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Summer 2020

# A Charge to Educational Action Researchers

Dusty Columbia Embury, *Wright State University*

Cherese Childers-McKee

Melissa A. Parenti



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# A charge to educational action researchers

Action Research

2020, Vol. 18(2) 127–135

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DOI: 10.1177/1476750320919189

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We conceive of education broadly and see it occurring in a diverse set of places and spaces, in classrooms and communities. We want to challenge our educational researcher colleagues to leverage the power of action research to better effect change within their schools and communities. We will point to constructive steps for this new way of working in the papers of the special issue we introduce.

We call on action researchers to engage in reflexive practice, to critically assess their intentions about creating opportunities to yield power to co-participants, and to share the messy details of their often imperfect learning process so that others may see themselves in the processes. We therefore invite practicing and emergent action researchers to continue what the authors in this themed issue have begun. In the following papers you see action researchers engaging in democratization of power and knowledge, welcoming risk, redefining spaces for learning, prioritizing reflexivity, and illuminating their practice through publishing. We want and need to see more of this. In other words, we invite and incite education action researchers to learn from one another as we reimagine and redesign the learning spaces we create with students.

We acknowledge the challenging barriers to conducting research in schools. Working with youth in ways that go beyond a structured or required curriculum is a challenge. Teachers, teacher researchers, youth, youth researchers and communities can, however, leverage the power of action research to transform educational spaces within and outside of schools to breathe new life into education by transforming relationships. From that basis the transformation of curriculum, assessment, ways of being, learning can grow. Ours is a call for a shift in education research to empower youth, educators, researchers, and community members so that collectively our efforts can support a sustainable relationship with the systems that support teaching and learning in all settings, all communities, and for all populations. This includes our beautiful planet.

As we think about the transformational potential of action research, sometimes referred to as participatory action research, we urge action researchers to consider how to operate within the curriculum and influence hierarchy and power in a school research site.

In the sections that follow, we outline our vision for transforming education with youth and educators through action research.

## Education as action research and action research as education

Ask an educator, a teacher, if she considers herself a “researcher” and the answer may be “no.” Ask an action researcher if she considers herself an “educator” and the answer may also be “no.” Better anyway may be to ask what she *does* and then notice that the description will likely include that she is working collaboratively with others to identify problems, proposing solutions, engaging in the work, collecting and analyzing data, reflecting on the process and results, sharing new knowledge, adjusting the approach to solving the problem, and repeating this iterative process. In other words, teachers and researchers engage daily in the action-reflection process, in collaboration with the folk most affected by changes (or lack of changes), to address complex issues with creative and practical solutions. Teachers are learning-oriented researchers and role models for their students.

Transformative processes of inquiry, teaching, and learning occur both in classrooms and in spaces across communities as groups of individuals come together for change. It’s not enough that teachers educate without embracing their potential as change agents. Likewise, action researchers must fully embrace the charge of educating the next generation of change agents. That is, good teaching *is* action research and good action research *is* teaching. And so, we challenge action researchers to embrace their identities as teachers and teachers to embrace their identities as action researchers.

## Why action research for education?

We understand action research not as a methodology, but as “transformative social learning” focused on co-creating and sharing knowledge with those individuals most likely to be affected by that learning (Bradbury, Lewis, et al., 2019, p. 2). With this understanding, we draw the attention of our action researching readers to engage in meaningful action research **WITH** children and youth, recognizing that decades of educational research have been conducted **ON** children and youth rather than **WITH** them. A sense of urgency is necessary with regard to education and young people, but in the rush to transform education through innovative solutions, we wonder what we might be leaving behind or overlooking.

Historically and today, administrators and legislators have decided what the problems are that face children and youth and how to address them. In the examples of educational action research we present here, our authors demonstrate beautiful, vulnerable, sometimes messy ways of disrupting that paradigm. The authors in this issue share stories of youth and teachers (both classroom and community teachers and leaders) recognizing the problems in their classrooms, hallways, and communities and collaboratively engaging in the work of creating transformation with and for participants.

## **Why address action research and education NOW?**

In order to continue forward momentum toward a sustainable world, education in all its possible settings must become a priority. Yet the traditional spaces for educational research and methodologies for educational research are simply too narrow. As we work toward a sustainable world that offers opportunity and hope for every individual to thrive collectively (Bradbury, Glenzer, et al., 2019), we acknowledge the crisis of inadequate, unjust, or altogether missing education for children and youth. As educators and action researchers ourselves, we know that transformative education of children and youth includes and goes beyond more than just academic knowledge. It engages the whole person. Because the education that children and youth need is diverse and situational, a broad spectrum of settings and contents can and should be considered to engage truly transformative educational action research designed to sustain humanity. Consider that educational needs comprise aspects that are social, emotional, relational, nutritional, recreational that are related to health and wellness, culture, academia. Education, or more broadly learning, occurs in whatever space it can: schools, community, etc. We are a learning species. Today we see the need for radical solutions to support the spirit of learning. We therefore highlight examples in our specially themed issue that gathers authors whose work points us toward radical, transformative, and disruptive solutions.

## **What educational action research *looks like* in this themed issue**

In this themed issue, we see and celebrate researchers for their honest, evolving, and often vulnerable descriptions of the processes they engage in. These works were selected because they demonstrate a value of practical knowing as a resource (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2015). This issue highlights powerful works by different kinds of educators: individuals engaged in social action with youth; teachers working with other teachers; and folx tackling the social, emotional, and physical well-being of, for, and with youth in our schools and communities. They present their journeys toward a transformation by engaging participants directly in the research process. Each of these illustrations shares stories of collective thriving, transcending individualistic goals and stories, tackling unilateral power, and exploring the spaces in which we can work together, in a participatory way, *with* stakeholders (Bradbury, Glenzer, et al., 2019), all foundational to the action research process. These papers tell the story of research that discovers and reflects upon the candid, developmental nature of internal observations and group relationships when engaging in the PAR process. They shed a rejuvenating light on action research in education and move it further forward into this arena of the complex, complicated nuance of relationships and social-conscious exploration.

## **Models for transformative educational action research included in this themed issue**

In conventional educational research, the results of the research and the sharing of results through publication serve to fill a gap in knowledge through novel results, different approaches to methodology, or new theoretical understandings. The challenge of engaging in and sharing transformative educational action research involves figuring out how to maintain the integrity of the research process while disrupting the traditional paths and products of educational research: a results-oriented approach that emphasizes product over process. With a renewed focus on engaging in research and practice that creates and encourages sustainability, including in education, as researchers and editors we take a collective step back and engage in critical inquiry about the purpose of educational action research and the purpose of publication. Transformative educational action research resists glossing over the “how” of interaction with participants and instead highlight these interactions as a central focus of the work. In this themed issue on action research in education, we share papers that model key themes that indicate truly transformative work with their partners. We selected these articles as exemplars because, like us, the authors recognize the sense of urgency and the need for transformation in order for children, youth, communities—our world—to thrive.

### ***Democratizing power and knowledge***

Familiar themes in action research such as the democracy of power and knowledge are highlighted. With youth, this looks like intentionally embedding youth pop culture in processes as a challenge to academic culture and using it as a vehicle for equitable distribution of power amongst youth and adults (Caraballo & Lyiscott, 2018). Educational action researchers can shift the lines of power, point out the implicit historical circuits of power existent between youth and adults, and challenge unfavorable power dynamics in order to call for change and reciprocity in roles (Call-Cummings et al., 2019). That is, when adults are confronted with students’ crucial questions, they can teach students to the social and scholarly skills needed to conduct meaningful research (Wójcik & Mondry, 2017) and create space so they can be central to the inquiry process (Carl and Ravitch, 2018 ; Roll & Browne, 2017). Researchers can create clear advantages for participants through collective action and work guided by an equity partnership that encourages youth to engage in their own research to create innovative solutions to improve their experiences, lives, and schools (Carl & Ravitch, 2018; Schiller et al., 2018). This kind of approach encourages researchers to face power dynamics head-on for the benefit of all participants (Bettencourt, 2018). The authors in this themed issue offer robust insights and descriptions of how participants and researchers challenged themselves and others to step forward in less-familiar leadership capacities and negotiate roles during the research process.

Action research is rarely a tidy venture and the ability to embrace the messy parts of the story along with the complexity of human characteristics offers readers insights into less-than-perfect research realities, but a reality that is worth investing in. The processes of growth and renewal, presented with humility and willingness to cede power that this necessitates (Grant et al., 2008), are key for the authors in this themed issue.

### *Welcoming risk*

In traditional research, discussions of ways to minimize risk are always present. We frequently think of this as it relates to implementing a responsible, ethical treatment or strategy to improve teaching and learning in an education or community setting. In the models chosen for this themed issue, risk is less about the treatment or strategy, and more about the uncertainty of engagement in the research process and exposure of one's professional practice, especially as a novice. In this issue, researchers confront questions related to norms of asserting themselves in the research process and willingness to be open to others' critiques of their work through multiple stages of action research. They display pure vulnerability in their willingness to be reflexive about this process, as they describe the mutual transformation in levels of acceptance and confidence as they open up spaces to provide and receive feedback amongst participants (Alam, 2018) and in doing so, they reaffirm that there is often truth living within the rewards of healthy risk.

### *Redefining space*

Opening ourselves up to the unknowns of action research and this risk also necessitates an environment conducive to and supportive of this growth. Creating the physical and mental landscape for transformation to occur is a highlight of this themed issue. These works describe the critical importance and need to acknowledge and create a safe, communicative space (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005), to create and value respectful spaces where conversation *with* youth can thrive (Caraballo & Lyiscott, 2018), and to make space for youth to embrace varying perspectives and envision their community's potential (Carl & Ravitch, 2018). We share, also, examples of how teachers working with marginalized youth hold space together to offer support and intervention when needed while still privileging local knowledge (Stapleton, 2018). Opening ourselves up to initiating safe spaces for growth and communication thrusts our relationships forward and provides greater opportunities for our transformation as researchers and practitioners (Call-Cummings et al., 2019; Caraballo & Lyiscott, 2018; Stapleton, 2018).

### *Prioritizing reflexivity*

Reflexivity moves educational action research forward as a process for real and lasting transformation. It explicitly calls out opportunities to demonstrate ways in

which we can “unmask” systems of power in our schools and communities (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009). These pieces explore the less-than-obvious feelings and positionalities that reside within an individual as they engage in participatory action research. Exploring routes for democratizing the research process by using methods such as reconstructive horizon analysis to critique the ways adult researchers engage with youth participants creates an opportunity for reflexivity about the tensions that exist in the research setting that is crucial to promoting an ethic of care (Call-Cummings et al., 2019; Schiller et al., 2018). That is, researchers must resist an overfocus on the *product* of research and instead spotlighting the *process* of transforming engagement with youth participants. Similarly, adult researchers can focus on processes and relationships in youth participatory action research settings to disrupt the youth–adult binary, directly challenge research norms that privilege hierarchy and adultism, and outlines strategies for youth-centered approaches that view collaboration as the product versus simply a means to a definitive product (Bettencourt, 2018). Authors in this themed issue embrace the risk of negotiation and sharing of power, of being vulnerable, of opening oneself up for critical feedback.

### **Illuminating transparency**

Transformative action research in education must include greater transparency in all parts of the research process. The authors in this themed issue carve out a unique space in that they push our understandings of relationships and power in action research by being transparent about the challenges of navigating power hierarchies in relationships. They speak of the difficulties in cooperative inquiry (Greenwood & Kelly, 2017). While in some research there is an assumption that relationships happen seamlessly and effortlessly as both researcher and participant work harmoniously to fulfill the research objectives, these authors share the discomfort and sometimes messiness of collaboration and relationship. Greenwood and Kelly (2017) highlight the authentic voices of practitioner-researchers working with and for youth marginalized by disability. Alam (2018) takes an honest look at challenges and expectations in working with teachers in rural Bangladesh, addresses the discomfort participants faced with the role of researcher as facilitator, and offered new learnings related to its rewards. They draw our attention to the tensions as they embrace the “I don’t know” and use them to teach us all a bit more about our work as action researchers (Bettencourt, 2018; Call-Cummings et al., 2019).

### **Educational action research today and tomorrow**

For all the problems and unlearning of conventional methods that impede real learning, there *is* also transformation happening in the sometimes overcrowded, under-funded, and inadequately staffed schools serving the most marginalized populations and in the communities that need it most. In these settings, school

leaders and community members face complex issues and nuanced, deep-rooted problems. Traditional strategies and quick fixes have not been effective in meeting the multilayered challenges. In many cases, teachers who work most closely with marginalized youth have not been included in decisions that affect their students, their voices have been silenced, and their agency has been threatened. In other cases, teachers and researchers interested in conducting research and implementing innovative school practices grapple with resistance and bureaucracy.

At times, those who attempt action research with youth are met with resistance, refusal, and discipline issues due to youths' prior negative relationships with adults. Strategies for navigating the complexity of action research in schools that serve marginalized populations are talked about less frequently in the literature. Instead, the reader is led to assume that youth are motivated, eager to engage with adult researchers, and ready for consciousness-raising and deep thinking about critical issues in school spaces that are ripe for change. While this represents the reality for some, others face much more challenging circumstances.

## **Our challenge**

It is in spaces of challenge that there is the greatest need to delve deep into the *process* of change and to foster the next generation of action researchers. Transformative action research in the most challenging educational contexts means deepening the understanding of action research methodology in ways that go beyond simply mentioning the theoretical origins of the action research then describing the data collection methods that were employed. Engaging in transformational educational action research means a greater focus on partnership, participation, and reflexivity. Addressing these elements forces us to engage in critical inquiry about our roles as researchers and educators *in partnership with* the people, schools, community members, and agencies where we engage in this transformative work. This will look different depending on the setting, but moving forward we know that transformative educational action research must privilege local knowledge even when it runs counter to prior assumptions. We must work *in partnership* with our participants, whether children, youth, or other educators, to navigate conflicting understandings of what change looks like, share power and decision-making, and reflect honestly about where and how we succeed and fail in these attempts toward a more sustainable world.

## **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## **Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.



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**Dusty Columbia Embury**

*Wright State University, USA*

**Melissa Parenti and Cherese Childers-McKee**

*Northeastern University, USA*