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BOOK REVIEW

A review of “Action research for sustainable development in a turbulent world” for Educational Research for Social Change by O. Zuber-Skerritt

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While the edited volume, *Action research for sustainable development in a turbulent world* (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012), is not focused specifically on educational action research, its title alone is likely to strike a chord with many educators and educational researchers. The word “turbulent” is derived from the Latin “*turbulentus*”, meaning “full of commotion” (Oxford South African Concise English Dictionary, 2nd Edn., 2010) and indeed, the process of education is “full of commotion”—experiential, emergent, changeable, and alive with uncertainties. The fluidity of human educational experience means that there is always space for development and improvement. Hence, educational action research is premised on a conviction that while producing new knowledge about education through research is important, it is not sufficient. The very *process* of the action research itself should be aimed at improving education and— according to *emancipatory* or *critical* action researchers—it should also be intended to contribute to social change (Zeichner, 1993; Robinson & Meerkotter, 2003; Zuber-Skerritt, 2012b). Significantly, as Zeichner (1993, p. 201) points out, this contribution does not have to be on a grand scale to be of value:

Individuals or small groups of practitioners such as teachers may not be able to change unjust societal structures through their classroom action research, but these teachers can and do make real and important differences in terms of affecting the life chances of their students.

It is interesting to see a critical action research orientation reflected in the 2012 theme of one of the most internationally influential educational research events—the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Annual Meeting. The theme of this year’s meeting is “*Non Satis Scire: To Know Is Not Enough*” and, in their call for submissions, Ball and Tyson argue that

when far too many children and adults in our global society have suffered—and continue to suffer—marginalization, neglect, and denigration, we must be vigilant in ensuring that our research is seen in the language of policy and legislation, as well as in the *actions* [emphasis added] of teachers, administrators, school boards, parent groups, community organizers, foundations, and government officials. (2011, p. 198)

From my perspective as a South African educator-researcher, this position certainly seems relevant in the South African context, where education (at schools and Higher Education Institutions) continues to be

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undermined by a combination of disturbing factors, including pervasive social and economic inequities, the HIV epidemic, and high levels of violence and discrimination (see, among others, Department of Education 2007; Firfirey & Carolissen, 2010; Shabangu, 2011; South African Human Rights Commission 2006, 2008a, 2008b). In apartheid South Africa, emancipatory educational action research was seen “as a powerful tool of resistance” (Robinson, 2009, p. 122) by educators and researchers who had “a clear commitment to linking the political and the educational in a concerted effort to stimulate educational and social transformation’ (Robinson & Meerkotter 2003, p. 462). And, as this special edition of *ERSC* illustrates, action research continues to make a valuable contribution to educational research for social change in the democratic South Africa.

While the context for the action research that is presented and analysed in *Action research for sustainable development in a turbulent world* is largely Australian, this volume is a potentially useful resource for action researchers globally. In particular, the strong focus on the theoretical foundations and contributions of action research will be of value in counteracting the common argument that this kind of research is not scholarly because it is ‘atheoretical’ and ‘not rigorous’. The practical exemplars given also provide an array of ‘hands-on’ approaches to action research.

To explore how accessible *Action research for sustainable development in a turbulent world* might be to a novice educational researcher in the South African context, I asked Teboho Hlao, a Master of Education student, to review one of the practical exemplars. Hlao is currently working on his research proposal and is considering taking an action research approach to his study of team sport as a way of promoting inclusivity on a university campus. He provided the following response to the chapter by Sankaran and Brown, “Coaching collaborative creativity and innovation: An action-based method for sustainable innovation learning and development in business organization”:

As the topic of this chapter states, it is clear that Sankaran and Brown (2012) are looking at how to develop the use of two concepts—creativity and innovation—together for development in the business world. They show how design thinking and action research/ action learning could be used together to overcome the problems that the traditional approaches and problem solving strategies could not bridge in the development of the businesses. They use Brown (2008), Carlopio (2009), Dorst (2010), and Martin (2008) to emphasise the value of design thinking in comparison to the traditional approaches and strategies in business. However, they indicate that design thinking and action research/ action learning used separately have some limitations, so that is why they coach for collaborative use of the two. Their study reveals that group coaching methodology with the combined use of design thinking and action research/ action learning can help managers in business to solve existing and deliberate problems in their organisations. In my view, this approach can work in many organisations or even educational institutions because there is teamwork involved; all stakeholders are included in decision-making. This means that, whatever agreement comes up, every party in the organisation or institution is represented.

In summary, my suggestion is that this methodology should be tried in different worlds (continents) with different backgrounds to explore the value of this approach for educational research. However, it should be taken into consideration that this methodology can have some limitations. For example, it could be time consuming because there has to be an agreement between stakeholders, which might take a long time to achieve.

As Hlao has suggested, as an action research text, the ideas and strategies presented in *Action research for sustainable development in a turbulent world* do need to be tried out in different worlds and for diverse research purposes. I anticipate that we will see further engagement with this volume in the research that is made public in future issues of *ERSC*.

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