Action Research Methods: An authentic response to professional issues in education.

George Richardson and Raymond Chodzinski

The thrust of Teaching and Learning Volume 4 issue 2 was prompted by a request from Consortium members to produce an issue about “action research in education” and more specifically how action research methods can be effective for teachers, other educators, social workers, health care advocates and administrators wishing to influence change in the classroom and the school community.

As I began thinking about this issue I recalled that I had met Dr. Richardson at a meeting of West Cast in Regina during the Millennium year. At that time he was deeply committed to matters pertaining to the professional development of teachers particularly with respect to preserving and expanding awareness of the identity and culture of Canadian teachers. His dissertation, *(The Death of the Good Canadian: Teachers, National Identities and the Social Studies Curriculum)* won the Canadian Association for Curriculum studies outstanding dissertation award. Later I came across his work at an AERA conference in 2004. His paper (Self Improvement or Ironic Awareness: The Divergent Cultures of Action Research, Richardson and Judah, 2004) looked at action research projects by school based research groups and more specifically how can teachers integrate action research as a means of assisting classrooms teachers to grow as professionals. It is now 2007 and Dr. Richardson is Associate Dean of the International Initiatives Program, Faculty of Education at The University of

Alberta. As an advocate of applied action research he employs action research methods to explore national and international opportunities for student centered approaches to teaching national identity, culture, leadership in schools and a host of other concerns that pertain to diversity and globalization. Since he teaches a course on Educational Action Research I thought that Dr. Richardson would be an ideal expert to explain what action research is and how he applies action research methods to real world issues and more importantly to glean from him some thoughts about what teachers could be doing in classrooms to effect change through action research inquiry methods. I managed to contact Dr. Richardson while he was involved in his ongoing project in Ghana and he graciously agreed to respond to a few questions.

Chodzinski: *The term action research has been used to describe a model of research that relies on problem solving, doing, observing, recording, and recommending, (change being the operant objective). Please explain for our readers why you believe this model of research is an appropriate approach to bring about change and improve practice within the educational, social, and health care environments. Share with our readers how you have applied these principles to your body of work.*

Richardson: From its inception, action research has been democratic in structure and participatory in ethos. Its collective aim (to

promote critical reflection, deeper understanding, improve practices, and bring about sustainable change) speaks to a more authentic response to issues, questions and problems that emerge in professional practice than do the “top down” and (after Michael Apple and others) “over-determined” instrumental approaches to improvement that typically emerge in institutional contexts. The iterative cycle of action research (collective reconnaissance, planning, action, reflection, re-planning) itself addresses the complex, and emergent nature of issues of practice and tends to build an infrastructure of response that has the potential to alter (for the better) professional workplaces.

Within my work, I have used action research to work with social studies teachers to find more student-centred approaches to teaching national identity (Richardson, 2002); enter into a dialogue with graduate students about the cultures of action research (Richardson and Judah, 2002); design, implement and revise a video that addresses issues of diversity in schools (Richardson, Carson, Johnston, Wiltse, Tupper and Mangat, 2003); work with teachers in one jurisdiction to develop appropriate programs to address teacher professional development in schools (Richardson and Judah, 2006); collaborate with school administrators in Western China to develop student-centred instructional practices (CIDA project, 2002-2007); design, deliver and revise a “Diversity Institute” for pre-service teachers at the University of Alberta (Johnston, Carson, Richardson, Plews, Donald, and Kim, 2007—in print).

Chodzinski: *The term “collaborative research” often appears as the lead phrase in many articles that report Action Research projects. Is the term simply a way of expressing a necessary union or coming together of parties, even perhaps compromise or does*

collaboration in action research hold specific meaning and implication?

Richardson: Action research is not necessarily or automatically collaborative in nature—for example, people have done action research into their own practices. However, in general, the overwhelming majority of action research projects are collaborative. What makes collaboration unique in action research contexts is its specific, intentional and conscious aim to investigate professional understandings and practices and to produce agency and empowerment through positive change in those same understandings and practices. Drawing on Jurgen Habermas, then, “in a process of enlightenment, [such as that produced through action research] there can be only participants.” Collaboration in action research also holds specific implications in terms of the sense of shared purpose and mutual obligation that brings participants together. Commenting on this unique aspect of action research, Terry Carson has noted that action research is a living practice “in which teachers and students ‘see themselves as inextricably tied to the complex relations that form various layers of communities.’” Finally, collaboration in action research involves more than change and emergent self-understanding in a local context; it is directed externally and publicly towards helping to improve practices and suggest possibilities for change in the wider professional community. In this sense, collaboration in action research meets Lawrence Stenhouse criterion that all good research is “systematic, critical inquiry made public.”

Chodzinski: *Since the introduction of the research concept known as “teacher as researcher” (Cory and Foshay 1940), the model has undergone significant scrutiny and change. In some circles it has been challenged as a less than “authentic and robust” research methodology and in many*

institutions, professors actually discourage graduates from using action research methods. Yet there are others who embrace the approach. In fact there appears to be a resurgence of reflective practice approaches. In your opinion is there still a place for Action Research in the classroom and if so what are some of the ways you envision school based research as having influence on changes to classroom practice and enhancing opportunities for professional growth?

Richardson: Action research has certainly received more than its fair share of critical comment and scrutiny. At the same time its increasing application in a wide variety of fields (public health research, international aid and development efforts, community development projects) show that it is being embraced for its focus on more authentic, “ground-up” approaches to generating change and improvement. In educational contexts it is particularly the case that action research has seen a resurgence and teacher education programs and school jurisdictions increasingly emphasize the need for teachers and pre-service teachers to find ways to become reflective practitioners and change agents in their own practices.

Currently, there is, interestingly, a doubled emphasis on the need for using school-based research to change and improve classroom practice. On one hand there is the realization emerging from the work of such researchers and Michael Fullan and Andy Hargreaves that sustainable school change must proceed from a school-based shared, democratic, purposeful commitment to change. In this context, teachers have the most important role to play in terms of identifying the nature of change desired and implementing practices that will produce the desired ends. On the other hand, ironically, two decades of educational policies emphasizing decentralization, school-based budgeting and local-

ized professional development have produced an environment in which action research can and should flourish and in which teachers and school administrators have “little choice” other than to research their own practice with a view to changing and improving classroom practice.

Chodzinski: *If a teacher decides to opt for a research project that relies on Action Research methodology what should they know and what guidelines/principles/procedures should always be followed to ensure that the research is robust and grounded and does not lend itself to critics who suggest that Action Research is a more of a way of solving “problems through systematic enquiry rather than actual empirical academic research.*

Richardson: Teachers embarking on action research need to become aware of the relevant action research literature and prepare themselves to be Stenhouse’s “systematic, critical” enquirers. This preparation is crucial to extending action research beyond situational problem-solving. There are many resources to help teachers gain the necessary background information and methodologies. Most faculties of education have specialists in action research that can be consulted. Government ministries and teacher professional organizations across the country have print and electronic resources on action research and professional development officers who can organize workshops on action research. There are numerous websites containing examples of action research projects and procedural guides. A final note of caution about “doing” action research needs to be raised here. Action research cannot be “forced.” Whatever project is developed, it requires time for a sense of community to develop, for the cycles of action research to play themselves out, and for the necessary critical reflection to take place.

Chodzinski: *Action Research methods are often linked to reflective practice and are favorable with teachers and social workers because it helps tie together theory, practice and personal career goals. In your opinion what areas of education research require immediate attention and how can teachers enrolled in graduate or in service programs bring about change through applied action research in the classroom and the community?*

Richardson: It is difficult to produce a "short-list" of educational research requiring "immediate attention." What is a "critical" issue in one area may not be an issue at all in some other jurisdiction and the fundamental ethos of action research itself attends primarily to emergent local issues rather than universal issues. That being said, there appear to be some issues (many of which are interconnected) that a number of jurisdictions across the country face.

- Schooling and diversity – as Canada's schools become more socially and ethno-culturally diverse, how can we meet the increasingly diverse learning needs of students; how do we help in-service teachers address these needs and how should our pre-service teacher programs help prepare future teachers to work in diverse classroom contexts?
- Schooling and the community – increasingly, it is important that schools and communities collaborate to produce positive, safe learning environments in schools, but understanding how this collaboration is best achieved requires research that brings schools and communities together to develop and test different approaches to collaboration
- Schooling and retention – the growing concern over retention and school completion demands school and jurisdiction-

based research into alternate approaches to schooling itself

- Schooling, globalization, technology and rapid change – the question of how we prepare students to respond to a rapidly changing world requires school and jurisdiction-based research into how students see themselves as "21st century citizens," what role teachers see for themselves in preparing students for this "brave new world" and how school-based practices might change to help students become responsible, active global citizens

The issues/concerns I have noted above can all be addressed in graduate and service programs through action research projects.

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Major Interests include Social studies education national identity formation and citizenship education in post-colonial/postmodern times, multicultural education, action research international education psychoanalytic approaches to curriculum analysis, teacher preparation. Dr. Richardson has published many papers and is a noted scholar and award winning academic. He has taught extensively in northern schools and internationally. He is active on several international teacher professional development projects including China and Ghana and is highly devoted to student centered education. He is extremely keen on developing teacher led programs about the Canadian Identity. His PhD dissertation "The Death of the Good Canadian: Teachers, National Identities and the Social Studies Curriculum" won the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies outstanding dissertation award. His non academic interests include hiking, alpine rock climbing and gardening.

Action Research Topics for Classroom Application

The following topics are a result of discussions with a variety of professors, teachers and administrators and colleagues. With adjustment they can be applied at all levels of education K-12 to enhance teaching and learning

Interventions aimed at improving mathematics skills in one classroom

Innovation in a physical health curriculum at the grade eight level

Changing lunch room habits of fifth and sixth graders

Drama as a tool to improve sociability and understanding

Parent /Teacher collaboration to develop greater understanding of the school curriculum

Supervised fiction reading to improve the reading habits of grade ten students

A collaborative approach to improving safe school environments

Increasing Canadian history knowledge through identity framed role play methods

Improving spelling through direct instruction methods

Helping students improve self governing behaviour through storytelling

Reducing bullying in classrooms with face to face dialogue methods

Increasing physics and science scores through field-based experiential learning

Experiential interventions to improve health habits of grade nine students

Teaching cooperative learning through an experience based project

Changing high school drop out rates through a mentorship based intervention

Walking as a means of improving learning

Increasing on the job happiness for beginning teachers: A mentorship project

Increasing the level of discourse between parents and teachers through chat room dialogue