

## Analysing the Use of Action Research to Develop Practices of Inclusion: A Case of a South African School

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**ABSTRACT** Developing practices of inclusion worldwide pose a challenge as the concept of inclusion is most often conceptualized differently making it difficult to have a uniform approach towards the process of implementation. This paper reports on the process whereby action research was employed in order to develop inclusive practices in a South African school context. The research approach was qualitative and several data collection techniques were used. These included a series of meetings, daily reflection diaries, observations and one on one interviews. Data was analysed using group interpretative data analysis and analytic induction by the researcher to arrive at the findings. Among some of the findings is that action research is useful in developing the practices of inclusion. However the form of action research that is relevant to the South African context could be the one that takes into consideration the fact that teachers in South Africa are not very reflective and do not readily collaborate. The study concludes that collaborative form of action research is significant for developing practices of inclusion.

### INTRODUCTION

Most literature on teacher change and change implementation points to the fact that teachers embrace and implement change when they are involved in or have had a chance to participate in the initiation, planning, designing and implementation processes. Most literature on initiating change in schools to develop inclusive practices also points to the significance of teacher collaboration as an appropriate approach (Savolainen et al. 2012; Morton Higgins et al. 2012; Ainscow et al. 2006; Cesar and Santos 2006; Engelbrecht and Green 2001; Fullan 1999).

The South African context provides evidence that teacher involvement is a prerequisite for change; for example, Engelbrecht and Green (2001) note that teachers in South Africa have developed a resistant attitude towards change because change was often imposed on them during the era of apartheid education. It is therefore crucial that any process of change, as Fullan (1999) maintains, takes the beliefs of teachers into consideration and acknowledges that they are active participants in the process, if it is to be realised. It is for this reason that this study is about exploring the inclusive practices where the participation and involvement of teachers is very important.

Teachers in South African schools find themselves in a position where they have had to

implement inclusive education since its introduction in 2002 (South Africa 2001). The process of change from the traditional way of teaching to a more inclusive approach prompts teachers to reflect critically on their practices. The process of reflection on teaching practice was not a common practice in South African schools. Consequently, the opportunity to be action researchers provides teachers with a chance to emancipate themselves from the bondage of indoctrination and the injustices of the past apartheid education ideology. This background led to the following question:

*How can action research be used to develop the practices of inclusion in a South African Context?*

### Relevance of Action Research to Inclusive Education

According to White (2005), action research was conceptualised by Lewin (1952) and developed further by Kolb (1984), Carr and Kemmis (1986) and other researchers. While there are different forms of action research, this paper assumed a collaborative action research mode. Collaborative action research is a complex process that recognises the role of the teacher as researcher. For example, Mohr (2004) acknowledges that action research is a method of research managed by teachers who elect their research group to contribute to the planning and

monitoring of enquiry processes (Aldridge et al. 2012). It is transformative in nature and offers teachers the opportunity to collaborate. Teachers taking part in action research should have certain characteristics and behave in a particular manner; for example Pollard (2002) postulates that teachers should have the following characteristics in mapping the development through action research:

1. the systematic questioning of their own practice as a basis for development;
2. commitment to study their own practice and
3. ability to test a theory into practice (which happens when teachers have a strong network).

The network between teachers manifests itself in what is called a “research forum”, which is a platform created to deal with conclusions, critique and testing new ideas (Pollard 2002). Research is mostly public in that stakeholders reflect on their practices publicly through the analysis of data and evidence collected – a process Ainscow et al. (2006) refer to as group interpretive process. Through evidence-based data, teachers begin to improve on their practice – a phenomenon referred to as “evidence-based teaching” (Hammersley 2007).

On the same note, Altrichter and Elliott (2003) mention that during the action-research process teachers assume what is called a “double task”; that is, the role of teacher and researcher. Teachers reflect on their practice using action research either with themselves or with colleagues through a process that Altrichter and Posch (2010) calls “dynamic networking”. The process of action research is characterised by the process of linking theory to practice, maintaining the conceptual and perceptual knowledge, value objectivity and subjectivity of the research and focusing on the individual or group (Altrichter and Elliott 2003).

The process is thus teacher-driven and the management of the school should not dominate the process. Hence Fullan (2001) and Somekh (2006) caution against management-led whole-school action research, which is intent on disguising teacher involvement while imposing ideas on teachers.

Unlike in management-led whole-school action research, in collaborative action research teachers negotiate and agree on the research questions and the means to find answers to them.

Action research adopts an emancipatory approach in looking critically at power relations and engaging with the broader political structures to ensure social justice (Tinning 2012). Somekh (2006) drawing on Habermas’s concept of “communicative action”, Marx’s concept of “false consciousness” and Foucault’s “deconstruction of the regimes of truths” – supports the argument that action research attempts to emancipate the socially oppressed through the deconstruction of meaning through the participation and involvement of teachers as researchers. It follows that the process is dominated by teachers forming networks and contributing through collaboration to learn more about their practices. However Ainscow et al. (2006) caution about regarding the contribution of practitioners as being above critique, they suggest that action research process should not lose its element of being reflective and critical, and that to strengthen the outcomes of the process, the voices of the practitioners must be supported by providing research training and providing different theoretical perspectives to clarify the views of the practitioner.

Action research has high triangulation potential since different sources of data are collected during the process; for example, Ainscow et al. (2006) describe this form of research as a process whereby teacher researchers engage in processes of triangulation such as observation and interviews. The process of data analysis and interpretation varies according to the interests of the researchers. The notion of a group-interpretive process, which is the process of teachers collaboratively embarking on reflection and meaning-making, becomes crucial in the interpretation of data. The process is illustrated by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), for example, by means of a four-phase model:

1. **The Plan:** a flexible, unpredictable anticipation of what will occur in the future;
2. **The Action:** a deliberate and controlled activity process often defined by putting ideas into action, as influenced by past practices and critical reflection on the changes between past and new practices;
3. **Observation:** documenting and recording the effects of action in an open way in addition to recording the unexpected, using mostly research diaries;
4. **Reflection:** recall of action as observed, active engagement with data to make sense

of it by giving meaning to it and interpreting the data, which is evaluative in nature.

In developing practices of inclusion teachers would jointly plan the enquiry activities, put them into action, observe if they impact on practice and reflect for the purpose of making their practice inclusive.

### METHODOLOGY

The research was an action research *case study* of a secondary school where the researcher was the principal. The study was initiated by the researcher, but worked with 15 teachers. The 15 member community of enquiry therefore jointly determined the purpose of the study which was to develop practices for inclusion to be realised in the school. Because teachers thought there was a need for them to reflect on their practices in relation to inclusion, the action research method was considered to be more appropriate.

The school was chosen because it serves a previously disadvantaged community with a student population with diverse socio-economic, linguistic, ethnic and cultural backgrounds which presented barriers to learning. The researcher's position at the time of the study, as the principal made it easily accessible. The

school is one of the models of the new South Africa; it has characteristics of both previously disadvantaged and advantaged schools (adequately but not highly resourced). Because of its relevance to the new educational dispensation in terms of learner and teacher composition, the research results could be transferable to other schools. The research process took the form of collaborative action research. Firstly, teachers acknowledged that they need a mechanism to develop practices of inclusion and therefore aimed to improve their practice. Teachers were collaborative in that teachers worked together and supported each other and jointly to develop the practices of inclusion. The process was critical in that the teachers questioned and challenged each others' existing notions of practice, thereby resulting in the development of their own local theory.

The sample of 15 teachers, who were conveniently sampled in that they voluntarily took part in the study, was spread as follows: junior teachers (0 to 10 years of teaching experience), specialist teachers (10 to 20 years of teaching experience) and senior specialists (20 and more years of teaching experience).

The research process was a four-stage action research study consisting of the following stages: planning, observation, action and reflection. Figure 1 illustrates the action research process.

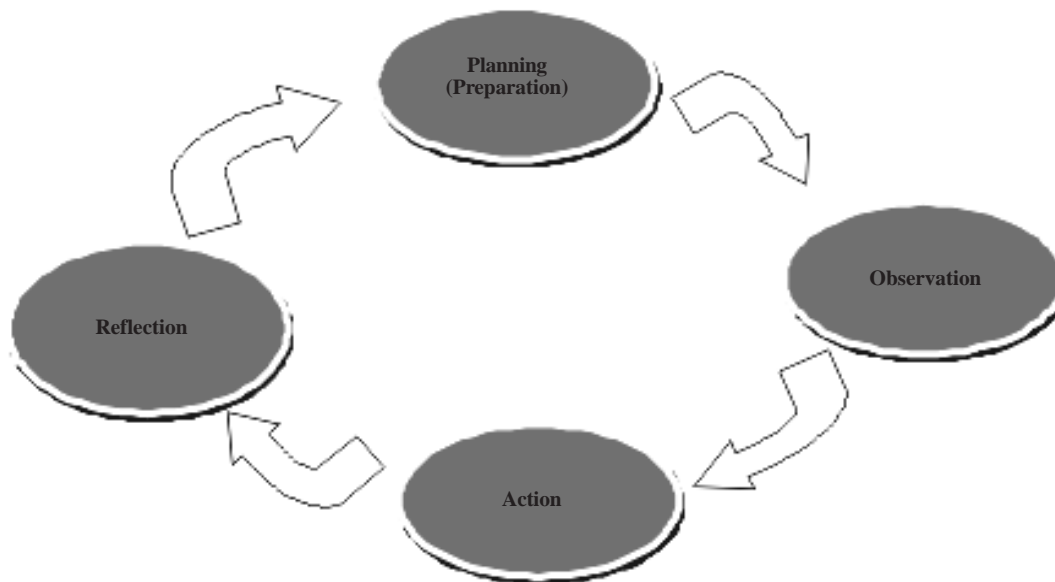


Fig. 1. Action research cycle

Data was interpreted in phases as the research progressed. Group interpretative meetings were held after each phase to analyse data. Bryman and Burgess (1994:6) explain the descriptive or interpretive method of data analysis as one that seeks to establish a coherent and inclusive account of a culture from the point of view of those being researched. The meetings took the form of a dialogue. The transcripts of extracts (quotes) were jointly read (usually from our minute book/diaries and observation schedules), categorised into themes, assigned quotes to themes, and then determined patterns to derive meaning and interpretations.

On the other hand, the researcher applied inductive analytical framework, which is the process of deriving meaning from data; alongside group interpretative data-analysis approach, which is a collective interpretative system.

Firstly, the researcher must indicate that two processes did not run parallel to each other but were interactive. In practice the group interpretative analysis would take place at the level of engagements with teachers, but the researcher would further go beyond and embark on a meta-analysis through induction from a theoretical perspective.

The researcher was also guided by the research question. The research questions are usually significant in choosing the lens through which data are to be looked at. Laws et al. (2003) indicate that this is the time when researchers impose theory on the data. The quality of the data analysis will depend on the researcher's interpretation of the data. Mouton (2001) refers to interpretation as the process of relating the findings of the research to the theoretical framework, either by confirming or falsifying the new interpretation. The two sets of analysis were coordinated, firstly for teachers the group interpretative analysis was geared towards addressing our objectives as we determined at the beginning of the action research, secondly my meta-analysis was intended to address the theoretical objectives, that is, making contribution to knowledge about inclusive practices and contributing to action research as a research methodology.

### **Why a Case Study Within Action Research**

In this study, apart from the action research project with teachers to address the shortcom-

ings of their pedagogy with respect to inclusion, the researcher decided to pursue a case study within the theoretical schema of action research. For the purposes of clarifying the epistemic stance, the case is conceptualised from the perspective of Denzin and Lincoln (2003, 2005: 442) who posit: "The case is not a methodology but a choice of what is to be studied." This definition is also supported by Scott and Usher (1999).

Most literature on educational case studies indicates that is one of the more widely used approaches in qualitative research. There are various types of cases, ranging from single (when a single case is intensively studied) to multiple (when numerous cases are studied) (Yin 2012). The choice of a case is usually determined by the nature of the phenomenon under study and the research questions the researcher intends to find answers to (Du and Hak 2012). An *intrinsic case study* is conducted when a better understanding of the phenomenon under study is needed; *multiple case studies* give a thick description of many cases, often with the purpose of generalising for the population of cases; whereas an *instrumental case study* is focused on gaining more insight which could serve the secondary purpose of clarifying the knowledge about the case under study (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). Although the researcher is guided by the research questions in order to determine which data to collect from the case, case-study research data are mostly not aimed at making generalisations but at achieving a detailed description of the case. Denzin and Lincoln (2005: 445) mention the following aspects as being prominent in case studies:

- the nature of the case;
- the historical background to the case;
- the context in which it is found (political or economic);
- its physical setting;
- other cases with which it could be compared;
- the informants through which it could be known.

Cases are often chosen for their representativeness and relevance to what ought to be studied. They could be seen as typical (representing other cases) or atypical, which means not necessarily common to others. Selection of a single case is done when clear, well-rounded propositions have been made and the case meets all the

requirements of the study (deVos 2001). Merriam (1998) postulates that case studies are not focused on the outcome but designed to obtain a rich data description of the case. They are context-bound, not variable-bound, and they are aimed at making discoveries rather than achieving confirmation.

For instance, Edge (2001: 1) argues that “case studies constitute a public recognition of the value of teachers’ reflection on their practice and constitute a new form of teacher research”. The case study could be a tool for reflecting on detailed processes of action-based research. Conversely, Comm et al. (2000) indicate that case study research has disadvantages such as lack of generalisability and the difficulty of finding causal relationships between variables. However, case-study research is known to have the following advantages:

- It takes the researcher to the real life situation.
- It affords the researcher the chance to see things through the eyes of the participant;
- The researcher gains direct experience of the phenomenon under study.

In support of the use of case studies, Weber (2007) justifies the use of case-study research in the educational context of South Africa by indicating that, unlike in the past when teachers had had policies imposed on them and were never given a chance to air their views, action research offers an ideal opportunity for researchers to gather rich data. In this study, the use of case studies is contextualised within the framework of action research.

### **Role as the Researcher**

While the researcher’s role was that of being part of the research team as an equal partner, it was however difficult, given the type of teachers who seemed to be less initiative. The researcher had to give purpose and direction for the study to commence because teachers were doing this kind of research for the first time. At the start ethical issues were dealt with. During the first stage of the research, teachers requested that the researcher do a presentation on current research literature on inclusion. While the researcher thought it would be easy for teachers to engage freely about their practices during discussions, that was not the case, the researcher had from time to time initiate the discussions.

The researcher kept by teacher’s choice records of proceedings and allowed teacher access to them whenever it was needed.

## **OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Action Research in Developing Practices of Inclusion**

This section focuses on the themes derived from the analysis of data, that is planning action research, action research as a strategy for change, the role of the researcher and action research and teacher collaboration. Quotes are used evidence to support claims.

#### **Planning an Action Research Study**

**Flexibility:** The analysis of the planning of the action research process suggested that the plan might not necessarily evolve unchanged during the actual process. Indications were that the planning of action research has to be flexible and adaptable so as not to derail the process. For example, when faced with the problem of teachers not being willing to talk during our discussions as a complementary measure to get their opinions, I had to give them a questionnaire in order to get their views on the essential issues.

**Participation:** The analysis indicated that sustaining the participation of the research members was a challenge for the use of it as a research methodology. For instance, the number of participants declined from 21 to 15 at the start and subsequently again during the research process. The researcher therefore had to create mechanisms to keep the participants motivated and to sustain a credible number of participants for the project. For example, one of the teachers said: *I am overloaded with marking work; sometimes it was difficult to attend all [the] meetings.*

The analyses of the project participation showed that the researcher had to take the following into consideration in order to mitigate the effect of the aforementioned issues:

- The work load of participants: for example, the participants were willing to be part of the project if I performed some tasks such as writing minutes and keeping records;
- The participants’ ability to conduct research: the participants were willing to take

part after I had given them training in research methods and the process involved in order to encourage participation in the project.

**Time to Conduct an Action Research Project:** Analyses of the time spent on the project show that the amount of time planned was different from the actual time spent on the project, as the following quotation suggests: *I think the time we got was short for me and the learners to adjust fully to the newly introduced way of teaching and learning.*

The planning and dates had to be adjusted continually to accommodate the professional commitments of teachers. For example, at times there were several apologies for the meetings and research activities.

It once again follows that the ability to be flexible is crucial in planning an action research project. The success of action research depends on the participation of practitioners and the available time at the research group's disposal.

### Action Research as a Strategy for Change

The process of action research was used in trying to change how teachers do things in relation to being inclusive in their teaching. The analyses reveal some important aspects:

It is evident that the project demonstrated that action research had created a platform for teachers to explore alternative ways of doing things; for example, one of the teachers stated: *I have discovered that there could be alternative ways of doing things.*

However, there was an indication that change as envisaged within this project might not have been achieved as it should, hence the remark by one teacher: *I think the time we got was short for me and the learners to adjust fully to the newly introduced way of teaching and learning.*

While the project might have changed the teacher beliefs and attitudes about how they think about their practice for example as captured in the following quote: *I had an opportunity to start a new way of teaching successfully.*

There seemed to be an indication that change as it happened during the project might not be sustainable; for instance, when asked about what was going to happen after the project, was pessimistic and said: *I think we can do this all over again if our work load could allow it.*

While action research may enhance change, the interpretation of the analysis is that it needed time and that mechanisms to sustain the process of change were necessary for full change to be realised.

### Action Research and the Role of the Researcher

One of the important aspects of collaborative action research is that the researcher becomes part of the research group. While it is not permissible within this mode of research for the researcher to impose his or her ideas on the research group, during this study, given the culture of not taking any initiative on the part of the South African teachers, it appeared very challenging to maintain this stance. For example, teachers requested the researcher to take the lead in initiating some of the research activities, such as discussions, reflective engagements and sharing some knowledge on some literature topics.

The interpretation of the above is that the role of the researcher within an action research mode seems to some extent determined by the context within which the study is conducted, the type of practitioners, their research skills, the ability to initiate change, being critical, reflective and motivated. For example, during this project one could not avoid the fact that teachers regarded one as an "authority" and as a "knowledgeable other".

### Action Research and Teacher Collaboration

One of the cornerstones of action research is its ability to foster collaboration among the practitioners. The analyses of this project seem to have proven that when teachers work together they stand to benefit from one another through collaboration; for example, in acknowledging this, one of the teachers praised action research for benefitting them by collaborating with others *I have learned to listen and share ideas with my colleagues.*

While it sounded as though teachers had benefited from the process of collaboration, the analyses suggest that that collaboration needs time for its value to be fully realised. This became evident when one of the teachers lamented, *I could learn a lot from colleagues but I think we should have done it more frequently.*

The interpretation is that the culture of collaboration does not happen overnight and that enough time is needed for its full realisation.

### **Findings**

The study has presented several findings with regard to action research as a strategy to develop inclusive practices. Firstly, using action research afforded the teachers an opportunity to reflect on their practice and suggest how it could be improved. Secondly, while action research is known of balancing the power relations between the researcher and teachers because they act as equal partners in the whole process, this was not the case, as teachers were less initiative and dependent on the researcher for guidance.

Several shortcomings were registered with regard to use of action research, firstly action research process posed challenges as far as participation was concerned. This unique situation in South Africa was further complicated by the culture of non participation entrenched during the apartheid system. Secondly, there was a problem of the inability of teachers to reflect critically on themselves and their practice, for example one of the factors hindering the action research process was the fact that teachers in terms of processes hardly disagree with anything said or done by those whom they regard as authority (culture of being submissive), so it could be very difficult to get an honest opinion from the teachers about anything if you are an authority (like I was the principal in this case) which could jeopardize the trustworthiness of the research process.

Furthermore, the role of the researcher was very instrumental; the study has shown that in the South African context action research teams still needed guidance from the researcher. For example although the objectives and processes were jointly determined the researcher had to take a lead to give guidance and purpose. The fact of the matter is that teachers are still used to being told to some extent what to do, therefore difficult for them to simply carry on and chart way forward.

While action research compels the researcher to refrain from imposing his/her ideas to action research teams and calls for strict ethical measures in order to maintain the trustworthiness of the research process, in this study the role of

the research had to reflect similar ethos, however it was very difficult in the sense that the culture of research in South Africa is still such that teachers expect initiative from the researcher. The research process relies to some extent on the ability of the researcher to stimulate discussions, debates and reflective accounts from the teachers. It is also sometimes expected from the researcher to give some opinions on certain topics by the teachers which could in turn have an influence on how teachers understand and do some of the research activities. In conclusion it is evident that for action research to be successful in the South African context culture of participation, reflection on practice, being critical, taking initiative will firstly have to be developed.

### **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, it is evident from the study that there is still room for more research as far as developing practices inclusion is concerned. The crux of this particular study is the significance of the voices and contributions of the practitioners in developing practices of inclusion which in most cases, it appears are ignored. The reflection on practice is a powerful tool with which beliefs about practices of inclusion could be challenged and improved. Action research appears to be a working system with reflective practices that allow the voices of the practitioners in developing practices of inclusion to be heard. While the study draws lessons heavily from the international context, its relevance to education research is that of forming the basis from which to develop inclusive practices within the context of the education system of a developing and transforming country such as South Africa. The following recommendations are therefore put forward.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The study has resulted into implications for practice and policy. Firstly, teams like the one constituted in this study could be established to enhance the development of inclusive practices.

#### **a) Establishment of Inclusive Research Working Teams**

The study has demonstrated that there are no research teams in schools which seem to cre-

ate a platform where teachers can share their views on teaching methodology in an inclusive educational environment in particular. The SBST (School Based Support Teams) are focused mostly on the technical aspects of inclusion, with much less emphasis on teaching methodology. From time to time, teachers have to do research to investigate new ways of enhancing inclusion. Teachers can only do this by establishing inclusive research working teams within which they try new methods. Schools in the same local area could cooperate among their research teams and establish communities of enquiry which will conduct research according to local contexts. These research communities will then empower teachers with regard to inclusive practices.

### **b) Principles of Inclusive Research Working Teams**

Research teams must be composed of teachers. While it could be advantageous to have experts on the inclusive education research teams, it is recommended that these professional research teams must be run and controlled by teachers themselves. The role of experts should be to advise and not play a leading role. Research teams should be run in such a manner that teachers collaborate and learn from one another. The following are the main steps for teachers to follow in pursuing the process of enquiry:

Steps in conducting research by teachers

Among other things, teachers should strive to achieve the following:

- a) Establish research team.
- b) Create a platform for brainstorming and for the establishment of meaning.
- c) Identify good practice through observation.
- d) Develop a programme to share good practices in the classroom.
- e) Engage in review and reflection practices in the classroom.
- f) Discuss feedback jointly and determine local theories.
- g) *Establishment of collaborative teaching forums*

The research revealed that while South African teachers believe that collaborative teaching could enhance inclusion, this was not the case in the classrooms. Teachers teach as individuals and never share the teaching platform with their peers. The collaborative teaching forums

could enhance an exchange of good practice among teachers leading to the empowerment of all teachers.

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