

CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS THIS THING CALLED ACTION RESEARCH?

The changing context of educational practice

Reflecting on and learning from our practice is perhaps the most natural and innate process in the business of being human. For a young child it is a completely instinctive process, so that the subtle changes in position which promote improved balance become innately understood and developed in any toddler in the early days of learning to walk or get around. Likewise, the processes of communication become honed and polished as we listen to our own voice and those of others, reviewing and refining our own in order to improve our communication practice. Gaining mobility and communication skills are highly situated, contextualised activities, and develop in different ways according to that contextualised need. If we take 'learning to talk' as an example, we can see that even within a relatively small geographical area, variations of syntax, accent, sophistication and extent of vocabulary and so forth are clearly evident. These variations will arise, in general, as a result of the beginning talker trying to find the best way of communicating within their own particular context.

The fact is, a small child learns a great deal about how to make its own way into the world without being formally taught, instinctively reflects

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on practice trying to make it better, and has a fairly egocentric world-view. It really is 'all about me' for a young child. It could be said perhaps that the developing infant instinctively understands the nature and potency of action research.

For many teachers or other education practitioners, however, action research, presented to them through the academic processes of their initial and continuing education, can prove quite a philosophical challenge. Somewhere between infancy and adulthood, we subvert (and occasionally lose) our naive understandings of the world, and become entangled in the processes and procedures of a more formal learning environment. As schooling becomes more ritualised and routinised, we begin to look to those rituals and routines as *sources* of learning, rather than *organisational strategies* for it. The tendency to ask how to do something, rather than explore the nature of that something, is, in a way, a pragmatic response to the reality and busy-ness of life. The corollary of this, though, is that it can be an inhibitory response in terms of learning. Without such a questioning approach, our engagement with concepts and processes can remain at a relatively superficial level.

Recent changes in education

Reflecting on the past 30 years in terms of school management, government policies and initiatives, we can see that there has been a significant change in ways in which schools are managed. The introduction of a national curriculum following the 1988 Education Reform Act, paved the way for a raft of associated policies and procedures, from guides to pedagogy, assessment and record-keeping, to classroom management, differentiation and, indeed, school management. The transition to this more heavily prescribed and bureaucratised approach to education was challenging for many teachers in its early stages, and in particular for those who had worked for a significant number of years under a much more flexible regime. For many, it represented a loss of autonomy and the erosion of both the place and the value of their 'professional judgement'. In the words of Hutchinson and Whitehouse, the education reforms did 'not brook any questioning' (1999: 153).

While subsequent reviews have made changes in the content and scope of curriculum legislation, the increase in bureaucracy continues to impact strongly on our concept of what contemporary schooling looks like and how it is organised. Alongside this growth in bureaucracy there was also the development of a new language. Learning styles, the three-part lesson, curriculum delivery, assessment for learning, best practice,

scaffolding and a raft of other new terms became part of the educational vocabulary. Words like 'value added', 'accountability', 'buy in' and 'stakeholders' were further additions and, for many teachers, suggestive of a change in both the focus and the values of contemporary education. Once only associated with marketisation and commercial venture, they became subsumed into the language of educational processes, bringing with them a feeling that education was being commodified in a way that was hitherto unknown for many teachers, and heralded significant philosophical challenges. The very art of teaching seemed to be under attack. In secondary schools, there were concerns about how teachers would cope with pupils suddenly facing the demands of a 'balanced curriculum', where they were forced to do subjects from within each of five curricular areas until the age of 16. In primary schools, the introduction of compulsory science and technology was perhaps the biggest area of anxiety for teachers.

The highly prescriptive programmes of study with their complex levels and statements of attainment suggested to teachers that the main function of teaching now was to ensure that all children reached these levels, and that the appropriate boxes were ticked in order to demonstrate that. Effective teachers would deliver the appropriate content to pupils (described by one of my colleagues at the time as the 'deliverology' model of education) and prepare them for assessment tasks which had become more standardised, thus enabling the establishment of school league tables so that schools could be compared, like for like, against each other. These tables allowed parents also to choose schools for their children, making judgements on the basis of the school's measured performance. The 'free market' model of education had clearly arrived.

Changing schools, changing teachers

Alongside curricular and organisational changes there was also a growing expectation that teachers would engage in continuing professional development throughout their career. From the early 1980s, part-time, in-service Bachelor of Education (BEd) programmes, which enabled all teachers to hold graduate-level qualifications, became increasingly popular as the proportion of graduate-qualified teachers joined the profession, and non-graduates felt the need to upgrade their qualifications, and thereby their job and promotion prospects. (Prior to that time, teacher training enabled holders of the earlier Certificate of Education to teach in primary and secondary schools.) It was not long before there was a demand for master's level professional development programmes, and most university faculties

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of education developed diploma and master's programmes to meet this demand. While this provision was very much driven by individual teacher needs and desires, it did much to embed the notion of postgraduate professional development into the culture of schools and settings. The mid-1990s saw a change in the funding arrangements for such provision, and a subsequent move towards partnership arrangements between universities and other providers to ensure that the provision matched need on a more organisational than individual level. The notion of school-driven professional development through postgraduate programmes was consolidated by then, and subsequent funding arrangements were, in the main, centred on postgraduate, award-bearing provision.

Initiatives in England, such as the introduction of funded Postgraduate Professional Development (PPD) opportunities by the (then) Training and Development Agency (TDA) from 2006 to 2011, the Master's in Teaching and Learning introduced in 2008 and the newly introduced National Scholarship Scheme for Professional Development, all suggested that award-bearing, master's-level provision was a valued and valuable option. The Chartered Teacher Pathway in Scotland, and the current development in Wales of a Master's in Educational Practice similarly attest to the desirability and the potency of highly contextualised professional development. Their designation as master's-level courses, rather than traditional in-service training (INSET) programmes which tended to train teachers in the use of specific resources or approaches (normally being completed in one-day or half-day sessions) suggest that academic rigour is a valuable feature.

While there have been recent changes in legislation and funding in England (the PPD funding stream has now been discontinued), there is still a focus on high-quality professional development for practising teachers (often linked to a specific subject or pedagogic focus). The introduction of the National Scholarship Scheme in 2011, which called for applicants who wanted to 'use this money for Master's level development, or other highly valuable opportunities, such as subject specific seminars', was as a direct result of the 2010 Schools White Paper, '*The Importance of Teaching*'. Master's-level professional development continues to be a central strand in educational initiatives and policy-making.

Rooting these programmes and initiatives in practitioner research means that, at present, most schools in the UK will have some form of small-scale practitioner research project in place. Similar experiences are to be found in a range of countries, from Australia to North America, with journals such as *Educational Action Research*, *Action Research*, *Reflective Practice* regularly featuring articles which have arisen from these projects. A range of networks exists to provide support for action

researchers, and conferences such as the annual Collaborative Action Research Network (CARN) actively encourage presentation from such work. While it is clear that all such projects have the potential to support practitioners and their schools, and are often branded as ‘action research’ in an all-encompassing way, it is important that we clarify what is and, probably more importantly, what is not action research.

The relationship between practitioner research and action research

For most teachers and other educational practitioners, Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and continuing professional development (CPD) work offer opportunities to engage in practitioner research. In addition to research experiences embedded in programmes of (academic) study, they also form part of other professional development, in-service courses. The National College offers opportunities for English teachers, aspiring and in-post school leaders to undertake recognised development programmes, many of which incorporate practitioner research elements. Similarly, the International Leadership and Management Program offers practitioner-research based programmes for school and college leaders in international schools.

The term ‘action research’ is often used in relation to the projects teachers undertake as part of these professional development programmes, regardless of whether their work is of an action research nature or not. At one level, this broad-brush understanding of action research can be seen as a pragmatic approach which serves the purpose of engaging people in activities that do explore and seek to understand practice and its impact. At another level, however, the potential for such project work to be inaccurately described and lacking in the intellectual rigour of a specific framework does no service to the programmes themselves, the participants nor, indeed, to the public face of action research and other practitioner research approaches. In a climate where deeply encultured approaches to understanding ‘research’ as a scientific process underpinned by numbers and percentages have led to a view of more narrative and naturalistic approaches to research as being ‘not real research’ and descriptions of such research approaches in a language which is at best, loose and, at worst, inaccurate, their public acceptance is made more problematic and their validity suspect. For this reason, this chapter seeks to articulate the provenance and nature of action research, and to clarify its formulation as a specific, rigorous and methodologically appropriate form of practice-based research. All practitioner research requires its participants to ‘to engage with both “theoretical” and “practical” knowledge

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moving seamlessly between the two' (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2006: 107), but action research makes a further demand. It requires not only the critical reflection on practice and theory–practice conversation, but also it designates ongoing and evolving action as part of that process. We will develop this later in the chapter, and throughout the book, but first a brief look at the nature of 'research' itself, and where practitioner research and action research fit into this.

The research continuum

It is perhaps helpful to start by taking a brief look at the nature of research and its manifestations. 'Research' may be thought of as a continuum of approaches, with scientific, or positivistic, research at one end, and the more naturalistic and interpretive approaches at the other. An example of scientific research is that which is carried out in medical drug trials, where the notion of 'objectivity' is embedded in the philosophy, and where the design of the project will normally involve some form of blind testing and/or control group, with the findings used to generate a generalisable 'truth'. Thus, trials suggest that 98 per cent of all patients will achieve a significant reduction of symptoms when taking drug X. Likewise, figures suggesting that only 1 per cent of those taking the drug are likely to suffer any unpleasant side effects, and of these side effects, none has been found to be medically worrying, can be used to assure us of its safety. Results such as this can inform the decision of a company to launch the drug, and brand it as safe. Similarly, engineering science may seek to produce a set of experimental results which can then be generalised. Repeated tests on particular materials allow engineers to choose specific materials and dimensions for specialist uses, knowing that they have proof of their efficacy in such uses. Proof is a word that is often found in scientific experimentation and research. I am not saying here of course that purely exploratory scientific research does not take place. What I am saying is that much experimental science and research is of the type that discovers 'truths' and seeks to 'prove'. It can be described, therefore, as belonging to the positivistic research paradigm. In other words, its underpinning philosophy is that knowledge is derived from the interrogation and verification of empirical data.

At the other end of this continuum of research approaches we find the more naturalistic and interpretive approaches. This end of the continuum is sometimes described as 'anti-positivistic' (although I often feel that is a confrontational term, and prefer 'non-positivistic') and is generally understood as the set of research approaches which includes phenomenological, ethnomethodological and biographical approaches. Practitioner research is

located at this end of the continuum. The term is broad in scope, and covers a range of approaches which tend to be characterised by a desire to explore, explain or describe practice. Data collected tends to be more qualitative than quantitative in nature, and the resultant report will often seek to identify key features of the practice, particular insights into practice, or recommendations for future practice. The practitioner case study is a good example of this type of research. Habermas, writing in 1970, suggests a tripartite typology of knowledge: empirical and analytical; hermeneutic (interpretive or explanatory) and historical; and critical knowledge. Practitioner research is usually thought of as residing in the hermeneutic and historical category. In newly identifying 'critical knowledge' as a valid category, Habermas paved the way for those researchers and theorists who felt that other paradigms did not fully address the need to either critique ideology, nor effectively deal with the practice-based knowledge incorporated in the day to day lives of people. This brings us to an introduction to the very specific nature of action research.

The location of action research on the continuum

While action research is usually considered to reside under the broad umbrella of 'practitioner research', its proponents would suggest that while it does indeed share some features of practitioner research, and does produce historical and hermeneutic knowledge, it does more than this. Its inextricable practice–theory relationship, and its acknowledged location of the researcher and the context right at the centre of both the research and the practice, suggest that it more properly resides within the critical knowledge category. It both explores and theorises practice, changes, evaluates and develops practice, provides a platform from which to critique ideology, and in doing so incorporates a moral as well as an epistemological dimension to the research. In its most simple form, it has its roots in the question 'How can I improve my practice', and in this way it implies a range of sub-questions from 'Why should I improve?' to 'what does improvement mean?' and 'Where does my practice and possible changes reside in a policy, theoretical and ideological framework?'. The action and the research, the theory and the practice become unified in questions of 'ought' rather than 'can'. The discussion and debate around such matters is important, but can be challenging, particularly for the action researcher. Getting caught up in the deeper philosophical conversation may indeed inhibit the potential for the novice researcher to 'get going' on their project. The challenge at this stage, therefore, is to develop sufficient understanding on a philosophical basis, but at the same time leave the reader feeling enabled and empowered

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to actually undertake the research with integrity. As is the case in real action research projects, philosophical issues will arise along the way, so rather than abstract them from their environment, we will discuss and explore them in the context of the case studies in subsequent chapters.

For this reason, I wish to move the focus back now to the more pragmatic matters of action research. Framing this discussion in Elliott's (1991: 49) notion that 'the fundamental aim of action research is to improve practice' is perhaps a good starting point in that it immediately makes a clear and explicit link to practice and, perhaps more so than any other statement of paradigmatic purpose, speaks loud and clear to the practitioner, be that a teacher in training, a teacher or teaching assistant in the classroom, a school leader or any other practitioner. Educational provision takes place in an increasingly broad range of settings and contexts, and while the words 'school' and 'teacher' are frequently used throughout the book, they should be understood as inclusive of all settings and practitioners. I am also conscious that, particularly for younger readers, some of the references in this chapter (and Chapter 2) may seem dated. I have deliberately chosen, however, to refer to the key works of some of the most important protagonists of action research in its current usage in schools and other educational settings. While the term 'active research' is familiar to perhaps all educational practitioners at present, in the 1970s and 1980s, it was just beginning to emerge as the approach of choice for teachers in schools, for health and social work professionals, and others, such as community and youth workers. Most of the current usage of action research draws heavily on texts written at this time, many of which speak directly to the needs and concerns of teachers in a relevant and accessible way, assuming no prior knowledge of the approach. They are still highly valuable texts and, from my perspective, a highly effective way to learn not only how to 'do' action research, but also how to 'think' action research.

The development of action research

Locating action research both historically and philosophically is important in helping us understand not only where action research has come from, but also how it has evolved to meet the specific needs and concerns of practitioners.

Initially thought to have been developed for the purposes of educational improvement by Corey (1953) from the work of Lewin in the 1940s, the modern usage of action research owes much to the work of Stenhouse, in the 1970s, who suggested that the work of the teacher be researched,

and by teachers themselves. He felt, however, that this study or research should be supported and guided by the use of professional researchers who would also choose the focus for the research (Stenhouse, 1975).

The model of practitioner research which located the research issue with the teacher's own initial concern was developed by Elliott in the late 1970s, suggesting that either the teacher could carry out the research or could commission someone else to do it. In either case, the research was an effort to understand 'the social situation in which the participant finds himself' (Elliott, 1978: 355), and was thus located in the teacher's intrinsic, rather than the researcher's external, concerns. This model was further developed in later work by Elliott and others, and unlike the traditional positivistic or scientific model of research, focused on the reciprocal relationship between theory and practice. This relationship was expounded in his 1981 paper advising that 'theories are not validated independently and then applied to practice. They are validated through practice.' (Elliott, 1981: 1)

In order to maintain the reciprocation between research and action, between theory and practice, action research, again unlike positivistic research (and, indeed, unlike most other forms of practitioner research) is operationally cyclical, the findings of each cycle informing the planning and carrying out of the next. While Chapter 2 deals with some of the representations of the action research cycle, it is important to note that most are based on the models illustrated by Kemmis and McTaggart (1981) or Elliott (1981, 1991). Their demonstration of the cyclical and reciprocal interaction between research and findings, between action and theory, is perhaps best summed up by Winter who suggests that while 'the possibility of change is grounded in the distinction between action and research, it requires equally an intimate and principled linkage between the two, in order that the "findings" of research can be translatable back into the world of action' (Winter, 1987: 21). Thus, the action researcher is both practical and theoretical in approach. Each aspect of the research depends on and supports the development of the other, providing an almost conversational relationship between them. This rather elegant articulation of what Winter (1987) describes as the essential reciprocity between research and action, between theory and practice, raises important issues about the epistemological and axiological or value-based nature of action research. Its immediate question however, is to the nature and place of theory in research.

Theory in action research

In many if not most approaches to research, even in the field of social sciences, research is something done *on* practice or *applied to* practice.

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There will normally be some degree of distance and detachment between the researcher and the 'subject' of that research (who may be a practitioner in the field), hence allowing a claim to objectivity. There will almost certainly be epistemological distance between the researcher and the practitioner during the research period, and it is likely that the carrying out of their roles and functions depends on differing epistemological stances. These differing roles and stances also suggest distance between the resulting theories and associated changed practices. By this I mean that theories are traditionally devised by a researcher who is part of a research community rather than part of the practitioner community being researched. This research methodology (and 'methodology' is more than just 'method', as we explore in Chapter 2) is likely to have a different epistemology to the practice it researches, and may therefore be distanced in its beliefs and values as well as its intellectual standpoint.

A further feature about this type of research is that it is usually carried out by outside academics or trained researchers and, as such, assumes, or is given, prescriptive authority over existing practice. Such a situation can have the effect of either antagonising or producing unquestioning conformity in practitioners. These are familiar responses in many school communities where teachers feel that their professional knowledge and judgement are undervalued, and their theoretical knowledge insufficient. Additionally, for many teachers and other practitioners, the resulting theory from research of this nature is not quite the match for their own context and specific practice that it might be. It is not uncommon for school improvement officers, on presenting a research-based solution to 'the problem of underachievement/demotivation/behaviour, etc.', to be faced with 'that would be all very well if my school/class . . .'. In dealing with real-world, small-scale concerns, context is everything.

Thus, most research presents an implied hierarchy, suggestive of the dominance of theory over practice. For teachers and other practitioners, this can seem somewhat denigratory of that which they value profoundly. Their own practical knowledge (a form of what Elliott and others would call 'practical philosophy'), shaped and honed by the experience of the practice, and associated thoughtfulness about that practice, is held in high esteem in both their own perception and within their profession.

Action research, in understanding theory as an essential part of practice, and indeed derived from it, seeks to redress this balance and speak to both the needs and the values of practitioners. Drawing heavily on the concept of 'reflective practice', it is also epistemologically aligned to the practice of teachers. Indeed, in attempting to dissolve the distinctions between theory and practice, and with an acknowledged practice-improvement stance, it

can (and, some would argue, should) result in the clarification of the practitioner's own beliefs, values and intellectual standpoint.

Further, in becoming a means through which practitioners can theorise their practice in collaboration with peers, pupils and others, it becomes both a democratic and democratising process, and raises important questions about the nature of knowledge, particularly that which is practice based.

Democracy in action research and the nature of knowledge

A move away from the theory-dominant hierarchy of many other approaches to research to a more democratic process, changes the relationship between theory and practice, and offers opportunities through which to question knowledge of practice, what it means, how it is constructed/derived and what use it is. The almost conversational relationship between theory and practice indicated in action research is suggestive of greater provisionality in our understanding of what counts as knowledge, than more positivistic approaches would imply. We have a deep cultural understanding of the nature of knowledge as 'scientific', based on truths and proofs, characterised, and indeed validated by, concepts of subjectivity, and action research as a way of knowing, presents us with challenges in this respect. Interestingly though, our cultural notion of science and scientific, and our understanding of their definitiveness, are probably based more on perception than actuality. Philosophers and practitioners of science recognise not only the provisionality of scientific knowledge, but that it is necessary for scientists to understand the need for challenge in their work. Popper, writing in the late 1950s, comments that science 'is not a knowledge (episteme): it can never claim to have attained truth, or even a substitute for it' (Popper, 1959: 278). Indeed, searching for a single truth suggests a search for confirmatory evidence (only), and leads to what Popper calls a 'wrong view of science' which 'betrays itself in the craving to be right' (Popper, 1968: 281). Likewise, Kuhn suggests that the interpretations by scientists are always provisional and, indeed, often controversial in nature, and advocates the need for science to 'prepare the way for its own change' (Kuhn, 1970: 65).

This concept of preparing the way for its own change is one which is central to the notion and practice of action research. Returning to Elliott's (1991) definition of action research as a means to improve practice, we can begin to move from a problem-solving, responsive strategy, to one which is problem-posing, or problematising, continually subjecting practice to

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critical inquiry, challenging the 'taken for granted' and consciously seeking alternative perspectives as a means through which to generate the understanding that will bring practical improvements into being.

Problem posing and generating theory

While much research in education is conducted along para-scientific lines in that it uses concepts and values such as proof, replicability, sampling, objectivity and so forth, action research draws upon other strategies and concepts, such as authenticity and truth, individual voice, relatability and so on. These concepts are all discussed in later chapters. Significantly, the centrality of 'T' in action research is key to its nature and its potency. Its situation is right at the heart of practitioners' own practice, and it subjects itself to continued testing and validation through that process. In essence, the research itself becomes part of the practice researched, while the practice becomes a research practice. The relationship is such that reflection is the critical process that allows both action and research their authenticity in retheorising action or practice as research, and research as practice or action. Winter puts it elegantly, saying:

[T]he theoretical necessity of a reflexive conception of research's relation to action, so that their relationship may be theorised in ways which preserves the authenticity of both, i.e. which preserves research's capacity for achieving a critical distance from action, AND preserves action's intelligibility, as a creative, rather than a causally determined response to interpretive meaning. (Winter, 1987: 22)

Action research therefore transforms both the nature and the possibilities of both action and research.

Reflection and action research

It would be remiss to discuss action research, even in a perfunctory manner, without discussing reflective practice. Described by Day (1993: 83) as a 'necessary but not sufficient condition for professional development' he views reflection without some imperative to action, as a process unlikely to lead to change. Recognising the need to become immersed in the (crucially important) messiness and complexity of practice (the 'swampy lowlands'), he also cites Schön (1983) in differentiating between those who do make this choice, and those for whom the choice is 'solid technical competence', concluding that 'It is tempting to suggest that the future for those who wish to contribute to professional development lies in

choosing the lowlands' (Day, 1993: 94). Similarly, while reflection is a necessary starting point for action research, without taking it forward through the full action research cycle the potential for change and improvement is lost. Chapter 2 explores in more detail the nature of reflection in an action research practice and ways in which its quality can be enhanced.

This chapter has provided a very brief overview of some of the conceptual and philosophical underpinnings of action research. It locates this form of practitioner research firmly in both an epistemological and a practice perspective, thus demonstrating its academic provenance and its relevance to practice. Chapter 2 develops these concepts further as you are introduced to models of 'doing' action research.

I have deliberately chosen not to deal with the issue of alternative notions of action research. As you engage in further reading during your studies, you will become aware of some alternative perspectives, in particular, the debate as to whether or not 'educational', 'educative' and 'social science' are interchangeable descriptors of action research. You will also come across 'emancipatory', 'participatory' and 'first and second order' action research, and various other descriptors. There are interesting debates to be had around these, and at one level they are important in your development as someone who 'thinks' action research, but they are also time-consuming, particularly if you are engaged in small-scale studies in education. Zeichner's cautionary note to teachers is apposite here:

[A] lot of this discourse, although highly informative in an academic sense, is essentially irrelevant to many of those who actually engage in action research . . .

There are many different cultures of action research and it seems to me that an awful lot of time and energy is wasted in arguing over who are the 'real' action researchers and who are the imposters . . . (Zeichner, 1993: 200–1)

The next chapter explores some of the pragmatics of undertaking action research, discussing models and approaches, and raises the most fundamental of all questions in relation to action research: 'How do I know that action research is the correct methodology for me?'

Further reading



McNiff, J. and Whitehead, J. (2011) *All You Need to Know about Action Research*. London: Sage.

Like all of the many books by McNiff and Whitehead, this book is highly accessible to a range of readers. Novice action researchers will find its structure

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easy to follow and its personal voice supportive of their own first-person writing. The book is divided into seven sections, each framed with a first-person question such as 'How do I test and critique my knowledge?'

Pine, G. (2009) *Teacher Action Research: Building Knowledge Democracies*. London: Sage.

This is in many ways a 'harder read' than the McNiff and Whitehead text mentioned above. That said, its easy combination of practical and theoretical matters enhances its accessibility. The book will be of particular use to those readers who, having gained an initial insight into action research, wish to further develop their theoretical understanding.

Combining a sound philosophical and epistemological analysis of the conceptual bases of action research, this text also addresses pragmatic and practical matters in a way that is accessible to practitioner researchers. Beginning action researchers will find it both supportive, but with appropriate intellectual challenge. The structure of the book, in making 'Practicing Action Research' the third section (rather than the first, as is the case in many such texts), following discussions of the conceptual underpinning, and the validity of action research, provides a refreshing and useful backdrop to the practice-based issues involved in doing this type of research.



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