

Using Action Research to Solve Everyday Problems in Classrooms – A Position Paper

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Abstract

Recent national and international reports have shown that South African education is not up to standard. Some of the problem areas are the low levels of literacy and numeracy among South African learners as listed in the local media. Instead of leaving it to academics and politicians who are not part of everyday educational practice, to find solutions to the literacy and numeracy problems this article suggests that the educational practitioner should become a research protagonist by engaging in classroom-based action research. Consequently, the objective of this article is to show how a pragmatic approach, utilising the attributes of action research, could be a viable option for conducting research from grassroots level, rather than engaging in traditional forms of research. Based on a literature study, a number of aspects of everyday educational practice are identified and matched with action research attributes to demonstrate its viability for pragmatic classroom-based research. It is suggested that educators become the leaders of such a pragmatic research process, with academics acting as associates and advisors.

Keywords: Action Research, expenditure, pragmatic approach, educational practice

The Problem

Although 20.4% of the South African expenditure was allocated to education in 2010-2011 (SAIRR 2011:194), various reports indicate that education in South Africa is not up to standard. Some of the challenges are the low and declining literacy and numeracy skills of learners, as well as a poor work ethic among teachers (and learners).

The Report on Annual National Assessment of 2011 reveals a 35% literacy rate and a 28% numeracy rate among Grade 3 learners and mentions that these percentages have dropped from 36% and 35% respectively since 2007 (SAIRR 2011:421). The Progress in International Reading Literacy (PIRLS) Report of 2006 shows that South Africa's overall results on reading achievement rates are the lowest among 45 countries (Howe *et al.* 2006: 17&18).

Taylor (2006) reports that up to 80% of South African schools were dysfunctional. This might be the result of a lack of self-discipline and a poor work ethic among learners and teachers. Research conducted by the Centre for Development and Enterprise reveals that South African teachers spend less than 50% of their actual teaching time per week in class (SAIRR 2011: 421). In addition, it appears that many teachers do not understand their subjects or how to teach them (SAIRR 2011: 422). A report by Van Vuuren (1996:11) indicated that daily an average of 227 000 school children found themselves in front of the television during school hours. As part of the endeavour to solve these problems it has been suggested that teachers themselves need to do research in the educational environment in order to be involved directly in the process of improving education (Mertle 2009: xix). International research in the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia and other countries has been conducted on the value of teachers conducting and disseminating their own school-based research (Koshy 2010:3).

However, little or no literature is available explaining appropriate research tools available to the South African classroom practitioner. From a literature study on the dictates of modern educational practice, focusing on the sphere of day-to-day realities and their dictates to find answers to practical problems, it became clear that solutions often come from within the school environment itself, rather than from the offices of politicians, officials or academics. Much of the research conducted in education has often been of little relevance to educational practice, resulting in a failure to have an effect

on education (Mills 2007:6). In addition, since the research has often not been relevant to educational practice, it has failed to address the educational practitioner's questions.

In terms of item 7 of the Professional Ethical Code for Educators, the educational professionals in schools are obliged to conduct research in order to stay 'abreast of educational trends and developments' (Oosthuizen 2001:86). However, not all educational practitioners have an appreciation for and understanding of research (Creswell 2012; 3). Gall, Gall and Borg (2007:3) observe that research still has little influence on their day-to-day work. They argue that, by contrast, surgeons who do not take cognisance of the newest reports on medical research will barely be able to continue their careers.

There are reasons why teachers are not inclined to conduct research. In the first place, teachers contend that, in general, the teaching practitioner should rather focus on the application of teaching skills and strategies in a teaching and learning school environment than on paying attention to research (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey 2009:3). They add that teachers are often fulfilling their roles as teaching technicians who are not supposed to be problem posers or to be problem solvers. Another reason for this inclination is to be found in the fact that, in the past, teachers did not have proper access to modern research tools to disseminate original knowledge they can take to the discussion table. Consequently they have to implement the findings to school-related problems of experts such as academics who are outside the walls of the school building, alien to modern trends of the school environment.

A convenience sample consisting of 76 educational practitioners, who are postgraduate students on two campuses of a large South African university, confirmed that almost 47% of the respondents were not involved in any kind of research directed at enhancing educational practice in class. This kind of approach actually entails that schools of the future would operate pretty much the same as they do now (Gall *et al.* 2007:3), which would mean a lack of development in educational practice. The purpose of research in general is to attain more knowledge about one's working field in order to ultimately enhance one's operational skills as a practitioner and to understand the ever-changing educational process in coping with its dynamics (McMillan & Schumacher 2010: 3).

In view of the above, the objective of this theoretical essay is to show why a pragmatic style of research may be appropriate for the teacher to use as instrument to solve the everyday practical problems of educational practice in order to improve the learning-teaching environment. In the process, the very essence of a pragmatic paradigm of research as well as matching research strategies and instruments will be identified. The dictates of everyday educational practice, as determined by a literature study, will be compared with the essentials of the pragmatic paradigm.

***Pragma* as a Conceptual-Theoretical Framework**

The conceptual framework of this article is based on the Greek concept *pragma* as a paradigm for research. In this section, the essence of *pragmatism* is analysed in order to identify the commonalities between the two derivations of the word *pragma* - pragmatism and pragmatic. The Greek word *pragma* basically means *dealing with things in a practical and sensible way; relating to fact* (Oxford 2001: 693). Rooted in the word *pragma* is the noun pragmatism as well as the adjective pragmatic (Greek: *pragmatikos*) which, freely translated, entails being practically inclined. Although these two words basically mean the same, they differ in their modern-day application in the sense that the *-ism* suffix adds a state or quality to the root word, *pragma* (Oxford 2001: 481). Pragmatism as an *-ism*, when applied as a world view, seems to over-emphasise the pragmatic to such an extent that it becomes the compass and the only norm that guides one's actions and perceptions about life. It becomes the vehicle that steers all actions and objectives in life. This implies that in pragmatism, 'what works in a particular situation is acceptable' is regarded as the only norm.

Creswell (2009:3) identifies a differentiated advance to research related to diverse worldviews or epistemologies. This diverse approach to research implies that the very nature of research is not only individualised, but also contextualised.

The concept 'pragmatism' is also related to the Greek word *praxis*, literally meaning *doing; practice as opposed to theory* (Oxford 2001:693). The obvious implication here is that the pragmatist emphasises the practicality of doing something or acting on a given situation rather than theorising about a problem. Pragmatism as a philosophy of life can be traced back in history as far back as Protagoras (485 – 415 B.C). More recently,

some of the exponents of pragmatic theory were scholars such as Charles Pierce (1839) –1914), William James (1842 – 1910) and John Dewey (1859-1952) (Landman, Kilian, Swanepoel & Bodenstein 1982: 30).

Dewey, for example, developed a pragmatic-empirical approach, which entails that the truth about a matter has to be tested and proved in practice for validity. Continual experimentation and (often in combination with) practical experiences are seen as vital instruments on the road towards attaining knowledge to be applied in one's everyday (practical) living environment. To the pragmatist, the application of these instruments to everyday 'real-life problems' now has to be submitted to a progressive cycle of reflection consisting of 'common sense thinking' and conclusions (Landman *et al.* 1980:29, 30).

Another essential of pragmatism is vested in the perspective that there is no absolute truth and that truth is relative – in other words, a kind of 'middle of the road' perspective which focuses on the here and now, the present, everyday world. For some of the exponents of pragmatism such as Bacon, the only truth is that which is to be found in the practical, passive experience and the constant adaptation to a particular environment (Van der Walt 1982:39; Landman *et al.* 1980:29, 30). This entails that pragmatism follows a contingent or situational approach in dealing with complex situations. Both the authors concur that it is difficult, if not impossible, to work from broad-based theories, generalisations and pre-set agendas to solve the problems of complex situations and environments. Consequently, congruent to relativism, which is a characteristic feature of their pragmatism, they proclaim that what proves to be true in one scenario does not necessarily hold true for the next. What proved to be effective in dealing with a particular problem a decade ago might not be as effective in the same situation ten years later.

Pragmatism stresses that in an effort to define truth, experience is to be regarded as the main criterion. In this regard, William James summed up: 'Everything real must be experienced somewhere, and every kind of thing experienced must somewhere be real' (Huchingson 1981: 12). Consequently, he argues, since experience is always changing, so does truth – which implies that all beliefs are relative to the concrete experience. Intrinsic to the pragmatic worldview is therefore that life itself is vested in a foundation of fallible probabilities rather than fixed certainties (cf. Huchingson 1981: 12).

John Dewey, one of the adherents to pragmatism, supporting his approach to scientific inquiry by the afore-mentioned views, proclaimed that the quest for knowledge could only be free if it is not restricted by religious doctrine. Consequently he held that, historically spoken, humankind's dependence upon the supernatural had restricted the actualisation of their human potential - and that a dependence on scientific research rather than religious ideology, would actually contribute to a much better and more stable adjustment to their world (Huchingson 1981: 39, 40).

The Pragmatic Dictates of Educational Research

The very lenses the researcher is wearing are subjective. Research approaches are *inter alia* defined by the nature of researchers' research experiences and their philosophical worldviews. The latter are regarded as the researcher's basic set of views that guide his or her actions as they observe the world through their own particular lenses. This is connected to what Mouton (2001:138) labels as the meta-science of research or science about science and Creswell (2009:8) depicts as the four worldviews of research, namely the post-positivistic, the social constructivist, the critical theory or advocacy and the pragmatic.

Some of the imperatives of everyday educational practice call for a pragmatic approach in order to solve problems. They are, among others, the following:

1. Practical problems in educational practice call for practical solutions
2. Educational practice calls for a focus on the individual
3. Educational practice calls for a multifaceted, holistic approach
4. Educational practice is complex and constantly in progress
5. Educational practice calls for effective change
6. Educational practice calls for immediacy
7. Educational practice needs to be monitored from the engine room

These are discussed in greater detail.

Practical Problems in Educational Practice Call for Practical Solutions

Even though qualitative and quantitative approaches both have their own merit, it is suggested that the mixed method approach holds optimal possibilities for research conducted by teachers in schools. Onwuegbuzie *et al.* (2009: 118) point out the usefulness of the mixed method in reducing, displaying, transforming, correlating, consolidating, comparing, integrating and assessing data. This implies, on the one hand, that the researcher can use the quantitative approach to obtain objective, measurable data related to trends and relationships between variables and to submit this data to a statistically sound process so as to achieve an objective, numerical analysis. If properly conducted, such research helps to identify pertinent trends and relations. However, once these statistically verified data are available, it may be necessary to explore and understand how learners or educational practitioners feel about, perceive and experience the issue subjectively.

The mixed method is not only pragmatic but also holistic and suited for education. Educational practice finds itself in a complex environment, which calls for a holistic, multifaceted, flexible approach. Education as praxis finds itself within dictates of the social science where intricate mental and physical demands of relationships between parents, learners and teachers have to be monitored from a holistic perspective.

Action research as a research strategy is also pragmatically and holistically inclined. Consequently, action research as a strategy runs parallel to the mixed method approach and can therefore ideally link up with the pragmatic-holistic stance of the mixed method approach.

Cohen and Manion (1994:192) explained action research as an on-the-spot research procedure, which is directed at solving concrete, real-world problems manifested in an immediate state of affairs. This step-by-step research process is constantly monitored by means of a variety of mechanisms, including questionnaires, diaries, interviews, case studies and others with the purpose of obtaining feedback relating to the questions in order to modify and adjust and redefine where needed. Mills (2007: 5) applied the former definition to education praxis in saying that it entails any kind of systematic research conducted by educational practitioners such as teachers and school principals within the boundaries of educational practice relating to the operation of the school and the effectiveness of learning-

teaching practice, in order to enhance insight into it, and consequently, into the positive effectiveness thereof.

The action research strategy originated from Lewin's action-reflection cycle, which was refined to what is today known as action research (McNiff 2002: 40). This cyclic strategy of planning, acting, observing the results and reflecting is sequential in that the first cycle is followed by the implementation of progressive cycles in pursuit of finding the ultimate solution to a practical problem.

Within the framework of the mixed method approach the action research strategy appears to be the optimal strategy due to its inclination to find practical solutions to problems using all available actions. Action research has shown to embrace basically all methodologies and approaches to research (Pine 2009:67). Although it is basically concerned with the qualitative research approach, it is not limited to it (Henning *et al.* 2009, 4; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:445). Action research has indeed been described as the most applied and practice-based design of all research designs (Creswell 2012: 576).

Action research emphasises the *how to* approach rather than the help with philosophical inclination (Mills 2007:6). Action research is practical and problem solving by nature. The practical nature of this strategy for research is to improve one's own practice or that of the institution (Koshy 2010: 8). Within the realm of action research, educational practitioners endeavour to identify the practical problems in their classes, determine suitable data collecting strategies, analyse data obtained and develop action plans based on the outcome of the inquiry.

The pragmatic emphasises that which works properly within the context of the particular situation and time (Creswell 2009: 9, 10). Many approaches, including the quantitative and qualitative, are used for collecting data rather than only one research approach. It is for this reason that the pragmatic worldview favours a mixed method approach, in which a variety of approaches are incorporated in the research strategy in order to obtain the information needed to solve a problem pragmatically. Since mixed methods are rooted in the meta-science of the pragmatic world view, it basically seeks to find practical answers to those problems educational practitioners constantly have to deal with - it is suitable for finding practical answers to practical problems in the realities of the educational praxis.

Educational Practice Calls for a Focus on the Individual

The mixed method approach linked to action research not only entails large study populations suitable for detecting generalised trends within a school, but is at the same time suitable for detecting the experiences, inner feelings and perceptions of the individual learner. While learning and teaching as an activity rotates around the collectivity of an institution such as a school or class, it also has to focus on the individuality of each individual learner. This implies that although many of the activities in a school are collective by nature, they also simultaneously focus on the individual learner.

The collectivity of inclinations such as, for example, violence in schools needs to be detected in a quantitative manner in order to apply collective school policies and strategies in order to curb the violence. Such a policy imperative for adopting a school code of conduct to regulate learner conduct on a collective basis is found in section 10 of the SA Schools Act (SA 1996_b). However, at the same time, the uniqueness of the individual learner's experiences, feelings and emotions, which have become victim of such violence, has to become the focus of research - in education it simply needs to be accommodated as well. Not only is the protection of the individual (or a small minority) viable from an educational point of view, it is also a Constitutional imperative. The SA Constitution not only emphasises the rights of children (plural) but also elevates the child in its individuality. Section 28(2) of the South African Constitution determines that the best interests of the child (singular) are of vital importance in every aspect concerning the child (singular) (SA 1996).

The necessity to focus on both the collective and the individual calls for the flexible research approach, which is accommodated by the attributes of the mixed methods approach and the action research strategy.

Educational Practice Calls for a Multifaceted, Holistic Approach

In their work on the fundamental theory of education, Van Loggerenberg and Jooste (1980:13) identified holism (Greek: *holos*, whole) as one of the vital essentials of education. The concept of education is derived from the Greek word *paidagogia*, which basically entails leading or escorting the child as holistic being from immaturity to maturity – from a condition of dependence

to a state of independence. In addition, education also calls for holistic, multifaceted activities, which include: endeavours to guide the child from ignorance to knowledge; from mental immaturity to mental maturity; from physical immaturity to physical maturity; from spiritual immaturity to spiritual maturity; from irresponsibility to responsibility. This again chimes with a Christian perspective.

Research in education, in turn, is holistically contextualised by the nature of the problem being investigated: this entails the particular subject area, the matter being addressed, the nature, characteristics and needs of the target group or research population, the nature of the audience related to the inquiry, as well as the juridical imperatives connected to the subject of focus.

The holistic nature of educational practice obviously requires a holistic approach in its research endeavours. The mixed method approach is holistic by nature because it combines quantitative and qualitative research instruments and inclinations. It utilises not only the qualitative but also the quantitative approach. Action research as a strategy also meets this requirement since it draws from vastly different worldviews in order to find appropriate answers to the variety of problems related to educational practice (Mills 2007: 8).

Educational Practice is Complex and Constantly in Progress

Education finds itself in a multi-layered world characterised by multitudes of paradoxes, and tensions in which the teacher is expected to implement constant changes advocated by top-down administrators and politicians from outside the school walls (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey 2009:1).

In essence, the positivistic approach to research is grounded on the notion that all behaviour and events are orderly and that all situations have empirically detectable causes, from which researchers are able to explain and predict (Mills 2007:2, 3). Education as a social science does not strictly comply with these criteria; it rotates around human behaviour, which is often disorderly and impulsive. The problems addressed by social science research are complex; to use only a quantitative or qualitative approach to address a complex scenario is often inadequate (Creswell 2009: 203)

For example, education is normally conducted in the extremely complex environment of a classroom (Mertle 2009: 23). One of the attributes

of the classroom is its multidimensionality due to the large number of events taking place – each event with its own set of consequences, constantly evolving around the diversity of individuals, each with its own objectives (Pine 2009:17).

The 2005 American report conducted by the Committee on Research in Education and National Research Council emphasises the complexities of educational practice (Pine 2009:11). The Report describes educational practice as multi-layered, and *constantly* shifting – being transformed by its intricate relations with diversities of people as well as the values of political forces. The Report also notes that research in education is multi-layered in the sense that it needs to pay attention to ‘the physical, social, cultural, economic and historical environment’ relating to the particular research.

This multifaceted complexity of educational practice demands a multifaceted research approach not predefined by any boundaries for research (Pine 2009:25). This scenario calls for a contingency approach that fits in with the attributes of action research that is constantly asking: *which method works* for this particular situation? (Pine 2009: 37). Action research is flexible, fluid, open and responsive by nature and therefore suitable for dealing with the contingent scenarios of the classroom and school environment (Mertle 2009:23; Creswell 2005: 14; Koshy 2010:4).

The afore-mentioned report issued by the American Committee on Research in Education and National Research Council not only emphasised the complexities of educational practice but also the fact that it is constantly shifting and being transformed by factors such as the intricate diversities of people it deals with and the driving forces behind political ideologies (Pine 2009:11). Since educational progression is an imperative in order to keep up with the newest scientific trends, it also needs to take cognisance of the newest research approaches available. A relatively new research approach is mixed methods, which – as explained above - has only recently started to receive serious consideration among scholars (McMillan & Schumacher 2010: 396). It can be typified as a step forward in the progression of world research, now gaining popularity by utilising the strengths of both the quantitative and qualitative approaches (Creswell 2009: 203).

Educational Practice Calls for Effective Change

Progression and change go hand in hand. In view of this, it can be averred

that educational practice in South Africa needs to change. Much of the traditional orderly report writing based on empirical findings not always results in effective change of educational practice. These reports often become documents filed in the dusty drawers of academe and politicians.

The ultimate aim of action research is to improve practice. In fact, the first step in the sequential spiral of action research is planning to change (Koshy 2010:1, 4) since its objectives are focused on effecting positive change in educational practice (Mills 2007:3).

Educational Practice Calls for Immediacy

Immediacy is regarded as one of the essential requirements for solving problems in a typical classroom scenario (Zeichner 2009:17). The problem with traditional research techniques is that they are often time consuming – they require a relatively formal procedure, which includes describing the problem, collecting and analysing data and writing a report. Action research, on the other hand, is not confined by these time limits – the teacher can immediately enter the sequential cycle typical of action research. For example, the moment an incident takes place in class, the teacher can immediately start reflecting on it, or begin planning on how to solve it or how to adjust to the situation (Zeichner 2009:24).

The pace of a typical classroom often leaves the teacher little time for reflection in a single period. The fact that the teacher is constantly on the scene of inquiry can obviously speed up the sequential action of the research cycles of planning, acting, observing results, reflecting and adjusting. Action research is practical since it affords teachers the opportunity of obtaining immediate access to the findings (Mertle 2009: 19).

Educational Practice Needs to be Monitored from the Engine Room

Action research is conducted by teachers for themselves – it is a systematic inquiry into one's own practice (Mertle 2009:4). The fact that the teacher is constantly in the class to plan, act, observe, reflect and readjust could assist in steering the ship out of troubled waters.

Teachers are constantly expected to adjust to the complexities, para-

doxes and tensions created by politicians, administrators as well as the legal imperatives from outside the school building (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey 2009: 1). In the past teachers were not able to contribute to the debate on educational practice due to the fact that they did not have access to it, or the necessary knowledge of traditional research tools (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey 2009: 1). Traditionally, research on educational practice was conducted by university professors, scholars and graduate students – with the educational practitioners left out in the cold as mere subjects of inquiry. In other words, much of research was done on them and not for them (Mills 2007:6).

Action research, again, is not so much an academically sophisticated instrument for research, as it is an easy-to-apply tool to utilise in the everyday working environment of the educational practitioner. In order to achieve the twin objectives of producing scholarly research while retaining a practical focus, it is useful for the student to understand and be able to employ effectively the research paradigm, which is commonly referred to as Action Research.

Although Action Research is a highly effective framework for achieving these twin objectives of academic rigour and experiential relevance, there is no doubt that it has its critics. Until recently many academics have taken the view that Action Research has much to do with action and little to do with research (Eden & Huxham 1996). It can be argued that the pervasiveness of technology, IS research should be salient to other fields of research. This could be directly applied to Action Research and its place in the area of research.

The idea of action research has not been embraced wholeheartedly by academics. There has been the notion, probably connected somehow to Plato's ideas in his *Republic*, that there were essentially two quite separate worlds – the world of the philosopher and that of the king. The king is the person of action and his domain is quite distinct from the realm of thought, which is where the philosopher resides. The combination of these two domains was considered problematical. Indeed, there is good reason to suppose this to be the case. It is not trivial to bring together the mindset of knowledge and reflection with the propensity to action. Thus the action researcher needs to be simultaneously deeply involved with the project, while absorbing detail to reflect on the situation and thus extract knowledge from the experience, as well as benefit from experiential training.

It was perhaps at least in part this type of thinking that underpinned

the criticism that rigorous knowledge could not be created from general experience but rather could only be established if the process of its creation was to comply with the scientific method espoused by the natural sciences. Thus the scientific method was considered the only way to obtain valid research results.

But this view has been amended over the past few decades. Medawar (1986), who is undeniably one of the 20th century's most distinguished scientists, posits that 'there is indeed no such thing as the scientific method. A scientist uses a variety of exploratory stratagems.'

It is clear that early definitions of the scientific method, which emphasised objectivity and truth, have been exposed as a gross simplification of how research actually functions. In fact, seeing science as being simply a process of objectively seeking the truth has now been seen to be largely a myth. As Gould (1992) notes: 'I believe that science must be understood as a social phenomenon, a gutsy, human enterprise, not the work of robots programmed to collect pure information'.

Recommendations

The intensity of the problems embedded in South African educational practice necessitates *practical* solutions. Research conducted by academe and politicians from *outside the school walls* appears to be too far removed from the everyday school practice to solve all the problems. The result of a rigid theoretical approach to research is that many of the current critical issues in educational practice remain unanswered. It is therefore suggested that these problems be approached from a pragmatic philosophy of research, linked to the practically orientated strategy of action research. In many of the developed overseas countries, educational practitioners are already conducting research from this hands-on perspective in an attempt to find practical solutions to their problems. As a result of the inherent dynamics of a classroom, educational practitioners in countries such as Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom already seem to favour action research (Koshy 2010:3). The afore-mentioned brief survey among South African educational practitioners indicated that almost 62% of the respondents did not conduct action research on educational practice as a form of school-based management in their classrooms

The vital question is: How can the tide be turned? First of all, one will have to bridge teacher indifference towards conducting their research. Resolutions need to be taken by South African teachers to solve everyday practical problems from within their own workplace. The practical experiences of teachers at the rock face may yield crucial information about what can work in educational practice. South African teachers need to turn the tide currently flowing top-down, from academe and politicians to the teachers, to a tide flowing upwards – from the teachers towards the politicians and academe. Instead of waiting on politicians and academics that are often not really familiar with the scenarios and conditions inside the school walls, the results of teacher-based research attempts need to be collected as sources of information made available to politicians, academe and ultimately, policy makers.

Teachers will have to be sensitised to the worth of their own research contributions for the improvement of their particular work environment as well as the service they are rendering towards education in general by sharing their findings within the broad educational community.

Teachers will also have to be informed about the dynamics of hands-on research, which originates from everyday educational practice – and especially about the cyclic approach of action research. Although the essential skills of action research are likely to be taught by academe, these skills need to be applied by the teachers as educational practitioners themselves.

The findings and outcomes of the research done by the teachers are to be shared with the teaching fraternity in consultation with the academe who now becomes a partner in reflection – a partner in the cyclic research process and not the sole agent of the process. Consequently, the traditional cyclic strategy of action research which basically entails the four-step cycle of planning, acting, observing the results and reflecting, followed by sequences of progressive cycles in pursuit of finding the ultimate solution to a problem, can be altered to include a fifth phase – consultation with a knowledgeable researcher (e.g. an academic partner).

According to the brief survey referred to, it appears that South African educational practitioners are not properly informed about the principles of action research. This condition of ignorance and unawareness needs to be resolved by a well-informed practitioner (e.g. an academic researcher) who now becomes an intermittent mentor of the process – a

trainer of the inexperienced educational practitioner regarding the dictates of action research. This does not necessarily imply that such a mentor is to become part of the actual research that is conducted by the practitioner; it merely means that such a mentor is an advisor regarding the dictates of the process itself, distant to the actual research process.

Relevance and Rigour

In the past few years there has been increasing pressure on business and management studies to accept AR as a method for academic research. The reason for this is that there has been mounting criticism that the more traditional approaches to academic research have not satisfied the community of practitioners; they may well have produced rigorous results, but findings have possibly not been as relevant as they could have been. In fact, the past few years have seen a substantial increase in the call by the business community for more relevant research. It is now clear that rigour in academic research is not enough and that without specific relevance the output of academics and academic institutions is of little value. In fact, Wittgenstein's (1969) in his article state that knowledge is in the end based on acknowledgment. This may in turn be interpreted as anticipating the need for researchers to be cognisant of the requirements of their communities; however, it is clear from the on-going debate on this issue that many academics have failed in this respect.

The process consultant does not have to be an expert in a particular functional area. In fact, Schein argues it is best if that is the case, as functional knowledge may sometimes obscure understanding of the processes occurring between organisational members. This is similar to the case of Argyris, where the consultant should go armed with an understanding of Argyris' theory of learning. Thus the theoretical background of the researcher/consultant could be in the arena of facilitation and interviewing.

Conclusion

South African teachers, finding themselves in the centre of day-to-day educational practice, are the key to the turn-about in South African education; they have to become the key role players in a pragmatic-action research strategy, and start conducting research from a pragmatic stance in order to

find practically based answers to the problems currently obstructing effective educational practice.

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