Action Research and Teacher Involvement in Curriculum Development

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Abstract

Action research has been defined differently by different scholars in the field, but regarding curriculum development, Action research is systematic personal inquiry employing the scientific method to solve curriculum problems; participants have critical reflection of both the process and the products of such enquiry. Action research may be in a stage of transition, but it has clearly been influenced by the philosophy and history of five trends. A further category of AR activity that teacher-produced publications is collaborative AR undertaken as part of broad curriculum change and professional renewal processes within particular educational institutions, systems or programs. Currently, the adoption of AR in second language teacher education programs falls in three major categories. The present time period seems to entertain the full spectrum of action research styles from the quasi-statistical, interactive-collaborative to the emerging critical theory school. Research is a method-a way of looking at the world. Practitioners are not only consumers of curriculum knowledge, but also significant producers of knowledge.

Keywords: Action research, Curriculum development, Teacher-as-researcher
1. Definitions of action research in curriculum development

This study reviews the links between action research and teacher involvement in curriculum research and curriculum development, paying particular attention to the collaborative action research and constraints on the teachers. Action research has been defined differently by different scholars in the field, but regarding curriculum development, Action research is systematic personal inquiry employing the scientific method to solve curriculum problems; participants have critical reflection of both the process and the products of such enquiry (McKernan, 1987, p. 8). The purpose of action research, as opposed to much fundamental research, is to help practitioners understand, and, it is hoped, to solve pressing curriculum problems. Although definitions of action research may not help us solve curriculum problems, they may provide spectacles from which to view such phenomena. One of the most percipient writers in the field, Elliott (1981, cited in Burchell, 2000, p. 265) defines action research as "the study of social situations with a view to improving the quality of action within it."

2. Historical and philosophical foundations of action research

Action research may be in a stage of transition, but it has clearly been influenced by the philosophy and history of the following:

2.1. The science in education movement

The application of scientific methodology to improve curricula traces back to the late nineteenth century by such men as Dewey (1929). The argument was for a band of teacher-researchers.
Bobbitt's discussion of curriculum (Bobbitt, 1918, cited in Burns, 2005b, p. 245) appeared at this time, and curriculum research became increasingly psycho-statistical with Rice's work in spelling. Yet curriculum development and research was not yet in the hands of practitioners in classrooms. The importance of this period refers mainly to the emphasis on the scientific method as the basis for educational research (Dewey, 1929).

2.2. Experimentalist-progressive ideology

The paramount influence came from Dewey and his logical-reflective-scientific thought. To control the problems investigators deal with, there should be active participation on the part of those directly engaged in teaching (Dewey, 1929, pp. 47-48). Perhaps the beginning of action research in curriculum development was first manifested through changes in the politics of who was to make and break curriculum. Early steps towards teacher involvement in assessing curriculum problems and developing new curricula were initiated by state and local authorities. The Virginia course of study (1934) was a landmark study to monitor curriculum development. Thus the period 1930-1945 in the USA witnessed a movement towards curriculum development at a regional level in which the participants were given a greater stake in determining research and development activities. Teachers now had a start in research and development (Crookes, 1993, p. 133).

2.3. Group dynamics movement

According to Brindley, (1990, p. 9), action research as a form of experimental research aims at groups experiencing social problems. It was used widely in the study of
group relations and dynamics work. The problems of intergroup relations, prejudice and other social concerns of psychologists shifted to educational programs, and the following period from 1950 onwards witnessed greater attention to classrooms and materials.

2.4. Post-war action research in curriculum development

According to Corey (1953, cited in Richard, 1992), a number of post war reconstructionist writers, promoted the use of action research in education. Corey (1953) was perhaps the most articulate in this drive for curriculum reform. He argued that action research would succeed because practitioners would utilize the fruits of their own researches. Reports such as those carried out at the Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute and its cooperating schools helped develop the idea of action research as a potential means for curriculum development. This period is referred to as the period of 'cooperative action research' in that schools made themselves available to outside researchers' experimentation.

Sanford (1970) argued that towards the end of the decade action research was in decline and subjected to increasing attack. In his paper, 'Whatever Happened to Action Research,' he wrote that the decline was directly related to the decision to keep an academic theory-practice split arguing that action research lacked rigor.

2.5. Teacher-as-researcher movement

The contemporary status of action research is strongly connected with a growing belief in teacher professionalism, inservice education, possibilities for school-based curriculum development, and professional self-evaluation. At least in Europe and Australia, the
'teacher-researcher' movement is well underway. Teacher research of this kind has a long background indeed, and in some cases represents a very direct form of applied, problem-solving approach to curriculum problems. More appropriately, this aspect could be referred to as the 'teacher as research student'. The idea of the extended professional teacher-researcher was in harmony with a number of school-based curriculum development project innovations which celebrated the freedom for schools and teachers to liberate curricula and emancipate teachers and students. In his influential book An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development. Stenhouse (1975, cited in McKernan, 1987, p. 12) devoted a chapter to the idea 'The Teacher as Researcher.' He believes that it is teachers who, in the end, will change the world of the school by understanding it. He continues that a curriculum is a set of hypotheses that the teachers could experiment with as the basis for a reflective translation of educational ideas, that the most important focus for research is curriculum since it is the medium through which knowledge is communicated. Stenhouse's effect has been quite great. What is of interest is the growing community of teacher-writers almost advocating a rigid separation between insiders and outsiders.

In the USA, action research has regained popularity within an interactive teaching and research framework. This interactive or collaborative framework is now widely endorsed in which curricula are jointly researched and developed through a careful division of labor between insiders and outside facilitators.
3. Critical-interpretive action research

A radical alternative style of critical action research has been offered by the account of Carr and Kemmis (1983, cited in Burns, 2005b, p. 248). There is little doubt that this is intellectually adds a new and vital philosophical analysis to curricular thought. The authors' work avoid using the positivist-empirical approach in favor of a critical-interpretive philosophy of social science, and it has much in common with critical theory and interpretive sociology. Rather than equipping practitioners with field research methods, the aim is to sharpen analytical-conceptual understanding and communal discourse so that participants can be emancipated through their collective understanding. Elements of a more critical orientation to AR, located within a holistic and ecological interpretation of language education, are also to be found in van Lier's (1996, cited in van Lier, 2004) discussion of awareness, autonomy, and authenticity in the language curriculum.

4. Collaborative action research in educational programs

According to Burns (2005a, p.65-66), a further category of AR activity that teacher-produced publications is collaborative AR undertaken as part of broad curriculum change and professional renewal processes within particular educational institutions, systems or programs. Work in India by Mathew (1997, p. 12), in Hong Kong by Tinker Sachs (2000, p. 35), in the United Arab Emirates by Coles & Quirke (2001), and Australia by A. Burns & Hood (e.g. 1995, as cited in Burns, 2005a, p.65), are examples. Such activities often involve collaboration between researchers based in universities, undertaking funded
projects and working with groups of teachers located in different schools or teaching centers.

For example, Mathew (1997, p. 35) describes a large scale national Curriculum Implementation Study project conducted in India from 1993–97 funded by the Central Board for Secondary Education (CBSE). The aims of the project were to support the implementation phase of a newly developed communicative curriculum, *Interact in English*, in secondary school classrooms. The curriculum was the outcome of a previous large-scale project.

Thus, one of the three major objectives of the study was: ‘To encourage and help teachers to become researchers themselves in their own classroom’ (p. 3). Having received training in techniques and strategies of classroom-centered investigation, teachers were involved as field-researchers gathering data from different stakeholders, including teachers, students, principals and parents. They were also introduced to the concept of ‘mini-projects’ or ‘small-scale classroom-based studies which they could take up in their own classrooms and in collaboration with other teachers’ (p.12). In all, 250 field-researcher teachers took part in the study with 800 schools finally participating. Approximately 50 of these teachers also conducted mini AR studies. The findings from their field-based data collection and mini-projects formed a major contribution to the overall evaluation of the feasibility of the curriculum reform and the issues that arose in its implementation, such as the relevance of the content, teacher training needs, student performance, and the nature of school management structures that facilitated or impeded effective implementation. Mathew reports that being field-researchers had a significant
impact on the teachers, including professional growth, more awareness of communicative approaches, and deeper understanding of the new curriculum. Teachers believed that their classroom teaching was more effective, that they understood how to provide more opportunities for skills practice, aimed for better classroom interaction and devised more efficient evaluation procedures. In addition, teachers indicated that they felt professionally enriched, more confident and less isolated.

Tinker Sachs (2000, p. 35), an academic from the City University in Hong Kong, worked with action researchers who were English language teachers based at primary and secondary schools in a project funded by the Hong Kong University Grants Committee, entitled *Fostering and Furthering Effective Practices in the Teaching of English*. The aims of this government-initiated project were ‘to enhance the professional competence and status of teachers’ and to forge stronger links between schools and universities.

A valuable aspect of Tinker Sachs’ account of the project, as well as those of the six teacher authors included in her 2002 volume, is that they highlight the political and logistical challenges involved in such a research undertaking, indicating the growing tendency in educational policy documents to recommend integrating AR into language teacher education. Statements such as the following increasingly exemplify trends in this direction.
5. Current approaches and practices

As Burns (2009, p.292-293) explains, Currently, the adoption of AR in second language teacher education programs falls in three major categories:

5.1. Required components in formal undergraduate and postgraduate courses

Teachers typically undertake small-scale projects that result in term paper and class presentations. The rationale for including AR projects by the teacher educators conducting these courses relates to the need for raising awareness of the relevance of research for teachers.

5.2. Collaborative teacher-researcher projects

The second category comes from a view of AR to involve teachers in wide-scale institutional curriculum change and continuing professional renewal. Such programs are likely to emanate from government grants or educational findings provided so that researchers and teachers can work together. Mathew (1997) describes a large-scale curriculum implementation project in India aimed at introducing a communicative curriculum into high schools. She notes that the teacher-researcher role was based firmly on the belief that curricular processes cannot be evaluated without self-monitoring on the part of the teacher (p. 2-3).
5.3. Individual projects by classroom teachers

A third category to AR in academic settings is by individual teachers and teacher educators. It is likely that much of this type of AR remains localized and unpublished. Just recently a small body of published work can be drawn upon by the teachers.

6. Constraints on teacher research and curriculum development

In what ways can curriculum be developed from within a research framework? A sufficient answer will respect the practical constraints facing practitioners (McKernan, 1987, p. 15).

6.1. Division of labor between researchers and practitioners

Professional experts have tended to use schools for their own, often arcane, purposes as clients rather than co-inquirers. More fundamentally, external agents often fail to take account of teachers' theories, ideas and concepts of action. Commonsense versions are still viewed as 'unscientific' and accounts for some of the lack of respect for action research (Tanner, 1980, cited in Richard, 1992).

6.2. Problem of language

External researchers tend to use technical, scientific concepts, models and theories grounded in social science literature; however, this is not the language of the teacher and staffroom. A common language, through which teachers may share their ideas with colleagues, seems a pre-requisite for the development of the field.
6.3. *Time to do research*

The most pressing problem of all is that of finding time to do research and development work. University teachers are expected to conduct research. Why does the same not apply to teachers? After all, they are much better placed to study naturalistic experiments. The answer is of course, financial; it would cost to adopt this policy. But the school ought to be a major centre for curriculum inquiry.

6.4. *Problem of research skills for practitioners*

In the final analysis, the problem of action research is the problem of attempting to solve practical difficulties by employing research methods to gather data. It is only in recent times that informative handbooks have appeared which offer some technical support and training in research methodology. Practitioners need to know how to ask important and productive questions which will be testable in the setting. A spirit of inquiry needs to be nurtured.

7. *Final remarks*

The technician view of the teacher as an implementor of centralized curriculum is giving way to enlarged freedom for teachers to experiment with a variety of styles and strategies for implementing curriculum. Consistent with the Stenhouse (1983) notion that action research be used to test curriculum proposals as intelligent hypotheses rather than correct solutions, the relationship of action research and forms of curriculum change are no longer difficult to understand. Teacher action research is not an end in itself, but a means of fostering curriculum improvement. Early action research work may have been
highly quantitative and statistical, rooted as it was in the psychological-positivist tradition. The present time period seems to entertain the full spectrum of action research styles from the quasi-statistical, interactive-collaborative to the emerging critical theory school. Research is a method—a way of looking at the world. Practitioners are not only consumers of curriculum knowledge, but also significant producers of knowledge. A research stance gives them 'reflection-in-action', or, schools that learn for themselves. The teacher and student thus become partners in the shared search for knowledge. Action research thus sets up knowledge as provisional, open to question, and problematic. The practitioner is not cast as an authority or expert, but as an inquirer and co-learner, treating her or his knowledge as improvable. Action research thus becomes the basis for not only curriculum but professional development.

References


