

## **Book Reviews**

Susan E. Noffke, Bridget Somekh (eds.) (2009):  
Handbook of Educational Action Research  
Sage 2009, 534 pp, € 112.99 (amazon),  
ISBN 978-1-4129-4708-4

Jean McNiff und Jack Whitehead (2009):  
Doing and Writing Action Research  
Sage 2009, 202 pp, € 23.99 (amazon),  
ISBN 978-1-84787-175-6

Reviewed by Richard Ennals

The field of Action Research is broader than any one tradition, or any one journal. How are we to respond to substantial contributions which present a different perspective to our own? Can we identify an overall coherence for a single movement, or should we expect to find disparate activities citing similar rationales? As leading Action Researchers approach retirement, have the foundations been laid for continuing sustainable development? Do we need new programmes which span traditions?

These two new volumes from Sage have significant implications, both for the literature and the future development of the field of Action Research internationally. Can we talk of an international “Action Research Community”, or is it rather a matter of different groups claiming ownership of the title, but divided by a common language (as Shaw suggested applied to the British and the Americans)? Alternatively, should we think in terms of family resemblances (as explored by Wittgenstein)? In memory of Darwin, should we find a family tree of Action Research, locate ourselves on one of the branches, and identify common ancestors?

Our conclusions will affect plans for future international Action Research conferences, which are already complicated by economic pressures. There are

current efforts to seek dialogue partners, and fresh energy. There are also implications for future issues of the *International Journal of Action Research*, which has been publishing articles on Educational Action Research.

Readers of “Doing and Writing Action Research” could be surprised by the approach that has been taken. McNiff and Whitehead, in a directive tutorial manual for busy students, are tightly focussed on the production of research reports by teacher practitioners, in a practical UK context, based on 25 years of collaboration. The focus tends to be on supporting individual reflection. The range of references is narrow, even within Educational Action Research. Numerous reports have been produced. Experienced supervisors of Action Research PhDs may be surprised by the confidence with which particular approaches are recommended.

One explanation may be that McNiff and Whitehead are dealing with individual students, engaged in single projects as part of professional development. However, they locate this endeavour in a broader philosophical context. They argue that the conventional view of practitioners is that they are “capable of telling good stories, but not of creating knowledge”, and that the necessary means are not put in place “to enable practitioners to be recognised as competent theorists”. They quote Foucault in arguing that practitioners are not required to offer explanations and critical analyses of their stories, which is “a means of keeping them in their place as products of a power regime”. They quote Derrida on the difficulty of overturning a hierarchical system when one is forced to abide by the rules of the hierarchy. Thus they offer a well-prepared route to recognition, through the production of reports which meet official criteria.

The “Sage Handbook of Educational Action Research”, by contrast, represents an eclectic breath of fresh air, opening the door to wider dialogue. The editors Noffke and Somekh provide a broader introductory overview, and Noffke’s opening chapter makes passing reference to Reason and Bradbury’s “Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice”, and the *Action Research Journal*. In particular the final section on the political dimension, “Popular Knowledge, Difference and Frameworks for Change”, with a strong Latin American input, resonates with many articles in the *International Journal of Action Research*.

Noffke provided the framework for the handbook in a 1997 paper, which highlights issues of power and control: “These three areas – the professional, the personal and the political – form the frames for this review of the literature on action research. They may seem to be distinct emphases, within the context of action research, however, all clearly deal with issues of power and control. In that sense, the public sphere of professionalism and the domain of the personal are also particular manifestations of the political”. Indeed, this is illustrated in her account of McNiff and Whitehead; “The position that teachers are generators of knowledge carries with it a sense of the political dimension, in that such a stance challenges hierarchies of knowledge production and the power relations they maintain”.

Do we have to regard the various research communities as mutually exclusive? Is it more a matter of applying related principles in different contexts? Can we learn from differences?

Each of our many Action Research traditions, presented in the rival journals, and successive editions of the “Handbook of Action Research”, have in common that they reject positivism, and emphasise the engagement of the researcher. In Educational Action Research there can be an apparent tendency towards conservatism, with Action Research projects conducted within institutional contexts which are not themselves challenged. On the other hand, with the work of Freire and Fals Borda, the need for change is emphasised. Educational and Emancipatory Action Research converge, and I can feel at home.

As Noffke and Somekh note, “Action Research both emerges from and is employed by social movements, which work explicitly to dismantle existing power relations and to create new forms of social structures. While Action Researchers in the political dimension engage with activist agendas, they also enhance new forms of personal and social relations and build a new form of professional knowledge.” Interestingly, they illustrate this perspective with chapters from Sweden, New Mexico, Australia and the UK. A Latin American chapter concludes with an action plan for Educational Participatory Action Research (EPAR), including “work to generate a new understanding of epistemology, a new language that crosses boundaries between social

actors and academics, and a role for the state as a broker of scientific and political legitimacy.” Dialogue is strongly emphasised.

The final chapter, by Zipin and Hattam, addresses “Partnership Action Research for Social Justice”, arguably bridging a gap between education and regional development. The case is made for school – university partnerships and networks, addressing organisational issues in what they term the “complex relational ecology of an education system”. They present examples from South Australia, with a network of 10 secondary schools, a Principals’ network and the state government. The account is reminiscent of Norwegian accounts of “The Triple Helix” and network orchestration, but with outcomes seen in contributions to the curriculum. I had encountered some of the researchers, such as Boomer, in work on computers and education in South Australia in 1983. Zipin and Hattam conclude that “Action Research is crucially about reflexivity: about theory-in-practice aimed at changing social practices and relations, provoking reflection on how well the change effort is working, followed by rethinking / re-practicing”. They recommend adding “reflexivity regarding partnership interactions and dynamics”.

Jesus told his disciples that “in his father’s house there are many mansions”. In our case there often appear to have been few connecting doors. From the “Handbook of Educational Action Research”, apart from one passing citation of Reason and Bradbury, there are no cross-references to the “Handbook of Action Research”, the *Action Research Journal*, *Systemic Practice and Action Research*, or the *International Journal of Action Research*. This tells us about professional silos, which could be made more permeable, rather than essential differences. To be more positive, we should be able to find more prospective dialogue partners than we had realised, once the communication can be opened.

In the age of the “knowledge society”, the “knowledge economy”, and the “learning organisation”, I suggest that barriers between education and working life should not be rigid. Our words must also be seen as actions, and our projects regarded as interventions which may result in change, and in learning. Many writers about Action Research are nervous about talking about the organisational level, so they focus on individual and global levels. In the

*International Journal of Action Research*, organisational renewal is centre stage. It is needed!

For those who have been collecting Handbooks from Sage, such as on Action Research and Qualitative Research, it is worth adding the “Handbook of Educational Action Research”. The ingredients are now available from which a sustainable way forward can be found for work, education and research. Those ingredients come from different traditions around the world. We are required to be prepared to cross borders of nation and discipline, and to recognise that we are actors, and not merely spectators. Noffke and Somekh share this perspective. They regard their book as not “inscribing” action research in stone, but allowing “diverse meanings to flourish”, providing “an opportunity for new coalitions to form”. They recognise “an intellectual opportunity for coalition building within and outside of education, and across international boundaries”.

We are left with a challenge. Thanks to the Handbooks, and a wider literature, we have access to the work of those who have “interpreted” the world. If we take the view that the problem is now to “change” it, the question is whether the different traditions and flavours of Action Research can be brought together as a single movement with critical mass. Alternatively, we may wish to focus on the various professions and social groups which have contributed, and note the implications for power relations and the production of knowledge. Uniting Action Researchers may be compared with herding cats, consistent in their search for cream, but each jealous of their autonomy. To fail would be to leave “Inaction Research” dominant.

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