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Education Action Research

With and for the Next Generation

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1.1 Action Research Is Not a Method

Action research is transformative social learning with a change agenda. It shapes the world *with* others in a more desired direction. For action researchers in education, the practice/inquiry combination at the heart of the work aims at making a situation such as a classroom or whole school system better by responding to the continuous need for development or change. The stakeholders of the school (i.e. the students and teachers of a classroom or others involved in the uses of a school, including parents, school board members, maintenance and administrative staff – the list is limited only for practical reasons) engage in cycles of inquiry and practice within their systems.

We offer a generic orientation for getting started with action research, referred to as a simple recipe which may look entirely different depending on context. This is followed by examples in order to set a practical foundation for the more abstract discussion that proceeds to for application.

Action Research: A Starter “Recipe”

- 1) Look and listen. Learn about the school you are in by listening for the varied stories that inform the culture. Talk with “leaders” and especially to a diverse variety of students.
- 2) Articulate the action research question with those who have a stake in the matter at hand. What is the purpose of your efforts together? What is the shared goal? What is distinct?
- 3) Develop a stakeholder network map. Who needs to be involved? Who can become involved? Who has influence in the system, given your intentions?
- 4) Design for a participative process that is clear about the degree of participation appropriate along the path from research question to notable results.

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Action Research: A Starter “Recipe” (Continued)

- 5) Consider what facts and evidence are needed and design a process for gathering those. Quantitative (e.g. survey) and qualitative (e.g. interview) data collection methods will help support data gathering.
- 6) Plan to analyze and discuss the data together with stakeholders, taking care that different stakeholders’ perspectives are invited.
- 7) Develop an action plan with those able to make change happen.
- 8) Review and reflect on what you’re learning and how to move forward. Use the quality choice-points (discussed later) as you evaluate your work.

1.2 Examples of Action Research in Education Worldwide

1.2.1 Korean Kindergartens

Professor Nah, a Korean action researcher, examined how young children’s participation can be actualized, and their perspectives respected, through an action research project that engaged them in the development of an outdoor play area in their childcare center (Nah & Lee, 2015). In South Korea, a country known for its Confucian values, the very young children learned to express their points of view directly on issues that mattered to them and found support with this from their teachers. The children were then encouraged to take new initiatives in leading the project so that they experienced themselves as confident learners, developed the ability to communicate and negotiate with other children and adults, showed initiative and enthusiasm, and acquired democratic attitudes and skills. Simultaneously, their teachers got to examine their deep beliefs about who has, and should have, voice, which leads to a deeper inquiry about children’s rights and capacities. In turn, the teachers begin to enact different practices than those they have been conditioned with from birth and through their own education. Maintaining these changes in the pedagogy and management of the classroom was then reinforced as the new changes spread to the entire system of childcare centers in which their experiment had started. We note this case to start as it interweaves the personal, or “first-person,” inquiry/practice of children and teachers. Additionally, we see the interpersonal, or second-person, inquiry/practice in how the project develops emancipatory *relational* re-patterning between teachers and students. Further, we see the more objective or third-person learning in the facts, figures, and stories of the case that result in the spreading of the experiment through their social networks, including the system of peer review. This interweaving of first-, second-, and third-person learning *with* key stakeholders is fundamental in good action research, and there are many ways of going about it.

1.2.2 Transforming a University: Action Research in the Philippines

Professor Ben Teehankee (2017), a Filipino action researcher, led a redesign of the curriculum of his highly-ranked university in the Philippines, bringing action research to help fulfill their espoused mission of social justice. He quickly involved his faculty colleagues and reached out to the administration for support with, in

parallel, the prototyping of new core curriculum. Starting with pilot programs, undergraduate and graduate students began to lead change projects which often acted as capstone integrative learning at the end of courses, such as those in the MBA (Master of Business Administration) program. These programs were adopted university-wide, in turn requiring support and evaluation by faculty, who were invited into a cycle of inquiry on their own practice of what counts as good research. This example suggests how action research is a social learning process from design to continuous collaborative improvement. It is, therefore, naturally contested and political, with a requirement that fellow stakeholders (in this case, other faculty members) are invited along to help shape the action research effort. When operating in ideal circumstances, action researchers get to convene the whole system (bound in a conscious way with key stakeholders) in moving away from conventionally received ways of enacting education into possible ways of engaging learning. In teacher education, we often talk about the teacher as either the “sage on the stage” or the “guide on the side,” but these examples illustrate neither concept. Rather, these models demonstrate something akin to a bird pushing baby birds out of the nest in order to practice flying. In this way, metaphorically, the teacher acts as a mother bird who nudges her fledglings out of the nest. Without this nudge, fledglings will neither learn nor survive. In this same way, the students in Teehankee’s university programs pursue learning by practice within the contextual reality of their own lives (e.g. students undertook change projects in local businesses). Through action research as a social learning process, the university students become engaged in social learning for change in their real-life contexts in ways that allow them to integrate their classroom-based conceptual knowledge in a timely manner with the stakeholders who make up their shared reality. Because what counts as a beneficial outcome and for whom is naturally a negotiated phenomenon, there is emphasis on dialogue and relationship building throughout. Education and change become more interchangeable because, in the process of action research, to change is to educate and to educate is to change.

1.2.3 Transforming a Nation: Achieving Equity Through Curriculum in East Timor

Professor Ernie Stringer (2015), an Australian action researcher, describes leading a redesign effort of the entire national education system of East Timor in its new independence from Australian colonial rule. Understanding that a developing economy – recently emancipated from colonialism – should not be recolonized again by finding exogenous values at the heart of its curriculum, Stringer sought out parents to ensure that culturally relevant values would be placed at the center of new curriculum. Gatherings with parents therefore became opportunities for teachers and administrators to think deeply about the re-patterning of culture they wanted to be part of at school. At its heart, action research is a process of interrupting habitual practice by exploring and inspiring innovative alternatives with others most impacted by the choices being made and actions being taken. As Danielle Zandee (Lifvergren & Zandee, 2017) explains, action research is not about establishing and verifying conventional truths about what currently exists, but instead is about providing for generative conditions that

allow better or more adaptive practices to arise. That is to say, action research is about bringing the world we (i.e. participants or stakeholders in the process) want into being. There is no “one size fits all.”

These three examples demonstrate some of the diversity in context and goals for action research. The projects, though quite different, used the same principles to inform their action research. In each project, key stakeholders were participants involved in the design and ongoing improvement of new practices that evolved via dialogue, action, and reflection; they were not passive observers or research subjects. They were agents with their own perspectives, generating new possibilities as contributors in collaboration with others interested in the same objective. Despite the important differences in emphasis, each project shows that action research is a social learning process, where relationship building among stakeholders is central in bringing the results for the stakeholders – i.e. students, educators, parents, administrators, and policymakers.

1.3 Student Inclusion Is Key

Having established our sense that there is no one way to do action research, in this chapter we choose to emphasize *the inclusion of students* in the social learning process. We do this not because they are always the primary stakeholders in education action research, but because we do not see enough emphasis on the importance of *including kindergarten to graduate students as stakeholders* in other treatments of educational action research. Indeed, we find that *most education and action research texts simply do not address students as participatory stakeholders or the possibility of them becoming engaged*. While we have seen emphasis on improving personal practice as teachers (which we applaud), we have grown concerned that this is now lending itself to treating students as data source objects, either through the collection of their learning products to analyze them or through behavioral observation aimed at simply measuring a teacher’s effectiveness.

We emphasize treating students as subjects *and* agents, encouraging the adoption of an “I–You” rather than an “I–It” relationship (to update Martin Buber’s [1958] well-known terms). This means relating to students – regardless of developmental stage – as persons, and working to include them as partners, participants, stakeholders, and even co-researchers with genuine voices in our *collaborative* work.

Our treatment of action research for educators is one elaboration of the action research that stretches across many professional disciplines. The first author has led efforts to gather a diverse “big tent” of like-hearted action researchers through her work as editor of a series of *Handbooks of Action Research* and the peer-reviewed journal *Action Research*. The second author frames “lifescaping” action research as a collaborative process involving students, parents, teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders interested in bringing about more vibrant school communities that enhance learning power and well-being. The third author works with practicing teachers through university work and in their P-12

classrooms to engage in classroom-based action research. In the remainder of this chapter, we aim to have these complementary perspectives define and illustrate what we consider good action research for the educational community.

1.4 Definition

The idea that learning is social and our lives are socially constructed is generally an accepted one. Yet, this idea has not translated enough to the practice of nurturing relationships that they are sufficiently robust to promote learning as a collection of traits and skills that enables people to engage in diverse learning challenges that are inherent in life (Claxton, 2002). We see the value of Kolb's definition of experiential learning as the transformation of experience through reflection and conceptualization for active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). This leads us to emphasize the importance of learning from experience throughout action research. As the famous butterfly effect (Lorenz, 1972) suggests, changes may start small.

Starting with attention to the conditions that allow for learning well from experience with others is very important. These starting relational conditions are not to be overlooked. We define relational space as "a rich context for aspirational trust and reflective learning across organizational boundaries, which is enabled by, and in turn gives rise to, collaborative projects" (Bradbury-Huang, Lichtenstein, Carrol, & Senge, 2010, p. 5). The development of relational space must lay groundwork that is robust enough for learning and enough to allow for collaborative projects. It is in this space that those involved can test assumptions and move beyond armchair theorizing to address complex challenges of learning as social change.

We find it useful to conceive of action research as placing equal emphasis on three elements: creating genuine relationships, bringing in useful concepts to the dialogue from which those involved can extend together into collaborative experiments, and developing experiments that are used to enrich a next cycle of inquiry for action.

A general, often-cited definition of action research used across professional disciplines reads as follows:

Action research brings together action and reflection, as well as theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern (Bradbury, 2015, p. 1).

How we view and engage others depends on how we have been taught to consider our histories and relational webs. Consider that an action researcher working with first graders would need to first earn the trust of the young students. The students' assessment, and then acceptance and trust, of the researcher may hinge on their perception of how well the researcher listens, how interpersonally adept or how playful the researcher is, etc. The researcher will need also to consider the histories and larger context, ecological and relational, of the

students, their relationships with other adults, experiences with success and failure in learning, etc. Action researchers ask how we can make adjustments and space for our co-researchers, their contexts, and their histories.

Taking seriously that we live in a world of many relationships, among people, cultures, natural influences, etc., we must recognize that meaningful relationships are not instantaneous. It is helpful to consider that significant learning (that results in meaningful change) rarely takes place on the first try. Essential to any relationship is listening deeply in order to understand and enter the world of the other person. We must recognize that relationships and significant change efforts grow over time, and require sustained effort to listen, see, and understand the world and experience of others, as well as the dreams they might have. Sometimes, all of this starts with simple everyday conversations and wondering about the challenges that the other person sees at school. Once the conversations and challenges are explored, even a bit playfully, more engaged inquiry and dialogue can emerge, and possible actions can be considered. Action research can be considered as a path that allows participants and stakeholders to relate to each other, to talk, to dream, to take action, and to track their efforts toward bringing about the school community they want.

Action research is, therefore, a pragmatic co-creation of scientific and practical knowledge *with*, not *on*, those people with a stake in the issues at hand. Action researchers are concerned with issues that require social or fundamental change among multiple stakeholders where systems are at work, and systems-thinking is prominent or required (Bradbury, 2015). As we view it, educational action research does not place undue emphasis on standardized high-stakes tests, but instead fosters an inquiry process concerned with investigating and producing discourse pathways that enhance focus, vital engagement, self-reflectiveness, and sense of being connected with people and issues one cares about in the educational community. This is anchored in relational spaces that enable the interweaving of inquiry and practice in participation with others.

Action research in education can be conducted in a variety of settings and levels within the educational community. Individual classes, grade-level teams, departments, buildings, and districts all offer opportunities for action research and, when viewed ecologically, are all important settings for learning-for-change that comes from engaging in action research. A common starting point, however, is the classroom. Action researchers must recognize the impact of the larger school community on any classroom and that the classroom does not function (or change) in isolation. We must proceed with caution and awareness that both the school community and the classroom have forms of hidden curricula that are not explicit beforehand and are frequently revealed when conducting action research.

As action researchers, we view knowledge as action that is pragmatic, contextually based, and relational. Learning moves away from attempting to pour content into individual brains and toward enhancing reflection on experience and learning with diverse people in varied environments, found in specific and local spaces, where people join together to bring about practical results. Seeing the world as a social construction can be bracing, liberating, and humbling. It is

bracing because we have been conditioned to accept that which is “real” is located outside ourselves, external to our own experience of it, as if knowledge of the world is a mirror of reality (Gergen, 2015). It is liberating because our knowledge creation is actively remaking the human systems around us in that action research offers us the opportunity to engage in “future forming” and “lifescaping” to bring about the world we want to live and learn in (Gergen, 2015; Lewis & Winkelman, 2017). Finally, it is humbling because we are called to actively participate as citizens of our communities, ranging from our smallest group to the entire world, which includes, as Aldo Leopold (1949) put it, the very land to which we belong.

An Illustration: From Telling to Listening in Articulating the Action Research Inquiry

Everyone has a passion for something. Graduate students often have many passions. Jenny knew that bullying was a national problem; she had a passion to stop individuals from bullying less fortunate kids at her assigned school. The first day there, she entered her school assuming that her action research would focus on reducing bullying at her school. She jumped right in, sharing this with her action research supervisor (the second author), her site supervisor, her principal, and fellow teachers. Nothing changed. She talked to the students. Still nothing changed. She met again with her action research supervisor, who asked: “How might you initiate conversations *with* others, including the students, to identify problems *together*?”

Jenny went back in. This time primed more for listening rather than telling, she initiated conversations with her teacher colleagues and students about their different challenges. She heard a lot, only some of which at first seemed related to her own inquiry and concern about bullying. However, as the relational space ripened, Jenny’s conversations with different stakeholders began to deepen. Sharing again her own concern about bullying, she began to see the possibility for a joint inquiry centered on expectations around, of all things, homework. How do bullying and homework connect? Jenny had heard the kids speak of a class period set aside to complete homework as “homework jail.” She had also heard a lot about the pressure the teachers were under to focus on educational achievement rather than personal-social relationships. In Jenny’s more formal assessment and reflection processes, which included separate meetings with students, teachers, and administrators, she was able to convene stakeholders in taking collective steps to better define school-wide policies on homework.

This shared assessment, rising from Jenny’s original inquiry, had become an opportunity to make school a more caring place. While Jenny initially insisted that the issue was bullying, students’ experiences of what was important was “homework jail,” and the teachers felt that the homework jail represented the very antithesis of what they wanted in their school. Together they found an inclusive path for continuous life-giving development.

1.5 Steady Rise in Uptake

Action research is currently growing in importance, especially among educators and the helping professions, as Figure 1.1 suggests.

The increase in published action research over the years sheds light on the increase in participation and engagement with others – and perhaps the need for us as teachers, counselors, administrators, etc. to affect change. We often feel so powerless and on the receiving end of someone else’s vision, someone else’s system or strategy, that may or may not reflect what our students need – doesn’t action research allow *us* to create meaningful change for ourselves and *our* students, based on our classroom/student/contextual needs?

Education professionals working together using components of action research to change our systems or change our classroom, school, or district culture is not new. Collaboration for problem-solving and designing effective intervention takes place every day in schools – in hallways, department meetings, grade-level meetings, professional learning communities, and more. We work together to address problems – asking our colleagues if they see the same issues in their classroom, on the playground, in talking with families – we reflect on our experiences, successes, and failures, and we come up with new approaches and then report back to our team, department, teaching partner, administrator, etc. This “action-reflection-action” cycle is embedded in teacher education programs as preservice teachers learn to become teachers and as practicing teachers work through graduate-level training. Teachers have traditionally reached out, reflected, supposed and suggested, acted, and then repeated those steps across buildings and districts. Innovation and adoption of platforms that connect teachers, not only to the other professionals in their buildings, but to teachers anywhere in the world, advances our potential reach to entirely new levels. Teachers celebrate, lament, and offer assistance to other school professionals, to parents, even to students themselves using social media. Today’s popular social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, offer a taste of what’s possible when educators begin to collectively share insights and wisdom. More than just sharing and commenting, these platforms allow communities to be created regardless of distance.

The turn toward inclusion and participation is a way to (re)establish a renewed sense of engagement, and ownership in our public school systems at classroom, school, and educational policymaking levels. For underrepresented groups, this may mean first recognizing and owning that their education system is supposed to serve them despite their many experiences that might suggest the contrary. Indeed, so dominant is the view that public schools are a form of corporate and military hierarchy that the very people whose children make up a school system see themselves and their children as pawns in an unfolding they did not choose. These parents find themselves alienated and often remove themselves from the system that is not serving their best interests. Sociology helps us understand this alienation, explaining that systems – including education systems – become “reified,” as if they represent the only reality, as opposed to a human choice that might be unchosen.



Figure 1.1 Action research on the rise. *Source:* As shown by Google Ngram.

1.6 Unlearning

Perhaps the biggest requirement for appreciating the action research approach is to bracket, or give up, what you think research processes *should* be. The standards of conventional research supposedly, but never actually, ensure objectivity. Relational intersubjectivity that works with the data of stakeholders' experience turns out to be a better dynamo of change. The conventional "shoulds" are therefore only partially useful when we take seriously that we are co-creating a system. As a consequence, the standard inherited models, though useful for rigor in certain types of methods, are largely useless for *changing* those systems in the direction of where the stakeholders wish to go and therefore cannot offer an overall approach to research that is useful to those who are trying to bring about genuine and sustainable change. This does not mean that action researchers never use such methods. Even implementing action research in the classroom, certain standards of the rigor and rules of conventional research must still be reflected – for instance, when selecting evidence-based practices or strategies to use with children, constructivist approaches to education have a history of/propensity to alienate and disengage students with disabilities. For this reason, we must acknowledge that those "rules of research" inherent in other methods act as a safeguard (whether intentional or not) for certain voiceless groups (e.g. students with disabilities) even as it may silence the voices of teachers, students, and parents through the methods of research as it has traditionally been practiced in educational settings (e.g. outsider watches-intervenes-watches and compares to other groups being watched by outsiders). As action researchers, we naturally engage and must also account for that.

Sometimes we are burdened by simplistic ideas (e.g. the teacher is *either* a sage on the stage *or* a guide on the side). When we stop to think about it, we realize we have been socialized to take these ideas for granted and that they're unhelpful to the degree that they operate out of awareness beyond honest examination. One key unlearning the authors invite is unlearning the "old school" idea that action research, like traditional social science research, should involve a question posed by a teacher whose students become guinea pigs and whose work products and assessment tools (such as surveys) aim at cleanly solving a perceived problem and allowing the research to be replicated. We view this as an old school approach because it hews to a pretense of objectivity, mirroring reality, or seeking to replicate/demonstrate conventional social science standards that were designed for large-scale experiments and not teacher–student environments. The current uptake of action research at this time may be read as a constructive response to our feeling of being increasingly burdened by systems designed by others in the past. Now, in a more diverse and inclusive time than we have ever experienced as humans, our research must address, promote, encourage, and require engaging with what is true to the stakeholders' experiences.

Action research is an invitation to look, listen, and take action with others in multiple ways. There is a welcoming of diverse ways of knowing, which means we must take time to try to understand and come to agreements about action to be taken – understanding shifts from school to school, and even class to class, just as it does from student to student. Conversations, understandings, and agreed-upon actions shift according to context; what we can do working with an individual is more flexible than with a classroom, and a classroom is more flexible than school-wide action.

Practice Example: Moving from Teacher-Centric to Teacher-and-Student-Centric Action Research

Context. Leadership in an independent school decides to bring more attention to experiential learning and with it, as a supportive process, decides to bring more of a shared understanding of what the action research orientation might mean for all faculty. A school-wide Action Research for Experiential Learning (AREL) team is convened by the school principal. She invites those who have already some interest in and understanding of action research and invites them to learn together about what this might look like in their own classrooms. Participating teachers who join the AREL team are paid for some of their time with the hope that they may even help proliferate some best practices beyond their first experiments.

In the first official meeting of AREL, the team articulated their overarching inquiry (“how to bring experiential learning deeper into our school”) and set as a goal to elaborate some new experiments with their students in their respective classrooms. The first author was then invited to be an action research coach.

Initial design. The focus was on articulating a shared need that is both aligned with the larger goal of deepening school-wide embrace of experiential learning and meaningful for the classroom students.

The inquiry, namely to bring experiential learning deeper into the school, appeared too abstract to engage students immediately. After listening to the teachers, the action research coach suggested that each project might best start with a need articulated by the teacher first – an inquiry located in something concrete, discovered in reflection on daily experience in the classroom – then, as soon as possible, to bring the inquiry to students as co-stakeholders. Within a few weeks, AREL had organized into three projects, each with a lead teacher from a different school-wide program: science, modern languages, and contemporary social issues.

Experimenting in the science program. The Action Research Inquiry: How to have our students move from performance mode to learning mode using the assessment process to support that move.

The science teacher had recently adopted a competency model and decided the key need was to decide how the assessment – co-designed with a science teacher colleague – would be presented. Their efforts at first appeared *technical* in nature, with a key question being which technology to use (e.g. Google Classrooms) so their students could have greater degrees of freedom to show their competency. Once the technical problem was solved, attention moved to the juicier issue of assessment itself. For the largely math-based program with an unexamined tradition of seeing answers as either right or wrong, assessment might require “unlearning.” The students perked up.

Experimenting in the contemporary social issues program. The lead teacher, having read widely, decided that a key focus and likely powerful leverage point for transformative learning was to make more conscious use of the physical classroom space. He set about designating different parts of the space to encourage students to “sit in” different parts dedicated to the quadrants of the experiential learning cycle (as described by Kolb’s experiential learning theory [1984]). Thus, when working with a topic, students might sit in the space designated for reflection (with cushions on the floor!), and then move to the space for experimentation where there were computers for researching good ideas.

(Continued)

Practice Example: Moving from Teacher-Centric to Teacher-and-Student-Centric Action Research (Continued)

Experimenting in the modern languages program. A Korean language teacher, resonating with the case of Nah and Lee, started the inquiry about how to turn the classroom over more to his students, beyond what he described as his “Confucian control.” He took a big step by asking the students what they *felt* enthusiastic about, what they *wanted* to do. Given the students’ previous Korean Holiday cooking module, the students enthusiastically decided they wanted to not just talk about cooking but actually cook together. They got quite excited.

Each team was encouraged to start their work and seek coaching in enriching the design when they felt ready for input. As noted above, unlearning is a key issue. Many of the teachers involved had been exposed to older understandings of action research in their own teacher training and each therefore delayed engaging their stakeholders; they appreciated the nudge to engage students sooner. As their projects slowly got underway, coaching then focused on the inclusion of students and other key stakeholders in support of the social aspects of learning for change. AREL came together again at the end of semester to reflect on what they had accomplished so far and to determine next steps.

Design phase II. Let’s bring the students in as partners in the inquiry! Some key new practices had imperceptibly arisen on AREL. As all coaching started with a “check in” (associated with Kurt Lewin, a founding voice in action research) based on concrete experience and some reminder of the original motivation for the research question, the teachers’ own level of enthusiasm began to rise. In all cases, we heard an easing of the original stress about “doing it right” which had combined with a concern about measurement. Team members began to take their own experience seriously, reflecting on what was important to nurture (namely students’ enthusiasm) and how to bring this experience into cycles of reflection and action. There was agreement that the coaching could proceed by bracketing, for a time at least, the conventional question of “how to get data” in order to allow the inquiries to unfurl in practice. The teachers were assured that naturally a point would emerge with clarity about the kind of evidence needed to anchor the claims they’d wish to share with others beyond their experiments.

Deepening the collaboration with students in the science program. Above and beyond the technical aspects, the teacher began to emphasize the “social learning” aspects. Key to this was listening deeply to his own aspiration and deeper motivation: namely, to have his students become articulate (evidence: ability to teach others) about the scientific principles they were each learning, and to do so with as much artistry as they wished to bring, which invited a creative format. The coaching emphasized giving space to the inquiry *with* the student and encouraging students to tell the story of their journey to understand scientific reasoning. Perhaps most important was an invitation to consider what he would be most proud of if this project could be successful. To this he replied: “students would be able to share their stories of transforming the all too common science and math phobias.”

Deepening the collaboration with students in the contemporary social issues program. Agreeing that the changes in space had been greeted positively by the students,

the teacher focused on “data collection.” The coaching was therefore about bringing more of a learning orientation *with* the students, inviting them to inquire in what ways the space changes were making a difference and seeking evidence of this difference in a kind of “before and after” intervention.

Deepening the collaboration with students in the modern languages program. Agreeing that having student enthusiasm was an excellent start, the teacher began to see there might be a middle path in the inquiry. There was a spectrum of Confucian control to laissez-faire, and the teacher could be more intentional with his choices. He had grown concerned that the students’ enthusiasm, thought high, was not sufficiently balanced by learning useful vocabulary (the students lapsed into English when confronted with kitchen utensils and cooking procedures for which they did not have Korean words). The teacher realized that he had constructed an interim identity as fire marshal (making sure no one set themselves on fire) but had too much given up the role of expert teacher. His inquiry was, therefore, how to better frame the cooking classes with learning goals, and then intervene (lightly) in the lapses into English. Moreover, it seemed appropriate to complete the cooking experiences with debriefing. Coaching highlighted how much was being accomplished in terms of experiential learning.

Word of the projects and student enthusiasm spread. As the entire school wished to take on proliferating these early projects, the AREL team saw that they could each tell their stories and findings of engaging students. In doing this they decided not to rely solely on writing up papers, although making presentations at teaching conferences was key. In understanding that sharing *evidence* would be useful, they considered themselves also as change makers, asking where the next circle of influence with their project could be found. In all cases there is attention on considering the audience who receives the evidence and, where possible, on inclusion of these too as stakeholders in supporting the adoption of changes that the findings point to. Because different audiences (teacher colleagues, students, parents, other schools) are compelled by different types of evidence, survey, photo, and arts-based methods are all treated as potentially useful at different times.

Action research is not a neutral affair, either ethically or politically. It is important to know your professional code of ethics and your license or credentialing code of professional conduct. For many, our official professional guidelines already promote social justice. Recognizing and building on this helps anchor our efforts. The political may need in turn to be anchored in our personal values. Can we be actively aware of our solidarity with the poor, such as advocating for free lunches, accessible medical care, and other basics for kids at our schools? Can we embrace the notion of diversity as a resource that serves us all? And, if you are of White/European ancestry, can you recognize your privilege and actively work to create welcoming spaces for persons of color, whether colleagues or students? Do we see our students having some connection to the natural environment? Can you see yourself not only as being a citizen of your country, but part of an international community of nations? Let us choose wisely when to be a detractor, an observer, a participant, or a contributor to community. The key principle in all these interlocking questions is about how to successfully engage true participation of multiple

stakeholders in the process of producing actionable knowledge. For this we must be aware that our results depend on the quality of our intersubjective inquiry processes. Can we make a difference? Yes! Can our systems become sustainable? Yes. It is good to see more of this work emerging.

1.7 Thinking About Practice

There are many ways to do action research. Action research is perhaps best known for its innovative second-person group practices, which are generated by a broad repertoire of methods at personal/interpersonal and collective levels. In comparison to conventional social scientists, action researchers use data generation and assessment efforts as opportunities for experiments in developing and prototyping sustainable futures. Its efficacy is evaluated by the knowledge and capacity developed (both academically and with stakeholders, this making it more valid) and the impact on the focal issue. Concern for contributing to a larger body of knowledge includes critical reflection on assumptions and practices that hold our current systems in place.

For those with conventional training in social research methods, there is an invitation to repurpose those methods, interviews, focus groups, etc. by bringing an attitude for inclusion and a little innovation. Looking critically and listening to stories are vital, and reflexivity is key for enriching how we see the world, too. This means that interviews and conversations become a suitable way to gain an in-depth understanding of the personal experiences and feelings, and the meaning endowed to these experiences.

Structured interviews engage people with open questions. In these interviews, the researcher is mainly listening, and probing can be generative for the interviewee. Structured questions can also be guided by a positive attitude that seeks to explore the strengths at the core of the school or classroom. This approach to inquiry cultivates an appreciative eye and helps those being interviewed to notice what is best and most positive in the current moment. Inquiry is not only a way to gain insight into the experiences of the people involved but can also enhance the personal understanding of the person being interviewed. Focus groups can be opportunities for consciousness-raising, for opening a space in which not just rationalistic discourse is allowed. There is a reckoning with the demands of knowledge democracy in which we confront epistemic injustice which has pushed away all but an intellectual elite from inquiry processes that design our society (Openjuru, Jaitli, Tandon, & Hall, 2015). Rather than naming all the practices of action research, we highlight a useful and transformative pathway developed within and for the school context.

1.8 An Integrative Practice: Lifescaping

Lewis and Winkelman (2017) offer “Lifescaping is world forming in action. We can take an active role in creatively shaping the world in the social and biological systems where we live” (p. 16). Lifescaping is cultivating a lifegiving core, and not discovering something new or mirroring what is.

Consider that the word “discovery” was unknown before early European exploration where the term was invented to address the anxiety of finding geography and concepts beyond the maps and “solid” and known world defined by the Greeks and Romans. “Discovery” shifted the terror and anxiety about stumbling upon unknown lands and unthought of ways of seeing reality. “Discovery” meant conquering the world. Hence, geographic and scientific discovery were linked linguistically in describing and colonizing the new and unknown (Wootton, 2015). Discovering the new world is linked to a colonizing mindset that displaces and minimizes what was there before, even the wisdom that was there. Discovering something new in science might be best described as offering the best current description of an evolving construct. That is, this current description or way of doing things is what works best right now, but it might change. Lifescaping emphasizes cultivating the living place and relationships where one is; it is not about colonizing but working with the wisdom of place, people, and context in ways that nurture and transform a life-giving core to both liberate and ground learning power and well-being.

Lifescaping’s four-phase participatory inquiry process (PIP) is designed to slow down action researcher-change agents at beginning research to deeply understand community ecosystems and build relationships. To do this while moving forward in the four phases, researchers are oriented to loop back if necessary to understand and build upon relationships, deepen dialogue, and invite the greatest possible inclusion and participation. First, the action researcher connects with the school community by *initiating conversations and identifying challenges*. Second, as trust and relationships deepen, the action researcher invites *engaged inquiry* in ways that explore possible actions to be taken toward bringing about an agreed-upon goal directed toward a desired future. Third, *collaborative action* with others is taken, recognizing the need for possible adjustments in response to the community. Fourth, those involved with the action invite *community assessment and reflection* so that the action can be considered collectively, revised, improved, and continued as an evolving developmental process.

Although all action research could be considered as lifescaping, the lifescaping action research defined by Lewis and Winkleman (2017) offers a PIP and an appreciative inquiry (AI) pathway. Both PIP and AI are designed to bring about greater learning power and well-being for students, teachers, counselors, administrators, parents, and other stakeholders in the school community. Both PIP and AI bring forth student and other frequently silenced voices. Ways of inviting participation and voice range from appealing to students to be members of focus groups to encouraging students to be part of youth participatory action research (YPAR) teams, where students become co-action researchers with teachers, counselors, and others.

Learning power and well-being are core constructs in lifescaping. Rooted in the research and practice of Claxton (1999, 2002), learning power focuses upon engaging students in meaningful activities that enhance resilience, resourcefulness, reflectiveness, and reciprocity. Framed by Lewis and Winkelman (2017), “learning power is an active belief and process focused on vital engagement and doing things that are meaningful to learners” (p. 15). Lifescaping frames student well-being as significantly influenced by the school’s eco-relational context and the connections students have in their school community with fellow students,

teachers, counselors, parents, other school stakeholders, as well as the physical environment where the school exists. Students exist in a living and evolving context where they can be gardeners. As gardeners, students are invited to lifescape a more desirable world in a local and specific place – their school. Students are also oriented to the reality that, like landscaping and gardening, lifescaping is a continuous and never-ending process of being actively engaged with others in bringing about the beauty they want to see come to life.

1.9 Situating Lifescaping in Graduate Education: An Example

Like most graduate programs, action research at California State University, East Bay, is limited to a single, yearlong effort to meet a capstone, thesis, grade, or graduation requirement. The bureaucratic structure inherent in educational programs, requirements, the world students bring with them, and other factors point to some limitations. For instance, the longitudinal impact and potential action research generated by a university can be diminished by a number of factors:

- 1) *Graduate students.* The desire to please the professor or fear about grades or getting it “right” remain part of graduate students’ conditioning. Even after lectures regarding social justice, advocacy, etc., some graduate students in education, despite recognizing their lack of power in the P-12 school where they are placed, are reluctant to assert themselves for fear of getting in trouble with supervisors. Cohorts divide into groups who see action research as an assignment and necessity to get a grade in a required course, and those who see action research as a transformative way of being a professional. Others fall somewhere in between.
- 2) *On-site supervision.* There is the promise of linking projects to each other over time. It may take years for site supervisors to see the potential in building upon the action research graduate students are doing. Excuses offered are often diverse, but usually such site supervisors say they are too busy to do anything but provide supervision and merely support graduate students conducting the research. Ironically, this is even after the site supervisor participates in helping the graduate student define a lifescaping project that can be accomplished during their yearlong placement at the site supervisor’s school.
- 3) *The site.* Some sites where graduate students are placed are facing the ongoing impact of poverty, racism, violence, and systemic educational dysfunction. Strong graduate students are placed in such settings to provide hope to the site supervisors, be allies to kids, and develop creative action research projects that address an immediate need.

In addressing these and other challenges inherent in bureaucratic organizations (see Graeber, 2015), a group of colleagues in Educational Psychology and Educational Leadership at California State University, East Bay, founded the Lifescaping Project in conjunction with the Taos Institute (<http://www.taosinstitute.org>).

taosinstitute.net/lifescaping-practices-in-schools). The Lifescaping Project is a performative and results-based direct-action advocacy endeavor designed to help education professionals bring about the world they want to build with others. Founded to help share the action research and AI efforts of graduate students, professionals-in-training, and working professionals in public schools in the San Francisco East Bay Area, the Lifescaping Project is grounded in the hope that having actual action research (warts and all) available to graduate students, site supervisors, and school communities will provide resources and models of practice that are concrete, specific, and exist in varied contexts. Knowing the limitations and possibilities enables graduate students to make choices about the type of professional they want to become, how they want to engage in the schools where they are, and how they want to foster their own learning power and well-being as professionals.

1.10 The Challenge of Doing Relevant Social Science: Action Research that Integrates Objectivity with (Inter-) Subjectivity

Lifescaping is an orientation to action research guided by a PIP designed as an effort to transform schools into places where children, professionals, and community members want to be. Lewis and Winkelman (2017) do not pretend researchers are on the outside looking in – the research is relational, participatory, and engaged. Researchers are oriented to reviewing, reflecting on, and looking critically at more traditional research that purports to be objective and controlled. Still, it is vital to know how to read and understand the research coming from varied traditions. We recognize our subjectivity creates blind spots, but encouraging critical inquiry and dialogue disrupts any drift toward solipsism. The participatory and dialogical nature of the endeavor presupposes intersubjectivity in the process; simply emphasizing seeing, hearing, and feeling *with* and *as others* in the school opens one up to noticing the world from differing perspectives.

1.11 Groundings

“Groundings” refer to efforts to articulate the multi-faceted worldviews that give rise to our work as action researchers. Articulating our worldview is an act of finding ground under our feet (hence, “groundings”), whereby we come to know both *what* we know and *that* we know, and that *we can take action based on what we know*. We emphasize three grounding concepts:

- 1) *Emancipatory experiential learning*. Attributable to Paolo Freire’s (1972) concerns with emancipating those who suffer the oppression of conventional pedagogical methods, we want to invite experience into action research, moving beyond an image of research that is at a distance from real concerns. Learning is grounded necessarily in (inter)personal experience, and it cannot be grounded solely or primarily in abstract concepts. Experience provides the

ground for reflection, which in turn creates space for new concepts that are tested for their value in active experimentation. When learning processes are done well, as they need to be in participative research, we often experience delightful surprise, unforeseen success where the costs of upholding the current centralized systems can be redeployed to a local stakeholder-centric model of emergent learning and coordinated action. This model of “researching *with*” is perhaps what people have always done for themselves before inquiry became the sole property of an objectivist ivory tower and corporate structure which both consumed and monetized experts’ knowledge as both real and singular.

- 2) *The relational construction of learning.* Teaching and learning are socially framed and determined (Dragonas, Gergen, McNamee, & Tseliou, 2015). Knowledge claims issue from particular groups, ranging from diverse scientific communities with varied specific methodologies to folks in the flat earth society, at particular times in history and in unique eco-relational contexts. Given the range of possibilities, social constructionists wonder how and what any particular curriculum enables students to accomplish in the world. Genuine skills are taught in apprenticeships by observing and working with mentor or master craftspeople. Individual minds and learning are always in relation to someone or something to some end.
- 3) *Extending epistemology: interweaving first, second, and third practice/inquiry.* At its essence, action research is about engaging groups of people to co-create meaningful change in the world. Starting in conversations, action can be coordinated. Yet, to bring about change, we know we need more than statistics and facts; we also need to inspire the heart. As action researchers concerned with today’s complex global challenges, we are learning that we need to tap into a variety of practices to successfully bring about change.

From the opening examples, we have emphasized the importance of interweaving and integrating first-, second-, and third-person practice/inquiry. Attending to first person, which refers to our personal reflexive subjective heart/mind, in our work has particularly resonated a lot with a new generation of action researchers. We might say that good action research resides in the quality of the “first person’s” ability to know biases and work with shadow elements of consciousness to help shift self and system toward a more emancipated community consciousness. Our work in second-person intersectional spaces is now called to larger scale and scope. Social contagion processes that move our experiments through ever-widening, eco-relational social networks lead to third-person proliferation.

We must nonetheless allow that when most people think about research, they normally default to methods such as surveys, interviews, and focus groups – so conditioned are we by conventions. Therefore, the growing momentum among action researchers who recognize creative or arts-based methods as essential to our human survival and who are turning to such methods to support their change objectives is itself a transformative moment for us all as learners. Creative and arts-based methods in action research processes can offer a range of possibilities for promoting embodied sensory experiences, building empathy with multiple audiences, and opening new ways of seeing, being, doing, and knowing (Etmanski & Bishop, 2017).

1.12 Quality Choice Points in Education Action Research: Integrating Objective, Intersubjective, and Subjective Perspectives

- 1) *Quality requires articulation of objectives:* We ask to what extent the action research (AR) explicitly addresses its objectives. These objectives might not be known at the start of the AR process, but it is vital that they emerge. In her lifescaping AR, Toy (2017) offers an example where the principal of her school wanted her to investigate how effectively the teachers were implementing the school's Second Step program as her AR project. Toy (2017) agreed but reshaped the objective to examine what social emotional learning (SEL) programs the teachers were using and what programs the students were responding to best. In her lifescaping process, Toy (successfully) reframed the objectives to find out what worked effectively to promote SEL in her school, allying herself with teachers and students to find out what worked best.
- 2) *Quality requires partnership and participation:* We might ask to what extent and by which means the AR reflects or enacts participative values and concern for the relational component of research. By "the extent of participation," we are referring to a continuum from consultation with stakeholders to stakeholders as full co-researchers. Toy's (2017) example also illustrates the importance of partnership and participation. She was invited to objectify and evaluate teachers, but she shifted to engaging teachers as partners in sharing what worked with their SEL programs and students as partners who could share something about their own experience of what SEL approach worked best for them.
- 3) *Quality requires contribution to action research theory-practice:* We might ask to what extent the AR builds on (creates explicit links with) or contributes to a wider body of practice knowledge and/or theory, or to what extent it contributes to the AR literature. Again, Toy (2017) conducts a traditional review of the literature, reflects on the theory guiding her work, and is invited to publish her work so that others can learn from her successes and challenges.
- 4) *Quality requires appropriate methods and process:* We might ask to what extent the AR process and related methods are clearly articulated and illustrated. By "illustrated," we mean that empirical papers "show" and not just "tell" about process and outcomes by including analysis of data that includes the voices of participants. Again, Toy (2017) shares how she was informed by lifescaping AR, integrating both PIP and AI into her AR.
- 5) *Quality requires actionability:* We might ask to what to what extent the AR provides new ideas that guide action in response to need. Toy's (2017) AR led to significant conversations about "where do we go from here?" regarding the school's Second Step and SEL program. Her action led to further action that included respecting the best practices of the teachers' SEL activities and the students' insights about what they liked.
- 6) *Quality requires reflexivity:* We might ask to what extent self-location as a change agent is acknowledged. By "self-location," we mean that authors take a personal, involved, and self-critical stance as reflected in clarity about their

role in the AR process, clarity about the context in which the research takes place, and clarity about what led to their involvement in this research. As a professional-in-training, Toy (2017) recognized her eco-relational location at her school, within her profession in the moment, and where she would guide her development.

- 7) *Quality requires significance:* We might ask to what extent the insights of the AR are significant in content and process. By “significant,” we mean having meaning and relevance beyond their immediate context in support of the flourishing of persons, communities, and the wider ecology. Again, with Toy (2017), her lifescaping AR at her school changed the school climate and practice. It had significance for her as a professional-in-training, for her school administrator, for the teachers who worked with her, for the students, and for the entire school community’s program.

1.13 Conclusion

Action research is not for the passive, the faint of heart, those who want to sustain the status quo, or those who want to simply get by in life. Educational AR is a call to dream with other educators about possibilities for bringing a new world into being, but not a new world at-large – a new world in a small group, a classroom, a certain grade level, a school, or a district. Lifescaping AR is a call and challenge for educators to work from and tap into the life-giving core of the community where they find themselves. That is to say, like all meaningful AR approaches, it is a call to change our local and specific school community with others in ways that we all dream is possible. Such efforts do not change everything at once. Like landscaping, lifescaping AR takes time. We begin by listening, and then listening some more. We look at what is working and where the challenges are, and then look some more. We have conversations about what we hear and see. We engage in dialogues about what could be and invite inquiry with others into concrete goals and objectives. We take action. We assess and reflect upon the action. We improve things. We try over or move to a new dream. We focus on the learning and well-being of students and adults. We recognize challenges and significant differences, contentious obstacles, and ways to align and move, or simply muddle toward an agreed-upon goal. We keep the dialogue moving. We keep our school community alive with learning. We look for what works. We share new ideas and keep our schools, and ourselves, alive and vibrant.

Educating conventionally, as we have done for over a millennium in what Freire calls the “banking model,” will not solve intractable, wicked, complex problems. We must innovate and join with others to cultivate transformative change toward our desired goals. Action research helps with this because it arises from a learning model that encourages inclusion and transformation. We are not arguing that being an “obedient” conventional researcher is bad, just that it means largely remaining passive as we await somebody else to invent the new “best practices” that our changing social contexts require.

To the degree that we work with unexamined practices, we are less able to prepare students for the world around us. Because the times, overshadowed by

runaway unsustainability, now require something different, in our chapter we emphasized the value of educator collaborations, both with each other and with their students, as a transformative approach. We do this to better link efforts in education to our ability as a species to sustain our planet. An action researching school is, by definition, more connected up with its stakeholders and environment. Action research liberates learning from a consolation of facts to taking our own experience seriously. As the “power over” model of education enables authoritarianism and leads toward an ever-deeper inequality, AR provides an alternative. Our very appreciation of the many truly good things in the present educational system suggests how key educators and students are in the transformation. We hope our work is received as a nudge toward experimenting with the spirit of AR.

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