Constructing a mutually empowering university: funder and school partnership through action research

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ABSTRACT
This article suggests that the traditional pure research which universities undertake is limited in impacting on communities. The article indicates that this type of research often does not empower communities as researchers, for these tend to be objects, of the research projects. The article argues that universities, however, have a role to play to facilitate research, which directly empowers communities, specifically as researchers. As part of the argument, the article refers to the Action Research project conducted in the Durban South Region, within the KwaZulu Natal Education Department. This research involved five racially mixed schools each working on its chosen problem area. The Department of Educational Planning and Administration facilitated the project through Professor R G P Ngcongo. The article also outlines how the process of facilitating the Action Research project by the University, which was represented by Professors L M Magi (Vice Rector of the University), Professor R V Gabela (Head of the Department of Educational Planning and Administration) and Professor Ngcongo (Assistant Head within the department) constituted mutual empowerment, between educator researchers and the Department of Educational Planning and Administration. The article also points out how accountability of the project was ensured. The article indicates challenges of facilitating the undertaking of action research by schools and discusses how these were managed. It concludes by mentioning the limitations and strengths of the project and reiterates the role which universities could play in promoting community service through action or similar research.

INTRODUCTION AND AIMS
Universities in general tend to have three roles, namely teaching, research and community service. However, many factors limit rendering of service, one of which may be the methodologies and approaches to knowledge construction, by university staff. It is common for universities to do the so-called pure research or research “within, but on” communities rather than research “within and with” communities (Heron & Reason 2001). While universities contribute to society by educating the citizenry and pursuing truth and knowledge from which society may benefit, practitioners such as educators in schools, who are not university students, do not readily learn to be researchers. In this way educators may largely rely on university research to inform or impact on their practice, and yet their work is a rich context for them as researchers, whether through ethnographic studies or action research.

This article argues that the traditional scientific research “on communities” whether for theses or dissertations, valuable as it is for the role of universities, is limited as a direct tool of empowering communities to improve practice. With regard to schools, many educators may not read university produced research, such as theses and dissertations. Further, for some teachers, especially those who may not have university education, using theses and dissertation may be limited and threatening. More importantly, since in many cases university researchers, tend to research on communities, as different from researching with them, the research process, may not offer communities any experience about undertaking some form of research. In this way, the research process may be limited as an empowering tool to communities.
This article argues for action research as a method of empowering educators, not only as researchers, but also as agents of improving practice within education. The article posits that university researchers are well positioned, by virtue of the opportunity they have to render community service, to facilitate research whose primary aim is improving practice. Action research in schools is seen as an example. By way of illustrating the argument, the article refers to an action research (AR) project undertaken by the Department of Educational Planning and Administration of the University of Zululand (UZ), Durban Umlazi Campus (DUC). For the purposes of this article, community refers to schools, particularly educators.

WHY ACTION RESEARCH AS AN OPTION

There are many variations of AR. Kemmis and McTaggart (2001) mention the following: Participatory research, critical AR, classroom action research, and a few others. While there may be different areas of foci, within these approaches, in this study the understanding of action research is based on a definition of the concept by Kemmis and McTaggart (1982, 2001) as well as Wickham (2000).

Kemmis and McTaggart (1982) define action research as follows: “Action research is a form of collective self reflective inquiry undertaken by participants in social situations. The approach is only action research when it is collaborative, though it is important to realise that the action of the group is achieved through critically examined action of the individual group members” (italics mine). Wickham (2000:4) states that AR is a form of strategy whereby educators can improve the quality of their work, based as she suggests on “systematic, self reflective, and rigorous inquiry”. It is argued that action research is different from sheer problem solving or advocacy. Rigorous use of research methods and research steps, accompanied by systematic critical reflection and review, gives this approach to research, a rightful place in social inquiry for action.

Another approach to defining AR is to determine the motivations for AR’s in undertaking it. Zeichner (2001:274) makes mention of three motivation, which have influenced educators to conduct action research. These are to

- Understand better and to improve one’s own teaching and/or the context in which the teaching is embedded.
- Produce knowledge that will be useful to others either in the same setting or other settings. This can be done through seminars, conference publications or papers
- Contribute towards equity and social justice in schooling or society.

These motivations are consistent with the definitions of action research given above. They span three of the variations of action research which Kemmis and McTaggart (2001) mention, namely Participatory research, Critical Action Research and Classroom Research. The project on which this article was based had as its aims, the first two motivations, which Zeicher mentions. It was undertaken to use action research as a tool for change in a social context and as an opportunity to generate situation based knowledge to shape desired action.

While AR is characterised by aspects of research such as reflection on the situation of concern; stating the problem; undertaking some literature review; deciding on methods of data collection and on a strategy to be used to impact on the problem as well as measurement criteria for improvement, these steps are often cyclic. They are not quite sequential. Reflection for example is ongoing, both structured and informal. Whatever the cycle, AR involves participants, who in the process of undertaking it, generate their own knowledge experientially. University staff cannot do action research for schools. However, they may facilitate it or work with schools. The process of knowledge and insight generation is experiential and calls for the subject’s experience as a source of data.

Indeed Heron and Reason (2001:183) makes an apt comment about knowledge generation. Speaking about cooperative inquiry and ways of knowing, they argue that knowing is valid if it is experiential (gained through direct encounter with others, a place or thing, and grounded in our own experience), presentational (provides a form of expressing significance and meaning through own stories and images), propositional (understood through theories which make sense to those involved, and is practical (expressed in worthwhile action in one’s life). It is posited that the process and cycle of AR outlined above, provides for opportunity for the forms of knowing to which Heron and Reason allude, hence its scope as a tool for community service and empowerment to participants involved.

Within the understanding of AR given above, the author discusses, in the context of the project mentioned in one above, a few principles of action research process. These principles, it is believed, indicate the potential for mutual empowerment between university staff who facilitate action research in communities and the communities themselves.

SOME PRINCIPLES OF AR

Hall (2001:173) cites a number of principles, which underlie action research. These it is suggested, provide an appropriate context for empowerment of all participants in the AR process. Some of these are the following:
● AR involves the full and active participation of the community in the entire research process
● The subject of the research originates in the community itself and the problem is defined, analysed and solved by the community
● The ultimate goal is the radical transformation of social reality and the improvement of the lives of the people themselves
● The process of the AR can create a greater awareness in the people of their own resources and mobilize them for self reliant development.

These principles, if implemented, enable action researchers to engage with their reality, to develop local and relevant solutions to problems they have identified and to learn to be creative in a systematic way. As Borda (2001:31) argues: AR is a “methodology and philosophy which can convert practitioners into more thinking feeling persons”. While practitioners, such as educators, are likely to enjoy benefits, which can positively impact on teaching or learning from action research underpinned by principles shown above, facilitators such as university staff also stand to benefit, especially if they are in the same field as participants.

SUMMARY OF THE PROJECT WITHIN WHICH THE ACTION RESEARCH WAS DONE AND METHODS USED

The Durban South Education Department in collaboration with the University of Zululand (DUC), in an attempt to facilitate systemic and wholistic development in schools targeted, established the project entitled Whole School Development. The concept of whole school development was used with three aims in mind: First, to enable schools to develop in as many areas of their operation as possible, second to assist them to learn from one another, from their varied interracial and intercultural diversity and third to use a variety of methods, especially those methods that involve them fully, to facilitate their development. The first phase (1999-2000) entailed a process whereby the five schools concerned, revisited their visions and missions, revised them if they chose to, re engaged through discussions with their strategic plans, drew and prioritised a list of needs for training and capacity building, in the areas of curricula, management, principal and learner leadership. The schools then scheduled a series of training programmes and chose suitable trainers. The second stage (2001 part of 2002) entailed schools reassessing problems which limited the fulfilment of their strategic plans, going through a prioritising process again and finally selecting one problem on the basis of which they wanted to do action research. For each of the phases the Durban South Region in consultation with their funder appointed an external evaluator, as point 6.2 below, indicates.

METHODS USED

A variety of methods was used. First were focused discussions to allow schools to table needs, prioritize these, and arrive at a consensus regarding which themes to base training on. Focused discussions were also used to enable schools to engage in a process of selecting a problem for action research. Focused discussions, were chosen over other forms of research tools, such as questionnaires. This was done facilitate schools to probe into why they chose particular needs and problem areas to focus on. The significance of focused discussions in enabling participants (respondents) to discover their real feelings about an area of research as well as their motives for preferred action, has been documented in relevant sources. Bailey (1982, Msimango 2001)

The action research method itself, was key in this project.

The process outlined above reflects how AR method was used. Evaluations done, by an external evaluator, appointed by the funder and the Durban South Region and that conducted by the evaluator from the KwaZulu Natal Education Department, were both quantitative and qualitative. The external evaluator used a participatory form of evaluation, especially to establish success indicators. Since, this article is not focussing on evaluation, the details of the evaluation methods, are not provided.

The process followed to facilitate action research

(a) Mutual empowerment between the UZ: DUC, and participating schools in the Durban South Region of the KwaZulu Natal Education:

In the author’s view, the process within which AR was facilitated needed to be created, main tained, supported and recreated and so forth. All parties did this in many ways. Among these were the following:

(b) Developing a mutually beneficial rationale for the project and the action research phase:

Like other university departments, the Depart ment of Educational Planning and Administration within the University of Zululand, not only strives to offer community service and thus contribute to social and educational transformation. It is also committed to inform theories used and developed in teaching and research, with the experience of practitioners, both its students and those who are only colleagues in the field of education. On the other hand, the Durban South Region in the KwaZulu Natal Education Department is keenly pursuing transformation in education in many
ways and welcomes projects such as the Whole School Development. It was against this background that the partnership between the Durban South Region, and the Department of Educational and Planning (DUC) was established. The project was a form of joining visions about school development from both parties.

(c) Ownership by the community:

Having proposed the concept of action research to the Durban South Education Department, the five schools involved and the Chatsworth District in which the five schools are located, and having had it accepted by the three parties, two structures were set up to guide the relationship and facilitate accountability. One was the Policy Formulation Committee, which comprised of members of the University as well as the Durban South Region, plus the Chatsworth District, as well as a member of the funding body. The member of the funding institution attended most meetings of the Policy Formulation committee. The other structure was the Operations Committee, which comprised of principals of schools concerned, the district manager and educator researchers. The author as main facilitator of the project served in both structures.

(d) Managing fears and concerns:

While the schools and educators liked the project, they had a range of fears, concerns, and limitations. Among these were concerns about time demands for research and for building capacity to do it. Some of these were articulated at the beginning of the process, some surfaced and were mentioned at different stages of the action research process. The following excerpt from Westville Senior and Greenvale Senior Primary Schools, two of the participating schools, indicate a challenge of the process:

Westville:

We found it difficult, initially, to come to terms with writing the proposal, as it became cumbersome and together with our busy schedule, we battled to find time’ (Zorich, Leslie & Permury 2001:2).

Greenvale:

We found it a struggle to get going. At first, everyone was demotivated. The feeling was that the problem of getting children to read was so overwhelming and the classes so big that nothing could be done. The literature review, has changed all that (Friedman 2001:2).

With regard to concerns and fears by educator researchers, firstly provision was made in agreement with schools and at the start of the AR phase, to have a Master’s or doctoral graduate, allocated for each school. The graduate’s role was to assist in such activities as writing a research proposal, collecting materials for literature review, approaches to data collection and analysis. The five graduates were each chosen on the basis of their declared interests in community service and AR. The other technique, which was used to support schools to be comfortable about their research project, was to enable educator researchers to work at a research area of their choice. In all cases, this was the problem chosen by the whole school. The areas chosen by the schools to research on were as follows: Christianaburg a historically African school was working on Facilitating Parental Involvement Within the School, their chosen problem was lack of parental involvement. Clernaville felt that there is an observable lack of commitment and involvement of staff in extra curricular activities and noticeable episodes of lack of cooperation and communication among staff. Hence they chose to work on Exploring Team Building among the School Management Team. Brooklyn Heights a historically Indian School currently was researching on promoting Learner Discipline, while Greenvale, a school with a similar background as Brooklyn Heights was working on An Approach to Enhance Reading Skills among Learners. Westville Senior Primary, a traditionally White School, researched on Approaches To Enhance Listening to Learn, Among Grade 6 Students.

Furthermore, a series of seminars was arranged for all action researchers involved and the project coordinator/facilitator. These seminars were aimed at capacity building for educators at different stages of the process, and for providing of opportunities for discussions and sharing of lessons between educator researchers. They also served to guide and support the AR process in whatever ways were necessary.

As part of the seminars, educators stated more of their fears and concerns, as these emerged during the AR process. To deal with these concerns, an attempt was made to enable educators to state them in the form of needs: action research related needs, teaching needs, staff development needs for the researchers, some personal needs which made difficult to undertake research and so forth. Subsequent to each session of needs identification, was a session of problem solving either by action researchers themselves or action researchers assisted by the graduates and the facilitator. Alternatively, some issues were attended to when the project facilitator visited each school.
for support or guidance of their research project.

With regard to concerns such as funding, the Operations Committee managed to work out a budget from the available funding, with an allocation for each school. This was discussed with the Policy Formulating Committee.

(e) Additional ways of capacitating educators as action researchers

Mention has been made of a series of seminars, some with all the action researchers and the Master’s or doctoral graduates attached to their school, some at the individual school by the coordinator. The latter visits also enabled the coordinator to observe the researchers interacting in their environment.

SOME COMMENTS FROM EVALUATION REPORTS BY EXTERNAL AND KWAZULU-NATAL EDUCATION DEPARTMENT EVALUATORS

Reference to the type of the evaluation done, was made above. Two sets of comments from evaluation reports warrant mentioning. These relate to things that could be improved in the AR project and to things that were seen to have gone well.

Some of the things that could be improved in the project

From both evaluations as well as feedback from the educators, through discussions, it was felt that the project did demand extra time from the researchers. It was suggested that in future there is need to shorten the time to something like four to six months and not a year or so. Some schools suggested that if the time for each research is shorter, more teachers could be involved in the next cycle of action research. While the author understands this difficulty, she believes a shorter time may not work for a research project. One school, Clernaville, thought it needed more consistent support from the graduate allocated to it. The graduate attached to Clernaville dropped out. As indicated this school had a sensitive topic regarding: relationships among senior staff. The school did not make much progress. The following is a comment from the external evaluator who also visited the school a few times: “There are no concrete outcomes as yet available”, in terms of the research project in Clernaville. Clernaville felt that had they consistently had a graduate researcher, like other schools, they might have been facilitated to make some progress. However, based on her own observations to the school as project coordinator and facilitator, the author believes that the school had other factors limiting progress. Deep seated conflicts needed more time for resolution, for the school to continue with the project.

Some benefits

- Like the evaluators, educators believe that the project demystified a form of research and showed how it can be a systematic and critical problem solving tool
- The educator researchers learnt important research skills, such as writing a proposal
- The practice which action researchers acquired to reflect on a problem chosen, on an ongoing basis and in collaboration with peers; to review literature to inform one’s perspective about the problem and possible solutions; to solve the problem systematically; to measure progress or lack of, etc was seen as a lesson for many
- As indicated by Friedman (2001:28) “Schools were amazed at what they learnt about what other schools were doing, both as part of the AR project, but generally too. The informal sharing that occurred in seminars was stimulating and meaningful”
- Besides Clernaville, all the four schools in their reports have stated a significant improvement in the areas they were working on
- Another benefit, which was identified by Friedman, was the enthusiasm which some researchers seemed to develop, as they worked on their project. As of now, four of the five schools, namely Westville Senior Primary, Brooklyn Heights, Greenval primary and Christianburgh have each chosen to share their AR project with one other school through conducting a seminar.

CONCLUSION

The Whole School Development (WSD) project has not only provided lessons for the educators, the university staff and the graduates involved have learnt from it, as well. As an illustration much has been written and researched on in the areas of parental involvement and discipline. Yet, engaging with the literature and contextualizing what is useful for local schools in the area of parental involvement is not common practice. The schools mentioned in this article indicate what is possible in terms of effecting change and generating knowledge. This project suggests a challenge to researchers, to attempt to work with practitioners to explore knowledge and models that are relevant to local contexts. Furthermore, much has been attempted towards developing the culture of teaching and learning in South African Schools. As an indication of the seriousness of South African Education Ministry about the development of this culture, a national and provincial directorates have been established to support the Culture of Teaching and Learning.
Services (COLTS). While the establishment of this office is a milestone in education, the author believes that such a culture is rendered difficult to establish if schools are not enabled to experientially create and sustain it. It is the author’s view that action research contributes to recreating such a culture, as teachers can effectively use AR towards improving teaching or learning.

REFERENCES


