practising teachers to conduct action research for social and educational improvement.

The articles chosen for this issue from the conference papers submitted are evidence of the burgeoning interest in action research in education circles. They also clearly illustrate the transformative potential of action research. Since action research is a broad term, that is open to many different interpretations, let me position it within the scope of this journal, whose aim is to promote research for social change, research that makes a real difference in the lives of both participants and researchers.

There has been a tremendous increase in the literature produced around action research in recent years (Dick, 2011). However, the term "action research" has been used and understood in many different ways – up to 24 different versions of participative, action-oriented research were identified by one researcher, in one context (Narayansamy, 2009). Add to this the different approaches to action research, such as critical action research (Davis, 2008), participatory action research (Jordan, 2008), community-based action research (Stringer, 2007) and living educational theory (Whitehead, 2008), and one can be forgiven for becoming confused. It is therefore important that I position action research in terms of its link to the focus of this journal - educational research for social change.

In spite of the plethora of action research approaches, certain key epistemological, ontological, methodological and axiological principles apply to them all. The overarching paradigm of all action research is grounded in definite, non-negotiable values and ideologies that underpin an inclusive and dynamic worldview. It is supported by constructivist and critical theories that allow for multiple ways to interpret reality. Educational improvement arises out of critical reflection of the status quo, followed by a definite plan to action. Common values that promote the social good give direction to the choice of research design and process, and include, inter alia, democracy, respect, equality, promotion of quality of life for all (Stringer, 2007), and authentic collaboration (Piggot-Irvine, 2012). In a practitioner self-enquiry approach,

participants foreground ontological values that then become standards by which they can judge their intentions and actions (Whitehead, 2008).

Action research promotes democracy and abolishes the notion of the all-knowing, all-powerful academic "expert" through the recognition that knowledge is context-bound, created in collaboration with others and that interpretations are fluid and changing (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). Participants are regarded as practitioner-researchers, perfectly capable of finding workable ways to improve their own educational situations. The role of the academic researcher is therefore to guide the participants to take responsibility for their own thinking, attitudes and actions (Wood, Morar & Mostert, 2008) since shifts on a cognitive, affective and behavioural level are more likely to be sustained as they become part of the personal and professional identity of the participant (Batagiannis, 2011).

Action research has been described as being more concerned with practice than theory (Townsend, 2010), but I would challenge the validity of such a claim. Action research allows for the creation of unique and personal "living theories" (Whitehead, 1989, p. 43) that generate knowledge that can influence educational practice and research in a significant way (see www.actionresearch.net for many examples of doctoral theses and links to articles).

Action research leads to transformation of the circumstances but, in the process, the participant-researchers are also transformed. Increase in self-confidence and self-awareness, improvement in problem solving ability and development of a desire and capacity for lifelong learning (Zuber-Skerrit, 2011) are all outcomes that have been ascribed to participation in an action research process. Hope and a growing agency to take control of their own situations is also noted in literature (Schoen, 2007). Transformation is thus enhanced on three levels:

- Practical outcomes: transformation in social circumstances/improvement in educational concern;

- Epistemological outcomes: transformation in how people think about research, about knowledge creation and what counts as valid educational theory; and

- Ontological outcomes: transformation of ways of living, how we interact with others, how we see our position in the world.

Action research is aimed at improving lives by "bringing scholarship and praxis back together … our immodest aim is to change the relationship between knowledge and practice … usually practised by scholar-practitioners who care deeply about making a positive change in the world" (Reason & Bradbury, 2008, p.12). And that is the bottom line – to bring about social, educational and personal improvement. For research to make a real difference, to contribute to continual and growth-enhancing learning in our own lives and in the lives of those we influence, we need to continually self-reflect on what we are doing, and why we are doing it.

Any theory that attempts to improve social problems needs to be dynamic, able to change and evolve. Living educational theory is a notion, first mooted by Jack Whitehead (1989), that is being adopted by academics and practitioners in South Africa and worldwide as a feasible way to engage in teaching and research that is truly transformational (Wood, Morar & Mostert, 2007). Action research is in a constantly developmental state: action researchers "should stress the importance of developing new forms of explanation rather than permitting their research to be dominated by method or by traditional forms of theoretical, conceptual frameworks" (Whitehead, 1989, p.42). The main questions that should be posed by all action researchers to validate their work are: "Do I accept and live out my values as fully as I can?" and "Are these values acceptable and useful for others in promoting transformation in educational practice?" (McNiff, 2005, p. 24). Most of the contributors to this issue have chosen to use a living theory approach to educational enquiry. In his global overview of this genre of action research, **Jack Whitehead** provides us

with ideas on how researchers can contribute to "a new epistemology for educational research" and ample examples from all over the world that serve as evidence that this is an approach to research that is helping to transform education.

Mark Schofield's focus is on using action research within the tertiary curriculum as a theoretical base for helping professionals enrolled on Master's programmes to improve their work practices. Through this module, he engages participants in reflecting on their own practice and deciding what model or aspects of action research would be most appropriate for their context. In this way, they learn how to improve their practices by working collaboratively, democratically and transformatively. Schofield positions his module as a tool that supports professional development and transferrable learning that encourages students to reflexively engage with the world to bring about mutual transformation.

Also focusing on teaching practices at tertiary level, **Lee Scott** shares her living theory of how visual prompts can be used to enhance student learning. She explains how she came to know that learning is promoted through the introduction of "play" in the classroom. Her "zig-zag" description of the research process aptly captures the iterative nature of learning inherent in the action research process.

Moving to research within a school context, **Linda Vargas** (together with Demi Fernandez) explores the use of flamenco dance as a means of educational and personal development within a multicultural context. Her account of how she discovered the value of dance as a means of encouraging cognitive, affective and behavioural transformation in learners towards a more socially just way of life has important implications for the task of "nation building" in South Africa.

Deirdre Kroone (under the supervision of Busisiwe Alant) explains how her values of honesty, integrity and concern about the well-being of her learners spurred her on to embark on a journey to find out how she could best influence healthy food choices among youth. As is common in action research, the findings were not exactly what she expected. True to the *"zig-zag"* nature of the process as described by Scott above, she found out things that indicated that she was a "living contradiction" (Whitehead, 1989) and she needed to face and resolve this. While her article does not offer definite answers to the main research question, it does demonstrate the value of the flexible and dynamic design of action research that allows for the unearthing of hidden barriers to growth and transformation.

Finally, **Bonnie Kaplan** explains how adopting an action research approach to continually assess her coaching and mentoring work with emerging entrepreneurs has transformed her practice. Her desire to help people to attain economic independence stems from her passion to eradicate social and economic injustice. Her narrative describes how her personal journey of transformation influenced the transformation of her students and their social circumstances.

The "post-modern" stage of South African education creates uncertainty about how to attain social and educational sustainability (Gaylard, 2005). However, such a situation can be an opportunity for creativity, rather than despair. Action research encourages creativity, helping practitioners to find ways of improving their work which often entails rejection of current social and educational norms and the development of new ways to approach the problems facing them. In short, the process of conducting action research transforms educators and education, leading inevitably to a transformative influence on society. I would like to end by quoting from the book that is reviewed in this issue (see page 98-99):

> That is why PALAR [participatory action learning and action research] has an important role to play not only as method or methodology, but also as an epistemology, ontology and ethical character/community building framework. (Zuber-Skerrit, 2012, p. 2)

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