Participatory Action Research: An Overview

What makes it tick?

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ABSTRACT

In this article I outline different elements of action research in an attempt to describe and define participatory action research (PAR). There is a lot more material available to readers these days, some of which I will refer you to in this article. I see my role here is to summarise enough of this material to help support your reading of the other articles that appear in this issue of *Kairaranga*. This material (I have tried to use work from Aotearoa New Zealand in the first instance) refers to the ethical, political and context characteristics of PAR, as well as the design and format for conducting such research.

Keywords

Action research, definitions, effective practices, participatory action research, professional practice, reflection.

INTRODUCTION

My first job as a graduate out of university was as a research assistant in an organisation establishing action research projects within its different departments. However, in the various courses I had taken at university, I could not recall any reference to action research. When I went to the library to find material there was little available other than *The Action Research Planner* (Kemmis & McTaggert, 1982) and *The Action Research Reader* (Deakin University, 1982) both from Australia. Even then they had to be borrowed from another university library.[1]

Twenty years on and action research has become a key approach for professionals to conduct research without needing to undertake large surveys or set up experimental conditions to test hypotheses. The underlying aim of action research is not to produce knowledge, but to create social change in the settings within which it is used (Munford & Sanders, 2003). Aligned with this increasing popularity has been the expanding New Zealand reading material available to support teachers and other professional groups in the use of action research (eg, Cardno, 2003; Zepke, Nugent & Leach, 2003; Munford & Sanders, 2003).

WHAT IS PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH?

Action research has often been linked to notions of professional development and the reflective practitioner, but not all material will refer directly to action research itself (eg, O'Connor & Diggins, 2002). Scouring the latest Best Evidence Synthesis released by the Ministry of Education *Teacher Professional Learning and Development* (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar & Fung, 2007) there was no reference to action research, but the diagram on the inside cover sets out a format for learning that mirrors action research cycles of inquiry. That is, a person or group sets out a question of professional relevance to their current teaching context, this is usually in relation to student learning, and then activities and experiences are designed to answer or explore these questions, which the teacher(s) then implement(s). This is followed by the teacher or group evaluating the impact of the changed practices. The answers, or non-answers as the case may be, are meant to lead to new questions and the process continues in what is usually referred to as cycles or spirals of ongoing action and reflection. Figure 1 is a simplification of some diagrams and does not show the iterative nature of the research over time that Cardno (2003) refers to, but it does outline the underlying format based on identifying an initial question or problem to start with.

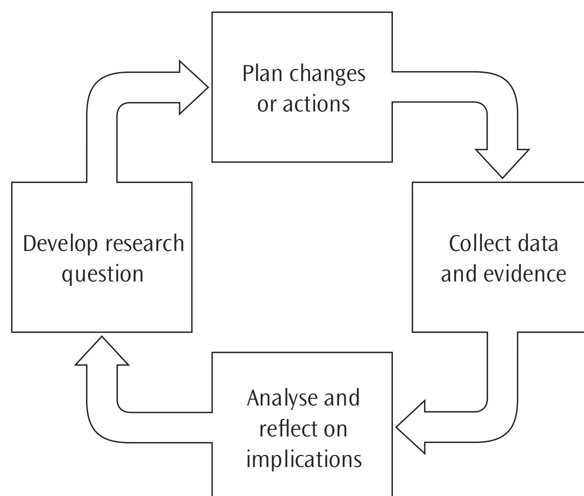

Figure 1. The action research cycle.

[1] There were a small number of New Zealand articles in academic journals also available. See Alcorn (1986) and Marshall & Peters (1985, 1986) in particular.

Participatory action research (PAR) has been described in much the same way as action research with little to distinguish the two, depending on whom you are reading. PAR has also been used as an acronym to remember the process:

> **P**lanning a change,
> **A**cting and observing the process and consequence of change,
> **R**eflecting on these processes and consequences, and then replanning, acting and observing, reflecting, and so on …
>
> (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000, p.595, bold added)

With reference back to my first involvement in action research, even though each group in the organisation followed the above format, it was surprising how different my experiences were as I worked with them to set up their projects. It ranged from large-scale work reviews involving all staff in a department, through to trying to resolve quite specific technical problems working alongside only one or two individuals. Some projects moved very quickly and others felt as though they were always struggling to get started.

The diversity of action research despite this framework or process can be surprising. One key element of PAR that distinguishes it as a subset of action research is the nature of participation by team members. Some writers assume that participation is always involved so do not see the need to add the qualifier *participatory* (eg, Whitehead & McNiff, 2006) and others do (eg, Cardno, 2003). Others have distinguished PAR from action research on the basis that PAR involves individuals with different roles participating as equal partners, such as when teachers and parents might work together, as opposed to teachers participating together as a professional group (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). I will return to the nature of participation later on in this article.

Alongside the increasing use of PAR in New Zealand there have been a number of variations in the name used or the purposes to which it is put. In early childhood education, action research is identifiable in the "prepare, gather, make sense, decide" cycle in the *Nga Arohaehae Whai Hua: Self Review Guidelines* (Ministry of Education, 2006a) and in the "plan study do act" cycle in the *Quality Journey: He Haerenga Whai Hua* (Ministry of Education, 2000), both provided as a resource to improve the quality of early childhood education in New Zealand. As these two examples show, there has been a strong link between internal or self-evaluation/review methodologies and action research. Other examples include *The Cultural Self-Review* (Bevan-Brown, 2003) and participatory evaluation (Patton, 1997). More recently the Ministry of Education has funded the Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) (Sandretto, 2008) and the early childhood education Centres of Innovation (COI) (Meade, 2006) programmes, which ask practitioners and researchers to collaborate in action research as a means of developing and researching innovative practice. The Ministry of Education has for a number of years supported action research as a means of professional development for teachers (eg, Ministry of Education, 2006b; Ministry of Education, 2007).

In this current special issue you are being introduced to a smaller Ministry of Education project. The autism spectrum disorder participatory action research (ASD PAR) project aimed to provide opportunities to establish what does and does not work for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in educational settings. Small teams of people worked collaboratively to develop research projects that made sense in their particular educational settings.

THE POLITICS OF PAR

There is an explicit political element to action research often associated with the sub-form of emancipatory action research. For example, Bishop and Glynn (1999) and Smith (1999) recognise the political elements of research and this is the basis for developing kaupapa Māori[2] research. The same views appear within disability studies (Mercer, 2003), such that Mirfin-Veitch and Ballard (2005) in writing about disability research draw on Bishop and Glynn to articulate these matters. They use the term "participant driven research", which recognises and asks:

> Initiation: Who initiates the project, who sets the goals and who decides on the research questions?
>
> Benefits: What benefits are intended, who will assess the benefits and who will benefit from the study?
>
> Representation: Whose voice is heard, who decides on the adequacy of the social realities that are represented, who will do this work?
>
> Legitimation: Who analyses the data, who determines the accuracy of the text, what authority does the text have?
>
> Accountability: Who is the researcher accountable to, who has control over the distribution of knowledge? (Bishop & Glynn, cited in Mirfin-Veitch & Ballard, 2005, p. 191)

As these context questions suggest, the nature of the resulting research will take quite different directions depending on how they are answered, who does the answering and why. Those who adopt a very inclusive and open idea about how to answer these questions will tend to adopt a PAR model (Munford, Sanders, Andrew, Butler & Ruwhiu, 2003). Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) go on to describe how PAR is a social process, is participatory, is practical and collaborative, is emancipatory, is critical, is recursive and aims to transform both theory and practice. I had to go back and check out the difference between participatory and collaborative. For these authors, to be participatory means there is no distinction between the researcher and researched, as often happens in other research approaches, and collaborative refers to how all participants are learning together. Munford et al. (2003) point out that participation and collaboration do not mean that everybody has to contribute in the same way. One of the roles of a research facilitator or mentor is to understand the varying demands on team members so as to maximise the opportunities for contribution without overwhelming participants. One key point they go on to identify is:

[2] Māori philosophy.

> Listening and acting on suggestions from participants and being sensitive to their role as research participants. This included knowing when the research needed to slow down so that the work of the community centre would not be disrupted. We were always clear that the research would not disrupt the daily activities of the workers and young people. (Munford & Sanders, 2003, p. 273)

The challenge is establishing a groundswell of support for action that is interpreted as changing practices for the better rather than disrupting participants' current routines.

Ownership in a project comes from maximising individual involvement without compromising commitment or creating a feeling of exploitation (Miskovic & Hoop, 2006). This is why the facilitators have to be so focused on the process of action research as well as keeping an eye on the research outcomes. This is something that is much more difficult to do if there are contractual obligations involving time. The article *What We Did* in this issue confirms that finding time to conduct the work was a consistent theme raised by participants in the ASD PAR projects.

For the ASD PAR project it has been acknowledged that the projects were not initiated by the teams that conducted the work. Potentially, there were tensions with a funder and the project teams being different and giving life to the concerns raised by Mirfin-Veitch and Ballard (2005). In programmes like the COI and TLRI, the initial work is by competitive application. The proposals come with general questions laid out by the participants. The funder's role is to choose the proposals that are found to be of interest according to pre-set criteria. This suggests that those who are successful are then funded to pursue their own questions.

Munford et al. (2003) recognise the high demand on time and energy within action research and without funding, the capacity to sustain PAR is much more problematic. Sustainability may be supported by having an external funder and that must be weighed against the potential and realised influences. In the end it is a collective judgement to be made by the participants – is there enough scope in the project to make it worth doing? There is a balance to be found that should satisfy all PAR participants.

Receiving funds for the study is not a neutral act, it implies a certain relationship between the funder and researchers in terms of obligations, responsibilities, and expectations. 'In the FSN project, all our meetings needed to be accounted for with a finished result, such as a paper or a research piece' (Miskovic & Hoop, 2006, p. 283).

Writing, for example, tends to be a very academic or contractual exercise that not all team members may necessarily appreciate in the same way. Cardno (2003) makes the point that action research needs to be reported, although in the age of multi-media this does not need to be formal writing. However, if a group's learning is going to benefit a wider community beyond their own changes in practice, then some form of recording and reporting is desirable.

Cardno (2003) refers to publication giving action research the credibility of proper research. For her this is what distinguishes professional or organisational development from action research. Also, in the wider world of organisations and external funding opportunities, reporting can constitute evidence of the worth of a project, and often more importantly, its continuation. This is why action research and evaluation have been so closely linked as referred to above (Duignan, 2003; Patton, 1997).

The means of reporting is important for creating a sense of "voice" in terms of who is speaking through a report. Cardno (2003) reminds us that there can be multiple reports that seek to address different audiences. There is a temptation to leave writing and reporting to only a few, but like all aspects of the action research process, they provide learning opportunities for less experienced members of the team to develop their presentation skills. One of the strategies for success here is to leave plenty of time for newcomers to experience success rather than being overwhelmed with the demands of meeting deadlines. Even partial experience in differing parts of the action research cycle builds confidence in preparation for the next cycle, making PAR a platform for experiential learning through apprenticeship. This confidence building was reflected in the *Making Assumptions vs. Building Relationships* article where the research contributed to peoples' improving confidence in their professional practice.

CONTEXT FACTORS IN PAR

One of the aims of my description of PAR in this article is to highlight how the differences in research context determine what type of action research might be achieved. Bruce-Ferguson (2003) defines three types of action research – technical, practical and emancipatory. The definition varies according to the relationship between the facilitator and practitioners, and the purpose of the particular project.

> *Technical action research* happens when an outside facilitator persuades practitioners to test findings from external research in their own practice … The aim of the research is to add to external research literatures.
>
> *Practical action research* happens when outside facilitators form cooperative relationships with practitioners, helping them to articulate their own concerns, plan strategic action for change, monitor the problems and effects of changes and reflect on the value and consequences of the changes actually achieved …
>
> *Emancipatory action research* is the final level of action research … when a practitioner group takes joint responsibility to change and improve practice 'aiming to explore the problems and effects of group policies and individual practices'. (p. 62, citing Carr & Kemmis in the last sentence)

Of these, only the last two would seem to meet the criteria set out by Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) as PAR referred to above.

The differences in type reflect the process of question development or "why are we doing this in the first place?" In the ASD PAR project, each team had a mentor in the role of facilitator. Within the definitions above we have an arrangement that reflects practical action research.

Forms of participation

The definitions also assume similar understandings across a participating practitioner group. In larger groups, a few people will be leading the team on the basis that it is a good idea and the others will follow, not necessarily having the time or enthusiasm to contribute to work in the same way. Timperley et al. (2007) commented that student outcomes were not related to whether teachers voluntarily participated in professional development, but rather it was determined by whether there was a point when the teachers engage in the learning process. Thus different participants in the same project may choose different labels to describe the action research. What is practical action research for one could be viewed as technical for another. There may also be participants who start a project viewing it as technical, but through engagement with it get to the point where they feel that it is now practical. Ideally, when they have had enough positive experiences and developed their research skills they will initiate further work themselves, which will warrant calling it emancipatory action research. Unfortunately, the reverse could also happen. A lack of flexibility and opportunity for contribution means a project could seem more technical than practical. Likewise, just because a mentor is involved does mean that the outcomes cannot be emancipatory. The definitions from Bruce-Ferguson (2003) outlined previously focus on the means rather than the ends.

This approach to defining action research is written as though you chose one or the other rather than learning the possibilities by experiencing action research in different ways. There are certain levels of capacity or understanding and knowledge required, which is usually provided via a facilitator. Thus, in my first action research experience I was in situations where, even though working with a large group, there was a common understanding and enthusiasm for developing a project, to the point that I was not so much a facilitator, but rather a resource person searching the library for relevant material or administering the project.

At the same time another group directed me to work with one team member to see if I could resolve an organisational concern they had. If I could resolve it, all well and good, but the answer was not going to be a collaborative experience to change practitioner practices or understandings. During another project I met with teachers who had been told to meet with the facilitator, their expectation was that I would do the research and so they waited for the research to happen or to be told what to do. Based on these experiences and others, I believe it is important for professionals to build up their skills and experiences of small-scale practical action research before they can appreciate the possibilities of, and work toward, the more idealised emancipatory research as described by Bruce-Ferguson (2003) above. Whitehead and McNiff (2006) have found that establishing teacher independence of researchers is very problematic.

My own experiences also suggest that a facilitator or mentor must also have an understanding about the way an organisation works. Outside facilitators may have developed relationships with individuals within an organisation, but their assumptions about the way the organisation operates may never have been tested. For example, does the facilitator know who is able to make significant decisions or allow certain questions to be asked? There is no recipe to follow because, as suggested by the action research cycles described above or reading articles like this, the learning is experiential and political although reading other people's projects can be very motivating and enlightening (as I hope this issue of *Kairaranga* will be).

PAR as group problem solving

The shared experience of participating in PAR provides the language and opportunities to articulate the direction for ongoing research and establish what possibilities there are for solutions or action within the organisation or group (Miskovic & Hoop, 2006). This is articulated within the article *Learning from Each Other*. The limits of what is possible within schools will depend on the organisational context and management systems when establishing solutions for certain problems faced by the group. The starting point is to establish which solutions are within the control of the group to provide. After this there is a significant role in advocating for the group's work across the school or network of potential contributors. Innovation, within and between schools, is supported by networking to share experiences (Hopkins, 2007). The local context and systems, including limited research experience, could also mean that a group may never get to the big questions or will restrict itself to certain solutions in the first instance. Whitehead and McNiff (2006), prominent action research theorists, refer to this as establishing the validity of the knowledge generated by action research. There are limits to how much questioning we are capable of, which is why self-study can only go so far, reflecting the old adage "we don't know what we don't know". There is a spectrum of change and research outcome – from that which does not seem to challenge or take us further, to that which requires ongoing review of personal and group understandings. A significant role of the facilitator can be that of critical friend (Bruce-Ferguson, 2003) to re-ask questions that may have been glossed over too quickly or support the strategising within the organisation and beyond.

PAR AS RESEARCH PROCESS

I have alluded to many of the challenges and the fluid nature of action research. It is so process orientated and, as a result, energy intensive, the full story is often not reflected in write-ups of the action research (Meade, 2006; Miskovic & Hoop, 2006). The article in this issue, *Building Communities of Support*, describes many of the issues I have referred to. There was reference to participant turnover, which I have experienced in the action research process myself. At first it seems very distracting having to engage new team members in the process, but this provides new opportunities to review progress, and re-establish purpose. A new member can ask the naïve question to keep a team on track. In larger teams it would be better to plan ahead for some turnover on the assumption that the research is not reliant on particular individuals.

In my descriptions of different projects above I have implied that they only occur in the context of single organisations,

but in the *Building Communities of Support* article the project was around a single child in one particular context and the participating adults came from different organisations. Thus there is no guarantee of shared understandings about each other's work demands or professional or personal thinking and there is an extra demand on coordination to achieve success as acknowledged in the article. Also, the methods of working together had not been established, this can be an advantage as fewer assumptions can be made and more questions about "how are we going to do this?" must be asked – referred to in the article as "developing practices".

This same article also acknowledges the link between evaluation and action research. In this context PAR is not only about agreeing on the performance of practices, but also agreeing on how to judge their success or otherwise. There is acceptance that not everyone has to have the same commitment to the project, which is true, but you can certainly tell when someone's commitment is insufficient. This is not always with respect to time and energy, but in terms of team members' understandings of their own practices and how they interact with each other.

Broadening participation

Several articles in this issue describe parents as being a critical part of the team. Increasingly researchers and practitioners are also being inclusive of children and young people as part of the "team". This was evident in several accounts in this issue, where the adults followed the child's interests and listened to the way children expressed their preferences. This approach has been promoted in New Zealand by Margaret Carr (2004) in the context of narrative assessment in early childhood education and I hope to see more appear within the context of the new school curriculum.

The articles in this issue highlight the adults' learning and experience of PAR. A balance between this and reporting the outcomes for students is a likely indicator that all, adults and students, are active participants in the team. The *What Works for One* article recognises that the research was not about changing students but instead, as one heading suggests, there was a "focus on changing ourselves," the adults. This is an appropriate starting point when thinking about including the students as part of the team.

There was some concern in the *Ethical Principles in Practice* article that the traditional approach to ethics does not fit the PAR model. It is likely that this misfit was owing to the blurring of roles between researchers and the researched. If researchers and practitioners are collaborating then it makes no sense to gain informed consent or obligation to maintain confidentiality. Instead, there must be explicit rules about how the team is going to participate and collaborate together. The trickier question is how many people need to sign up. As the author of the *Building Communities of Support* article recognise, people have varying levels of commitment to and awareness of the project. Also, many professional bodies have their own ethical principles or guidelines alongside organisational requirements that should hopefully support research rather than compromise it. This suggests the importance of a group of participants being ready to address issues as they arise, with each context likely to create new concerns for the group to resolve.

CONCLUSION

I have endeavoured to provide an outline of the nature of PAR, its characteristics and the important contextual factors that make it distinctive. The notion of researchers, teachers, students and families participating together to find out what will make life better for them, is a strong motivating factor in support of PAR. However, there are high costs or demands to make the process successful. It comes down to establishing working relationships based on a collective purpose.
This makes PAR a very challenging process, but at the same time it can be very rewarding for those who participate.
The leaders within PAR projects are having to make ongoing judgements about context issues by anticipating and acknowledging the political and ethical concerns in advance. Each context presents its own configuration of challenges and opportunities within which to develop PAR. From establishing a working team that allows different members to make their own contribution to the PAR process, through to using group learning to reflect on practices and look for new solutions. I think the articles in this issue of *Kairaranga* reflect many of these challenges and show how participants in the ASD PAR project found their own solutions.

RECOMMENDED READING

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