

IS ACTION RESEARCH COMING OF AGE? – THE VALUE OF A HISTORY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT IN PROFESSIONAL TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

M Noor Davids

Cape Peninsula University of Technology

Mowbray campus

davidsno@cput.ac.za

Abstract

The new B.Ed curriculum at the University of Kwazulu-Natal proposes the inclusion of a compulsory action research module to provide professional skills that teachers are expected to demonstrate. The Norms and Standards Policy for Educators requires teachers to be transformative. An appropriate educational component would therefore be required to fulfil this need. By acknowledging the potential that action research offers a transformational teaching model, this paper deals with a pedagogical journey from a product-oriented to a process-oriented teacher. Action research does not necessarily change the teacher but it sensitises the teacher to alternative, more democratic practices and a critically reflective disposition. In this paper a method of “self-reflexive historiography” is used that involves reflecting retrospectively on professional development and identifying valuable lessons for the present. The context of the transformational experiences was an action research history teaching project conducted for a M.Ed degree (Davids, 1991). The research question that informs this article is: what are some of the lasting influences of an action research project on a teacher’s pedagogical compartment and what lessons were learnt that are relevant to teacher education today? Based on this case study, recommendations are made for the use of action research as pedagogy for professional practice in teacher education and in-service teacher initiatives.

Keywords: Norms and Standards; Action research; Transformational teaching; Professional development; Critical thinking; Teachers; Education.

Introduction

Action research has recently been included as a research module in the new B.Ed curriculum at the University of Kwazulu-Natal. Before enrolling for the M.Ed action research degree, I was in possession of a postgraduate professional

qualification which gave me confidence as an academically qualified and professionally competent teacher.¹ However, after the completion of the action research Masters degree at the University of the Western Cape, I gained a different sense of myself and a different philosophy of teaching. In light of the current educational crisis, of which the lack of appropriate teacher education and professional development is of grave concern, it may be appropriate to reflect on what is lasting and worthwhile about action research knowledge and experiences in past practice. Wood (2014:660) asserts that an action research paradigm may offer suitable ways to navigate new educational pathways suited for improving and sustaining social life in the 21st century. Given that action research is often presented as an emerging model for professional development, the question arises: what are some of the lasting influences of an action research project on pedagogical comportment and what lessons were learnt that are relevant for teacher education today?

When the democratically elected government came to power in 1994, it inherited a complex education system. Nineteen departments of education catered for different provinces, homelands and population groups structured under a single education department (Msibi & Mnchunu, 2013:23). The second significant step for the new government was the announcement of Curriculum 2005 (C2005) in 1997 and implemented in 1998. This was the post-apartheid government's educational plan to transform the apartheid-formulated education policy (Harley and Wedekind, 2004:195). Outcomes-based education (OBE) was intended to replace Christian National Education (CNE) – a symbolic break from the past. It set out to promote a democratic and egalitarian philosophy of education (National center for curriculum research and development 2000). However, this notion of OBE as a paradigm shift has been disputed by some and supported by others. Given the parameters of the National Qualification Framework (NQF), the implications for what is taught, how it is taught and how learning is assessed would arguably change the hierarchical structure of schooling. On the contrary others see little or no change and insist that “this is how we have been teaching all along and that C2005 does not have the depth and magnitude to be considered a paradigm shift” (Arjun, 1998: 20). This notwithstanding, the critique “Why OBE will fail” (Jansen, 1997) was devastating and undermined the pedagogical integrity of the new curriculum which subsequently underwent revisions in 2000 and resulted in educational reforms. The most recent of these has been launched

1 The normal entrance to an education Masters' degree was a B.Ed (postgraduate) or a honours. I completed my postgraduate teaching qualification and the B.Ed at the University of Cape Town after the completion of a honours degree at the University of the Western Cape.

in 2011 – Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS).

Teachers often stand accused of neglecting their professional responsibilities as stipulated in the Norms and Standard policy of the Department of Basic Education (Department of Education, 2011:52). Viewing teaching as a profession, I adopt Talburt and Mclaughlin's (1994) understanding of the profession as being identified with specialized knowledge, shared and standard practices, a service ethic, a strong personal identity, some formal controlling authority and accountability. The focus in this paper is my experience in a history teaching action research project that had lasting effects on my pedagogical philosophy and practice. While agreeing that the present educational sector is inundated with complaints of unprofessional teacher behavior (Msibi & Mchunu, 2013:25-28), the focus of this article is on personal transformation as a professional practitioner – the path from a traditional, to a more engaging and learner-centered educator. More specifically, what needs to be related is the realization of inadequate teacher training² and how certain fundamental shifts in teaching philosophy in the context of an action research can happen. Initially, my teaching pedagogy was mainly teacher-centered. But, through deeper understanding in the context of action research, my own practice was challenged. The realization of a need to change grew slowly. Teacher education is, however, still grappling with the problem of shifting theory and practice towards learner-centered pedagogies. Without offering any ready-made solution, my experiences may retrospectively provide valuable pedagogical lessons worth sharing with others. This paper argues that action research provides a suitable pedagogical framework for professional practice to enact the Norms and Standards Policy requirements during teacher education programmes. Core aspects in the Norms and Standards Policy are highlighted.

Current teacher education programmes are still struggling to make a successful transition from teacher-centered to learner-centered pedagogy. An analysis of final-year History Method students' "philosophy of teaching statements" Wassermann (2009:86) asserts that students failed to relate to the schooling system because their statements were focused mainly on an uncritical acceptance and preoccupation with learner-centeredness as a teaching strategy. Ideological and theoretical issues were largely left unexplored. "Learner-centeredness was adopted as an act of "performativity" rather than engaging meaningfully with the context of education. The

² The author completed the teacher training (Higher Education Diploma and a post-graduate B.Ed) at the University of Cape Town.

concept “performativity” is based on Ball’s notion that performance works in a disciplinary system of judgments, classifications and targets to which teachers and schools must strive and through which they are evaluated...” (Ball, 1998:190). In his analysis of data on learner performance in numeracy and literacy, Spaul (2012:125) comes to the conclusion that most schools in poor areas in South Africa are dysfunctional and unable to equip students with the necessary numeracy and literacy skills they should be acquiring at school. Responding to the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), Msibi and Mchunu (2013) claim that the policy fails to account for the lack of teacher professionalism. The policy has its roots largely in the historical apartheid construction of teachers as conveyors of knowledge rather than active agents towards self-discovery.

Drawing on pedagogical experiences as a learner and teacher under the apartheid system of education, a “self-reflexive historiographical” approach is used here to explain personal transformational experiences from a product-oriented to an emancipated, process-oriented teacher. A self-reflexive historiography traces conditions and processes through which subjects have become professionals trained within disciplinary orthodoxies and conventions of power and knowledge (Coloma, 2011). Emancipation from those historical conditions needs a self-reflexive pedagogy to subject experiences to critical examination.

Following this introduction as background, the article unfolds as follows: theoretical framework, a brief statement on action research methodology, locating the study in action research literature, reflections on two action research projects in a history classroom, critical reflections on the projects. In conclusion, a case is made for an action research approach in teacher education with some recommendations for professional teacher education.

Theoretical framework

Self-reflexive historiography is based on Foucault’s notion of self-articulation as an expression of knowledge and power within a disciplinary context (Coloma, 2011:192). Educational discourses are social constructions of knowledge articulated as a result of an expression of power. Self-reflexive historiography emerges from different levels of discursive practice that may influence the discourse in a myriad of ways. Discourse is never fixed and stable: it changes with the shifting of subject positioning. Wetherell (1998:

387) views discourse as an expression of a multiple concept of self which is key to understanding that teachers as human subjects have transformatory capabilities.

Foucault's method of self-reflexivity allows for the author's subjectivities and context as sources of narrative construction. The focus of this paper is a pedagogical journey as a transmission-trained, product-oriented teacher to an emancipated, process-oriented, questioning educator. The central role of classroom practice in the context of educational and social transformation is an integral part of an ongoing process of building a democratic, egalitarian society.

South African teacher education is still facing the challenges of educating its teacher corps for democratic practice. Teachers are part of the broader society that needs to move away from social determinacy to a transformative mode of thinking. Teachers cannot ignore the important relations between theory and practice and the need to consciously engage them. Action research allows for theory and practice to evolve into "personal theories" (Whitehead 1989:43 in Wood, 2014:667). Walker (1990:57) argues for action research as a viable form of inquiry that leads to educational improvement:

Since every lesson might be regarded as something of a joint experiment founded on certain hypotheses between teacher and pupil, Simon suggests that a form of research is needed "which seeks directly to penetrate into, illuminate, and so improve the process of education".

During practical involvement in an action research project, action research resolved many theoretical and contradictory practices in my own practice. A definition of action research as explained by Carr and Kemmis (1986:162) is:

Simply a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practice, their understanding of these practices and the situations in which the practices are carried out.

The theoretical framework used to construct understanding of an action research project employs self-reflexivity drawn from past experience. This framework recognizes the changing nature of power relations in the process of discourse formation and social interaction. Given the historical past and inequalities of the South African educational system, this inquiry is informed by a disposition that seeks to promote social justice for all.

The methodology of action research

Action research is self-reflective and cyclic. Action research has at least three different methodological approaches to knowledge production. According to Kemmis and McTaggard (1988:5) action research is participatory and involves a spiral of self-reflective cycles such as: planning for change, acting, implementing and observing, reflecting on these processes, acting, implementing, observing, and reflecting and so on. Kemmis and McTaggard (1988) suggest that these stages may not be as neat and rounded as described. In practice, the process is often more fluid, open and unpredictable. Reflective thinking is a multi-layered process that occurs throughout the action research cycle (Webb & Scoular, 2011:469).

By emphasizing concepts such as justice and rationality (Carr & Kemmis 1986), this model of action research can be considered to be of a critical philosophical nature following Brain Fay (1975:79) who distinguishes between three approaches to social science. This leads to three methodologies: the positivist approach which creates a “policy science” (Fay 1975:49); secondly is the interpretative which, Fay (1975:79) believes aims at uncovering the “meaning” of social action as manifested in social relations and the critical approach which aims at eliminating frustrations experienced by members. These methodologies are based on Jurgen Habermas’ theory (1972) of constitutive interests of knowledge: technical, practical and emancipatory.

Action research in this critical mode would be most appropriate given the need for empowerment and emancipation from historical oppression. Action research is a rational engagement and reflective action for the purpose of promoting social and educational justice. It favours a dialectical form of reasoning that promotes democratic participation and understanding (Wood, 2014:669). Because this study is avowedly self-reflective in nature, in the section where I report on the two action research projects, I use the text of my Masters’ thesis to reflect critically on its relevance in light of the Norms and Standards Policy.

Locating the study in the action research literature

The Department of Education’s Norms and Standards policy document identifies seven roles for the educator: mediators and facilitators of learning; interpreters and designers of learning programs; educational leaders; administrators and managers; scholars, researchers and life-long learners;

members of a community promoting ethical citizenship; pastoral carers and lastly, learning specialists (Government Gazette, 2000). Arguably, not all of these policy objectives have found their way into mainstream teacher education programmes yet. This paper reflects upon the use of a history teaching action research project as a case study to show the potential of action research as a possible way of enhancing professional procedures among teachers along the lines of policy.

Action research seems to have re-entered mainstream educational research since its appearance in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Lees (2008:i-iii) uses a critical participatory action research methodology to analyse his work in the HIV and AIDS pandemic in various countries to discover the importance of the relationship between historical contexts and meaning that people assign to the pandemic. Using an action research framework Lees proposes a new approach to AIDS education in South Africa. By reflecting on fifteen years of working experience with teachers, Lopez-Pastor et al. (2011:153) assert that action research presents great potential to improve practical knowledge and teaching for all teachers.

In another study, le Grange (2012) argues that, by tracing the history of participatory action research which derived from the anti-colonial struggles of the developing world in the 1960s, action research remains a relevant approach for local problems and pressing societal issues. Recently action research inspired studies by Esau (2012:1234); du Toit (2012:1216); and Wolvaard and du Toit (2012:1249) demonstrate its uses in various educational contexts. These articles show that action research can be used in collaborative work in transnational spaces that globalization affords (le Grange, 2012: 1136). Esau (2012:1235) describes how, as a doctoral student, he improved his practice in a primary school classroom focusing on HIV and AIDS. The study of Wolvaard and du Toit (2012:1256) which was conducted in the health care sector refers to the transformation of management to create a sustainable learning organization. Their study produced evidence that action research and particularly the production of professional portfolios, have enriched the management programme and created learning organizations managed by transformational leaders (Wolvaard and du Toit 2012). More recently, Wood (2014:667) argues that action research is based on constructivist and critical theories that acknowledge that there can never be a complete solution to any problem. There are many equally valid ways to envisage what is perceived as reality. On-going improvement is attained through critical reflection of the

status quo, which understanding is followed by further action to improve the situation.

While action research is successfully applied in different settings, the action research history project under discussion became the specific context in which my pedagogical ideas and practices were challenged. The main lessons and contexts in the project are shared in the section to follow.

Reflection on two history action research projects

What follows in this section is a description of the content, method and processes that constituted the two action research projects. A discussion of the two projects is then presented in light of their relevance to the Norms and Standard Policy referred to earlier. As mentioned before, these projects were conducted during the last days of CNE (1990s) but the issues that were engaged, such as the need for transformative teaching, teacher-centeredness, participation, alternative methods of engaging learners, are still challenging to teacher education institutions today.

The original study was conducted at a school located in a Southern Suburbs coloured working-class “township” in the Western Cape.

Action Research Project 1

Teaching in the post-apartheid classroom requires multiple roles as explained in the new Norms and Standards Policy for Educators. Action research creates possibilities and contexts for these different roles to be played. These roles are detailed in the discussion section. Extensive use is made of footnotes to identify the norms and standards in the con(text) provided.

The aim of project 1 was to implement and research a plan devised to increase learner participation in the history classroom. The starting-point of this project emerged from the realization that educators need to move away from a teacher-centered mode of teaching to a learner-centered classroom approach. This kind of change promotes a democratic teaching ethos in which the teacher adopts a transformative pedagogical disposition.

Planning the action for Project 1 was done in collaboration with a triangulator.³ Triangulation, according to Mathison (1988:13) is:

To use multiple methods, data sources, and researchers to enhance the validity of research findings. Regardless which epistemological or methodological perspective an evaluator is working from, it is necessary to use multiple methods and sources of data in the execution of a study in order to withstand critique by colleagues.

Project 1 was conducted with a grade 10 history class. Compared to the old mode of teaching, which was “whole class teaching”, the class was divided into four groups,⁴ each of which had to select a topic and sub-theme to the major theme dealing with post-revolutionary France during the reign of Napoleon. The following themes were agreed upon:

- The period after the French Revolution;
- Internal reforms with reference to economic, political and legal code;
- Expansion of the French empire;
- The end of the Napoleonic empire.⁵

Groups were given two periods – roughly eighty minutes to discuss and design a plan. The expectations of each group or/and learner were the following:

- contributes towards the major theme;
- participates in the sub-theme;
- prepares a written piece to serve as tangible evidence and to serve as “notes”;
- makes a presentation to the class.

The arrangements for group work involved allocating specific tasks to each participant. A group leader had to keep track of the activities and state clearly the task of each group member. Groups had to plan how they were going to implement their individual and collective plan and how each contribution would contribute towards the group theme.

3 My methodological plan included the use of a “triangulator” who acted as an observer but also as a critical friend. The triangulator was a trained researcher who attended my planning sessions and provided feedback on my classroom practice. At the end of the project she wrote a report which provided reflexive materials for critical engagement. The triangulator also provided moral support and research advice while I was assuming the role as “teacher-researcher”.

4 The selection of “group work” as a method of learning fulfills the policy requirement that the teacher should promote an “ethical and cooperative” spirit amongst the learners. The learners and the teacher created a “community of learners” sharing a common goal for the common good of all.

5 The teacher displays “learning area specialist” knowledge and understanding as he divides the subject into smaller themes for the groups to be able to select and develop. The role of teacher as “leader, administrator and manager” also comes into play here as the teacher needs to arrange and keep control and record of the groups and their activities.

The role of the educator was to provide source materials in the form of articles and books relevant to the themes and to ensure progress and participation.⁶ The classroom furniture that was normally organized in rows was reorganized to facilitate group discussions and work space.⁷ Two worktables were borrowed to facilitate practical work. Materials provided were cardboard paper, starch, brushes, paint and glue.⁸ Students spoke about costumes, war music and the use of audio-visual equipment for the purpose of role-play and drama sketches. The groups carried on with their projects in the class and outside for the ensuing week and a half.

Data were collated in a number of ways. Teacher's field notes, the triangulator's report, group open-ended questionnaires at the end of the project and individual learners reflected in writing on their personal experiences during the project.⁹

The educator's previous approach to classroom practice was disrupted during the project. Instead of presenting a formal lesson consisting of an introduction, activity and dictation, the beginning of the lesson was now determined by learners' input.¹⁰ Often the planned activity of the teacher had to be abandoned in favour of learners' agenda. More time was spent on group and individual discussion than was anticipated. Group report-backs were instituted to ensure that all the groups would be making progress towards their objective.¹¹ It was during these sessions that the groups were showing what really happened on a micro level. It became clear that some groups were experiencing possible collapse due to absenteeism and poor co-operation amongst some members. One particular group had to be "saved".¹² Surprisingly, this group made an impressive presentation. The Triangulator's report (Davids, 1991:99-104) stated the following:

The only group that showed some signs of an exciting process having taken place was the third group, the one which had been most problematic in the beginning. This was the group in which only two participants remained

6 Considering the Norms and Standards Policy, the role of the teacher as "facilitator" were enacted during this activity.

7 Reorganizing the classroom desks, involves elements of "design" which is part of the role of the teacher to be "an interpreter and designer of learning programs and materials, according to the Norms and Standard Policy.

8 In this instance the teacher was involved in "learning mediator", he mediated, facilitated and created an effective learning environment.

9 The role as "scholar, researcher and lifelong learner" is covered in this activity which promotes love for academic and professional growth, according to the Norms and Standards Policy.

10 Here again is a "mediatory role".

11 The teacher as "assessor" is identified in this activity. The policy requires that the teacher recognizes the skills and knowledge of the learner which in this case is done on a "formative" basis.

12 The teacher as "leader" recognizes the potential collapse of the group and intervenes.

active. The one person (Chris) never spoke at all, he only held up the chart while Eugene gave a most interesting talk on the invasion of Britain. He had obviously become stimulated and involved in what he was reading, he spoke to the class, referring to his notes occasionally only.

It seems that unpredicted and unplanned activities sometimes grew into the most interesting and meaningful learning activities.

At the end of the project, different groups presented their work which consisted of a variety of charts, maps, talks and notes – a reflection of their learning and involvement in the classroom. This kind of learning is different in quality and meaningfulness than the normal transmission mode of teaching which entrenched the dominance of the teacher over the learners.¹³

Action Research project 2

Learning does not always take place in an organized and systematic way. In an action research approach, learning takes place in action, by doing. Reflective action creates cognitive and practical moments of learning. While project 1 was the first macro cycle of action, each stage of the project contained many micro-cyclic phases. During the second project, selective learning took place and the teacher decided on which aspects of his professional practice he wanted to focus upon.

An action research approach to classroom practice is cyclical, reflective and tends to lead to critical analysis of the practical situation by the teacher-researcher. Action research as a transformation model for improved practice, is ongoing and its principles are applied in different contexts. In the second action research project the need to be more assertive proved to be a valuable learning experience.

During the conventional transmission mode of teaching, the teacher is always at the centre of the classroom which was consciously guarded against during the first cycle in project 1. There was a “fear” of teacher domination. The intention to create conditions for more learner participation led to a lack of involvement of the teacher. Conceptually, the role of the “teacher-researcher” took shape more clearly in project 2. A shift from the “researcher-teacher” in project 1 to “teacher-researcher” in project 2 brought a different role and disposition to the teacher’s involvement and conceptualization of

¹³ The teacher assumes the role of “assessor” when he had to evaluate the groups and provide feedback on their performance.

the project.¹⁴ During the second cycle, the teacher played a more active role as a “teacher” in the position as educational leader and expert without compromising the value of promoting an alternative classroom philosophy and transformative mode of classroom practice.

Project 2 was conducted with a different grade 10 class on another aspect of the syllabus: the Industrial Revolution. A new pedagogical approach was adopted which consisted of six separate activities. Group work was again used as a pedagogical framework to engage subject knowledge. Activity one required each group to engage with all the topics:

- The family and home environment;
- Social and health conditions;
- The function of the police;
- Economic changes during the Industrial Revolution, e.g. the textile industry;
- Education and schooling during the Industrial Revolution.¹⁵

The groups engaged reflectively, considered their personal situation and expressed their views on each topic. A summary of their views were presented on newsprint. At the end of the activity, they shared their discussions with the class. Newsprint became the main evidence of their learning experiences.¹⁶

For the second activity groups were provided with reading material dealing with the Industrial Revolution in Britain. They were asked to read and relate the literature to their topics discussed in the first activity. Newsprint was again used to summarise their discussions which were presented to the whole class.¹⁷

Activity three was a comparative exercise that required groups to analyse the difference between hypothetical experiences and knowledge of issues such as the school, home and family, social and health and other economic activities. At this stage the groups had a sense of the social and economic changes that occurred over the past two centuries. They understood more immediately the Industrial Revolution as a significant historical phenomenon.¹⁸

Activity four dealt more specifically with the economic changes that took place during the Industrial Revolution: focusing on the changes in the wool

14 In this context the role of the “teacher as researcher” and its various shades demonstrate the multiple roles the teacher play simultaneously.

15 Here is again an example of the teacher as “subject specialist”.

16 The “assessor” function of the teacher illustrated.

17 The teacher promotes a sense of “community” and belonging.

18 Here were opportunities for the teacher to be a “learner” as this section contains learner reflections on their personal conditions in relation to those that prevailed during the Industrial Revolution.

industry in the textile sector. The class was divided into two groups: group 1 discussed the process of wool production before the Industrial Revolution and group 2 discussed the production of wool during and after the Industrial Revolution. At the end of the activity, each group gave feedback on their topics.

Activity five was an open book test which served a dual purpose as a reflective exercise as well as an assessment activity. Learners eagerly participated in the test and were free from the examination stress that they were used to.

Activity six was an evaluative session in which learners had to provide written notes on their experiences of the project. For project 2 the following served as data which were used for analytical purposes:

- Teacher's field notes;
- Triangulator's report;
- Newsprints;
- Learners open book test scripts and evaluative notes.

The objective of this project was to move away from the practice of teacher-dominant pedagogy to a learner-centered classroom practice that would allow learners more meaningful learning experiences. The question that arises now is whether transformative teaching is a mere technical shift of focus from the teacher to the learner. The teacher's experiences in this project suggest that changing classroom practice involves far more than a performative change in teaching method. Transformation of classroom practice involves critical assessment of existing values that inform practice.

During project 2 there was a tangible shift from the transmission to the development of a process-oriented mode of teaching and learning. The frantic concern with learner control and uniformity was relaxed for greater pedagogical objectives such as teacher conscientiousness, learner participation and learning moments. At the end of the project both teacher and learners agreed that they had learnt more through this approach than the conventional classroom teaching that both were used to. The following was a response of a learner (Davids, 1991:71) to the notion of an open book test:¹⁹

The test was easy because it was based on my practical experience on the project. I understood better. It is also better than the normal test because it is more effective. Working in a group provides opportunities to express yourself and to add. Doing things in smaller pieces made for better understanding (learner).

¹⁹ This is an "assessment" activity.

The sense projected in this statement is that assessment is not an evaluative measure to see what the learner “knows”. The learner seems to be more involved. His reflective action brings about a greater self-awareness of the knowledge and experiences gained in this project.

The following learner acknowledges (Davids, 1991:72) the meaningfulness in this form of assessment as opposed to the more usual formal structure of testing:

I feel that the test we wrote yesterday was interesting because it was about the Industrial Revolution that we discussed and it was not difficult. We were required to use our ideas and to say what we understood and learnt. It will be better if we can do this every day (learner).

What is interesting in this response is the interpretation of the classroom experiences of this learner. It was “interesting” as it was dealing with “... the Industrial Revolution that we discussed...”, and it was practical because “... it was not difficult”. In the process of learning and assessment, learners were exposed to different but relevant experiences of learning. While the potential for transformative teaching was demonstrated in this project, this does not mean that learners were “transformed” or that the teacher “changed”. Some learners expressed the view that the process was aimed at improving the final “examination marks” which is indicative of the powerful presence of the dominant transmission and examination-oriented system.

Critical reflections on the two action research projects

Action research is defined as (Carr and Kemmis, 1986:162):

Simply a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which practices are carried out.

If this definition holds, then it is appropriate to give an account of some of the lessons of self-reflection from past exercise to current re-introduction of action research. What follows below are some of the major learning moments that emerged from this project which had a significant impact on the philosophical and pedagogical comportsment of the teacher.

Reflecting on values in practice

The dominant teaching mode and classroom practice falls within the transmission model: the teacher is in a dominant position and the learner is subordinate. The teacher, who is generally a product of the school system, tends to replicate the knowledge and practice dominant in society and classroom. This deterministic understanding of the role of the teacher detracts from the potential creativity of the teacher.

Changing perceptions of learners

Action research, as an active and participatory mode of educational enquiry, is one approach which allows for teacher intervention in a collaborative manner. This in turn creates space for the action and involvement of participants to constantly construct and reconstruct their understanding of their environment. Self-reflective activities of participants bring a deeper understanding of relations between self and others. This process of critical self-reflection potentially leads to the questioning of existing and traditional knowledge and perceptions. During lessons, the perception of learners became an essential aspect of the classroom situation. Action research challenges the disposition of control and manipulation of learners. This creates an impersonal and formal atmosphere that counters frank expression and participation of learners in the classroom. The following are some daunting responses of learners (project 2) to the question: what is the learner perception of teachers with reference to their teaching style?:

Learners think teachers mainly exert their authority and they always have the final say. Learners do not feel much for teachers as they are bullied by teachers ... (learner).

Learners and teachers do not always agree because they do not understand each other... (learner).

However, some learners also expressed themselves in favour of teachers' authority: They play a major role in determining the outcome of the learners' future.

Teachers' classroom practice needs to be dialectically informed. Self-reflective activity and a concern to interact consciously, not only subjectively, may lead to critical awareness of teacher and learner perceptions as well as values in practice. An impersonal and formal atmosphere needs to be transformed into a situation where education can take place in a space which allows for the

voices of both teachers and learners to be heard. Action research provides many opportunities to challenge existing teacher and learner epistemologies at classroom level which have the potential for future development and transformation.

Changing pedagogical roles in practice

Society influences the role and role expectations that individuals fulfil socially. Social values influence role expectations. A change in particular role relations presupposes a change at the level of the values of a social group. However, social change does not always conform to the rationality on which society is perceived to operate.

Implicit and explicit roles

In an action research context, the teacher is collaborator, initiator of critical thinking and a protector of differences and democratic values. The reflective nature of an action research approach brings to the teacher and learners two types of roles namely: explicit and implicit. The explicit roles refer to what teacher and learners are doing such as “explaining” (teacher), “discussion” (learners) and “questioning” etc. The implicit roles refer to the conscious purpose and intention of the teacher and learner when in action. While the teacher and learners may be involved in “action” and “doing”, they may simultaneously be involved in changing what is perceived as normal to something different or new.

The action research projects focused on the processes involved in moving towards a learner-centered and democratic pedagogical model in which the teacher’s role is less dominant and more conducive to meaningful learning. Learners were asked to express their views on the role that teachers should assume as educational leaders. The following were reported:

- The teacher has an educative role: ...‘to educate the learner’;
- The teacher has a supportive role: ...‘teacher should support the learner and assist where necessary’;
- The teacher has a conscientising role: ...‘to make learners aware of what happening around them’;
- The teacher has a disciplinary role: ...‘to teach children discipline’;
- The teacher has a transmission role: ...‘the teacher must be there to transmit the knowledge to the learner’.

The acquisition of multiple pedagogical roles requires an active engagement in the process of teaching and learning. A deliberate inculcation of the complex amalgam of roles in an action research framework promotes critical awareness and practice. This freedom creates opportunities to break the dominance of the traditional classroom that imposes the teacher's position as the centre of the pedagogical encounter at the classroom level.

Action research and Group work

In both projects 1 and 2, group work was used as pedagogy to increase learner participation. The following advantages of group work emerged:

- It encourages interaction among and between learners and teacher;
- Ownership of an activity was shared amongst all participants;
- Sharing and distribution of learning materials often occurred;
- Democratic values such as choices, own voice and decision-making were demonstrated.

While group work may have these advantages, an overuse of the method may develop negative attitudes. Group work should rather be negotiated with the learners to achieve its maximum educational value.

Conclusion

This article is written in the context of the implementation of a history curriculum in a history classroom. It demonstrates how history teaching can provide a framework for professional development. By integrating subject-based knowledge (history) and policy objectives (Norms and Standard Policy) through the means of action research, professional competencies may be enhanced. This article provides opportunities for history education to develop similar classroom-based research activities with potential learning moments. It should be remembered that action research is by its nature self-reflective and cyclic. Therefore no predetermined outcomes can be assured. However, by taking a position of openness and vigilance, new learning experiences may emerge during the process.

During these two projects there were many instances where the roles of the teacher according to the Norms and Standards Policy for educators were demonstrated. In response to the research question formulated earlier "what

are some of the lasting influences of an action research project on a teacher's pedagogical comportment and what lessons were learnt that are relevant to teacher education today", it can be answered that action research had a positive impact on my later work as teacher, academic and researcher. Action research left me with a critical and democratic disposition, an empowered sense of self and a reflective, dialectical frame of reasoning. The complex nature of change and the power of human agency were some of the valuable lessons learnt. I argued earlier that action research offers a meaningful point of departure for transformational teaching. Action research brought rationality to my practice in which I felt empowered in the formal and bureaucratic context in which I found myself. I appreciated education as a life-long, dialectical process, not the linear product-orientedness that is designed to fulfill no more than short-term educational objectives.

Based on my experiences as well as the re-emergence of action research as evinced in the literature, teacher education programmes are encouraged to consider action research as a possible pathway for the enhancement of professional competencies. This article is written in the context of history teaching, but its transferability to other subject contexts cannot be denied. It is therefore recommended that action research projects be promoted as a pedagogical framework to develop not only professional competencies but also subject-based pedagogical practice. Careful planning involves an introductory action research module, with a follow-up action research project in the context of the curriculum. Needless to say, this suggestion is not only limited to teacher education institutions but also in-service teacher professional initiatives.

The form and structure that action research will take in the proposed B.Ed curriculum at the University of Kwazulu-Natal is keenly anticipated. If the module is implemented as a technical requirement with assessment as its main objective, not much will be achieved. But if the approach is constructed to initiate life-long learning, professional development and growth, then exciting times lie ahead for the profession. If action research can stimulate an emancipated and democratic pedagogical practice as shown in this case study, then action research is coming of age.

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