Chapter 1. Title: Social Constructivism and Action Research: transforming teaching and learning through collaborative practice

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This chapter explores ways in which Action Research and Social Constructivism can be harmonised to provide a theoretical framework and ways forward for developing inclusive education through practitioner research. The main focus of the chapter, and of this book, is on bringing about change in support of developing inclusive practices through collaborative and participatory action research. Drawing on ideas related to social constructivism which inform the research design and process, action research is presented as a powerful approach to transformation in teaching and learning. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1962) and 'scaffolding' (Wood, D. 2003) are key concepts in the approaches discussed later in this chapter, and in some of the other chapters in the book.

Three key ideas for thinking about participation in learning and in developing positive relationships in schools provide the framework for this chapter: Inclusive Education, Social Constructivism, and Participatory Action Research. These frameworks overlap and there are a number of themes which run through them all – participation, observation, reflection, voice, collaboration, community, democracy, exploration and *learning* in its widest sense.

Inclusive Education

One of the fundamental understandings of inclusive education is that diversity and differences are to be celebrated as natural and as contributing to the richness of communities. Inclusion is interpreted in very diverse ways and is the subject of critical debate reflecting different perspectives, values and contexts.

Differences in understanding are deeply rooted in experience, meaning that interpretations we make as individuals reflect our own life experiences, cultural context and values. They also reflect differences in the way we approach problems: to what extent do we approach them pragmatically and focus primarily on what we consider will 'work' or is 'possible' *realistically* within the constraints of existing policies, conditions and resources? And to what extent do we believe that constraints and barriers to inclusion can and should be explored and challenges removed through critical engagement and struggle? In the context of this chapter the fundamental principles of inclusive education are that it should be "driven by equality, social justice and human rights, involving children's learning" (Goodall, 2018: 2). These principles relate to school cultures and the kinds of social relationships which they foster. But how are they understood and interpreted through practice in different contexts? The chapters in this book provide some examples of the way different interpretations of these principles can be explored by teachers through small research projects, reflecting the particularities of their unique local environments and the people they work with.

Underpinning this interpretation of inclusive education above, is the belief that all children and young people should have the right to equal participation in an education which is of value and engaging and relates to their individual interests, as well as those of the wider learning community. Inclusion is not about competing against others. Being 'successful' in education cannot be measured only against narrow criteria such as achievement in standardised tests designed to assess performance in a narrow and coercive curriculum. Inclusion is as much about the culture and relationships fostered in a school community as it is about the experience of learning and the opportunities provided to explore and create knowledge. Working to support the development of inclusive education involves critical examination of values and practices and *ways of seeing* in the wider context of school and society. It requires an understanding of the means and pathways through which children and young people learn and the many ways in which they may experience exclusion and marginalisation in education. *Understanding* must involve *listening to the voices of,* and *responding*

to, those involved – teachers, teaching assistants, parents, the wider community and – most importantly – the voices of children and young people themselves (Carney, 2018, Fielding, 2004)

A further theme of this chapter is the belief that inclusive education must involve the development of collaborative and reflective practices between teachers and learners, and *collaboration* appears in its many guises, in different contexts, throughout the book as a fundamental component of inclusion. 'Teachers' and 'learners' are concepts which are interpreted fluidly, with all members of the teaching and learning community moving between these roles in different situations – regardless of the 'official' role – teacher, teaching assistant, student – assigned to them in the hierarchy of the school culture and organisation. In many of the projects discussed in the chapters in this book, teachers found themselves in the position of learners during the research process – learning from their colleagues or from their students. This is particularly evident in their critical reflections on their own practice and on their observations made in their role as teachers and researchers during the action research process. In other projects, children supported each other in their learning and social development. Students and teachers are learners, 'instructors' mentors and 'builders' and 'scaffolders' in the interplay of collaborative relationships involved in democratic and creative learning communities.

Inclusion and the problem of language

Terms such as 'inclusion' and labels such as 'special educational needs' and its abbreviation 'SEN' - are adopted uncritically across many contexts and can hide fundamental differences in policies, cultures, beliefs and practices. As (Armstrong, A-C. et al. (2010: 4-5) observe,

> The meaning of 'inclusion' is by no means clear and perhaps conveniently blurs the edges of social policy with a feel-good rhetoric that no one could be opposed to. What does it really mean to have an education system which is 'inclusive'? Who is thought to be in need of inclusion and why? If education should be inclusive, then what practices is it contesting, what common values is it advocating, and by what criteria should its successes be judged?

Clearly, the idea that terminology related to inclusion – or any other terminology informed by values and culturally informed interpretations - can be universally applied in any education system, policy document, community, school, or region has to be challenged. Labelling, too, is a contentious and complex issue. What's wrong with labels such as 'SEN' ('Special Educational Needs'), 'EBD' ('Emotional Behavioural Disorder /Difficulties') and 'PMLD' ('Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties')? Labelling, too, is a contentious and complex issue. What's wrong with labels such as 'SEN' ('Special Educational Needs'), 'EBD' ('Emotional Behavioural Disorder /Difficulties') and 'PMLD' ('Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties')? Routine use of these labels both creates and confirms public identities and assumptions about people's abilities, and inform expectations about what they can and can't do. A label such as 'SEN' serves as a kind of 'alias' which hides a person's unique identity, and doesn't necessarily provide useful information about their existing knowledge, their interests and teaching and learning requirements. Unlike the usual form of alias, in which a person *chooses* to hide their real identity and selects their own alias, labels are imposed on people by others. In this sense, labelling people raises questions of power in which professionals assess and diagnose others who have, in general, a passive role in the processes involved. In social systems, labels serve to signal difference and contribute to organizational mechanisms for sorting people into groups for many purposes including responding to particular needs or requirements, providing resources and support, as well as allocation to different types of schools offering different opportunities. Labelling is a very knotty problem because of the close relationship between identification and labelling and the release of resources and support. The argument is not that 'professionals' set out to construct particular identities of the people they work with, but that they, and many of us, are part of a much wider and deeply embedded system in which resources, 'support' and 'placements' are harnessed to processes of diagnosis and labelling. While medicalised labels may be necessary and helpful in clinical contexts, casual and endemic use in the context of education settings can serve as a blanket thrown over groups of children and young people, beneath which there are unique individuals with their own particular characteristics, interests and aspirations which may go unrecognised. The uncritical use of labels such as 'SEN' encourages the creation of stereotypes relating to difference and dependency, and assumptions about who people are, what they can do, what can be expected from them (Barton, 1996, Corker and French, 1999). While

we have tried to avoid the casual use of 'labels' in the chapters in this book, in doing so we have sometimes come up against the real difficulties involved as they are deeply rooted in the systems, habits of thinking, cultures, and practices of education.

The following sections in this chapter focus on the role of practitioners in bringing about change by working collaboratively with others and through collective reflection. In particular, the discussion explores the relationship between Action Research and social constructivist approaches to teaching and learning.

Action Research

Action Research (AR) is one of many kinds of practitioner research. A key feature is that it is concerned with *bringing about change* of some kind, very often in the researcher's own context. It often involves others besides the lead researcher(s) and these 'others' (e.g. other teachers, parents, students, teaching assistants etc.) may take on the roles of co-researchers. Action Research may involve outsiders such as professional researchers or academics working with teachers or others, particularly in an advisory capacity. It may be initiated from 'the top' in order to implement a new policy or strategy, for example, emanating from government or the senior management of a school. An example of this model can be found in Chapter 10, where Sarah Wakefield writes about an action research project which was imposed on teachers in her school by the head teacher with the purpose of improving academic performance as measured by test results. Crucially, he also required teachers to work collaboratively in small groups and it was during the process of collaborative planning and critical reflection that one group of teachers re-interpreted the notion of 'academic performance' to mean something rather different, subverting – at least in part - the original aims of the project which they had been required to fulfil. Not everything goes 'according to plan' in Action Research!

A fundamental purpose of Action Research is to explore an area or set of issues relating to existing practices in order to develop and implement strategies for change (Armstrong & Moore, 2004). In the process of designing, carrying out and critically evaluating processes and outcomes prevailing assumptions and ideas are examined

and fresh insights and interpretations emerge. Winter and Munn-Giddings (2001: 5) describe action research as referring to

> '..a process which alternates continuously between inquiry and action, between practice and 'innovative thinking' (Hart, 2000) – a developmental spiral of practical decision- making and evaluative reflection. It is both reflective practice and practice-based research'.

The reference to a 'developmental spiral' here captures a defining characteristic of Action Research – it's potential for continuous development, with revisions made along the way in the light of on-going critical evaluation. The accounts of small projects found in later chapters capture a particular stage in this dialectical process of reflection – planning-action- observation- reflection, described by Carr and Kemmis (1986: 33) as *praxis*.

> 'Praxis (…) is informed action which, by reflection on its character and consequences, reflexively changes the 'knowledge base' which informs it.'

Thus, change emerges at the levels of both theory and practice.

In the context of the small projects discussed in this book, '*praxis*' can be understood as the reciprocity between action and reflection and the bringing about of change through interventions guided by critical reflection. The role of 'theory' in Action Research is discussed later in the chapter.

Participatory Action Research and Collaborative Action Research

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is an important branch of Action Research but is distinctive in a number of ways. In its purest form

- PAR always involves those who are themselves part of the research context. It is these participants who are likely to be most affected by the situation as it is, and by any changes which are brought about.

- PAR is based on democratic principles in which all those involved have the right to be consulted and listened to and their views respected. Dialogue and debate are, therefore, key elements in PAR.

- Participants are key contributors in terms of identifying issues and areas which need intervention, and in planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating change and reflecting on outcomes.

- PAR requires all those involved to think critically and reflexively.

- PAR is, therefore political in that it reconfigures the traditional power relationship between the researcher and the researched.

Collaborative Action Research (CAR) is closely related to Participatory Action Research in that both emphasise the collaborative role of those involved in the research context. However, unlike PAR, Collaborative Action Research does not require all those affected by and involved in the research context to have a role in democratic decision making about *all* aspects of the project such as identification of the issues to be addressed, designing the methodology, including monitoring and evaluation, and the planning of future interventions. In the CAR approach, collaboration plays a core role, and this may take place between teachers, students, Teaching Assistants, parents, and anyone involved with the school community. But in CAR in education contexts, there is usually one, sometimes more than one, lead researcher who consults with others, and draws others into the research project as 'co-researchers' or observers or contributors in some aspects of the project but although their perspectives may influence the research, they do not share responsibility for overall decision making regarding different aspects of the project. In reality the terms 'collaboration' and 'participation' become merged and projects which respect the PAR model in all its democratic features, are relatively rare because they are hard to put into practice in the busy daily life of schools. In the context of the chapters in this book, the terms 'participatory action research' and 'collaborative action research' have been used to refer to projects in which collaboration, listening to the voices of others and critical reflection have been fundamental aspects of the research.

Action Research and theory making

Through the processes involved in planning, carrying out and reflecting involved in action research projects, earlier theories and practices held by participants may be critically evaluated and new observations and theoretical ideas emerge which are the

subject of scrutiny and debate. Teachers, therefore, can be described as knowledge creators as well as 'consumers of knowledge' (Zeichner &Noffke, 2001, Wennergren & Rönnerman, 2006). In some of the chapters later in this book there are examples of such developments and shifts in perception, leading to changes in the way issues and situations are understood and responded to. For example, in Dhana Lazarus's work with teachers described in Chapter 2, she learns from those teachers about their lack of prior knowledge and experience in the area of visual impairment, and wider issues which they face in their classrooms. She also learns about the role played by students in explaining or suggesting to their teachers ways of including their friends with a visual impairment. From these exchanges emerge new understandings of Dhana's own role and ways she can develop her work with teachers in the future. In this way, through the research process, developments emerge at a theoretical level, as well as in relation to practice.

Action Research is itself underpinned by theory and beliefs about the ways in which change can be brought about in a particular context, and about a whole range of other things underpinning who is involved and how, what kinds of intervention are likely to be effective, what it means to 'critically evaluate' their own work and the role of evaluation and how it should carried out. Those involved bring theoretical knowledge to the task of identifying issues and planning intervention in terms of theories about social justice, the role of education in producing or reducing inequalities, the values and beliefs involved relating to curriculum and pedagogy, and what it means to teach and what it means to learn. The contributors to this book have made choices at several levels in the process of developing their project proposals based on theories of learning, their interpretations of inclusive education, the purpose of their own teaching, and the nature and importance of social relationships. Their approach to their projects, therefore, is informed by multiple levels of theory and beliefs which are mediated during the research process. It is through careful observation, listening and critical thinking, all of which are mediated by reading and discussion, that new *ways of seeing*, new theoretical insights emerge. As Winter and Munn-Giddings (2001: 20) argue,

> Theory is to be found in libraries, to be sure, but it is also to be found activating our thoughts and feelings as we go about our business. Negotiating an action research project among participants thus always involves, among other things,

an interchange of theoretical perspectives. Making these theoretical perspectives explicit, questioning one perspective in the light of another, and suggesting possible sources of ideas which might be illuminating and might help to carry the inquiry forward: this is the theorising dimension of action research. Thus, although an action research project is always focussed on practice, it always has a theoretical *scope* – a specific but shifting horizon of general ideas and general possibilities and implications, arising both from the outcomes of the work (as they emerge) and from the process itself. This means that action research can also 'generate' theory…

Social constructivist approaches to teaching and learning

Social constructivism is associated first and foremost with the Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky (1896-1917) who developed a theory of learning and cognitive development in which the role of 'instruction' and socio-historical context in cognitive development of children are seen as crucial. Rather than cognitive development occurring 'naturally' through the child's interactions with her environment through play and exploration, social constructivist approaches regard the role of others in mediating learning through an engagement with the learner's prior and potential learning and experience embedded in their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which is…what exactly?

Rogoff (1990) in her classic book *Apprenticeship in Thinking* observed that developmental psychology has tended to focus on the individual child or on the environment in which learning takes place. In contrast, with Vygotsky, she argued that in order to understand child development, it is necessary to take account of the reciprocal relationship between the child and their social world.

'For Vygotsky, children's cognitive development must be understood not only as taking place with social support in interaction with others, but also as involving the development of skills with sociohistorically developed tools that mediate intellectual activity. Thus individual development of higher mental processes cannot be understood without considering the social roots of both the tools for

thinking that children are learning to use and the social interactions that guide children in their use'. (Rogoff 1990: 23)

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is the cognitive area in which the child engages in learning activities or problems slightly beyond their cognitive 'comfort zone' with the assistance of a teacher or a 'more experienced other' which can be anyone else, including another child, a parent, a swimming coach or skateboard enthusiast. Of course, children also consolidate their learning through experimentation and practice without direct assistance from others, and we can see this in the many ways that children like to play and explore their environment or experiment with language and the sounds they can make, both on their own or with others.

'Scaffolding' is the process through which learning is mediated 'scaffolding' – a term adopted by Wood et al (1976) and which is commonly used to describe the interactions between the learner and the 'teacher' in exploring problems and co-constructing meaning. Scaffolding involves intervention by a teacher or more 'expert other' in ways which enable a child or novice '… to solve a problem, carry out a task or achieve a goal which would be beyond (their) unassisted efforts'. (Wood et al. 1976: 90).

 The metaphor of scaffolding is a good one because it suggests the careful construction of frameworks which can, themselves, support other frameworks. It also suggests the presence of *collaboration* in negotiating where to go next in the co-construction process. If we go back to the source of the metaphor, it is unusual to see a scaffolder working alone. Like building, scaffolding requires a level of team work in which questioning (*do you think this bar is the best one to use here*?), hypothesising (*I wonder if we need to put something round the chimney stack*?), head-scratching (*I don't get this. Why won't that plank sit firmly on those bars*?) and reflection (*These pins aren't strong enough, but a clamp might work if we strengthen it with clips*) all play a role in working collaboratively.

The building itself and the scaffolding equipment are not neutral or passive blank canvasses, but present particular characteristics and issues to be resolved by those working on them. As Diana Tsokova pointed out during our discussion of this chapter, *the building talks to the builder, embodying human interactions*. The building

makes demands and poses risks and constraints. The builder and the scaffolder have to interact with the conditions they are confronted with and take them into account in negotiating solutions and ways forward. Similarly, The child or 'learner' is not passive in the scaffolding process. And – like the building – the problems and activities being addressed are not neutral. They create demands on the learner and on the teacher or mentor and present constraints on what is possible, as well as opening up opportunities for tackling or solving a problem. Thus, in social constructivist approaches to learning and teaching, all parties involved are 'scaffolders'.

The learner contributes to the construction of meaning in many different ways: through suggesting, questioning and hypothesising, and through 'trial and error' as they try out different approaches to solving a problem or grasping an idea or a particular procedure. Often the teacher's own understanding or interpretation of a concept or activity will shift, in the light of the learner's contribution to the scaffolding process. Dialogue and experimentation play important roles in the scaffolding process, but so do moments of 'head scratching', of silence and reflection. It is through introspection that shifts in understanding occur and are consolidated.

Another reason why 'scaffolding' is a good metaphor is because it refers to the building of *temporary structures* which can be removed when they are no longer needed. In the Zone of Proximal Development concepts and skills are superseded by other skills and by new or reconfigured concepts as the learner becomes more independent in the problem-solving process.

There are important implications of this understanding for teaching and learning in terms of the relationship between the teacher or mentor and the learner. But scaffolding should be seen as an approach which can occur when pairs or groups of children, or other learners, are exploring an activity or problem together. By encouraging children to work collaboratively and independently, children learn from each other and develop self-esteem and a belief in themselves as creators, makers, doers and problem solvers. They gain experience in sharing, listening, explaining and respecting the perspectives and knowledge of others. As Hewett (2014: 403) explains:

> When pupils collaborate, they can be seen to construct their understandings socially, through discussion, explanation and justification of ideas; their joint activity and social interaction promotes intellectual development.

Observing any group of children making something, or playing a game of some kind we can observe how children often seem to be 'natural scaffolders', making suggestions and asking questions – and sometimes giving orders or 'going on strike' (which is not 'good scaffolding', of course!). Social constructivist approaches can harness this apparent facility for collaborative working and playing, by making room for group activities in which children are encouraged to work democratically and independently. They also provide productive opportunities for experiencing and dealing with differences and conflict which can always occur among people working together.

Discussions about social constructivism often focus on 'the learner' and 'the teacher' or 'more experienced other', as if approaches such as scaffolding only take place between two people. However, social constructivism can inform teaching and learning with groups and whole classes – in which the teacher then has the task of engaging with the class as a group of learners, as well as engaging with the ZPD of individual learners. An example of whole class teaching using social constructivist approaches can be found in Chapter 8 in which Jessica Greenham describes the challenges she faced in teaching class '8x'. In her project she draws on social constructivist approaches in planning her teaching of Poetry for the whole class and in her engagement with individual students, through a process of critical reflection and dialogue through scaffolding.

Social Constructivism and Action Research in the development of inclusive education

Social Constructivist approaches to teaching and learning share a number of features with Collaborative Action Research (Koshy, 2010), in particular the primacy of observation, collaboration, dialogue, reflection and the recognition of the experiences and perspectives of others. Consider the different aspects of Action Research from a procedural point of view, and the way they relate to features of social constructivism, notably the ZPD and scaffolding. In CAR a starting point is for the researcher(s) to try to understand and assess the research context in some depth, including sharing information and perspectives, with the purpose of identifying a particular issues or area which requires some kind of intervention. This preliminary, but essential, stage may be referred to as a 'reconnoitre' – or 'doing a recce'. This corresponds to the

stage in social constructivist teaching and learning in which the teacher familiarises herself with the child or group of learners, and tries to assess their zone of proximal development – what they bring with them in terms of prior learning and experience, as well as their existing learning strategies and possible difficulties. This should involve listening to the children's own ideas and perspectives on their learning. The teacher also tries to assess the next stage in terms of the children's potential to move on to another level in their learning, with collaborative support.   In Action Research consultation and discussion will be on-going throughout the planning process, and at this stage next step in Action Research will be to draw up a plan, in consultation with others involved in the research context. This is reflected in the planning and consultation undertaken by the teacher in her work with her student, or group of students, about the focus and kind of activities to develop as the next step.

In a teaching and learning context and in Action Research this stage is followed by the planned intervention, with different forms of observation, monitoring, recording and evaluation taking place. Critical reflection and discussion is a crucial part of the evaluation, leading to decisions about future interventions and activities. In both Action Research and in constructivist approaches to teaching and learning the voice of participants and critical reflection are crucial in planning, intervention and evaluation (Florian & Beaton, 2018). Participatory and Collaborative Action Research and Social Constructivist approaches to teaching and learning have a reciprocal relationship which has the capacity to enrich our understanding of how we can bring about change and strengthen understanding and practices in inclusive education.

The chapter provides a framework for the other chapters which make up this book, in which the themes of inclusive education, Action Research, social constructivism and collaboration emerge in different ways and in different contexts.

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