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Review of Creating Equitable Classrooms Through Action Research

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Review of Creating Equitable Classrooms Through Action Research by Cathy Caro-Bruce, Ryan Flessner, Mary Klehr, and Kenneth Zeichner

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For educators frustrated by simplistic prescriptions disconnected from complex classrooms, this book is like a cool drink on a hot day. The editors have assembled ten accounts of teacher research so detailed that readers can smell the chalk dust and picture the faces of students struggling to find belonging and success at school. Each account illustrates teachers' inquiry and action: problem framing, data collection, reflection, and instructional decisions to increase equity of opportunity and outcomes for all students. Introductory and concluding chapters situate specific initiatives within the contexts of *equity pedagogy*, which includes two current movements that resonate with teachers: *culturally responsive teaching* and *differentiated instruction*. Thus, the book as a whole has inspirational coherence beyond the local initiatives it describes. From within education systems that mirror the social inequities of society, these authors and editors live and write their belief that change is possible: educators need not wait for societal or system wide change before doing what they can to improve children's lives today.

A principle expressed throughout the text is the profound respect the university-based editors and action research mentors have for teachers as constructors of knowledge. Equally important is the corresponding respect that the teacher authors have for their own reflective work and its significance beyond professional development. From chapter to chapter, readers sense that the authors are achieving the essential leadership tasks of finding their leadership voices and gaining professional integrity by matching their talk to their touch (Kouzes, 1999), within their own classrooms and beyond. By publishing their reports they not only reach and inspire a wider professional audience, they assert their agency in acts of resistance. Teacher inquiry and action for equity pedagogy combats twin perils of the teaching profession: the brutality of top-down reforms and prescriptive curricula, and the tragedy of blame and resignation that brings hopelessness to students' lives.

In accordance with the editors of this text, I see writing as an integral part of the development of leaders in education and a means to emphasize the value of their constructed knowledge to themselves and others (Brown, 2008). To that end, I have encouraged teachers to use a common framework to give feedback on the articles they read and to assess the quality of their own writing with reference to three interrelated criteria: *accessibility*, *trustworthiness*, and *relevance*. As an example to my students and to further the kind of collaborative work that Caro-Bruce and her colleagues (Caro-Bruce, Flessner, Klehr & Zeichner, 2007) encourage, I apply these criteria as I write this review.

Accessibility

This collection of chapters is accessible to busy educators in its well-structured organization, concise yet detailed writing style, and concrete examples of otherwise abstract concepts such as "sociocultural consciousness". The editors open with a description of the pioneering school district and university partnership that supports their work with teams of teacher researchers. They identify increasing cultural and socioeconomic diversity in their neighbourhoods as the catalyst for their sustained focus on professional learning through action research.

Subsequent chapters consist of teachers' research reports, each with a brief introduction by the editors that enables readers to preview and select articles of interest. Teachers of young children include Richards, Lyman, and Williams, who documented their reflective action and learning about presenting instruction for English Language Learners. They devised a controversial but socially relevant curriculum for children who have experienced the impact of drug abuse and AIDS and worked to help a troubled boy redefine his identity for himself and among his classmates. Melton describes capitalizing on underachieving fourth graders' preference for working with friends to encourage them to construct understanding in Math. In contrast, Coccari addresses a disturbing trend for sixth grade students to sort themselves academically and socially and defer to classmates along lines of gender and race. Secondary teachers include Shager, who studies high school drop out issues with his minority students; Nguyen, who examines black male high school achievement and experience across a district; and Valaskey, who reports the success of de-tracked science courses made more inclusive with constructivist teaching and student collaboration. Hanson also reports crossing bridges of culture, color, and language by drawing on native Spanish speakers' strengths in the role of teaching assistants and Kavaloski develops empowering service learning for students in an alternative high school.

On the whole, the dialogue between practitioners and academics is innovative and effective, providing readers with purposeful, justified practice, and theory that is grounded and illustrated with examples. Throughout their studies and in epilogues, teacher authors emphasize the personal meaning of improvements, a component that Fullan (2007) described as essential for sustainable change but often lacking. In the last chapter the editors highlight the lessons learned and make explicit connections to academic literature. Rich examples from the studies illustrate aspects of equity pedagogy, including building a sociocultural consciousness, attending to cultural frames of reference, practicing culturally responsive and relevant teaching, and engaging in reciprocal and interactive forms of practice. The studies contribute to a suggested agenda for change that includes attention to achievement gaps, empowerment of students from diverse backgrounds, engagement through culturally responsive practice, and activism for both teachers and students. The book concludes with recognition of the valuable contributions that teacher researchers have made to the knowledge base of equity pedagogy and a view of research that emphasizes integration of teacher inquiry with "outsider-generated knowledge that enables us to see across educational settings" (Zeichner, as cited in Caro-Bruce et al., p. 293).

Trustworthiness

Applying the criteria of trustworthiness, I examine the credibility of the authors through their supporting arguments and references, and consider the logic of their conclusions. For me, trustworthiness is first established in the teachers' voices and their authentic accounts of classroom complexity that are different from the ideal conditions often assumed in education textbooks. For example, Williams fuses empathy, identity and community building, classroom management and differentiated instruction in her struggle to connect with Davante. Davante is a seven-year-old who "sprawls and twists and turns", "is easily angered, expresses his feelings in the raw, and seems unmotivated to become an accepted member of [the] classroom

community" (p. 101). Williams, like other authors in the text, shares the vulnerability and self-doubt she experiences, exposes her mistaken assumptions, and describes the decision points in the trial and error approach that leads to her eventual qualified success. If adult learning is about uncovering assumptions and revising beliefs (Cranton, 2006), these studies are rich with examples of teachers, like Williams, who engage courageously in painful transformative processes for the benefit of their students.

The editors explain that teacher researchers are invited to include literature reviews when they see them as useful. Thus, informing academic literature is noticeably absent in several chapters. However, problem framing – precise descriptions of the classroom situations that initiated inquiry and action – is prominent. Most authors do identify authentic influences on their thinking about society, equity, and classroom practice, including inspirational speakers, poems, novels, and public television broadcasts as well as traditional research. Some authors referred to academic literature in their data analysis, showing their ability to call upon relevant theory and research to help make sense of their observations. In my own action research practice and mentorship, I have struggled with how traditional literature review formats might be adapted to better serve the practical, exploratory nature of action research. The relationship between these editors and teacher researchers provides a model of fluid give and take, true community collaboration in the sense that responsibilities are taken up by those who see a need or an opportunity to contribute their knowledge and skill.

As a researcher, I value the informing literature presented in the final chapter. Like Greenwood and Levin (2007), I believe that credible background knowledge is essential for action researchers whose experimentation will affect human lives (p. 4). However, as a teacher and mentor, I trust the practical knowledge of teaching and of action research mentorship that is evident in the strategies shared throughout the text. Most of the studies, with the exception of Valaskey's and Nguyen's, differ from traditional research in that they are

concerned with illustrating *how* a problem of practice was solved. For example, Kavaloski shares how she learned to prepare students for their culminating service learning assignment, teaching sixth graders about Malcolm X, with a series of skill-building exercises.

Such detailed accounts of knowledge construction in and for teaching are rare in educational literature and yet these works show that teachers need not struggle alone with the technical problems of practice. Tips for facilitating action research groups are similarly practical, including cause and effect diagramming as data collection, processes for drafting effective research questions, combining apprenticeship with direct instruction about action research, writing at meetings as a source of data, and having two facilitators for each group "to build a core group of skilled facilitators" (p. 18).

Despite my enthusiasm for this book, I wonder why the study by Nguyen on the school experience and achievement of black males was described as action research. I do agree that the study has merit as research relevant to a local district. It is certainly focused on gathering data for the solution of a local problem, which I see as an initial stage of action research. However, only the prologue hints at the eventual application of the data analysis to practice. There is potential for reflective action based on the information gathered but Nguyen does not describe the next steps after information gathering.

This question that I have for Caro-Bruce and her colleagues prompted me to survey influences on my own understanding of action research. I thought first of Carson and Sumara's (1997) definition of action research as "living practice", which described a professional lifestyle of questioning current behaviours and understandings and designing new ones. I noted the ongoing tension between action research for improved practice (Elliott, 1991; Sagor, 1992) and for teacher empowerment through knowledge construction (Carr & Kemmis, 1988; Levin & Merritt, 2006). Finally, my recent reading of Greenwood and Levin (2007) began to resolve that tension by

identifying two key outcomes of action research: contributions to "democratic social change", which could include movement toward equitable educational practices, and contributions to "the simultaneous creation of valid social knowledge" (p. 3). Considering this definition, the Nguyen study seems incomplete. Without documented, reflective attempts at social change – an attempt to improve conditions for these students – the knowledge constructed about their context appears inert – *about* education but not yet *for* education (Carr & Kemmis, 1988).

Turning back to the question of trustworthiness, I believe that the authors and editors have established their credibility firmly with the coherent theme of empowerment that runs through the book. Shager's interest in issues of race as pertaining to drop out rates was not picked up by his students in their parallel inquiry, and after some invitational prompts, he states simply that it was "not an issue" for them. This teacher's respect for his students' inquiry mirrors the respect shown by the editors for teachers' right to define their problems and construct knowledge within an umbrella concept. Perhaps most convincing in terms of respect is the steadfast refusal of these teachers to blame neighbourhoods, families, or the children themselves for problems of emotional adjustment and achievement. Instead, they embrace the professional responsibility to adjust their teaching to respond more effectively to changing needs.

Learning that action research accounts are prescribed reading in teacher education courses in Wisconsin convinces me that the respect these editors express for teachers' knowledge is thoroughly sincere. As school improvement, the inquiry approach to enhancing equity appears less superficial and more sustainable than well-meaning but disconnected top-down agendas and pre-packaged professional development. Social justice in these studies is neither trendy nor instrumental: all are trustworthy in that they have personal meaning for teachers who are connecting their daily lives in classrooms to the moral mandates of a diverse and democratic society.

Relevance

Achieving the relevance criterion includes clear identification and thorough analysis of problems and specific recommendations that address both benefits and challenges, all of which are achieved in these studies to varying degrees. A deeper aspect of relevance includes the power to uncover assumptions and contradictions and make a sustainable difference to teaching practice and learning conditions: achievement of this criterion is also evident in this book. Strong writers will always consider their audience but in the qualitative research tradition, relevance is ultimately determined by readers who see opportunities for application to their own settings.

Having taught minority students, including some striving to become teachers themselves, this collection of studies causes me to doubt that I have done all that I might do to provide inclusive experiences and scaffold academic success. The inclusion of many perspectives shows readers how equity must become a fundamental professional concern in any setting. Although this book includes no reports of work with children with physical and cognitive special needs or gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual or questioning (GLBTQ) youth, it is not difficult to imagine how similar action research studies might also improve learning conditions for these groups.

Just as Richards successfully transplants lessons for second language learners from Australia to Wisconsin, I see that much of this work could be adapted for sites that I am familiar with by teachers of marginalized Native Americans and First Nations students on the Canadian prairies and in the northern territories, and for the children of Punjabi mill workers in British Columbia's forestry towns. Across North America, concerns for equity span urban and rural settings as teachers and policy makers struggle to help students achieve their potential in their home communities or to access opportunities in the wider world (Corbett, 2007).

This book illustrates the power of action research to unlock local solutions and inspire a

global movement, fulfilling Kemmis' (2006) insistence that quality action research address a broad social theme. And yet, the authors also focus unapologetically on technical improvements to instruction that are immediately importance to teachers and to their school and district administrators. Concern for the needs of diverse learners appears to be an ideal meeting place for technical improvement and social justice, pointing to the need for inter-institutional collaboration to connect instructional skill development to larger purposes. Changes in demographics without responsive changes in materials, approaches, and beliefs (Fullan, 2007) can bring teacher despair and cynicism that leads to blaming families and abdicating professional responsibility. However, these authors provide "beacons of hope" (Caro-Bruce et al., p. 294) by modeling responsiveness and resilience and illustrating the orientation to inquiry needed to create more just and democratic societies.

Conclusion

As a whole, this book is powerfully accessible, trustworthy and widely relevant, a catalyst for focusing teachers' skills and commitments on increasing the experience of equity for all of their students. Appropriately, the unit of change is the classroom and differences will be made in the beliefs and practices of teachers. However, important points can be drawn about the support required to realize the potential of teacher research to improve schools and even to inform policy. Inquiry that makes a difference within and among classrooms through shared understandings and shifting professional cultures will require pooling the resources of teachers, principals and district leaders, and academics. This book is a ground-breaking example of that kind of collaboration.

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