Incorporating action research in school senior management training

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What training do school managers need?

Parallels with the business arena
In the current post-education-reform era in New Zealand, school managers (principals, and other senior administrators) are increasingly required to fulfil expanded and challenging roles associated with the self-management of schools. The role of a school principal is onerous and ambiguous and involves simultaneously administering school operations including financial management, appointing staff, appraising and developing teachers, supervising instruction, being accessible to and liaising with all stakeholders, delegating responsibility, strategic planning and policy development, marketing, visioning, and so on. Many of these roles now closely parallel those of managers in the wider business arena and require leadership to influence change. Management, in the sense which we use it, encompasses leadership as a central feature of effective management. It is our contention, therefore, that the changes requested in general management training now apply equally to educational administrators.

Traditional training
Traditionally some training for educational administrators has been available through university-led, theoretically-oriented courses that teach a number of well-known theories and encourage discussion of how these ideas might apply to the practitioner’s own context. Robinson[1] has examined the trend away from this typical training to a more collegial and practical in-service model which is currently favoured by practitioners. She argues, however, that “to suggest a false dichotomy between theory and practice severely limits both types of provision”[1, p. 25].

In the past, explicitly theoretical, content based programmes have primarily been concerned with the transmission of knowledge and skills from the expert to the novice, with little attention paid to the application of this knowledge in the work context of these managers. Consequently, graduates from these programmes had considerable theoretical knowledge but few demonstrable applied skills which prepared them for the rapidly changing managerial workplace.

Future management training
In recent years there have been increasing calls for changes in management training approaches both in general management fields and for educational administrators.[1-11]  

Future management training, we are informed, should include all or some of the following characteristics:

- use of workplace-based problem solving, with students working on real problems or issues;
- development of competences for dealing with rapid and continuous change;
- collaborative teamwork practices;
- development of interpersonal, people management skills – especially those needed to resolve complex problems;
- opportunity for self-development;
- training which has an academic and applied learning mix and reduces the gap between theory and practice;
- a focus on the process of management rather than the content;
- critical reflection on practice; and
- practice which results in data-based change implementation.

Robinson[1] adds to this that if leaders of these programmes hope to influence the thinking of participants, let alone their practice, they need to:

...examine critically the utility, applicability and ethics of the implicit theories of course participants as well as invite similar examination of the theories they themselves advocate. Given that course members’ theories are largely implicit, their examination must proceed by progressive uncovering of the assumptions that inform their discussion and critique of the material of the course [1, p. 26].

She concludes that it is not the presence of theory that is problematic but the failure to examine it within the context of the theories of action which inform the participant’s own practice. She advocates a type of in-service education for educational administrators which is simultaneously highly theoretical and highly practical.
Action research is an approach which can be incorporated in management training to integrate theory and practice. It may potentially include all of the characteristics described above.

**Action research: relationship to action learning and experiential learning**

Action research, a term coined by Kurt Lewin in the 1940s, is variously defined and described. The shortest and most straightforward definition of action research is given by Elliott[12, p. 69] as “the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it”.

The reader is referred to Abraham[13] for an extensive summary of conflicting interpretations of action research. Abraham confirms that ideas about what constitutes action research are many and varied but concludes that it is a method “in which members of an organisation work collaboratively with a facilitator (the researcher) to address problems that are of concern to the group”[13, p. 23].

Peters and Robinson[14] identify three minimal requirements for action research common to a selection of the contemporary literature. These are:
1. a problem-focused change orientation;
2. iterative stages of planning, action, fact-finding and reflection; and
3. the collaborative characteristic.

While these three conditions were shared by all the writers surveyed, Peters and Robinson distinguish between most commentators who subscribe to a “weak version” of action research (as a research strategy), and a trio of researchers who have sought to develop a “strong version” that emphasizes the emancipatory potential of the method.

In the management context, Perry and Zuber-Skeritt[6, p. 18] summarize action research as involving groups of managers working on real problems in complex and dynamic situations where the social processes of learning about these situations is inextricably linked with the acts of changing those situations.

**Action learning**

Action learning is a notion akin to action research. Its development is attributed to the work of Reg Revans since the 1930s. It has many similarities to action research at a philosophical level but differs from it in that there is no obligation to make findings public. In action learning there is greater emphasis placed on learning than action per se, and the standards of data collection and validation are less rigorous than in action research. The overall goal of action learning is the development of questioning insight.

Both action research and action learning are approaches which aim to narrow the gap between theory and practice. They adhere to the principles of a non-positivist, or alternative, interpretative research paradigm, in which practitioner understanding of problems is given prominence. In these approaches, the practitioner-researcher collaboratively participates in the events being studied and explicitly acknowledges the way in which they are implicated in these events. The predominantly (but not always) qualitative data collected are interpreted, analysed and reflected on together by researcher and participants, who comprise a collaborative group. Such an approach, therefore, rejects the positivist subject-researcher distinction and value-free espousals.

**Experiential learning theory underpinning action research and action learning**

Unlike traditional learning, which involves individuals receiving information, and then applying this theory to a situation or problem, action research and action learning involve experiential learning cycles[15]. In this type of learning knowledge is gained from observations, questioning and reflection related to concrete experience or action. This leads to generalizations or the formulation of abstract concepts, the implications of which are tested in new situations. A new concrete experience then occurs, followed by another cycle of learning. Understanding, improvement, and transformation of the specific situation in which the group are working is the ultimate outcome of these learning cycles.

**Our interpretation of action research**

In our practice we define action research as an applied approach for resolving organizational problems collaboratively. In the model we use (Figure 1) it involves three major phases or cycles of activity. Each cyclic phase incorporates steps of planning, acting, observing and reflecting:
- Cycle one: examining an existing problem;
- Cycle two: intervening to improve practice;
- Cycle three: evaluating the effectiveness of change.

Action research is an educative and developmental process. We believe it is effective when:
- reflective practice is data-based;
- multiple perspectives are acknowledged;
Support - in theory and practice - for action research incorporated in management training

Support evidence
The value of either action research, or the closely affiliated action learning process, in management training has support from several writers.

Cunnington and Trevor-Roberts, for example, state that:

…the Action Learning process ... provides the only feasible vehicle for learning competencies associated with general management and must therefore form part of the development of the leaders of tomorrow[16, p. 46].

Sorohan's[10] recent article indicates that this shift is already occurring, when she reports that action learning is probably the favoured strategy for executive education these days. Further support for the implementation of action learning and action research in management training comes from Calabrese and Bartz[17], Perry and Zuber-Skerritt[6,18] and Zuber-Skerritt[19].

There are conflicting accounts of the degree of incorporation of action research in management training programmes. Zuber-Skerritt[19] reports that the only award-bearing, postgraduate management training programmes she is aware of, which are genuinely based on the action learning philosophy, are the MBA and PhD programmes offered by the International Management Centres worldwide. This differs from anecdotal evidence, both in New Zealand and Australia, which indicates that several graduate management training programmes incorporate action learning or action research projects. These conflicting accounts suggest that increased networking and collaboration is required between programme leaders who wish to be better informed about successful initiatives in current provision. In New Zealand, the Action Research Network (established by Piggot-Irvine in 1993) proposes to facilitate such dialogue, and to establish a register of management programmes incorporating action research.

Institutionally-based management training projects in Australasia
There are now several examples of management training programmes in Australia incorporating action research. At the University of Queensland a series of action learning projects has been implemented which have the goal of improving management practices[11]. James Cook University, South Australia University, Swinburne University of Technology and the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) are further examples of Australian universities which have implemented management training programmes based on action learning or action research. The support for these latter programmes arose from the Australian Vice Chancellors’ Committee (AVCC) initiative which established a staff development and training programme[20] to improve management training through the pooling of resources, inter-university networking, and enhanced delivery. Courses for executives conducted at the Brisbane-based Centre for Strategic Leaders[21], and the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service[22] are further examples of programmes which
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Management development through action research

The diploma programme is intended to increase the knowledge and skills of school principals and those aspiring to principalship. Towards the end of the first year of study, participants are introduced to the notion of action research as a tool for the simultaneous resolution of organizational problems and for management development. They subsequently plan an action research project to implement in their schools over the course of the following year. Reporting on the action research study is the final formal requirement of the Diploma in School Management for senior managers of schools.

The rationale for teaching action research
A research component establishes the status of the programme as a higher education professional qualification for practitioners. Undertaking action research should make it possible for a participant to resolve a real management problem in the school. To do this, or even to attempt to do this, both research skills and critical reflection skills, which can be practised in the programme setting with the help of a supervising lecturer, must be developed. We hope that the benefits of these skills remain long after the formal study programme is completed. The cycles of research activity conducted in the study unit are intended to flow on into further cycles. As King and Lonnquist state:

"The reflection of one cycle becomes the problem framing of the next cycle, so that, once initiated, action research is technically an ongoing process, distinguished from evaluation processes that end after accomplishing a given task [23, p. 5]."

Ideally, the lessons learned in carrying out an action research project will not only lead on to further cycles of research in the same problem area but could also be transferable to other problematic management situations which call for a systematic and sustained approach to resolving significant issues.

Emphasis on management topics
Because the diploma is a qualification for school managers, participants are required to choose a topic with a management focus, rather than a teaching focus. Action research is presented as a problem-based research methodology which focuses on a real problem and aims to generate results that lead to relevant and collaborative change that has a direct impact on the management of education. In the first year of diploma study the participants are examining and identifying relevant topics and theories of practice.

An underlying theme in the UNITEC approach is the emphasis on developing norms of organizational learning which could lead to error detection and correction through critical and collaborative reflection. The diploma curriculum offers opportunity to learn a problem-solving approach which deals with difficult issues from a theory of action perspective [23]. Such learning enables participants to discover how they and others might inadvertently be implicated in problem maintenance while avowing their genuine commitment to problem resolution.

The action research project provides a means for conducting an in-depth examination of management practice in the school; preferably a practice in which the participant is closely involved, and a practice that is problematic in either a neutral or a negative sense [8]. Therefore, participants must choose topics that allow them to examine their own management practice as well as the practice of others where a gap is perceived between current and desirable practice. The specific focus that the programme demands on a management issue can create challenges for participants because a close investigation of a
problematic management practice in the school can be a very threatening notion for all concerned.

Organizing action research

In teaching action research our aim is to demystify the methods and processes, and promote the values and the aspirations of action research as a means for organizational learning which can be managed in a formalized way. Action research into management problems should be a tool that is understood by and is accessible to managers at all levels in the organization.

A formal process

We make no apology for the fact that the process described in our teaching model is formally organized and needs to be carefully managed by the student. Because the student-researchers hold senior positions in schools, it is inevitable that implementation of this model (see Figure 1) tends to be hierarchical. The formality and organized approach of this framework is justifiable in our opinion because it is necessary to make our expectations and the research possibilities explicit to participants. Within this structured framework, students are encouraged to adopt an appropriate and wide range of data gathering and reflective techniques with a collaborative group. They are also encouraged to be flexible and responsive to the uniqueness of each research context, and to recognize and articulate limitations of the process and their own practice as they encounter and surmount difficulties.

It is evident that an organized, directive approach is at odds with a section of the action research literature that supports a more fluid, organic view of the methodology: a view consistent with notions of groups participating in liberating discourse to resolve mutual problems and to achieve an emancipatory outcome. The transformative (that is, changed thinking; changed action) imperative that underpins our research model is concerned less with a critique and alteration of social or political order and power relations and more with a collaborative critique of personal and organizational theories of action that guide practice[24].

Collaborative challenges

Whether the student is a researcher-participant within an action research team or acts to facilitate a team research effort, our experience shows that several difficulties have to be overcome in relation to the demanding team approach requirement. In spite of espousals of collegiality and collaboration on projects, our student researchers find that in practice their colleagues are extremely busy when it comes to finding time to participate in an action research group. Even when existing collaborative channels – such as meetings schedules and established task teams – are used, they usually find themselves having to play a considerable motivating role. They find that they have to move the iterative process forward vigorously if they wish to show evidence of action and change because colleagues need a degree of pressure to be exerted to ensure that things happen when there is a problem to be solved.

The action research project requirements

To qualify as action research, our students' projects must meet the criteria for action research implicit in the model that frames the approach used at UNITEC. An effective action research project is conducted according to an agreed proposal. It is supervised and reported on in a manner which demonstrates that:

- the problem situation involves a management issue;
- the project has clear aims and well-formulated research questions;
- a collaborative approach is used, and issues of ethics and validation have been attended to;
- the problem situation has been examined and analysed, encompassing a review of the relevant literature;
- an intervention strategy has been implemented;
- the effectiveness of the intervention is evaluated;
- discussion of implications of the findings has led to the drawing of conclusions and the formulation of recommendations;
- the methodology is understood and applied appropriately.

Participant outcomes

The UNITEC Diploma in School Management has been offered since 1990. In this time well over 100 students of educational management have conducted a form of research which is intended to have an immediate impact on the effectiveness of their organizations. We believe that most participants in our programme have met the learning challenges we set out to create for them to a very high standard. In their turn, they have created challenges for change in their schools. They have addressed a significant management problem and they have acquired skills; and even more importantly, they have, in a number of cases, adopted mental modes[25,26] which allow and
encourage collaborative, data-based inquiry to become a cultural norm in their schools.

Conclusion

Effective educational leaders should be equipped with management competences which will enable them to solve new and challenging problems and provide leadership in a framework of organizational learning. By assisting managers to reflect on current issues and practice, and to alter these on the basis of theory that guides “best practice”, action research processes encourage them to develop as managers and to make use of a systematic, problem-based approach for improvement.

This paper has discussed how one higher education institution incorporates action research to foster management development in an award-bearing programme. The writers are interested in the comments and conjecture of others involved in training managers, and hope that discussion and debate on the challenges and successes of using action research as a tool for management development will provide grist for the mill of learning in the action research community.

References

20 Australian Vice-Chancellors’ Committee (AVCC), Staff Development and Training Program Development Bulletins, Nos 1-4, University of Queensland, Brisbane, 1993.