EDUCATIONAL ACTION RESEARCH AND THE TEACHER

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Resumen:

La ponencia parte del planteamiento del profesorado como investigador, comprometido con la mejora continua de sus prácticas. A partir de ahí se justifica la Investigación-acción como una metodología que integra docencia e investigación de forma crítica, como forma de indagación ética sobre los valores educativos que hay tras nuestras prácticas docentes. Para ilustrar estos aspectos, se presentan los ejemplos clásicos del "Humanities Project" y el "Ford Teaching Project" llevados a cabo en Inglaterra. Se explicitan los principios de procedimiento que se utilizaban para desarrollar el curriculum desde la investigación-acción. Acaba el trabajo, planteando la eterna cuestión sobre la generalización de los casos de investigación-acción concretos.

Palabras clave: investigación-acción, profesor investigador, valores educativos, ética docente.

The teacher as a researcher

Educational action Research involves teachers making and creating *educationally* worthwhile changes in their classrooms and other learning environments together in 'communities of practice.' If teachers believe that they are mere functionaries in the educational system and have little control over what and how students learn they will see themselves as technicians implementing a learning system prescribed by external authority. In order to do action research teachers must be open to the possibility that there is space in their practical situation for them to make and create educationally worthwhile changes. Discerning where these spaces are - these opportunities for action in a practical situation - is an important part of the action research process. Making and creating educational change involves teachers in developing their *situational understanding*. In the process their taken-for-granted practical knowledge is frequently challenged.

For example, teachers often believe that there is very little they can do to motivate and engage persistently disruptive students in their classroom, since their parents condone their hostility to formal learning. The only solution is to exclude them for the benefit of those students who want to learn. I am aware of a piece of action research (see Fletcher and Brown 2002) in which a teacher came to see disruptive behaviour in his classroom in rather different terms. With the help of a university-based researcher he gained access to observational and student interview data that gave him a new understanding of disruptive behaviour in his lessons. He discovered that many disruptive pupils were engaged with the subject matter he was teaching and motivated to learn. The problem was that they lacked the social skills to engage in the forms of interaction with himself and their peers that he was seeking to establish in the classroom as a context for learning. However, this new understanding of the problematics of his situation opened up new possibilities for action in it. Such understanding was made possible by the teacher's own attempt to change the classroom environment from one that reinforced teacher controlled passive and individualised learning to one that encouraged a more socially interactive mode of teaching and learning.

Action research integrates teaching and research.

Action research fuses teaching and research into a singular activity. In action research 'making and creating change' and 'developing knowledge and understanding of practical situations' cannot be separated. They go together. Many teachers say that they are too busy teaching to do action research. This is because they have learned to view all research as a mode of knowledge production that is external to their practice as teachers. They have often been told in their training that their role is to apply the findings of research to their practice. Having failed to discern the relevance to their practice of many findings from externally conducted educational research, many teachers will interpret action research as a proposal to give them more responsibility for research in order to enhance its application to their practice. On the basis of such an interpretation teachers will inevitably resist what they perceive to be an additional work-load when they already feel overloaded and stressed by having to comply with the quality assurance mechanisms being put into place to render them more publicly accountable for their teaching.

Such resistance is based on a misunderstanding of action research. It is not simply 'insider research' but research that is an integral part of teaching rather than a separate process. The findings from such research are not retrospectively applied to teaching but developed in the context of teachers' actions to bring about educationally worthwhile learning. Just as research is an integral part of teaching so teaching becomes an integral part of research.

Of course this kind of research-based teaching may be more time-consuming than the traditional practice of teaching. The latter may appear to be less time consuming because it is largely grounded in taken-for- granted commonsense knowledge that is handed down to teachers as part of their induction into 'the practical realities' of teaching in classrooms and schools. Traditional teaching is largely based on tacit craft knowledge, which enables the teacher to make quick intuitive judgements about what to do in a given situation. However, the rapid pace of social and economic change in society has meant that traditional teaching may no longer work in helping teachers to cope with the contingencies that arise in formal learning contexts on a day-to-day basis. These

contingencies call for a more self-reflexive mode of teaching in which traditional understandings of situations are called into question and new understandings evolved as a basis for practice. 'Action research' is the name we give to this kind of teaching. Its importance resides in helping teachers to reconstruct together their professional tradition and the culture of teaching and learning. It does indeed take more time than teaching that is largely grounded in taken-for-granted commonsense understandings. It involves creating spaces for teachers to reflect individually, together and with their students (and also with other stake-holders such as parents) about the problems that arise in the contexts of their practice. And it also involves creating space for gathering evidence from different points of view other than the teacher's own, such as those of their students and professional peers, which will serve to discipline post-lesson analytic conversations and reflections. This *triangulation data* may include observational evidence gathered by the teacher's peers or a collaborating researcher from a local university, or evidence gathered from their students in the form of interviews and opinion surveys. "No time to do research" implies "no time to change my teaching in any fundamental sense."

Action research should no longer be an optional extra for teachers. There are fewer comfort zones into which they can retreat from the problems they are confronted with in formal educational settings. They can either strive to empower themselves to make and create change through action research, or simply hand responsibility for change over to policy makers and educational managers. The latter are attempting in many countries to re-engineer the educational system to render its outcomes more predictable. In this scenario teachers are cast in the role of technical functionaries responsible for delivering changes that have been planned and designed beyond the world of the classroom and the school. In effect it is a scenario that disempowers and deprofessionalises teachers as agents of educational change. It is also one in which the purposes of education are not open to reflection. This is left to market forces to decide. Teachers will not be expected to safeguard students' access to 'goods' that are specifically educational and refer to learning in both its achievement and process aspects. For example, teachers may aim to promote self-directed learning in their classrooms as an educational good. But this implies certain process values, such as teaching in a way that does not foster dependence

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on the teacher for knowledge and ideas, or giving pupils the freedom to express and develop their own ideas, or respecting the right of pupils to think critically about the subject-matter. The *educational* aims of teachers cannot simply be regarded as contingently related outcomes of the teaching and learning process. This is because they also imply what is to count as an educationally worthwhile process.

Action research as a form of ethical inquiry

Educational action research is informed by *educational values* in the form of ideas about what constitutes a worthwhile process of education. In the process these values become articulated as objects of reflection in parallel with the means of realizing them in action. They specify pedagogical criteria for representing curriculum content – *the objects of learning* – to students in an educationally worthwhile manner. In other words, such educational values define the ideal pedagogical relationship between the content of the curriculum, teachers and learners. This explains why educational action research has tended to emerge in curriculum change contexts, which requires content to be represented as dynamic objects of the student's understanding - of his/her thinking and discernment – rather than simply as inert 'knowledge' to be learned, remembered and applied. Hence, Lawrence Stenhouse's contention that there can be "no curriculum development without teacher development" and his well-known notion of 'the teacher as a researcher' (see Stenhouse 1975 Ch. 10). Remove teachers'-based action research from such a curriculum change context and you reduce it from an ethical mode of practical reasoning – *phronesis* – to a technical – *techne* – mode.

Educational action research is a form of ethical inquiry in which teachers reflect about how to teach in ways that are consistent with their *educational* aims and values. In the process they not only change their teaching strategies but also clarify their educational aims and values. For example, teachers have undertaken action research to create conditions for students to engage in more 'self-directed' or 'autonomous learning'. In reflecting about their strategies for realizing this aim they have inevitably called into question the way they have construed the aim itself. Initially 'autonomous learning' may be construed as a very individualised process, but as teachers reflect about the actions

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they take to realize this aim they tend to move towards a more social view of the process; one in which autonomy is fostered through opportunities to engage in free and open discussion with the teacher and other pupils. Hence, action research is a kind of practical philosophy of education that opens up a space in classrooms for ethically committed action (*praxis*).

Two examples of the use of an explicit value framework as a basis for teachers' action research.

    1.   Stenhouse's 'The Humanities Project' (HCP).

Stenhouse (1975 Ch's 5-7) evolved a 'process model' of curriculum design for this project on the grounds that an 'objectives model' was inappropriate as an expression of its aim.

"The pedagogical --- aim of the project is to develop an understanding of social situations and human acts and of the controversial value issues which they raise" (Stenhouse 1975. 93).

He argued (p.94) that two implications of this aim were worth pointing out:

"First, it is implied that both students and teachers develop understanding, that is, the teacher is cast in the role of a learner. Second, understanding is chosen as an aim because it cannot be achieved. Understanding can always be deepened. Moreover, there must always be dispute as to what constitutes a valid understanding. The teacher and the group have to accept as part of their task an exploration of the nature of understanding."

Rather than specifying measurable outputs of learning a number of *principles of procedure* were logically derived from the aim.

HCP's Principles of Procedure:
    1.   That controversial issues should be taught in the classroom with adolescents;
    2.   That teachers should not use their authority as teachers as a platform for promoting their own views;

3. That the mode of enquiry in controversial areas should have discussion rather than instruction at its core;

4. That the discussion should protect divergence of view among participants;

5. That the teacher as Chairperson of the discussion should have responsibility for quality and standards in learning.

(The Humanities Project: *An Introduction*, p.8)

These then provided foci for teachers' research. From evidence gathered with teachers in the project's 'trial schools' a number of action patterns were identified in the light of these principles as either consistent or inconsistent with the aim. These were initially formulated as general hypotheses for other teachers to test in their own classrooms. However, Stenhouse was concerned that they would be treated as prescriptive rules rather than hypotheses, so they were cast in the form of questions for reflection within the project's self-training procedure for teachers. Some extracts from this procedure are as follows:

➢ To what extent do you interrupt students when they are speaking? Why and to what effect?

➢ Reflective discussion can often be slow -paced and contain sustained silences. What proportion of these silences are interrupted by you? --- the students can use silence as a weapon to make the teacher take over the task they should face as a group.

➢ Do you press towards consensus? For example, "Do we all agree?" If so what is the effect of this type of question? Compare this with the effect of: "What do other people think?" "Does anyone disagree with that?" "Can anyone see another possible view or interpretation?"

➢ To what extent do you confirm? Do you, for example, say "Yes" or "No" or "An interesting point" or "Well done" or "That's interesting"? What is the effect of this on the group? ---

➢ Are you neutral on controversial issues? --- Are values implicit in the questions you ask? Are they implied in the words, gestures, or tone of voice with which you

follow a student's statement? Are you careful to maintain balance in clarifying or summarising a position or point of view? Are you scrupulous not to feed into the discussion evidence intended to push the group towards a view you yourself hold? Do you draw attention by questions to certain parts or aspects of a piece of evidence which seems to support a viewpoint with which you agree?

(The Humanities Project: *An Introduction*, pp. 30-32)

2. Elliott and Adelman's 'Ford Teaching Project' (Ford T).

Stenhouse (1975 Ch.6) argued that planning by objectives distorted the nature of knowledge across the curriculum disciplines. It had a more limited relevance inasmuch as it was appropriate to the teaching of specific skills. However, Stenhouse viewed all propositional knowledge as provisional and therefore open to question. Propositions were open to challenge in the light of evidence and therefore objects for thinking and discussion. The main concepts and ideas embedded in the disciplines, for Stenhouse, were resources for thinking about experience rather than objects with definitive meanings to be mastered. He regarded 'the development of different forms of understanding' as a central aim of education, but an open-ended process that is always capable of development in depth and in which what constitutes a valid understanding is always open to question. Given this view of the nature of knowledge a 'process model' of curriculum planning seemed more appropriate than an 'objectives model.'

One example of a 'process model' of curriculum design that attracted the interest of Stenhouse was Jerome Bruner's 'Man: a course of study', a social science curriculum for the US elementary school. It cited the following procedural principles or 'pedagogical aims':

1. To initiate and develop in youngsters a process of question-posing (the inquiry method);

2. To teach a research methodology where children can look for information to answer questions they have raised and use the framework developed in the course (e.g. the concept of the Lifecycle) and apply it to new areas;

3. To help youngsters develop the ability to use a variety of first-hand sources as evidence from which to develop hypotheses and draw conclusions;

4.To conduct classroom discussions in which youngsters learn to listen to others as well as to express their own views;

5. To legitimize the search; that is, to give sanction and support to open-ended discussions where definitive answers to many questions are not found;

6. To encourage children to reflect on their own experiences;

7. To create a new role for the teacher, in which he becomes a resource rather than an authority.

(See Stenhouse 1975 pp. 90-93)

Unfortunately, these principles were not translated into concrete action strategies by engaging teachers that used the curriculum in a systematic process of action research.

The school-based curriculum reform movement in the UK in the 1960's and '70's generally espoused 'inquiry/discovery learning' as a pedagogical aim but the projects generally revealed a considerable gap between aspiration and practice. It was too easily assumed that teachers were capable of translating innovatory pedagogical goals into practice without support. Elliott and Adelman's Ford T Project brought teachers together across the curriculum disciplines and age levels to explore the possibility of constructing a general pedagogy of 'inquiry/discovery learning' through action research (see Elliott 2007 Ch.2 esp. pp. 41-42 and pp.50-55).

The core pedagogical aim of inquiry/discovery learning was defined in terms of *independent or self directed thinking*. This aim *was then* analyzed into four basic *freedoms* for students. The following formulation represents the outcome of discussions with the teachers:

(1) to identify and initiate problems for inquiry;

(2) to express their own ideas and develop lines of inquiry;

(3) to discuss problems, ideas and evidence;

(4) to test hypotheses and evaluate evidence.

The pedagogical implications of the four freedoms of inquiry/discovery learning were then specified as a set of *negative* and *positive* procedural principles for orientating the role of teachers. The negative principles emphasized the teacher's responsibility to refrain from actions that impose constraints on students exercising these freedoms, with a reminder also to do all in their power to protect students from other forms of external constraint. The positive principles emphasize the teacher's responsibility to intervene in the learning process in ways that actually enhance students' capabilities to exercise the freedoms. Implicit in the procedural principles of the project is a distinction between the *negative* and *positive* aspects of freedom. Students, for example, may be *free from* external constraints on their *freedom to express their own ideas and develop them into hypotheses* but still be unable to exercise this freedom because they lack the necessary capabilities.

This clarification of the aims and principles of inquiry/discovery teaching was subsequently used by Ford T teachers as a framework for gathering and analyzing data about the problems of engaging students in inquiry/discovery learning and testing strategies to ameliorate them. In the light of it they were able to identify the extent to which their teaching strategies constrained or facilitated such learning, and to compare and contrast their experience across a range and variety of classroom, school and curriculum contexts. Over time they were able to discern certain universal patterns of interaction in each others' classrooms that were problematic for the realization of their pedagogical aim, and begin to experiment with strategies for changing them in discussion with each other.

Representing findings, two examples:

2. The freedom to express ideas and develop lines of inquiry.

Procedural Principles

(a) Refrain from preventing students expressing their own ideas and developing lines of inquiry.

(b) Help students to develop their own ideas and lines of inquiry.

Constraint

2.7 *Subject-Centred Focusing*

When the teacher's questions focus students' attention solely on the subject-matter, rather than on their own ideas about it, s (he) may prevent them from initiating or developing their own ideas. Such focusing will be interpreted as an attempt to find out whether they know what s (he) expects them to know.

Constraint Removing Strategy

Refrain from framing your questions in terms which draw attention exclusively to the subject-matter rather than students' thoughts about it.

Guidance Strategy

Ask person-centered questions which focus the students' attention on their own ideas with respect to the subject-matter.

3. *Freedom to discuss problems, ideas and evidence*

Procedural Principles

Refrain from restricting students' access to discussion.
Help pupils to learn how to discuss.

Constraint

3.4 *Reinforcing ideas*

When the teacher responds to students' ideas with utterances like 'good', 'yes', 'interesting' etc. s(he) may prevent others from expressing alternative ideas. Such utterances may be interpreted as rewards for providing the responses required by the teacher.

Constraint Removing Strategy

Refrain from utterances that might imply finality e.g. 'yes', 'good', 'right'.

Guidance Strategy

Reward students for their contributions to discussion by listening carefully to their remarks and asking others to do so.

The idea behind the construction of such a knowledge base was to provide other teachers, who embraced a similar pedagogical aim, with a set of diagnostic and action-hypotheses

to examine, test, refine and further develop in relation to their own pedagogical practices. Hence, it was hoped that other teachers might avoid constantly 'reinventing the wheel', while having space for exercising personal judgments in an ongoing process of collaborative professional knowledge construction.

Action research and the issue of generalizability

Some may argue that what I have termed 'action research' is best described as 'action inquiry' or 'reflective teaching'. I have always persisted with the use of the term 'action research' because research places teachers under an obligation to render the insights they have gained from an inquiry in some publicly accessible form. This is important because teachers need to build a stock of common knowledge about how to realise their educational aims and values in practice in order to enhance their claim to be a profession. Hence, any insights that have been generated by individuals and groups of teachers through this kind inquiry need to be made accessible to other teachers as hypotheses for them to test and explore in their own classroom settings.

It is often argued that case studies of teachers' attempts to bring about change in their particular contexts of action are not generalizable. Those who argue this have a particular view of generalisation in mind. They assume that generalisation depends on statistical aggregation. However, there are other uses of the term. We can generalise across cases by comparing and contrasting them in a way that highlights similarities in many of their practically relevant features. This is what some groups of teachers do when they carry out action research together into how to realise in their particular action settings the educational aims and values they share in common. By comparing and discussing each other's case data and case studies they develop shared insights into the practically relevant features of the situations that arise in their teaching. These shared understandings can then be reported by the action research group to other members of the teaching profession and grounded in evidence drawn from across their case studies. Even a single case study may have generalising potential inasmuch as teachers reading it may discern practically relevant features that illuminate their own practical situations. Educational action research aims to contribute to the teaching professions stock of practical

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knowledge. It should not be viewed as a process of private 'navel gazing' or personal 'therapy'. To do so would effectively hand control over what is to count as public knowledge about the practice of teachers in educational institutions to external researchers or policy makers.

A concluding note

Educational action research as I have depicted it above is not lacking in scientific rigour as some have also argued. It demands, like all science, the exercise of what John Dewey called the 'democratic virtues'; namely, curiosity, honesty and integrity, open-mindedness, and respect for freedom of thought and discussion. It is shaped by a democratic as opposed to a technical rationality, embodied as I hope to have illustrated in the 'process model' of curriculum planning.

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