Theory to Practice

Action Research for Professional Development and Policy Formation in Literacy Education

B. Allan Quigley

"In what areas do most people appear to find life's meaning? We have only one pragmatic guide: meaning must reside in the things for which people strive, the goals which they set for themselves, their wants, needs, desires and wishes."

<div align="right">Eduard C. Lindeman, 1961</div>

The implementation of *The National Literacy Act of 1991* has created the highest level of literacy staff development activities since the halcyon adult basic education funding days of the 1960s. No fewer than 53 states and territories implemented new training activities through 1992 and 1993 as a result of this act[1]. These new staff development activities have ranged from a new JOBS Training program in Alaska to "Seminars in Adult Education and Computer Literacy for teachers in American Samoa" (Division of Adult Education and Literacy, 1993, p. 24); from "A technology Training Program at the University of Hawaii for computer usage by classroom teachers" (Division of Adult Education and Literacy, 1993, p. 27) to "Collaborative training with Head Start, Department of Labor and the Department of Human Services" in the state of Maine (Division of Adult Education and Literacy, 1993, p. 3). All states have established or enhanced a State Literacy Resource Center to support state literacy as well.

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The first act dedicated to literacy in this century, *The National Literacy Act of 1991* increased the amount of federal "set-aside" funding for staff development in each state from 10 to 15 percent (two-thirds of which being designated for teacher training). According to a very recent 1993 Office of Vocational and Adult Literacy report, it has created major statewide activities. New York state has utilized the new funding to establish 10 regional consortia on staff development, pilot-tested two distance learning options, and installed a telecommunications network among consortia to connect them to their new Literacy Resource Center. Pennsylvania has created nine training regions, each with a training coordination center and staff to conduct regionalized needs assessment and training. Indiana has hired three full-time training specialists for their three newly created training regions. Iowa has utilized the finding to implement a competency-based instruction model. Montana has established Master Teachers to work in becoming subject matter experts with the Montana State University. Meanwhile, most states, including Pennsylvania, have developed and offered new institutes and workshops across their states.

Virginia, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania are three states which have promoted "grassroots research" as part of this new thrust in staff development. Virginia began an inquiry-based decision process as opposed to an expert-driven system, while Massachusetts has enhanced its action research-based SABES project (Division of Adult Education and Literacy, 1993, pp. 4-14). Meanwhile, Pennsylvania, in its first "Request for Proposals" under the new act, specified one priority as "The provision for supporting ... teacher research" (J. Christopher, personal communication, March 16, 1992). In later meeting minutes wherein guidelines to the newly-created training regions were distributed, action research was described and promoted (J. Christopher, personal communication, September 7, 1992). In this latter document, action research was described as "research undertaken by practitioners in order that they may improve practices . . . [and enhance the] inquiry teachers undertake to understand the situation and improve their practice." Under the act funding was made available in Pennsylvania to assist practitioners with action research projects. However, to the time of writing, no funds have directly been expended on action research projects. This is regrettable.

Here is an opportunity which many hope will not be lost. These three states can lead the way in developing field-based research, research owned by and shared by teachers. These states can provide classroom-grounded direction to policy information which can make a difference to how we function.

"In order to understand anything well, you must have at least three good theories," goes William Perry's famous maxim. The position taken in this article is that we need to consider longer range staff development plans than we have seen thus far in this first flurry of training activities. It is argued here that, in this longer-range planning, such thoughtful professional development would seek to foster the very increase of self-reliance in our own field that we typically seek for our own students. How? By creating and owning more of our own knowledge out of systematic inquiry conducted by teachers, tutors, administrators, and our own students. If knowledge is power, as Francis Bacon once said, we can engage in the creation of our own knowledge through action research and truly empower ourselves and our field. Practitioners, in effect, can share the "expert" label through action research.

Is Action Research Actually Research?

Some argue that action research is not research at all. As this argument goes, action research lacks rigorous controls; therefore, it is not widely generalizable; thus it is not really research. This point of view, arising particularly out of the quantitative research paradigm, says action research cannot control variables sufficient to reduce threats to validity. In other words, we cannot know at the end of the project if, for instance, what we think has caused the observed effect actually did bring about the effect. Students may get better grades because of a new teaching technique, but was it in fact because of a better group of students this year? Could it be because the teacher was trying harder? Was it perhaps because the students either sensed or knew the teacher was trying something new and wanted to make him/her feel good? Maybe it was just a sheer fluke.

The prevailing counter-argument is that the methods of action research are well established in the research literature, dating back to Kurt Lewin's first use and development of the model in the 1940s and 1950s. Action research is found in sociology (e.g., Runcie, 1980), policy studies (e.g., Tornatzky, 1980), community studies (e.g., Lees & Smith, 1975), and education, including the U.S. (e.g., Nelson, Haggerson, & Bowman, 1992), the U.K. (e.g., Whitehead, 1989), Canada (e.g., Baskett & Hill, 1990), and Australia (e.g., Kemmis & McTaggart, 1982), as well as in Africa (e.g., Haidara, 1990), Indonesia (e.g., Dilts, 1986), and the South Pacific (e.g., Community Development, 1990). Despite arguments against it, action research is found in standard quantitative as well as qualitative research texts (e.g., Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Issac, 1971; Schumacher &

McMillan, 1993).[2]

However, if the question of internal validity arises, it should not just be ignored. In the field of adult education, Merriam and Simpson (1984) devote considerable space to action research and conclude that action research "lacks external and internal controls" (p. 108). The issues they raise can be overcome using some of the recommendations Merriam (1988) herself gives in her later work. To "ensure internal validity" (p. 169), according to Merriam, we may use a number of techniques, one of the most useful being "triangulation." This involves using "multiple investigators, multiple sources of data, or multiple methods to confirm the emerging findings" (p. 169)—what Foreman (1948) over forty years ago termed validity through "pooled judgement."[3]

Clearly, action research is an accepted research method. The issue, however, is how to enhance internal validity and, thus, enhance the wider generalizability of its findings. As will be discussed, the staff development funding under the current act provides real opportunities for using action research on a broad, perhaps statewide, level to advance professionalism, implement policy, and enhance internal validity. By satisfying internal validity using the methods discussed, action research can be a key to professionalization and policy in the field.

What Is Action Research? How Does It Work?

One of the most straight-forward definitions of action research is provided by Issac (1971): "to develop new skills or new approaches and to solve problems with direct application to the classroom or working world setting" (p. 27). Kemmis and McTaggart (1984) provide an especially useful, longer definition:

> Trying new ideas in practice as a means of improvement and as a means of increasing knowledge about the curriculum, teaching, and learning. The result is improvement in what happens in the classroom and school, and the better articulation and justification of the educa-tional rationale for what goes on. Action research provides a way of working which links theory and practice into one whole: ideas-in-action. (p. 5)

Action research is based in inductive experimentation and grounded in "trying something out to see if it works better."

Taking a closer look, action research follows a spiral—we try one "cycle" of the research; then having learned something, we try another,

and so on. Action research does not have a static or frozen "end of experiment" conclusion because it is conducted in the action-based world of daily practice.

Step One is to Plan the Project.

This is perhaps the most difficult step because it begins with trying to identify the problem, deciding where to intervene, and determining if the problem, as defined, is "researchable." To take an example of a project I undertook in my own teaching, for years in my Introduction to Adult Education class—the first class most returning adult graduates will take in their M. Ed. at Penn State—I would ask my graduate students to read several chapters/articles before class the next week, at which time we would discuss them. This is the classic method of teaching university classes. However, students complained of too much reading. It also seemed that I ended up "lecturing" when I had hoped we would be discussing.

What was the problem? I tried cutting the reading down, but that made little difference to the students or me. Then, one of my students suggested I give a brief lecture on the topic for the next week — in effect use "mini-lecture" as an advance organizer.

Step Two is the Action Step.

I tried the old method for the first four weeks of the next 460 class; then the mini-lecture for the next four weeks. Students were told from the beginning that I was comparing both methods. I said I had no idea which would be more effective, a statement which was quite true.

Step Three was to Observe and Record.

I asked students to keep reflective journals. They had a short test at the end of the eight weeks. We then talked about the test results, and I asked them to look back over their journals and answer (an anonymous) questionnaire about how well each method—old and new—worked, both for recalling facts and learning concepts and for purposes of the discussions and this exam. Based on 100% return (e.g., 25 replies), every student said the mini-lecture helped in every aspect. I was able to look at the mean score of the test as compared to previous years. It was considerably higher.

Step Four is to Reflect.

Was this a valid finding? Could it be that this was just an aberration? I was to give a presentation on a teaching technique at the Annual

Commission of Professors meeting. I gave the results of the mini-lecture research and asked others to try it. Two did, and I heard later that students preferred the mini-lectures and performed better at their universities, too (and provided triangulation of results). In the final evaluation of my course, no one said there was too much reading. However, would it work again? Would it work in senior courses?

Enter Another Cycle of the Research.

I have tried the experiment with two 460 classes since (i.e., further triangulation) and found the same results. I have also moved the method through another cycle with two senior level classes but have come to think that mini-lectures are more successful with new (e.g., newly returning adult) students since senior level students usually organize themselves well. Senior students actually felt a bit patronized by the "mini-lecture." I would need to "triangulate" with other senior level courses in my own program and around the country, but I now have reason to think that this method works well with adults newly returning to classes irrespective of location or course content where academic organization skills are needed but are "rusty."

Adult literacy practitioners who have taken action research courses over the past year have investigated, for instance, new methods of teaching chemistry material, new ways to recruit students into GED classes in a housing project, new ways to peer teach essay writing in English classes, new ways to retain ABE students using different intake methods, and new ways to recruit students into a GED program at a correctional center, to name but a few. Beyond literacy, others have used it to try new methods to recruit participants into adult religious classes and to ensure that nurses were using proper hygiene in a hospital Intensive Care Unit, and a student from a Community College in the Bahamas will be trying action research to ensure that his college's adult education correspondence lessons actually are received and returned from students across the Bahamian islands.

Imagine A Research and Policy Plan For the Future

Consider for a minute how many teachers/tutors have basically the same questions and frustrations every day. Imagine for another moment that the problems of illiteracy are not isolated incidents, but patterns re-occurring in every classroom in every region of our state. Whether trying to experiment with teaching, recruiting, or retention across several class-rooms or, at the policy level, trying to implement new ideas such as ways

to achieve quality indicators, common problems could be addressed through a common action research strategy. Done collaboratively, internal validity could be enhanced by multi-classroom, state-wide "pooled judgement."

Fantasize for a moment. Imagine a planning group of state policy makers, literacy teachers, and administrators, all familiar with action research, and a seasoned action researcher or two engaged in setting an agenda of state-wide issues in literacy: recruitment issues, retention, evaluation, best teaching methods, quality indicators, etc. Imagine that they prioritized these issues and different literacy programs across the state then took on various of these according to the priority list. Imagine each of these programs/teachers using action research to investigate their designated problem while communicating with other programs, investigating similar problems, on their progress. Four or five may be working on a new way to teach math. Another three or four might be trying a new way to retain adults. Another group might be working on using a learning style technique. What if each placed its findings in the State Literacy Resource Center, creating a critical mass of pooled judgement on each of these issues? Imagine that the seasoned researchers suggested what was still needed in each area for fuller validity and, with the committee's support, designated programs took up other cycles of remaining issues. Just imagine if monthly monographs of each research area were discussed at, for instance, the annual state conference and regional meetings. Finally, imagine if the findings on each issue were implemented across the state as we found better ways for doing things.

Through time, the state would have set and investigated its own mutual agenda. Findings would inform policy, policy would be based on what the field itself experienced, and internal validity would be constantly enhanced. Could it ever happen? Sadly, practitioners, policy-makers and researchers rarely blur the lines of their professions. Unfortunately, funding typically flows to isolated projects—however many times the research is repeated. Most states have much more knowledge stored on shelves than wisdom applied. Long term planning has never been one of literacy education's strong points, and research has either been shrouded in mystery or otherwise considered "valid" when it supports a politically favored funding thrust.

Our new professional development funding provides new opportunities to resolve issues. If we use them to research new solutions through action research, we can professionalize, create more effective policies, and substantively reduce illiteracy. As Nick Carraway states it in *The*

Great Gatsby: "Reserving judgements is a matter of infinite hope" (Fitzgerald, 1953, p. 1).

Notes

[1] The author would like to acknowledge the contribution of Ron Pugsley, Acting Director of the Division of Adult Education and Literacy, U.S. Department of Education, who initiated the report referenced here.

[2] For a discussion of the debate between quantitative and qualitative investigation approaches, see E. Guba and Y. Lincoln (1981), *Effective Evaluation*. For a discussion of action theory see C. Argyris, R. Putnam, and D. Smith (1987), *Action Science*.

[3] For a discussion of methods to enhance internal and external validity in qualitative research, see S. Merriam (1988), *Case Study Research in Education*, chapter 10.

Resources

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