Orientations, purposes and reflection: a framework for understanding action research

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Abstract

Interest in action research has grown exponentially during the last twenty years. Each year, more and more educators are becoming involved in action research through a variety of activities, such as credit-bearing courses, school restructuring efforts, and professional development. Because of the different roles and perspectives of participants in these activities (teachers, teacher educators, school administrators, parents), multiple models of action research have evolved.

In this paper we present a framework for the comparison and evaluation of action research that transcends differences among existing models. Our framework or schema has as its dimensions theoretical orientation [Grundy, S. (1987). Curriculum: products or praxis. Falmer: New York] purposes [Noffke, S. (1997). *Review of Research in Education, 22*, 305–343] and types of reflection [Rearick, M. (1998). ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 412 229]. We tested our framework by using it to analyze several recent books on action research written by teacher educators. When applied to those current studies, our framework served to clarify the different approaches employed: what orientations were served (technical, practical, emancipatory), what purposes of action research were emphasized (personal, professional, or political), and what types of reflective processes were used (autobiographical, collaborative, or communal). The schema that we offer here can help future action researchers find the model most suited to their objectives and interests. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

What is action research? In this paper we seek some fresh answers to this question. A daunting number of definitions for action research or teacher research already appear in the literature (e.g., Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). In the face of that plethora of definitions, some scholars of action research have attempted to identify its varieties and to classify or categorize them in some manner (e.g. McKernan, 1988; Calhoun, 1993; King & Londquist, 1992; Noffke, 1997; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993).

Through a review of the literature we have seen that previous attempts at classification have been

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uni-dimensional, such as by theoretical orientation, purpose or product, and relationships among the participants. We have found that uni-dimensional categorizations do not adequately take into account the complexities of action research. Therefore, we have devised a framework along three dimensions: theoretical orientation, purpose, and type of reflective process. In this paper we describe how we developed this framework and give several examples of how it can be used to analyze different approaches to action research and particular action research studies done by practitioners. We end by providing a new perspective on the problem of answering the question, "What is action research?"

2. Dimensions of action research

After we reviewed the international literature on action research in teacher education, we found numerous examples of action research, which are varied and adaptable to unique situations and contexts (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Grundy, 1987; McKernan, 1988; McTaggert, 1993; Noffke, 1990; 1997; Whitehead, 1990). This multiplicity has led to attempts by scholars to group these models into types so that they can be better understood. A number of articles and books have been written in which the authors develop classification schemes to compare and contrast, and trace the development of the different models of action research (Calhoun, 1993; McKernan, 1988; McTaggert, 1993; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Reason, 1994). For example, McKernan (1988) has identified three types or "countenances of action research"—traditional, collaborative, and emancipatory-critical conceptions—which he tied to ideological perspectives. Calhoun (1993) has taken a more technical stance and has grouped action research by the number of practitioners involved and the unit of analysis: individual, collaborative, and school-wide. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) have produced a typology of teacher research that goes beyond the usual classroom studies to include teachers' journals and essays, and oral inquiry processes. Noffke (1990) has emphasized the different views of the nature of teacher's work and the workplace as keys to various conceptions of action research.[1] Reason (1994) has identified three approaches to participative inquiry: collaborative inquiry, participatory action research, and action science.

In our attempt to understand the relationships among the various models and categorizations of action research, we suggest that three dimensions—two of which have been used by other researchers—can be used to define a "space" in which all models can be located. These dimensions are theoretical orientation, purpose, and type of reflection. We define these dimensions operationally by locating three aspects of each.

2.1. Theoretical orientation

Along the theoretical orientation dimension are found the technical, practical, and the emancipatory (Grundy, 1987; Habermas, 1971; Van Manen, 1977). The technical orientation is similar to what Schön (1983) has described as technical-rational. It assumes a stance in which problems are defined at the outset and solutions sought. The technical orientation is grounded in experiences and observations, and often relies upon experimentation (Grundy, 1987). It can result in the development of theories, propositions, and hypotheses with empirical content. The technical orientation has "a fundamental interest in controlling the environment through rule-following action based upon empirically grounded laws" (Grundy, 1987, p. 12).

While the technical orientation is toward control, the practical interest is toward understanding (Grundy, 1987). It is based on a realization that human activities are steeped in the moral and ethical, and that decisions to act come through deliberation on alternatives. In this view, the action that is studied arises as a result of interaction and group meaning-making. Habermas (1971) and Grundy (1987) define the interaction as not action *upon* the environment which has been objectified in some way, but action *with* the environment, which is regarded as a subject in the interaction. A practical

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[1] We look more closely at Cochran-Smith and Lytle's and Noffke's categorizations later in this paper.

orientation has "a fundamental interest in understanding the environment through interaction based upon a consensual interpretation of meaning" (Grundy, 1987, p. 14).

The emancipatory orientation arises from a critical perspective that seeks to uncover the societal structures that coerce and inhibit freedom. It leads to "independence from all that is outside of the individual" (Habermas, 1971, p. 205; Grundy, 1987, p. 16.). Grundy (1987, p. 18) claims that since human beings are steeped in tradition and taken-for-granted assumptions, they must generate critical theories "about persons and society which explain how coercion and distortion operate to inhibit freedom" to translate emancipatory interest into action. While the technical and practical orientations are concerned with control and understanding, the emancipatory orientations has "a fundamental interest in emancipation and empowerment to engage in autonomous action arising out of authentic, critical insights into the social construction of human society" (Grundy, 1987, p. 19).

The identification of these three interests has important implications for action researchers. One is to make clear that the form of action research is determined by interests of particular persons and their worlds. A second is to get a better understanding of why teachers and other practitioners ask different types of questions when they reflect on their practice or do action research (Van Manen, 1977). For example, from a technical orientation, teachers may ask, "What means shall I use to get my students to talk or write about what they read?" The practical orientation can lead to, "What assumptions or predispositions underlie the teaching activity? "Are the goals worth achieving?" Finally, since the emancipatory orientation promotes ends like self-determination, community, and justice, the practitioner may ask, "Which educational goals, activities, and experiences contribute to humane, just, equitable, fulfilling life for the students?"

2.2. Purposes of action research

The purposes of action research include professional understanding, personal growth, and political empowerment (Noffke, 1997). Professional purposes include staff development and adding to the knowledge base for teaching. The action leads to shared knowledge and to the improvement of the academic and social curriculum. Personal purposes for engaging in action research include teachers becoming more familiar with the development of their knowledge and educational theories, which can lead to understanding themselves and others.

Finally, action research can have political purposes, such as to critique the nature of teachers' work and workplaces and the advancement of social agendas. While doing inquiry in their classrooms, schools, and communities, action researchers can become increasingly aware of socioeconomic, racial, and gender inequalities, and of the interconnections between knowledge and power. As they identify the political ramifications of the beliefs and purposes that guide action, they become increasingly capable of directing their social action toward desired goals and of generating a language of possibility, a vision for the future, and sense of interconnectedness with others.

2.3. Types of reflection

Our third dimension is the type of reflection that occurs in action research. Rearick has identified three forms of reflection that we locate along this dimension: autobiographical, collaborative, and communal.

Autobiographical reflection involves the researcher as the main focus of the research. The researcher engages in philosophical introspection as a way of perceiving the immediate reality of objects and events. A person engaged in such reflection examines the literal meaning of his or her stories and probes into the metaphorical meanings as they relate to common usage. The aim is to understand, then explain. The explanations are related to the desire to achieve greater clarity about the relationship between his or her inner state and action.

Autobiographical reflection can be utilitarian. Rather than to look at experiences in a superficial manner, the action researcher attempts to find the public meaning in the particulars of lived personal experience. The first move away from personal self-understanding to a more public form of self-understanding is achieved through the

philosophical act of acknowledging the inadequacies of a strictly autobiographical reflection.

The collaborative move is a response to those inadequacies. Collaborative reflection responds to the uncertainty by asking questions and seeking answers beyond oneself. Greater openness to understanding the perspectives of others moves the action researcher beyond subjective experience and particularity. Whereas autobiographical reflection preserves the significance of particularity, collaborative reflection involves reflecting on the social construction of self and the system within a larger interpersonal context, and may consider interpretive, scientific, artistic and poetic works.

Collaborative reflection occurs at a distance. When the action researcher abstracts principles or propositions based on collaborative reflection on data, he or she seeks the whole meaning of the lived experience. The action researcher finds him/herself caught in a web of intersubjective meanings, and, in an effort to reduce confusion, he or she engages in analysis and interpretation. The process of collaborative reflection results in a new kind of clarity, a new level of communication. Now communication can involve problem-solving within a critical community.

Communal reflection involves reflecting on the self in interaction with others in even larger contexts—cultural, historical, and institutional. Communal reflection involves dialogue about actions, ideologies, and the development of society. The action researcher who engages in communal reflection asks questions about such things as the meaning of democracy, freedom, and social justice. Public meanings that result from communal reflection are not determined by scientific evidence, but rather are acquired through public dialogue and debate. Dialogue may serve instrumental purposes, as a way of dealing with other human beings, or it may be primarily philosophical and moral.

Communal reflection helps the action researcher to better understand the perceptions, values, and deeper meanings that direct social action. To engage in such reflection, the action researcher must be able to move from one disciplinary discourse to another in response to discourse of the other conversational partner. The movement tends toward freedom. The action researcher engaging in communal reflection sees the emptiness of his or her actions separate from public action. The researcher gains understanding of the past, the origins, traditions, and the values that the community holds as ultimate. In public life, communal reflection may be subversive, undermining the moral authority of a political regime or it may serve to help people transcend that authority through greater understanding.

3. Constructing the framework

Our purpose in this study was to create a framework with which to better understand the nature of action research. The idea of the framework and its structure as three dimensions that define an "action research space" arose out of many hours of conversation of the type that Feldman (1997) has called "long and serious". We began by reviewing the literature on action research in teacher education from an international perspective, particularly the historical evolution of definitions, methods, and conceptions of action research in Australia, England, and the United States. From this we identified two dimensions along which action research has been categorized: theoretical orientation and purpose. To this we added a third dimension based on the work of one of us (Rearick, 1998). The methods that we used to construct the framework were interpretivist, critical, and hermeneutic.

After identifying existing classification schemes, we then analyzed several papers to determine what orientations were served (technical, practical, emancipatory), what purposes of action research were emphasized (personal, professional, or political), and what type of reflective process was used (autobiographical, collaborative, or communal).[2]

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[2] The first paper (Nyhof-Young, 1997), which was by a graduate student, was a description of a Science Methods course in which she had her students engage in action research to reflect on gender issues in Science. The second paper (Stevenson, 1990) was by an experienced researcher and teacher. In it he described his action research for experienced teachers in a masters-level program. Each selection was read and coded according to our framework by both authors. Between analyses of the papers, we examined the coding categories and the meanings of the labels on the framework, and revised it.

We used our framework to look closely at four recently published books on action research. Each book was representative of a different conception of action research. Susan Noffke and Robert Stevenson (1995) in *Educational action research: Becoming practically critical*, demonstrate how they and their students and colleagues inquire into basic issues related to democratic education and strive to improve the lives of children and the conditions of schooling. Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle (1993) in *Inside/outside: Teacher research and knowledge*, describe the nature of teacher research and then identify a range of methods used to study practice, and, finally, identify contexts that support such inquiry. Sandra Hollingsworth's (1994) *Teacher research and urban literacy education: Lessons and conversations in a feminist key* provides an example of how conversation was used to encourage a group of urban teachers to investigate their practice in light of feminist theory. Jean McNiff (1992) in *Action research: Principles and practice*, articulated a model of self-study in which the researchers engage in cycles of action-reflection on their experience and development as historically situated human beings, then identify contradictions between theory and practice to construct "living educational theories" (Whitehead, 1989).

Our first graphical representation looked a bit like a Rubik's Cube (Fig. 1). However, we saw that its rigid compartmentalization did not reflect the complexities of the action research world. As we analyzed the pieces in the four books, we realized that the action research varied along the dimensions and was located in a spatial continuum, rather than a cell or a collection of cells. This led us to a more open diagram that defined the space using three Cartesian coordinates (Fig. 2). We located the studies in the space as a point or line in a graph. As we continued to apply the framework we saw that this representation did not adequately represent perspective and depth. Our diagram then evolved into an open box in which we could locate examples of action research (Fig. 3).

As we continued to read and analyze action research papers, we continued to find the framework problematic. We realized that the labeling of the axes in a certain order suggested a normative hierarchy with some purposes, types of reflection,
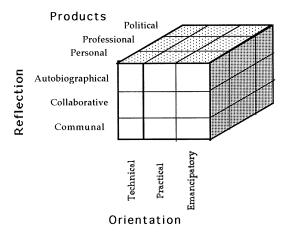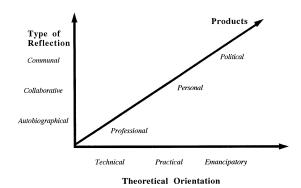

Fig. 1. The box framework.

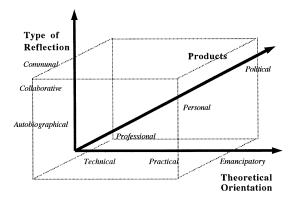Fig. 2. Three dimensions of action research space.

Fig. 3. An action research space.

or theoretical orientations "better" than others, e.g., technical → practical → emancipatory. It was at this point that we devised what we now call the

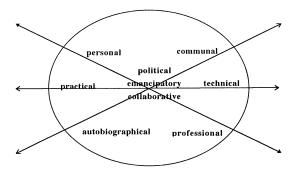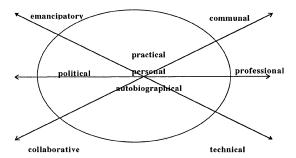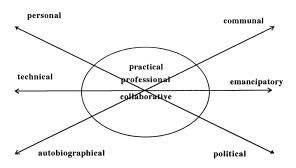Fig. 4. Star diagram for Noffke and Stevenson.

Fig. 7. Star diagram for Kanevsky.

Fig. 5. Star diagram for Brunner.

Fig. 8. Star diagram for Hollingsworth.

Fig. 6. Star diagram for Cochran-Smith and Lytle.
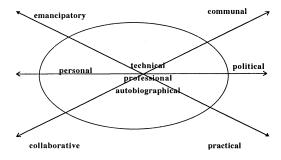
Fig. 9. Star diagram for Dybahl.

4. Applying the framework

In this section of our article, we report on the results we obtained by using our framework to understand the nature of action research in the four books that we reviewed.[3] For each book, we first

"star diagrams (Figs. 4–11)." This form allows us to show the relationship among the different dimensions, to locate the primary foci of the examples of action research, and to be able to vary the order of orientations, purposes, and types of reflection to better reflect their relationship in each example.
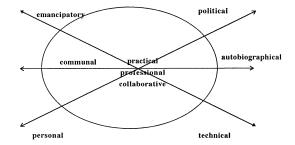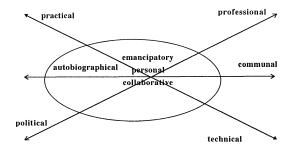
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[3] We want to make clear that our analysis is based only on the works reviewed in this paper. Readers may wish to seek out these and other work by the editors and authors.
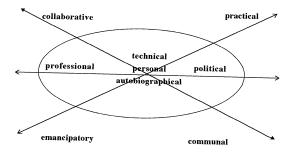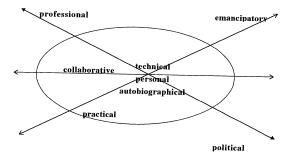
Fig. 10. Star diagram for McNiff.

Fig. 11. Star diagram for Foy.

look at the ways that the editors have characterized action research. We then turn to an example of teacher research from each of the volumes. We begin with Noffke and Stevenson's approach to action research and the case by Lynn Brunner (1995). After analyzing their conceptions of teacher research, we look at a report on oral inquiry by Rhoda Kanevsky (1993). We then turn to Cochran-Smith and Lytle. Next, we analyze Hollingsworth's conception of action research. After examining her feminist theoretical framework and her method of conversational inquiry, we turn to Mary Dybahl's (Hollingsworth, 1993) case. We end by reporting on our reading of McNiff, and of the action research report written by Margaret Foy (1992).

4.1. Educational action research

Noffke and Stevenson (1995) integrated the knowledge they gained through cross-cultural inquiry into a coherent framework for using action research as a catalyst for democratizing education.

In their book they illustrate how emancipatory forms of action research can be used to democratize schooling, improve teaching and learning, and enhance participants' self-understanding and capacity to act rightly and justly. In a series of case studies written by preservice teachers, teachers, administrators, teacher educators, and staff developers, we see examples of collaborative curriculum planning informed by social justice agendas.

Since they have made a commitment to social justice and fidelity of persons, they are trying to help other educators to become aware of problematic situations and to work to alter aspects of the status quo that are unjust. They assume that educators can develop in citizens a sense of "ethical caring," which involves showing concern for how one's words and actions affect others and oneself. Noffke and Stevenson (1995, p. 20) assume that education leads to enlightened action and a commitment for educational equity for "everybody's children." Therefore, they try to help their students become aware of the role that personal biographies, professional theories and practices, and moral and political interests have on life in schools and in society.

Where is Noffke and Stevenson's action research located in our classificatory schema? Along the axis of theoretical orientation, they are taking an emancipatory stance. Practical concerns motivate them to want to select activities and goals that raise educator's consciousness about the origins, values, and traditions that inform their choices. However, Noffke and Stevenson, and their colleagues Zeichner and Gore (1995) feel that reflective practice involves not only reflection on experience of teaching as a craft, but also critical deliberation about the kinds of educational experiences that prepare citizens for work and life in a democratic society. An emancipatory orientation to action research encourages the authors and their students to develop new competencies—a focus on the learner as a whole person, a problem-posing and problem-solving orientation to practice and the practice situation, a capacity for relational thinking, and strategy for analyzing social problems and for healing social ills through education.

Noffke and Stevenson are strong supporters of the power of action research to encourage educators

to achieve a variety of interrelated purposes: political, personal and professional. Action research can politically motivate informed educators to direct their efforts at social reconstruction and democratic ends. In addition, collaboration with others can potentially lead to a deeper self-understanding because one's interpretation of the situation in a school is also informed by others' interpretations. Finally, action research, which makes problematic educational policies, practices, and goals, brings educators together to discuss the issues that are relevant to contemporary society.

Collaborative reflection appears to be central to Noffke and Stevenson's version of action research. Teachers are encouraged to use the lenses of critical theory to reflect on their practice and to develop their educational theories. Although they place themselves in the social reconstructionist tradition, there is no question that they are informed about other traditions; moreover, there is no question that they expect that their students will be able to place themselves in a tradition while they reflect on their own orientations to teaching. The authors also engage in autobiographical reflection. They critically reflect on their own autobiography and they identify problematic aspects of their own teaching. They explain the origins, values, and traditions that motivate them in their work, and they share with us the way they become aware of how tacit knowledge maintains the status quo and how reflective consciousness empowers them to continually improve the rationality and justice of their actions. In addition, Noffke and Stevenson engage in communal reflection. A close reading of the text and a cursory review of the authors cited reveal that they drew upon concepts from sociology, psychology, political science, and philosophy. Although the actual contributors to the book are all educators, they include multiple perspectives: that of the preservice teacher, administrator, teacher educator, and staff developer. Within each case study, the voices of multiple actors contribute multiple interpretations of the situation and problem.

What this suggests is that Noffke and Stevenson's version of action research extends throughout the action research space. Their conception of action research develops political knowledge, has an emancipatory orientation, and is collaborative. Politics are informed by personal knowledge, practical concerns, and by reflection on their own autobiographical experiences. The professional knowledge produced is multi-dimensional and multi-vocal. Through a process of communal reflection they invite educators and others to reflect on the "best" education for all children.

4.1.1. The death of idealism? or, issues of empowerment in the preservice setting

At the time of her study, Lynn Brunner (1995) was a preservice teacher in the teacher education program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her action research focused on developing empowering practices in her own classroom.

Brunner intended for her research to be political and emancipatory. However, the knowledge that she created was personal and the project itself had a practical orientation. Although she collaborated with others, she engaged primarily in autobiographical reflection. Brunner's motivation for doing the research was personal. She found it problematic that the contexts and practices in her field work placements did not empower students. She began by reviewing contemporary literature on empowerment, and she learned that when people feel empowered they are informed about how to make change; they have a sense of confidence in their own abilities, and they feel socially supported and accepted. She identified some strategies for empowering students: contextualize knowledge, include multiple perspectives, treat knowledge as open-ended and constructed, and focus on active social involvement in the learning.

Brunner's narrative has an autobiographical quality to it. She included in her review some reflection on discussions she had with her cooperating teacher and her supervisor, and she showed sensitivity to student feedback by adjusting her pedagogy to meet their expectations, and to that degree her reflection was collaborative. Nevertheless, the bulk of her reflection was on her own perceptions and her own interpretations of events. In the end, she learned a great deal about the politics of schooling. She felt torn between her desire to empower her students and to maintain control of the group. She also learned about herself. Initially, she felt

frustrated when students were in noncompliance with her efforts to empower them. She realized that she had been taught to listen to adults and to follow their directions. Her own family, with roots in the working class, made her want "children to be seen and not heard." Her personal reaction to having her authority threatened was to resort to an authoritarian teaching style to maintain control. Her anger toward her students' disobedience and her own need to have the approval of her cooperating teacher led her to decide to get control of the class. Her observations of her students' reactions to group work made her want to return to the concept of "banking education." Eventually, she began to understand that the curriculum in any classroom is socially negotiated through practice. She realized that the norms and expectations of the community and the history of contestation between her teacher and the principal influenced classroom life. What this suggests is that Brunner's action research, which occurred during student teaching, has a practical orientation and served personal purposes.

4.2. Inside/outside

Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle have collaborated for many years in the support of teachers doing research and in an analysis of teacher research. Their book, *Inside/outside: Teacher research and knowledge* (1993), reports on their thinking about teacher research and provides examples of the different varieties that make up their typology of teacher research. We have taken a close look at Cochran-Smith and Lytle's writing and some of the examples that they provide of written reports of teacher research.

Inside/outside is divided into two parts: "Concepts and Contexts of Teacher Research" and "Teachers on Teaching, Learning and Schooling." Cochran-Smith and Lytle use the five chapters that make up Part I to explore the relationship between teacher research and academic research; to present and explain their typology of teacher research; to place teacher research within the lives and careers of individual teachers; and to argue the importance of communities for teacher research.

Part II consists of four chapters, each devoted to a type of teacher research (journals, oral inquiries,

classroom and school studies, and essays), and each containing two or more examples of that type of research.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993, p. 24) define teacher research as "systematic, intentional inquiry by teachers about their own school and classroom work." They see as its purpose the professional development of teachers and a way to include teachers' knowledge and voices in the professional knowledge base for teaching (p. 85). While it is clear from their writing that they find the improvement of practice an important outcome of teacher research, and while they claim that they are not trying to raise the professional status of teachers by calling them researchers, much of their argument in the first five chapters centers around the legitimation of teacher research. They see this as being important for several reasons:

- First, the activity of teacher research changes teachers from the researched to the researcher. This acts against forces that can lead to the disenfranchisement and deskilling of teachers.
- Second, teacher research is a knowledge generation activity. It makes explicit the discrepancies between theory and practice, and it pays close attention to context and makes explicit teachers" negotiation within that context. In doing so, it makes "problematic what teachers think they already know, what they see when they observe their own students as learners, and what they choose to do about the disjunctions that often exist in their classrooms, schools and communities" (p. 64).
- Third, while traditional educational research can inform practice and shape policy, they claim that "…only teachers themselves can integrate their assumptions and their interpretive frameworks and then decide on the actions that are appropriate for their local contexts" (p. 64).
- Finally, Cochran-Smith and Lytle see teacher research as "a radical challenge to assumptions about the relationships of theory and practice, school and university partnerships, and school structures and educational reform" (p. 23).

From this we can see that Cochran-Smith and Lytle see the legitimation of teacher research as one way to help to remove obstacles that act against

teachers being professionals in their classrooms and schools.

While they have stressed knowledge generation as an outcome for teacher research and have argued for its legitimation, Cochran-Smith and Lytle do so from a practical orientation. They make explicit the moral and ethical factors that can only be addressed through deliberation, and they recognize the importance of collaborative reflection through conversation for doing so. In addition, at times contributors make reference to the social, economic, and political in education in an emancipatory fashion. The knowledge that is produced by the teachers is knowledge generated for the profession, created by members of the profession.

One of the most significant contributions that Cochran-Smith and Lytle have made to the field of action research is to expand the notion of what counts as teacher research. This has come out of their focus on the legitimation of teacher research and the recognition of already existing forms of teacher inquiry. They have done this through a review and analysis of the types of inquiry activities in which teachers have engaged. They divide these activities into two broad categories: empirical and conceptual. Among the empirical types of teacher research they include journals, oral inquiry processes, and classroom studies. They categorize teachers' essays as a form of conceptual inquiry. In Part II of their book, they present multiple examples of each of these types of teacher research. In this article we look closely at the example of an oral inquiry described by Rhoda Kanevsky.

4.3. Descriptive review of a child: a way of knowing about teaching and learning

Rhoda Kanevsky is an experienced elementary teacher in the Philadelphia Public Schools and an active participant in the Philadelphia Teachers Learning Cooperative. In this piece she describes a type of oral inquiry process used by the TLC teachers, gives an example from her own practice, and reflects on its nature as research.

One of the ways that the TLC teachers help each other with their practice is through a process called the descriptive review. In the descriptive review, a teacher "presents" a student to the other teachers along with a focusing question. The presentation is organized around five headings: "physical presence and gesture, disposition, relationships with children and adults, activities and interests, and formal learning" (p. 152). To prepare for the descriptive review that she describes in this book, Kanevsky relied on her classroom observations to write down her recollections for each of the five headings and collected the students' work. While she used the headings to prepare for the review, Kanevsky claims that the headings are not discrete categories, and that

> During the presentation, information from one heading may lead into another heading. I can gather anecdotes together as I speak and connect the portrayal by circling back to earlier statements. Through the portrayal, the child emerges as a unique person with integrity and wholeness, trying in her own way to create meaning in the world (p. 152).

It can be seen from this that while the preparation for the descriptive review can rely on written materials, there is an assumption that the presentation will have the fluidity that one finds in conversations due to their collaborative nature.

For this particular review, Kanevsky used the focusing question: "What recommendations can I make to Janean's new teacher and to the school community about her academic growth?" In an earlier review of the same child, she had asked, "How can I support her learning and help her grow academically?" Focusing questions used by other teachers include, "How can I help the child to get along with other children?" "How can I help the child to become more independent?" "How can I help the child to get more involved in school life?" and "How can the child bridge the gap between school requirements and his own interests?" (p. 152). It is important to note that while all these questions are phrased as problems to be solved, the teacher's concerns lie in the moral and ethical domains.

After the focusing question and the teacher's presentation, the reviews shift to questions asked by the other teachers. When all the participants have a complete enough image of the child and the situation, they then turn to recommendations. The

teacher gathers those recommendations without comment. Kanevsky claims that the process leads to the generation of knowledge:

> In the process of asking questions and making recommendations, teachers create knowledge about teaching and learning. New ideas and insights are generated about children and classrooms.... The descriptive review is a way of knowing that starts with a description of a particular child and ends with insights and theories not only about the child being described but about children in general. Through each review, the participants create a rich body of knowledge and open up questions and possibilities for understanding and educating the children we teach (p. 153).

In this way, Kanevsky ties oral inquiry processes to Cochran-Smith and Lytle's argument that teacher research is a legitimate, knowledge generating activity.

The descriptive review process as described by Kanevsky appears to have as its purpose the generation of knowledge and understanding to improve practice: "each meeting...results in a shift in awareness, new knowledge, questions, and ideas about how to be responsive and reflective practitioners." (p. 151) While this sounds like an instrumental goal, the TLC teachers see this as a way to not only generate knowledge about how to teach, but in addition as "a way to know a child and her values" (p. 161) and "to expand teachers' vision as it becomes another way of looking" (p. 162). It does this through collaborative reflection that is guided by a technical orientation as seen in the specific steps of the descriptive review process. In addition, some communal reflection occurs when the teachers try to understand the child and her values. However, the focus on personal knowledge generation to improve classroom practice suggests that the participants have a practical orientation focusing on concern for the child's well-being, rather than an emancipatory orientation.

4.4. Conversations in a feminist key

Hollingsworth's book *Teacher Research and Urban Literacy Education* chronicles and analyzes a multi-year collaboration between a group of urban literacy teachers and Sandra (Sam) Hollingsworth, a university professor. The book is divided into three parts. Part I, which was written by Hollingsworth, is an introduction to the feminist theoretical framework, which values feminist thinking and the concerns of women and children. The feminist perspective is not only theoretical, but also methodological. In the first five chapters, Hollingsworth describes why she considers "sustained conversation" a feminist approach to teacher education, "The idea of simply talking together about the concerns of practice as both a method of longitudinal research and a means of support in learning to teach was inspired by these teachers' criticisms of the support structures offered through traditional teacher education formats such as courses and supervision" (p. 4). Hollingsworth aims to help teachers gain a sense of themselves and their own authority. By reflecting on their own autobiographies and through continuous interaction and conversation, the teachers reconstruct their existing knowledge of teaching, develop their own theories of society and of schooling, and they see themselves as knowledgeable persons and authorities in their own classrooms.

In describing the method used in the study, Hollingsworth writes that the conversations were neither dialogues nor discussions, rather "they were a collective reformulation of ideas, intimate talk, and reconstructive questions—extended conversations that enabled each participant to understand their "common stories" (p. 6). Later on in the book we learn that the teachers consider themselves a community of teacher researchers and that they feel there is value in relating their stories, talking with peers, and discovering their tacit knowledge. In other words, the autobiographical reflection led to collaborative reflection. "Unlike the principled and objective findings from traditional approaches to learning, our reports showed less cognitive or behavioral change as they did personal and connective 'settling' or tacit knowledge. The threads of what we were learning seemed to gently fall into place in the fabric of our lives" (p. 26).

In the introduction, Hollingsworth notes that the conversations among the teachers emphasize a holistic and collective orientation to world and work

experiences, experience as knowledge, emotion as a means for learning about self and relationships, and consider the critical and contextual nature of the social use of knowledge. The book resulted from collaborative reflection in which Hollingsworth and the teachers reflect on their stories and conversations. Hollingsworth indicates that in the evolving conversations, the teachers develop an understanding of (1) classroom relationships, (2) diversity of values, and (3) increased critical awareness of power relationships inside the school, which can lead to praxis.

In Hollingsworth's mind, the teachers' evolving conversations encourage relationship building and professional growth. The teachers discover their biographical connections and their differences and they learn to value their lived experiences and emotions as knowledge by sharing stories of practice. As they reflect on their experiences they find their stories to be full of theories of self/other relationships and concern for the care of children. As they develop caring relationships with one another, they find themselves moving beyond the model of teaching that they were taught and they claim allegiance to "a social constructivist theory of learning" (p. 57). Their stories, which are described as theories of feminist epistemologies, are about the personal as political and the political as personal, rather than disembodied theories.

While this case is an example of the ways that the teachers engaged in research, it also illustrates how Hollingsworth worked with the teachers and reflected on her own practice. This can be seen in her conclusion to Part III, where she described the personal events in her own life and the intellectual traditions that led to her feminist framework. She then discussed how her work with teachers and with colleagues also informed her approach to teacher education. The book ended as it began: with an articulation of Hollingsworth's feminist theory for teacher education.

Teacher research and urban literacy education: lessons and conversations in a feminist key is an example of autobiographical reflection by Hollingsworth that was informed by the conversations she had with the teachers. Throughout, Hollingsworth reflected on her experience with the teacher researchers. It also appears that while Hollings-

worth's personal orientation may have been emancipatory, the orientation in the book itself was practical. By engaging in research with the teachers, Hollingsworth became more conscious of her own socialization as a teacher educator and of her own professional practice. Therefore, her purpose in writing the book was essentially political: to incorporate feminist theory into her role as a teacher educator.

4.5. The power of friendship groups for urban students

Part II of the book begins with Mary Dybahl's case as told by Hollingsworth. Hollingsworth begins by providing a justification for teacher research:

> The work thus exemplifies not only learning to teach, but the international movement toward "teacher research" across all of its three interrelated stances or standpoints: curriculum improvement, professional critique, and epistemological/societal reforms. A derivative of action research, teacher research from a curriculum improvement stance seeks to improve practice in social settings by trying out curricular ideas as both a means of increasing knowledge of the situation and improving it. (p. 85).

Next Hollingsworth observed Dybahl's teaching and recorded excerpts from conversation between Dybahl and her students and among the students. In one excerpt from her field notes, Hollingsworth included a brief summary of procedures, tasks, and bits of conversation, but did not discuss the lesson content. In one observation, Dybahl was conducting a round robin reading routine. After the lesson, Hollingsworth and Dybahl analyzed the data together and identified strategies that fit with Dybahl's intended goal: to get the children more involved in discussions. In the follow-up paragraph, Hollingsworth wrote, "I shared my observations with Mary. On the basis of their reflection on the data, Mary decided to drop the round robin reading but to keep the partnered response format" (p. 94). Hollingsworth concluded that Dybahl's case

illustrated how "buoyed by trust in themselves, they [the teachers] gathered confidence to take new risks" (p. 86).

Dybahl's case is difficult to place in the action research framework. Hollingsworth's voice dominates the discussion and the reflection. It appears that Dybahl's case is a vehicle that Hollingsworth used to provide an example of how she works with the teachers. The brief excerpts of Dybahl's own conversation suggest that she has a technical orientation. "I want to know what [my students] think [as they read]. I have to figure out how I can find that out" (p. 85). The knowledge she created is personal and it is procedural. "I watched and wrote down [partner] conversations … I noticed variations in the process…… There are undoubtedly patterns in each of these groups" (p. 94). She makes some generalizations based on her experience, but not all of them are related to her study.

Dybahl engaged in autobiographical reflection about some observations she made in her classroom. Her purpose in doing the research is personal and professional. She wants to do a better job. There is little to suggest that Dybahl's purpose in doing the research is political. Although she did notice ethnic and gender patterns, she did not see the connection of ethnicity and gender to her research question so she continued focusing on her own questions and responses. "While it is important to understand why students think and act the way they do, what matters is how I respond to what their thoughts and actions tell me" (p. 100).

Dybahl shared the results of her research with the members of the teacher researcher group. Leslie Turner, another teacher researcher, discussed the importance of the researcher "owning" the problem or question and grounding the research in observation, experimenting with new techniques, and drawing conclusions. These bits of data suggest that the teachers did engage in collaborative reflection, but there was little evidence of collaborative reflection in the text itself.

4.6. Principles and practice

In this section of our paper, we examine McNiff's (1992) exposition of action research in her book, *Action research: Principles and practice*, using our heuristic of the action research space. We then do the same with one of the three cases of practitioner action research that she has included in the volume.

McNiff's book is divided into three parts: Background and explanations; Practice; and Implications. Information from all three parts informs our analysis of her version of action research. McNiff defines action research by referring to how others have defined it. In particular, she supplies us with one from Carr and Kemmis (1986):

> Action research is a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants (teachers, students or principals, for example) in social (including educational) situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of (a) their own social or educational practices, (b) their understanding of these practices, and (c) the situations (and institutions) in which these practices are carried out (McNiff, 1992, p. 2).

This definition highlights who does action research, in what types of situations, and for what purposes. They are practitioners, doing research within their practice situations to either provide better reasons (in a normative sense) for their actions, or to improve their understandings of their actions and the situations in which they act.

Carr and Kemmis' focus on the educational aspects of action research is reflected in McNiff's (1992) own concepts. For example, she claims that action research "encourages a teacher to be reflective of his [sic] own practice in order to enhance the quality of education for himself and his students" (p. 1). Action research is educational for teachers because it encourages them to "make sense of the reality of immediate solutions and enables [teachers] to account for their own educational development" (p. 11). "She sees it as an approach to education that encourages teachers to be aware of their own practice, to be critical of it, and to be prepared to change it (p. 4). Teachers gain this awareness by changing their practice, collecting evidence to show how it was improved, and by then being able to describe the intervening action. McNiff (1992, p. 11) adds that "It is this ability to explain the process and present evidence to back up claims that is inherent in the notion of teachers' educational development."

It becomes apparent later in her book that McNiff ties the educational development of teachers to the improvement of their practice. This occurs through an action research scheme developed by Jack Whitehead:

1. Statement of problems,
2. imagination of a solution,
3. implementation of a solution,
4. evaluation of the solution,
5. modification of practice in the light of the evaluation (pp. 58–59).

While this scheme can lead to the examination of practice in light of societal and political issues, either hidden or overt, McNiff suggests a more technical approach by casting action research as problem solving. She goes on to suggest that attention be paid to questions such as:

How can I improve the process of education here?

Why is my present practice unsatisfactory?

How can I develop my own personal and professional expertise to deal with the problem and give reasonable justification for my actions? (p. 13)

It is through the application of Whitehead's scheme to McNiff's questions that she sees action research leading to teachers learning about their practice, to improve it, and to generate their own educational theories from their practice (pp. 36–37).

Where then is McNiff's version of action research located in the action research space? Along the axis of theoretical orientation, her orientation is technical. This is partly due to her use of an algorithm to describe the action research process. Even though her algorithm is a spiral rather than linear, she describes it as a way to solve problems and improve practice by following a series of steps that is similar to the traditional "scientific method."

McNiff encourages teachers to engage in action research as a means of self-understanding, staff development, improving the status of teaching as a profession, and of generating knowledge. By following Whitehead's lead, she also claims that action research encourages teachers to develop "living educational theories" that are based in their own practice. Finally, she claims that action research can act against the de-skilling of teachers by changing the power relationship between teachers and professors.

Autobiographical reflection appears to be the centerpiece of McNiff's version of action research. Teachers are encouraged to reflect on their practice and to develop their own educational theories. MicNiff pays little attention to teachers working together collaboratively, or in relation to their communities. While she does recognize the importance of dialogue for action research, she does not make clear what purpose the dialogue serves.

What this suggests is that McNiff's version of action research can be described as a line in the action research space—a line that sweeps through a variety of purposes as it retains the technical orientation and autobiographical reflection.

4.7. Values into practice

In one of McNiff's case studies, the action research focused on a middle school English teacher's practice in Somerset. Margaret Foy's starting point for her study was the dissonance between her educational values and her teaching methods. Briefly, her values were highly student centered while her instructional methods tended to be didactic. She chose to try to teach by her values. She experimented with her methods in three stages. In the first, she gave the students a set of instructions for a long term (5-week) assignment, had them form groups, and then provided little instruction or guidance until the assignment was completed. In the second experiment Foy again provided the students with instructions, had them do a mixture of group and individual work, and acted as a facilitator and mentor to their learning. In the third experiment she returned to her didactic style.

During the 14 weeks that she experimented with her instruction, Foy collected data through observation, tape recordings of the students' conversations, and through debriefing conversations at the end of the third experiment. Foy's written case ends with a section labeled "Summary." In it she reports that both she and her students liked the second set of methods best, but she devotes most of her writing to reflection on how she felt about the whole process and why it was important to her.

From the written case, Foy appears to have a theoretical orientation that lies between technical and practical. She describes her study as a series of action research cycles and refers to the guidelines that she followed. However, it is also evident that while her language suggested a technical bent, her actions appeared to be trying out of ideas to see what happens, tied to a moral and ethical stance towards her students. There is little evidence in the case that Foy is interested in professional or political purposes. She is concerned about her own practice, how it relates to her personal educational theories, and the knowledge that she has about her teaching.

Finally, her form of reflection comes out as a combination of autobiographical and collaborative. She looked at the relationship between her work and her students by paying attention to the situation and the interactions among her students and with her. There is no evidence in the case report that she engaged in collaborative reflection with others. Therefore, Foy's study would be located as a point in action research space that is between a technical and practical orientation, is centered on a personal purpose, and lies between autobiographical and collaborative reflection.

5. Conclusion

Our review of the literature made clear to us that there is no use in seeking a single definition of action research, and that a single category would not be complete enough to cover the field. As we struggled with the groupings developed by others, we realized that three dimensions could serve to map a space through which we and others could move to understand the nature of action research from different orientations, purposes, and ways to reflect.

We have developed a tool that has helped us to gain a better understanding of how action research is practiced. We sum up by stating that action research is an activity that locates the researcher somewhere in the action research space we have described.

Our framework can be used, as we have, to examine others' practice of action research. This

has led us to several findings. One is that while the language used by all the teacher educators was similar, in some cases the same terms mean significantly different things for them. For example, we have seen that Noffke and Stevenson have approached action research from an emancipatory theoretical orientation, while McNiff, who uses Carr and Kemmis' emancipatory definition of action research, has a technical orientation.

A second is that there is not necessarily a tight connection between what is espoused in the theories and what was done by the practitioners. Noffke and Stevenson provide us with their theoretical framework, and we see their influence in the students' choice of topics and in their own work. Yet there are cases in the book that work within the emancipatory framework, but that are not necessarily related to their framework. Cochran-Smith and Lytle articulate their framework, and the teacher researchers in their book articulate theirs. Hollingsworth suggests that her group of teacher researchers constructed a feminist framework, but the conversations among teachers suggest that the framework was not necessarily understood or shared by all participants.

It should be clear that just as the framework allowed us to understand the action research practice of the authors and of others, it can also be used for self-analysis. For example, once a practitioner locates herself or himself in the space, she or he can say, "This is where I am" and then can determine where it is that she or he would like to be in the action research space. This could be of benefit both to experienced researchers and those learning to do action research as they struggle to meet their personal, professional, and political purposes. In this way, our framework can become a tool for the self-reflective analysis of one's own practice of action research.

This framework may also be useful to those who teach or facilitate action research. As we have seen in our analysis, the way that action research is practiced is not always located in the space near to the facilitator's theoretical conception of action research. This dissonance between the location of the practice and the theoretical description can be used as a way to figure out ways to modify the teaching of action research to reduce that gap. We also

imagine that it could be used as a heuristic for identifying what variety of action research would best suit a particular situation.

Finally, what we have done so far is to focus on one of at least two orders of analysis that are possible with this framework. One is to place examples of action research or their theoretical descriptions in the action research space. The other order of analysis would be to compare the locations in the space between the theoretical descriptions given by the educational researchers (Noffke, Hollingsworth, and others) with the locations of the action research reports that they give as examples. This has implications for teacher education. It may be that for teachers to be able to do action research within these different "schools" they need to have access to different types of knowledge. They would need not only to know the techniques of action research, they also have to be familiar with the knowledge base that grounds that school of action research.

We hope that this article is the beginning of a conversation that will add other perspectives and voices to our own. As a way to begin that conversation, we end with these questions:

• Are the rubrics that we provide for locating action research along the three dimensions adequate? How can they be improved?
• Does the framework lead to a better understanding of individual action researchers and of action research in general? How can the framework be modified to better meet these ends?
• Can this framework be expanded to include action research in settings other than schools? Where do participatory action research, action science, and collaborative inquiry lie in the space?

Acknowledgements

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