

Action Research: An Early History in the U. S.

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Action research is a strategy that seeks to improve the quality of action through systematic examination of the processes and the consequences of action. In the United States, as applied to Education, it may be said to have had its beginnings in 1926, with the publication of a book by B. R. Buckingham, then Director of the Bureau of Educational Research at The Ohio State University, called *Research for Teachers*. Writing out of the "certainties" of the Scientific Movement in Education of the Twenties, Buckingham instructs teachers in the use and interpretation of standardized tests, and offers some advice on tool-making. The book had very little influence; it went out of print shortly.

During the Thirties, extensive curriculum revision was attempted. The most prominent leader of this work was H. L. Caswell, first at Peabody College in Nashville, Tennessee, then at Teachers College, Columbia University, in New York. During that decade, Caswell made a number of discoveries, which he later summarized in his 1950 book, *Curriculum Improvement in Public School Systems*. One of these was that teachers would not adopt innovations from outside their classrooms. They had to "own" (Nelson Haggerson's term) an innovation before they would try it. This has been rediscovered by Bowe, Ball, and Gold, in a recent report of research on the consequences in The United Kingdom of the Educational Reform Act of 1988. They found that educational reforms must suffer "contextualizing" -i.e., being given a "local habitation and a name"--in the course of being adopted, even under official mandate. Teachers believe their own eyes, not someone else's.

Caswell put this early finding to work when he founded the Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute of School Experimentation, first by creating what is now called a "school network" that extended across the country, and second by urging the staff of the new Institute to undertake classroom experimentation.

Shortly after the end of World War II, Stephen M. Corey became Executive Officer of the new Institute. Influenced by Caswell, Corey took advantage of the work of John Collier, Director of the U. S. Bureau of Indian

Affairs, who had developed what was called "operations research", an approach that sought to improve action by applying systematic data-gathering to decisions in the field. The approach was immediately adopted by the military, and it attracted the attention of those involved in action in many fields.

Corey made an important addition to operations research, however. Remembering the reluctance of classroom teachers to try someone else's practices, Corey suggested that the teachers be drawn in to the design of the classroom research, and that they participate in the gathering and interpretation of whatever data were collected. This approach he called cooperative action research, and that name held.

Members of the Institute staff proceeded to do research with teachers, resulting in several publications: *Developing a Curriculum for Modern Living*, by Florence Stratemeyer, and *Ways of Studying Children*, by Ruth Cunningham, both with members of the Denver school staff. Another was *Children's Social Values, an Action Research Study*, which I did in partnership with Kenneth Wann and the faculties of six elementary schools in Springfield, Missouri.

The cooperative action research movement was summarized in a 1953 book by Stephen M. Corey, *Action Research to Improve School Practices*. Corey documents the origins of the idea, explains why it is necessary to conduct classroom experimentation with teachers if one seriously intends to have an effect on school practice, and provides illustrations of the process. A number of articles on action research appeared in the professional journals between 1949 and 1957. The 1957 Yearbook of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), "Research for Curriculum Improvement", which I edited with James Hall, was largely devoted to action research. It contained chapters by several well-known curriculum leaders of that time: Corey, Matthew Miles (at that time a member of the Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute), Ross Mooney, Hilda Taba, Margaret McKim, and Virgil Herrick, among others.

The chief limitation of cooperative action research, from the point of view of the educational researchers of that time, was that it was not possible to generalize from the examined population to others, because no attempt was made to see whether the examined population was representative of a larger population. In addition, since much of the research was designed and carried out by classroom teachers, who are not trained in research, the data often were flawed. For these reasons, the movement was ridiculed in the publications of AERA, and it did not spread. It disappeared as the members of the Institute staff scattered with the passage of time.

During the Eighties, elements of the process reappeared, though with different names: "networking", "classroom research", "site-based management and inquiry", and, finally, under its original name, "action research".

It may be useful to consider what was learned about this process during its lifetime in the Fifties.

For one thing, it did not turn out to be classroom experimentation. The work was descriptive, not experimental. What the teachers wanted, and could do well, was to examine, systematically, certain aspects of the children's behavior. The results of these examinations were not, directly, changes in school practice. The results were improved theory, or perhaps better, improved questions about children's development. For example, Stratemeyer's work in Denver contributed the concept of "persistent life situations" to the literature of child development, such as the changing answer (with development) to the question "What shall I eat?", or "How shall I deal with the opposite sex?" Stratemeyer proposed that questions such as these be addressed directly in the classroom, since they are of such basic importance. Again: in Springfield, we found that the teacher played a much greater role in the children's self-esteem than we had supposed.

One of the most durable contributions to practice made by these projects can best be called "tool-making". Cunningham's *Ways of Studying Children* was just such a compilation of tools for gathering useful information about children's social development, their attitudes, and their achievement. When I returned

to Springfield five years after the completion of the project there, I found that what remained in use was the sociometric devices we had found and developed. It is safe to say that nothing remains in Denver of Stratemeyer's work, though the ideas she put forth have entered curriculum theory in various forms.

The other contribution, which was limited to the members of the participating staffs, is an array of interesting and pleasant professional memories. The staffs clearly were pleased to carry on hours of professional thought and talk with the university consultants--but the talk ended when the consultants left; conversation in the teachers' lounges returned to gardening, an occasional anecdote about a difficult child, and personalities.

Not so for the consultants. They remembered and reported what had been discovered. However, since the findings could not be generalized to unexamined populations, they were generally ignored.

Nevertheless, the findings remain intriguing. For example, one elementary school staff in Springfield "hunched" (hypothesized) that children's social interactions became more complex as they grew older. They defined "complex" as the number of steps required to bring the interaction to completion. The hypothesis was rejected when a teacher observed a seven-year-old girl going through at least thirty steps, and taking more than a month, to prevent another girl from being invited to a third girl's birthday party. Or, again, we had speculated a good deal about attitude change. Gordon Allport had defined attitudes as follows: an attitude is a disposition to find a given referent aversive or valuable. A child may like or dislike Math, for example. Moreover, any attitude has a degree of strength, or intensity. A child likes or dislikes Math (a referent) in some degree--from much to little. Or perhaps the child doesn't care one way or the other--he is apathetic. Thus, attitudes have valence (direction), and intensity. We supposed that a change in attitude from, say, an aversion to a value would be gradual. The aversion would become weaker and weaker, until the attitude was apathetic, whereupon its referent would acquire-gradually increasing value. Not so. What we found was that it was very, very difficult to change an attitude at

all, but that if it did change, it flipped; the valence might change, but the intensity remained constant. The change matched exactly what we had heard about religious conversions. The child who changed liked the referent as much as he/she had disliked it, and presumably vice versa.

In another study, we contrasted physical and verbal aggression, supposing that response to verbal aggression would increase as the children grew older. Not so. Second graders responded to verbal aggression more than did the sixth graders.

In these studies during the late Forties and early Fifties, we were much influenced by the social psychologists who had followed after Kurt Lewin, who had found American classrooms to be as authoritarian as Nazi Germany, whence he had recently fled. These psychologists were primarily concerned with group behavior, and we were, too. Hence the teachers' desire to study the social behavior of children in Springfield, and Cunningham's book about the group behavior of boys and girls.

So influenced, we used the tools that had been developed for such study: projective devices, such as unfinished stories, and attitude questionnaires, such as "things that make me feel important", or "things that make me want to strike back". We also used what Herbert Stolz once called "systematic, incidental observation", and sociometric analyses. We never did get round to experimentation to improve academic performance. The prevailing talk in educational circles of that time was heavily influenced by the external situation: the war against dictatorship had just ended, and we were deeply concerned with the preservation and improvement of democracy at home. The Cold War was just beginning. I had to include an explanatory paragraph in my social values book to defend it against the right-wing extremism that had appeared in Pasadena, in Ohio, and in McCarthyism. Springfield, Missouri, where the project was undertaken, was in the American Bible Belt--a seat of religious fundamentalism--and the teachers there consequently cared deeply about questions of social morality. It showed in the schoolyard, where, instead of playing "cops and robbers", the children often played "Jesus and the Pharisees". That seems hard to believe, but I was told that it was common.

As I observe the present scene, I find almost no residue from the Cooperative Action Research movement of the Forties and Fifties. It may be well, therefore, for me to offer a purely subjective account of what those who now attempt action research should bear in mind.

First, remember that teachers have so far found educational research of little use as applied in the classroom. It follows that action research, if it is to improve the quality of action, has to come from the inside out, not the top down or the outside in. It has to originate in classrooms, not in constructed lab situations. Second, remember the function of theory: it exists to clarify reality. It follows that outside consultants can bring theory to bear on actuality in the classroom, provided that the theory clarifies the actuality. For example, we found Allport's definition of attitudes very useful in understanding the attitudes of the children we faced in Springfield.

Third, keep it simple, or the teachers will be skeptical. For example, I once worked with some teachers in a suburb of Columbus, Ohio; they worried that children in the Third Grade couldn't seem to deal with "word problems", such as "Johnny went to buy a dozen apples at five cents each. What did the apples cost Johnny?" I suggested that the teachers assign as homework that the children make up their own word problems. It worked. The children enlisted their parents. Some of the problems they brought in could not be solved because there wasn't enough information (Johnny went to the store to buy some apples. How much did they cost?) Some were complicated with useless detail; some were too simple; and so on. The performance of the children on the "word problems" in the textbook improved dramatically. Nobody quantified anything to support the conclusion that it worked. It was obvious.

Fourth, learn how to be an effective classroom consultant. The human relationship between a university consultant and an experienced classroom teacher requires direct attention by the consultant. The relationship will always be polite, but the teacher can be expected to test the consultant's sincerity constantly. For one thing, teachers usually begin with the assumption that the university

consultant hasn't been in a classroom for years, and knows nothing of the realities of teaching in the lower schools. Don't parade your knowledge. Instead, seek the teacher's opinions, and pay close and respectful attention to them, because the teacher knows the immediate situation better than you ever can.

Fifth, learn how the teacher thinks. I once was asked to find out how a certain kindergarten teacher managed, year after year, to produce such independent children. The children entered more or less infantile, and emerged self-respecting young people, full of initiative and independence. I asked her how she did it. Her response was to tell me story after story about individual children she had known. She was about sixty years old, and she seemed to remember every child she had ever faced. I didn't know how to listen to her stories, so I learned nothing that way. I sat in her classroom every morning for a month, and it finally dawned on me that she gave the children no alternative to being independent. If there was noise in the hall during a class planning session, she asked "Does anyone else hear the noise in the hall?", and one of the children got up and closed the door. When a boy brought her a boat he was carving and asked if it was all right, she asked, "Are you satisfied?", and he returned to work on it some more. When a child asked her to tie his shoe, she asked "If I tie the second knot, can you tie the first?" Of course the children became independent. They had no alternative. I was looking for technique, and I finally saw some. If I had learned how to listen to her anecdotes, I might have learned much more than I did. I might have gone beyond technique to ideas. But I didn't, and I'm the poorer for it.

Finally, be modest in reporting action research. We live in a time when exaggerated claims for educational accomplishments are almost the norm. If our main audience--teachers in service--is to pay attention to what we report, we have to explain to them how they may verify what we say, and we must include the false starts and the mistakes in the report. Education is not yet a science; there is very little that we know without doubts. Action research continues to be promising, but-we must be aware of its limitations as well as its possibilities.

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