‘You learn from going through the process’: The perceptions of South African school leaders about action research

Lesley Wood
North-West University, South Africa

Bernadette Govender
Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, South Africa

Abstract
In South Africa, the under-resourced and socially challenging contexts in which the majority of schools function, calls for leadership that has the vision to look beyond seemingly insurmountable problems. South African school leaders must develop the capacity to envisage and create schools that function well, in spite of the daunting environmental challenges. To facilitate the development of leaders capable of doing this, we engaged ten schools, and 24 school leaders, in an action research project. In this article we provide qualitative evidence that engagement with a systematic process of critical reflection and action facilitated epistemological and ontological shifts within the participating school leaders, contributing to changed perceptions and leadership practices. Critical reflection on the values underpinning this transformation also provided them with standards against which they can gauge the quality of their future leadership practices, thereby promoting sustainable development and improvement within their school communities.

Keywords
Action research, quality assurance, school improvement, school leadership, transformation, values

Introduction

Successful schools are led by successful leaders (Van der Westhuizen & Van Vuuren, 2007), with the most prevalent shortcoming in failing schools being weak leadership (Taylor & Ryan, 2005). Existing literature (Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe & Orr, 2010; Piggot-Irvine, 2011) relates good school results to transformative school leadership. However, school leadership is no easy task in the current educational environment in South Africa. Under Apartheid, non-white schools lacked the basic requirements for good schooling, such as well-qualified educators and adequate school equipment and infrastructure (Fiske & Ladd, 2005). Perumal (2009, p.36) describes the teaching practices and management styles in many schools of that era as autocratic; curricula as "racist and sexist"; and rote learning as the preferred approach, precluding the development of critical thinking in pupils (and teachers). Although 'white' schools did have superior facilities and better qualified teaching staff, the objective of education was to cement the philosophy of apartheid and encourage blind acceptance of the authority that enforced it (Fiske & Ladd, 2005). Therefore, school leaders in all racial categories of schools tended to be autocratic, rigid and task-oriented in their management style.

The plethora of difficulties experienced in most formerly non-white schools today could be said to stem from the abuse of power wielded by the Apartheid educational authorities, resulting in weak leadership, the destruction of the ethos of teaching and learning, and the complete failure of education in these schools (November, Alexander & Van Wyk, 2010). Given this historical background, school leadership in formerly disadvantaged schools faces daunting challenges (Bloch, 2009; Kamper, 2008; Steyn, 2008), in particular the need to adopt a leadership approach in keeping with the democratic and inclusive values in which post-Apartheid education is grounded (November, Alexander & Van Wyk, 2010).

As researchers we are interested in education*al* research, where both researchers and participants collaborate in the creation of knowledge that leads to improvement in their learning as well as in the targeted problem. Education research (McNiff, 2008), in contrast, focusses on the researcher creating knowledge *about* the situation to produce outputs that 'are meant for academic advancement and not for social change' (Said, 1993, p.53). It was important to us that our research should contribute to making a difference in the situation described above, by engaging the school leaders in exploring their own learning and development. Based on our knowledge and experience of the transformative potential of action research (McNiff, 2007; Wood, 2009), we decided to use this methodology to engage school leaders in developing a more democratic and inclusive style of leadership. The question we explore in this article is: *how do school leaders perceive their leadership to have been transformed through the process of action research?*

We first explain why we considered an action research approach suitable for transforming school leaders' understanding of their practices. We then contextualize the research process by presenting two case studies that illustrate participant understanding of how the process impacted on their practice. Throughout, we

comment on the significance of their, and our, learning for future development of school leaders working in similar contexts.

Conceptualizing action research

We view action research as a *methodology*, based on a critical, emancipatory paradigm, grounded in values and principles that underpin an inclusive and dynamic worldview. This paradigm acknowledges that there can never be a final solution to any problem; that there are many equally valid ways to envisage what is perceived as reality; and that ongoing improvement is attained through critical reflection of the *status quo*, which leads to action. Action research requires participants to identify ontological values that become standards by which they can judge their intentions and actions (Whitehead, 2008). These values should always promote the social good, and include, *inter alia*, democracy, respect, equality, promotion of quality of life for all (Stringer, 2007), and authentic collaboration (Piggot-Irvine, 2012).

From an *epistemological* viewpoint, action research regards knowledge as context-bound and collaboratively created, with all interpretations fluid and changing (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). Action research thus abolishes the notion of the academic researcher as the 'expert' who imposes his/her own knowledge to guide the process. Instead, it regards participants as practitioner-researchers who, by dint of their insider knowledge, are viewed as the most capable of finding workable ways to improve their own educational situations. We thus consider school leaders as best-placed to improve their own practices to bring about positive change in their environments. The focus is on helping participants to take taking responsibility for their own thinking, attitudes and actions (Wood, Morar & Mostert, 2008). Shifts on a cognitive, affective and behavioural level are more likely to be sustained, as they become part of the personal and professional identity of the participant (Batagiannis, 2011).

Through the creation of unique and personal "living theories" (Whitehead, 1989, p.43), action research contributes to improving social situations, while simultaneously generating knowledge that can influence educational practice and research in a significant way. Because of the authentic involvement and critical self-reflection required of the participants, outcomes include an increase in self-confidence and self-awareness, improvement in problem-solving ability, and the development of a desire and capacity for lifelong learning (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011). Another important outcome for participants such as South African school leaders who experience severe social, economic and political constraints, is hope and a sense of knowing that change is possible and that it is in their power to improve their own situations (Schoen, 2007). Therefore, in agreement with McTaggart (2012), we conceptualize action research as a "practice changing practice" (p.2) that follows a rigorous process of enquiry, the aim of which is to: improve the identified educational concern (practical outcome); create useful educational knowledge through a critical reflection on what was learnt and its significance for future practice and research (knowledge outcome); and bring about epistemological and ontological transformation in the participants (emancipatory outcome).

Conceptualizing school leadership

We understand effective school leaders to be persons who strive to embody democratic values and principles and who care, listen to and reflect multiple voices (Batagiannis, 2011). As they listen, they learn from others, reflect on what they have heard and consider the merit of the contribution for their particular context (Carr, 2007). Effective leadership requires a move from a technical to a constructivist approach (Batagiannis, 2011), from autocracy to democracy, and a sincere desire for promoting collegiality and collaborative relationships. Such leaders embody the passion and commitment they wish to inspire in others. In short, they change their organizations by first changing themselves (Wood, Morar & Mostert, 2008). This is the essence of transformational leadership.

Day and Leithwood (2007) explain that transformational leaders work with others to create a shared vision and mutually-agreed-on goals, modelling the high standards of performance expected, while providing appropriate support. They believe in the leadership potential of all, and pursue productive relations with stakeholders, both within the school and in the wider community (Giles, Johnson, Brooks & Jacobson, 2005). The overall responsibility and purpose of transformational leadership is to influence the performance of an organisation (Kythreotis, Pashiardis & Kyriakides, 2010), through influencing others involved in it. The ability to influence others is a key leadership competency that resonates with the critical self-reflective process of action research. As leaders begin to understand their own thinking patterns, they can modify their actions to be more in line with their vision for a transformed school. Their transformed actions in turn begin to influence the thinking, and eventual behaviour, of others. A transformational leader thus influences through "personal actions" and "interpersonal relationships" (Brown, Trevinõ & Harrison, 2005, p.120) to shape a transformed climate and culture that resonates with the democratic, inclusive and relational values in which post-Apartheid education leadership should be grounded. This was our hope for the school leaders in this project.

Explaining the project

The action research project formed part of a larger Integrated School Improvement and Development project for socially and economically challenged schools. We invited the principals of the 27 schools involved in the large project to participate or to nominate another senior member of management. Ten schools agreed to take part, with a total of 24 participants – two principals, eight deputy principals and fourteen heads of departments from seven primary and three secondary schools. It was disappointing to us that only two principals volunteered. We also checked with the rest of the participants to make sure they were willing participants, rather than having been told to attend. One principal, who sent his deputy and a Head of Department to represent the school, explained to us that he wished to extend the development opportunity to others, but would be fully involved in the respective school project throughout. '*Lack of interest'* was the most cited reason why other

principals did not attend, according to the participants – this reinforced our belief that leadership development was very necessary in these schools.

To help school leaders understand the process of action research and the type of leadership it requires, we brought the participating school leaders together regularly to form a community of practice (COP) (Batagiannis, 2011) so that mutual learning could take place. Through dialogue on critical reflections of their actions, the information they shared could be converted into shared wisdom (Li, 2008), leading to communicative action (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). Critical discussion and reflection on action taken was informed by using the principles and values of action research as "standards of judgment" (Whitehead, 2008, p.104) to which they could hold themselves and each other accountable. In this way, each school leader could reflect on what he or she had learnt and the significance of this learning for his or her future actions.

We chose to adapt the format suggested by McNiff and Whitehead (2006) to guide the participants in the identification of an aspect of school functioning that they wished to improve. They thus had to reflect on and describe the social and educational contexts of their schools; what their concern was and why it was a concern; what actions they took to improve the situation and why; how successful their actions were in addressing the issue; and what they had learnt that would influence their future practice. The process was a collaborative one, requiring the leaders to work with colleagues in their schools, with the COP sessions providing a place where they could critically reflect on the process for mutual learning. The COP sessions were spread from February to December of 2010, with an average of one session per month. The process culminated in a public seminar, to which Departmental officials, other educators and school leaders, School Governing Bodies (SGB), parents and academics from the University were invited. A composite project report book was given to every person attending (see http://aru.nmmu.ac.za/Projects/Action-Research-for-School-Leaders).

We also provided a comprehensive manual that introduced the ideology of action research, highlighting the importance of democratic, inclusive, relational leadership; outlined the process step by step by means of exercises for the project teams at each school; and provided guidelines on report writing. Ongoing, individual mentoring services were an important medium of support for each school. Three experienced educational consultants (ex-school leaders) provided support, offered advice and generally served to motivate, through respectful sharing of their expertise with their respective school teams. The schools arranged appointments with their allocated mentor as and when needed, but at least once per month.

Methods

We adopted a qualitative design, informed by an interpretive paradigm (Hartas, 2010) to gain an in-depth understanding of how the school leaders perceived the process of action research had impacted on their leadership. One of us acted as facilitator in the action research sessions and was therefore an integral part of the

process (Byrne, 2001), while the other assumed an observer role and took field notes. We made the participants aware of our views and assumptions around action research and educational enquiry as a democratic, participative, inclusive and emergent process.

Data were collected by means of semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with the participants from the ten participating schools. We opted for semi-structured interviews because the use of pre-determined questions would allow us to ensure that data responding to our research question would be gathered in less time (Hobson & Townsend, 2010), given the fact that school leaders are generally extremely busy. One interview was conducted at each school with the participants that had attended the action research sessions; therefore, in a few cases it was more like a small focus group, with up to four participants; in other cases, it was an individual interview. The open-ended questions invited them to reflect on what they had learnt and how they had changed both professionally and personally as a result of their participation in the project, their thoughts around the usefulness and relevance of action research as a means of school improvement, their successes and challenges in attempting to live out their identified values, and any other comment they wished to make. We triangulated the interviews with field notes made during and after observation of the 10 group sessions (Creswell, 2005) and a content analysis of the final project reports and the seminar DVD.

Both of us independently analyzed the data, using open coding techniques as described in Creswell (2005), before consulting to agree on final themes. The data were verified against Guba's model of trustworthiness, using the criteria of truth-value (explanation of research methodology and data triangulation), applicability (rich description of methodology and data), consistency (detailed description of process), and neutrality (observer in sessions; values stated up front) (Krefting, 1991). The usual ethical considerations of informed consent and voluntary participation were adhered to (Strydom, 2002), as confirmed by the ethical clearance obtained from the Ethics Committee of the University at which the researchers worked. Anonymity was not an issue, as the school leaders chose to use their own and school names on the project reports and to present their reports at a public seminar. The participants all signed consent forms indicating that they understood the purpose and process of the research and that they could withdraw at any time, in which case their data would not be used. They also signed consent that their data may be used for the purposes of article writing and public conference presentation.

Discussion of findings

Our analysis of the data revealed the following themes, which, although separately identified for the purpose of discussion, are closely related to each other and to the paradigmatic intents of action research.

Theme 1: The participants perceived their thinking and subsequent practice to be transformed by their learning on the action research process.

Theme 2: The participants learnt how to lead in a more democratic and inclusive manner.
Theme 3: The participants thought that following an action research process led to improvement in school functioning and climate.

The themes will now be discussed via two 'case studies' that provide rich examples of each theme. The context of the school and the action research process followed is explained through extracts from the data. These case studies provide robust examples of how the action research process helped transform the thinking and practices of school leaders (emancipatory and knowledge outcomes), which in turn helped to impact positively on the school climate, while promoting improvement in the identified problem (practical outcomes). Additional support for the claims to transformation is provided by selected extracts from other participants.

Project A: How do we get our learners to read more?

Context

> The school draws most of its learners from former 'black' suburbs as far afield as M . . . as well as learners from G, a semi-rural area outside PE . . . it is situated in a formerly designated "coloured" area of PE, due to apartheid policies of old, and is surrounded by a relatively impoverished working class community . . . over 60% of learners are Xhosa-speaking, while the remainder are either Afrikaans or English speaking. However, the language of instruction at the school is English.

Unlike most of the other schools in the project, this school is reasonably well-resourced, due to funding from the church.

What was their concern?

The concern identified by the team in this school was the "*low level of reading ability in English . . . many of our Grade 8 learners battle to cope . . . some even drop out after Grade 8 or 9*." According to the teachers, reading was seen as "*drag*" by most learners. This situation was denying their values of "*excellence and the optimal development of learners*". They wanted to promote reading as an enjoyable pursuit, realising that the educational benefits would follow. However, "*there was no real culture of reading at the school*." The library was now a store-room, there was no time set aside for reading in the curriculum, and so it did not happen.

What did they do?

The first step in addressing the issue was to set up a committee of teachers who unilaterally decided on the following actions: to conduct a survey to find out more about learners' reading, to dedicate one period a week to reading, to revamp the

library, and to set up book corners in class. The analysis of the survey revealed that learners actually did read more than teachers thought and they actually had a positive attitude towards reading. This feedback was the first learning for the school leader in this school – "*we need to carry out research to find out what is really the case*." The survey also revealed that learners enjoyed magazines and wanted more time to read. This information resulted in the addition of a second period for reading. Another "*surprise*" to the teachers was learners bringing reading material from home, proving wrong their assumption that learners came from "*literature poor*" environments. The library was revamped as far as possible and funding sought to set up reading corners in classrooms. However, the participant in this project was frustrated by the difficulty in "*getting already busy teachers to attend another committee meeting*." He felt that he was taking sole responsibility for the problem, but, after receiving critical feedback from the COP that maybe he must "*try something different, because if not, you will get the same old response,*" he did just that:

> I found a disused notice board and pinned up a copy of the cover of a novel I was reading and a short review of the book and a notice inviting learners to put their own books and reviews up – this captured the attention of other learners and teachers and now many learners and teachers are contributing to it.

How successful were they?

The school team evaluated their project as successful, since learners are using the reading periods, teachers and learners are discussing books together and even reading the same books. Their report concludes:

> We are pleased with the response to our actions and think that we are making an important contribution towards instilling a culture of reading in our school and thereby improving our leaners' educational opportunities. Our value of helping every learner to reach their potential is thus being realized in a small way each day. We are also motivated by our success in this venture and can sense the excitement among our colleagues also.

What did they learn?

By gathering baseline data, they were able to get a clearer understanding of how learners approached reading, and this enabled them to find more creative ways of promoting a culture of reading.

> We have learnt that adopting a formal and structured approach may not necessarily lead to successful implementation of the project . . . rather the action that gave learners a choice in whether to respond or not [the reading board] has sparked the most interest in reading among learners and teachers.

This "*simple action, done out of sense of not knowing what else to do*" had a positive impact on the culture of reading. The transformation in thinking in this school leader is evident when he says "*perhaps we have to give more control over to learners, thereby living out our value of inclusion and belief in the ability of learners*." He realized that by forming a closed committee of teachers (which is the usual strategy in schools to address challenges) in an attempt to ensure participation, he had actually excluded learners (and other teachers) from participating, added another burden on the shoulders of already overworked teachers (committee members) and was also shutting down the possibility of a creative and contextually relevant response to the issue. He learnt that he needs to "*go with the flow*" as the action research process "*does not always follow a pre-destined plan*." His transformed thinking and practice has benefitted his leadership of the school in addressing this issue. The success of the creative intervention has sparked his enthusiasm, and made it possible for others to become involved, thus improving the general climate and collegial culture at the school. He has learnt that "*change is a slow process*" and that he has to accept that teachers may take time to come on board, but that leading by example is much more effective than formally requesting them to attend committee meetings or to enforce reading in their classrooms. The school is now open to letting learners choose their own reading material, rather than prescribing books the teachers think are "*good for them*." The school leader in this project underwent a deep transformation in the way he related to others, in comparison to before: "*I would walk into the room with an idea that I would have to convince you what is best for you, because you have no idea what is good for you. How vain can that be?*" The acceptance that others have valuable insights to share is evidence of a transformed leadership practice.

Project B: Regenerating moral values in the school environment

Context

> We have 1,010 learners, mostly from the neighbouring informal settlements... Poverty, unemployment (80% of our parents are unemployed), alcohol and drug abuse greatly impact on our school. There are six shebeens [unlicensed taverns] in the same street as the school. Our learners are exposed to sexual violence at an early age... This violence impacts on morals and affects behaviour amongst learners. Incidents of promiscuity amongst learners have increased... Our staff complement is 40 permanent teachers... unfortunately we will be losing nine teachers through the current redeployment process...

What was their concern and why?

> Our concern identified during this project was learner bullying and the need for discipline with the basic question being "How can we improve discipline at our school?"

> Through the action research project, this question has broadened to encompass the question of values. Taking a more constructive approach, the project finally looked at "the regeneration of moral values in our school."

The critical reflection necessitated by the action research process and the input from the COP group, helped this team to refocus their approach to address the root causes of the bullying and violence, rather than imposing policies and punitive measures to control learner behavior. The data gathering during problem identification – gleaned from analysis of incidence book registers, interviews with teachers and the school care-giver, who makes home visits – allowed them to see that the negative behavior of learners was intricately related to what was happening in their homes:

> Generally, there is a lack of positive parenting, promotion of positive value systems and role-modelling. Major problems . . . are unemployment, high alcohol consumption . . . HIV/AIDS also plays a role, as infected parents may be too ill to discipline their children, while in some cases the parents have already died. The majority of our parents are illiterate. Those that are employed . . . leave their homes early and return very late in the evenings, leaving children unsupervised . . . these children tend to bully others . . . the majority of our learners are living with extended families, who do not always invest much time in bringing up these children.

They wanted to address this issue because their values of "*respect for others and their property, accountability for own behaviour, honesty and integrity*" were being denied. They wanted to be able to "*practice what we preach and this is not only for the benefit of the school but also that of the community, as the learners are the future leaders of their communities*."

What did they do?

They first formed an Action Research Committee, open to all interested teachers:

> . . . it was not difficult to get the teachers to buy into the project in that they all wanted to contribute a make a difference. The action research committee has grown as new components have been added to the project.

They also gathered data, through questionnaires, on learners' perceptions of the bullying and violence; involved parents in reviewing the code of conduct; established a programme to turn "*troublesome*" learners into leaders in each class; enrolled the whole school and some parents in a local NGO's Peace Programme; involved the whole school in choosing values to live by; established good relations with the community police forum; involved community members in a forum that aims to help "*shape future citizens*"; and increased opportunities for

extra-mural activities. It is worth noting that the principal in this school was very involved in the project, although not a participant in the COP.

How successful were they?

Table 1 summarizes how these participants evaluated their actions:

> The adoption of a developmental and positive approach to school discipline, in keeping with their values identified during the action research process, appears to have had a more profound positive impact on school climate than the original corrective approach.

What did they learn?

The school leaders report they are developing a monitoring tool to ensure that they can evaluate the ongoing success of their programme in a more objective way. The action research process has helped them to realize that, "*The most important thing for us as leaders is to be aware of what we have learnt from this process and build on this learning to inform our future research*."

The impact of participation in the action research project on this team's leadership is best described in their own words:

> We have learnt that inclusion of as many stakeholders as possible is important when we want to improve the values in our school. This has been an exciting process for us, and as we reflect on what we have learnt, we are excited about the potential for positive change in our school and motivated to know that we can make a definite positive input into the lives of our learners and community – this helps us to stay motivated and to rekindle our passion for teaching. We have already identified fundraising as the next project that we will be doing using this model of research.

The above case studies highlight how the action research process helped to broaden the vision of participants and allowed them to access innovative and creative responses, rather than sticking to how things had been done in the past. Data from the other projects supported the learning described here. There were many indications that participants could now apply the action research process "*to other areas where challenges exist*", allowing them to take action that is "*based on a deeper understanding of the context of the problem, which in turn helps to give purpose to action*." Participants also learnt to view challenges as learning experiences and felt more able to address problems that had previously seemed insurmountable.

Literature indicates that action research can lead to significant mind-shifts (MacTaggart, 2012; Wood, 2009). Transformation in the way we think, leading to epistemological and ontological shifts, is well documented as a pre-requisite for

Table 1. Participant evaluation of project.

Activity	Action taken	Evaluation	Learning
Reviewing code of conduct	The review and signing of the code of conduct	More learners know the contents of our code of conduct and parents have been involved in deciding on it.	There are some learners who did not bring back the form. We will have to follow this up.
School leaders	Training and inauguration of leaders	Formerly disruptive learners are now acting responsibly and becoming good modellers of the values we wish to live by.	Some learners are still disrespecting school leaders and have received warnings from the principal. We acknowledge that changes to behaviour will take time. We will continue with the process.
Peer mediation	Peer mediationAnger managementFeelings alphabet	Noise has lessened as we encourage learners to speak softly. Less incidents of fighting.	Vulgar language is still a problem and we have to find ways to promote more acceptable language.
Parenting skills	Workshops for parents	Parental involvement has improved. Parents have been exposed to alternative ways to discipline their children.	We now have 60 volunteers who clean classes daily – this is quite an achievement but we would also like to find ways to involve parents in more educative activities.
Community police forum	Including a policeman in our HAC committee	The relationship has helped with speedy response to our cases. We have called them to warn a parent who was neglecting her 5yr old boy. Police have started to address learners on crime, drugs and absenteeism	We need to include our policeman in prevention work and not just in punitive work.

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Activity	Action taken	Evaluation	Learning
Extra-mural activities	Umzingisi Foundation sporting activities	There are happy sounds as the learners are playing. They are now being introduced to Tennis and hockey. We are expecting a donation of +_R90 000 from Reeds College (UK) towards the development of a sports field in July.	Involving youth in positive activities is a natural way for them to learn pro-social values.
Skills training	We have revived our skills training this year. Learners are doing beading, sewing, mosaic and decoupage on Wednesdays from 14h00 to 15h00	The focus is learners with academic challenges but it does not exclude interested learners.	Giving learners something useful to do increases their self-esteem and this leads to better behaviour.

changing social conditions (Adler-Collins, 2011; Tattersall, 2010). It is extremely important for school leaders to realize the importance of reflexive thinking that entails re-examining assumptions that form the basis of their practices (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). Participation in this project seemed to develop a "readiness" (Kirkbride, 2006, p.26) for transformed thinking, since they were encouraged to develop their capacity for critical reflection.

There was also evidence that the participants adopted a more democratic leadership style. One of the principals, whose problem was that there was constant conflict among his staff and with himself, revealed that participation in the project helped him to change his style of leadership, which would presumably lead to improvement in relations:

> I used to be autocratic in my leadership, and this created tension in my school. Action research opened my mind to share ideas with colleagues and work together in achieving our goals, not my goal. I am now somebody who approaches people in the correct way and takes decisions that are democratic, so now whatever I am doing, I consult with the teachers, so that I know that they also buy (into) the same . . . even if they don't buy it, so long as I am not trying to force my things on them . . . that is wrong . . . I was not respectful of them, also not of myself . . .

This participant actually continued with the project for another year, with the mentors help, and did manage to significantly improve the school climate.

Values and practices that the various participants now embody and attributed to their learning on the project included "*team work,*" "*promotion of appreciation for the environment*", "*empathy*", "*respect*", "*social justice*", "*honesty*", "*perseverance*" and the "*importance of considering the input of all*." This implies that their leadership was becoming transformational (Pillai & Williams, 2004). Two participants summed up the 'value' of values for them:

> As leaders we have learnt that the action research process really makes us aware of what we are doing, why we are doing it and how we could do it better. The constant self-reflections made us realize how easy it can be to drift away from our values, and how difficult it is to live them out in the face of barriers that threatened the success of our project. However, when we do stick to our values, we feel much better about ourselves and are able to give more of ourselves to the project.

The basis for transformation in all genres of action research is adherence to values (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012). Values are used not only as a basis for decision-making, but also as standards by which actions and intentions can be judged (Whitehead, 2008). Because the school leaders defined specific values up front, in collaboration with their larger school teams, they knew how they should be acting at all stages of the action research process and could use them as lenses through which they could critically reflect on their actions and those of the other participants (Piggot-Irvine, 2011). It is extremely difficult to introduce and implement

democratic leadership, policies and practices in schools without perceptive and committed school leaders who embody values such as inclusion, equality, collaboration and democracy (Engelbrecht, Oswald & Forlin, 2006).

Reflecting on the process

Analysis of the data has made it clear to us that, when leaders begin to live out the values and principles on which action research is based and follow the systemic process it provides, transformation is enhanced. However, we also identified learning that will help us to improve our future engagement with school leaders.

We were often frustrated by the unscientific approach to data gathering and analysis by the participants. In spite of us 'teaching' them how to do it, they tended to rely more on oral reports derived from their own perceptions and experiences. Steele (2012) also found this to be the case when conducting action research with teachers. Yet, the schools who could not write reports without help from us, actually seemed to have attained the best outcomes, both in their school and in their own development. We are now questioning if our research training is actually leading us to think too rigidly? Reading the reports, most of them are able to justify why they think they have a problem and have provided convincing evidence of their learning. When we sat down with participants and asked them the process questions, taped their answers and then wrote them up for them, we found their reports to be very rich. Action learning is what helps to develop leadership (Zuber-Skerritt, 2009), and perhaps our rigid focus on the research component needs to be adjusted. Are we expecting too much from participants working under severely challenging circumstances and whose focus is not research outputs, but practical improvement in their circumstances? These are questions we need to continue to think about.

We also learnt that, when participants did not regularly attend the COP, their learning was limited. Two of the schools tended to just implement the action research process from a technical-rational approach, focusing on the problems (school safety and late coming) rather than on critical reflection of how they were addressing it. Although they improved the problem situation, we did not see much evidence of transformation in their leadership.

Hierarchal power relations prevalent in South African schools mean that transformative initiatives may be blocked or limited if the principal, whose authority is usually unchallenged, is not involved. In two of the projects, implementation was restricted because the principal did not give his/her backing to the project in any meaningful way, in contrast to the schools where principals fully supported the projects, even if they were not part of the COP.

We acknowledge the limitations of this evaluation, since it relies only on the perceptions of those involved, but the focus of the evaluation was on the perceived learning and transformation of leadership practices of the participants, rather than on the long-term impact on the school. The limited space allowed for discussion of our account here cannot encapsulate the profound shifts in thinking that we

observed during the COP sessions. The growth in passion, commitment, capacity for critical self-reflection was very evident to us.

We offer our account here to support the argument that involving leaders in their own development promotes transformation and to illustrate how an action research approach can achieve this. We believe that we have provided evidence to show that, when given the opportunity and initial support and structure, school leaders are perfectly capable of bringing about positive change, in spite of the adverse socio-economic contexts in which they find themselves. As an aside, we are happy to note that two of the participants in this project are now using a participatory action research approach as the basis for their respective masters and doctoral studies to pursue the topics identified during this project. We believe this says something about the value they attached to this way of addressing school improvement.

Funding

This work was partially enabled by a grant from the DG Murray Trust, South Africa (no specific grant number was allocated).

References

Adler-Collins, J. (2011). A narrative of my ontological transformation as I develop, pilot and evaluate a curriculum for healing and reflective nurses in a Japanese Faculty of Nursing. In M. Farren, J. Whitehead, & B. Bognar (Eds.), *Action Research in the Educational Workplace* (pp. 165–202). Palo Alto: Academia.

Batagiannis, S. C. (2011). Promise and possibility for aspiring principals: an emerging leadership identity through learning to do action research. *The Qualitative Report*, *16*(5), 1304–1329.

Bloch, G. (2009). *Building education beyond crisis: development today*. Retrieved from http://www.dbsa.org/Research/Documents/Building%20education%20beyond%20crisis.pdf.

Brown, M. E., Trevinõ, L. K., & Harrison, D. A. (2005). Ethical leadership: A social learning perspective for construct development and testing. *Organisational Behaviour and Human Decision Processes*, *97*(2), 117–134.

Byrne, M. M. (2001). Linking philosophy, methodology and methods in qualitative research. Retrieved from http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_MOFSL/is_1_73/ai_70361334.

Carr, W. (2007). Educational research as a practical science. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, *30*(3), 271–286.

Creswell, J. W. (2005). *Educational research: planning, conducting and evaluating qualitative and quantitative research*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Publishers.

Darling-Hammond, L., Meyerson, D., LaPointe, M., & Orr, M. (2010). *Preparing Principals for a changing world: Lessons from effective school leadership programs*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Day, C., & Leithwood, K. (2007). *Successful school principalship: international perspectives*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Engelbrecht, P., Oswald, M., & Forlin, C. (2006). Promoting the implementation of inclusive education in primary schools in South Africa. *British Journal of Special Education*, *33*(3), 121–129.

Fiske, E. B., & Ladd, H. F. (2005). *Elusive equity. Education reform in post-apartheid South Africa*. Pretoria: HSRC Press.

Giles, C., Johnson, L., Brooks, S., & Jacobson, S. L. (2005). Building bridges, building community: transformational leadership in a challenging urban context. *Journal of School Leadership*, *15*(4), 519–545.

Hartas, D. (2010). The epistemological context of quantitative and qualitative research. In D. Hartas (Ed.), *Educational Research and Inquiry. Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (pp. 33–53). London: Continuum.

Hobson, A. J., & Townsend, A. (2010). Interviewing as Educational Research Method(s). In D. Hartas (Ed.), *Educational Research and Inquiry. Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (pp. 223–238). London: Continuum.

Kamper, G. (2008). A profile of effective leadership in some South African high-poverty schools. *South African Journal of Education*, *28*(1), 1–18.

Kemmis, S., & McTaggart, R. (2005). Participatory action research: Communicative action and the public sphere. In N. Denzin, & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *The handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 487–497). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Kirkbride, P. (2006). Developing transformational leaders: the full range leadership model in action. *Industrial and Commercial Training*, *38*(1), 23–32.

Krefting, L. (1991). Rigor in qualitative research: the assessment of trustworthiness. *The American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, *45*, 214–222.

Kythreotis, A., Pashiardis, P., & Kyriakides, L. (2010). The influence of school leadership styles and culture on students' achievement in Cyprus primary schools. *Journal of Educational Administration*, *48*(2), 218–240.

Li, Y. L. (2008). Teachers in action research: assumptions and potentials. *Educational Action Research*, *16*(2), 251–260.

McNiff, J. (2007). 'My story is my living educational theory'. In D. J. Clandinin (Ed.), *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry: Mapping a Methodology* (pp. 308–329). Thousand Oaks: Sage.

McNiff, J. (2008). The significance of 'I' in educational research and the responsibility of intellectuals. *South African Journal of Education*, *28*(3), 351–364.

McNiff, J., & Whitehead, J. (2006). *All you need to know about action research*. London: Sage.

McNiff, J., & Whitehead, J. (2010). *You and your action research project* (3rd ed.). London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

McTaggart, R. (2012). Sustainability of Research Practice for Social Justice: A Generation of Politics and Method. In O. Zuber-Skerritt (Ed.), *Action Research for sustainable development in a turbulent world* (pp. 107–124). Bingley, UK: Emerald Books.

November, I., Alexander, G., & Van Wyk, M. M. (2010). Do principal-educators have the ability to transform schools?: A South African perspective. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *26*, 786–795.

Perumal, J. (2009). Reading and creating leaderful schools that make a difference: the post-apartheid South African case. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, *12*(1), 35–49.

Piggot-Irvine, E. (2011). Principal development: self-directed project efficacy. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, *39*(3), 283–294.

Piggot-Irvine, E. (2012). Creating authentic collaboration: a central feature of effectiveness. In O. Zuber-Skerritt (Ed.), *Action Research for sustainable development in a turbulent world* (pp. 89–106). Bingley, UK: Emerald Books.

Pillai, R., & Williams, E. A. (2004). Transformational leadership, self-efficacy, group cohesiveness, commitment, and performance. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, *17*(2), 144–159.

Said, E. (1993). *Representations of the Intellectual*. London: Vintage.
Schoen, S. (2007). Action research: a developmental model of professional socialization. *The Clearing House*, *80*(5), 211–216.
Steele, A. (2012). Looking backwards, looking forwards: a consideration of the foibles of action research within teacher work. *Canadian Journal of Action Research*, *12*(2), 17–33.
Steyn, S. C. (2008). The education system of South Africa. In H. J. Steyn, & C. C. Wolhuter (Eds.), *Education Systems: Challenges of the 21st Century*. Noordbrug: Keurkopie.
Stringer, E. (2007). *Action research: A handbook for practitioners* (3rd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
Strydom, H. (2002). Ethical aspects of research in the social sciences and human services professions. In A. S. De Vos, H. Strydom, C. B. Fouche, & C. S. L. Delport (Eds.), *Research at Grassroots: for the social sciences and human service professions* (pp. 62–76). Pretoria: Van Schaik Publishers.
Tattersall, P. (2010). On becoming an activist: a 'progress report' on a 37 year journey to date. *Educational Journal of Living Theories*, *3*(1), 74–104.
Taylor, C., & Ryan, C. (2005). *Excellence in education: the making of great schools*. London: David Fulton Publishers Ltd.
Van der Westhuizen, P., & Van Vuuren, H. (2007). Professionalising principalship in South Africa. *South African Journal of Education*, *27*(3), 431–445.
Whitehead, J. (2008). Using a living theory methodology in improving practice and generating educational knowledge in living theories. *Educational Journal of Living Theories*, *1*(1), 103–126.
Whitehead, J. (1989). Creating a living educational theory from questions of the kind, 'How do I Improve my practice?'. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, *19*(1), 41–52.
Whitehead, J., & McNiff, J. (2006). *Action Research Living Theory*. London: Sage.
Wood, L. A. (2009). What kind of respect is this? Shifting the mindset of teachers regarding cultural perspectives on HIV & AIDS. *Action Research*, *7*(4), 405–422.
Wood, L. A., Morar, R., & Mostert, L. (2007). From rhetoric to reality: the role of Living Theory Action Research. *Education as Change*, *11*(2), 67–80.
Zuber-Skerritt, O. (2012). Introduction. In O. Zuber-Skerrit (Ed.), *Action Research for sustainable development in a turbulent world* (pp. 3–27). Bingley, UK: Emerald Books.
Zuber-Skerritt, O. (2009). *Action learning and action research: Songlines through interviews*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Author's biographies

Lesley Wood is Research Professor in the Faculty of Education Sciences, North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus, South Africa. Her research focuses on helping teachers to develop their potential as change agents to address the adverse circumstances facing the school system in South Africa, including the challenges of HIV/AIDS and education. She focuses on the methodology of action research as a way to promote social change.

Bernadette Govender is an educator at Patterson High School in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. She based her research for her Masters degree at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University on this project.