Book Reviews

Effective Action Research: Developing Reflective Thinking and Practice
Patrick Costello
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This edition of *Effective Action Research: Developing Reflective Thinking and Practice* is a valuable book which augments the author's earlier volume *Action Research* (2003), published some eight years prior. It is certainly good enough to sit on the shelf alongside the other recent reputable monographs and edited volumes (cf. McNiff 2010; 2013), which document this approach to research. Whilst it covers some of the same ground, it does so in a refreshing and accessible way for both students and academic staff involved in scaffolding and facilitating such research. The book has well organised chapters with carefully framed sections. These spell out systematically answers to a set of eight key questions, most of which are of the frequently asked variety! For example, 'Why undertake action research?'; 'How do I develop an action research project?'; 'How do I produce an action research report?' A major strength deriving from the very clear structure is that the volume is easy to navigate and readers wishing to dip into it selectively can do with ease because of the effective use of headings, subheadings and boxed figures.

The readability of the author's style is exemplary and his emphasis throughout is to demystify action research and emphasise its strengths and typical affordances for undergraduates, trainee pre-service teachers and those in other professional and institutional contexts where action research can be employed. The volume is divided into ten well signposted sections, opening with the nature of action research and closing with the theory and practice of it. This unusual shape is rationalised by Costello in the concluding chapter 10 (p. 117) who states clearly that his 'primary emphasis has been on the *practice* of action research underpinned as necessary by references to educational theory'. The reader is guided through various

sequential stages: how to develop an action research project, how to collect and analyse data and how to produce and publish an action research report.

In Wales, England and further afield in nations beyond, the development of various applied postgraduate programmes for practising teachers such as the Master of Educational Practice (MEP) in Wales, and the Master of Teaching and Learning (MTL) in England, would, in my view, generate significant audiences for this useful book. Indeed, many traditional masters programmes and professional doctorates include module assignments that involve action/practitioner research. For academics teaching or facilitating such action research modules of study, the book is particularly valuable as a guide to the structure and content of taught inputs. It has splendid ready-made prompts in the form of 'Reflective thinking exercises', which would serve well as the agenda for discussion seminars and workshops or as stimuli for online discussion threads. Costello has presented the main elements that would comprise a very solid scheme of work. Of particular note for students and lecturers alike are the exempla assessment feedback pro-forma supplied in chapter 7 on 'How will my action research report be assessed?'

In a discussion of rigour in chapter 4, readers learn the important distinction conceptualised by Wragg (1999) between action research which is 'rationale–reactive' and that which is 'intuitive–proactive'. The former involves the researcher examining what is occurring in, for example, a classroom, usually focusing upon something known to be a problem or in particular need of improvement, and then establishing an intervention or actions to remediate and improve it. The second type of action research is undertaken by practitioners who know, 'or think they know what needs to be done, so they implement an intervention programme first and then visit classrooms to see how well it is progressing' (Wragg 1999, p. 118; cited in Costello 2011, p. 530). Both forms are context driven, meaning that the research is undertaken in a context of application and can generate what Gibbon et al. (1994) call 'mode 2 knowledge' for the professions. Teachers and practitioners can – through their action research – be seen as contributing to the broader field of educational knowledge, though tensions around the quality of applied and practice-based educational research have been raised (Furlong and Oancea 2005).

The provenance and goal orientation of action research is important, and in the discussion of rigour I would have liked to have seen researcher 'reflexivity' addressed. By this I mean the particular 'variety of social

scientific self-consciousness' that Delamont (2002) refers to when describing fieldwork and observational research in educational settings.

The three exempla cases used by Costello to outline action research projects; each focuses on development. Indeed, the three titles each begins with the word 'developing' – effective school governing bodies; the use of questioning in organisations and thinking skills in the early years classroom. He builds on these examples to illustrate data analysis and presentational formats, cross-referring between chapters 4 and 5 in a most helpful way. Whilst sound, the discussion of the selected cases does not acknowledge or reveal any of the tensions around practitioner research for example, many teachers, trainee teachers and managers will have an emic perspective as insiders to their classrooms and institutions ; they will also find it hard to 'make the familiar analytically strange' (Delamont and Atkinson 1995). It would have been particularly useful for readers to learn of an intervention and research cycle where the researcher came up against obstacles and challenges which required a modified action plan. A further point of criticism is the book's lack of reference to any published action research projects funded by the UK's extensive twelve year *Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP).* The ESRC/TLRP funded project (Howe et al. 2009), for example, is a positive illustration of how to get action research going in schools. It focused on the principle of inclusion and revealed that collaborative action research can draw more teachers into the exciting challenge of engaging all their pupils in learning.

Researching children in educational contexts or a cohort of trainee teachers in classroom settings, as with most captive populations, does generally require ethical approval and clearance from an Ethics Committee. Whilst chapter 4 describes this process and presents four illustrative figures of sample pro-forma, including 'An ethical approval form preliminary checklist' (p. 48), which is helpful, I was somewhat surprised not to see this matter discussed in a little more detail. Campbell and Groundwater-Smith (2007), in *An Ethical Approach to Practitioner Research: Dealing with issues and dilemmas in action research* (published well before Costello's second edition), discuss numerous ethical issues for action research and that conducted by practitioners .Typically these include researching *with* rather than *on* other practitioners and finding secure procedures for research with children, especially those who are vulnerable or have special educational needs. Some additional reflective thinking exercises/questions focusing on the involvement of pupils, colleagues and other staff may have foreshadowed more effectively some of the caveats of negotiating informed consent and

challenges of data collection. It is pleasing, however, to see that in the recommended further reading section in chapter 9, readers are referred to the *British Education Research Association's* (BERA) (2004) Revised Ethical Guidelines and a number of other excellent sources.

On a matter of scholarly etiquette and with an international readership in mind, a glossary of acronyms in the preliminaries pages would certainly aid readability. To be fair, the author does actually spell these out at their first usage, but further occasional use of the full term would be appreciated – even by UK based readers who sometimes need a reminder!

In summary, this is a welcome and interesting volume which is highly accessible and most importantly one which does point its readers to other valuable sources such as the *Collaborative Action Research Network* (CARN) website. The book contains significant guidance, good exemplification, and much which would be of value to undergraduates or others whose professions require them to have an understanding of action research.

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The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in Wales
Jane Williams (ed.), 2013
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The political, social and cultural implications of realising the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) cannot be overstated; viewing the child as an active citizen challenges both normative understandings and legal and political frameworks. The Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011 (the Measure) is the first legislative measure in response to the UNCRC within the UK. Because of this, it is emblematic of Welsh devolution – and policy divergence from Westminster – and elicits pride within many policy circles. The Measure is emblematic, not only in terms of Wales's external relationships, but also within its internal political structures; as a constitutional enactment, it frames governmental action and, as Jane Williams (editor's introduction) highlights, represents a maturation in the relationship between the government's executive and legislature. However, while the rhetoric of rights (especially children's rights) is alluring, as both Hoffman and Williams (chapter 12) and Fitzpatrick (chapter 4) argue, without implementation this is merely symbolic and *only* emblematic. One of the virtues of this book is that it does not simply celebrate the Measure as evidence of 'Welsh enlightenment' (though Butler and Drakeford make political capital by claiming the Measure for Welsh radicalism and Welsh Labour progressivism [p. 18]); instead, it offers an insightful and engaging piece of policy analysis which, initially, traces the conflicts, contests, and compromises as the Measure moves from political commitment to legal realisation and, latterly, considers the implications for the application and non-application of this groundbreaking Measure.