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Discussion Paper

Action Research for Social Justice

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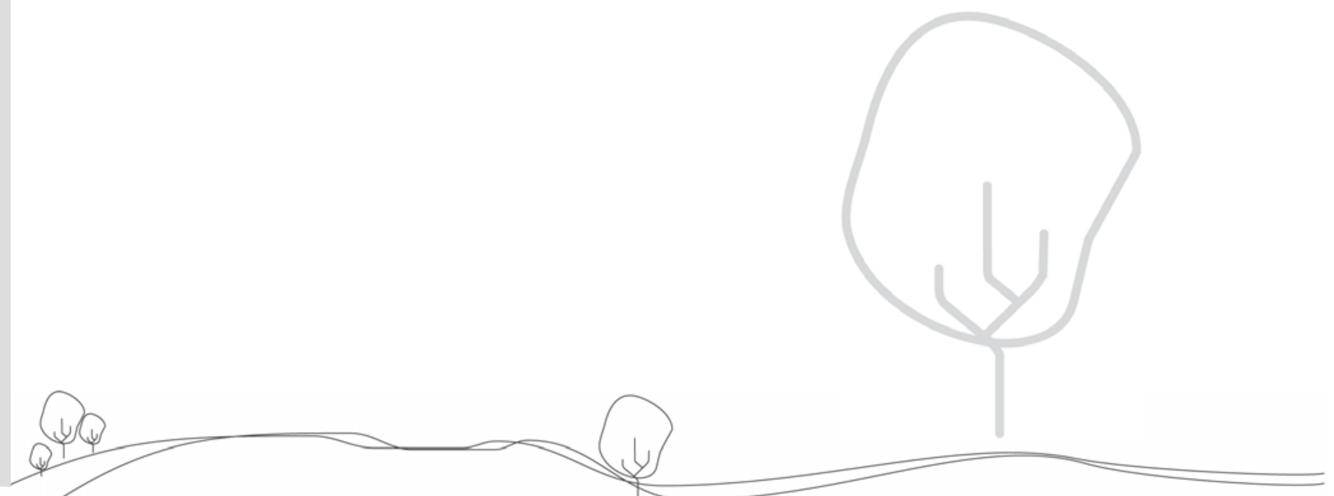
2007



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Abstract

This essay is one of a series commissioned by the Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) as an introduction to, and exploration of, different educational research methodologies for researchers and practitioners. It explores theoretical aspects of action research, in particular the use of action research as a means of enacting change for social justice in educational settings. First, action research is introduced—with a brief historical overview—and three different types of action research are outlined: technical, practical, and emancipatory. The following is then discussed: the potential of action research as a methodology for practitioners to enact change towards social justice. Next, some ethical considerations are examined, as are those of quality in action research projects, and accountability, and some of the strengths and limitations of action research for making a difference in terms of social justice. The essay concludes by returning to the main focus: that action research provides an important vehicle for practitioners to not only add to the knowledge-base on teaching and learning, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to act as change agents who strive to make schools better places for all our students.

Introduction

The term "action research" has come to describe a related group of research methodologies that share aims ranging from an emphasis on personal reflection, to claims that action research can lead to greater social justice for disempowered groups (Cardno, 2003). These methodologies include such approaches as developmental action research, practitioner research, participatory action research, collaborative inquiry, emancipatory research, action science, classroom action research, action learning, and critical action research (Noffke, 1997). Susan Noffke (1997) uses the metaphor of "large family" (p. 306) to describe the ways in which there is a family resemblance, but where the many variants differ in terms of their underpinning beliefs. Nonetheless, all of the family members can be considered forms of "research leading to social action" (Lewin, 1946, as cited in Day et al., 2006, p. 451). In this way, action research has been described as:

> a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situation in which the practices are carried out. (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 162)

This definition incorporates personal and political dimensions of action research (Noffke, 1997). That is to say, it reflects attention to one's practice in the classroom, and ways in which this practice may reflect wider societal inequities, or may seek to address them. In educational contexts, "action research is a special form of research that may be carried out by teachers who are not only interested in *understanding,* but in *changing* their teaching to make it more in line

with their values" (Arhar & Buck, 2000, p. 336, original emphasis). Therefore, the action that occurs as a result of the systematic inquiry during an action research project is a key element, and distinguishes action research from other forms of practitioner inquiry such as self-study research (Loughran & Russell, 2002; McNiff & Whitehead, 2006a).

Action research has a long history, dating back to the work of John Dewey at the turn of the century, and—in the US context—to John Collier and Kurt Lewin in the 1930s and '40s (McTaggart, 1991; Noffke, 1997). It is, however, difficult to trace a definitive history of action research, as many of those involved may not have been associated with academic publishing (Noffke, 1997). Lewin, a social psychologist interested in group decision-making and minority group equality, is frequently cited as a key influence on the development of action research (Adelman, 1993). He developed a research methodology that he termed "a type of action-research, a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action" (Lewin, 1988, p. 41). Lewin developed and viewed action research as a means for minority groups to move "gradually to independence, equality, and cooperation" (Lewin, 1988, p. 46), because of the collaborative nature of the research process.

Stephen Corey is credited with introducing action research to teachers (McTaggart, 1991). His book *Action Research to Improve School Practices* (1953) is still cited widely (Noffke, 1997). For Corey, action research in educational contexts consists of "research that is undertaken by educational practitioners because they believe that by so doing they can make better decisions and engage in better action" (Corey, 1953, p. viii, as cited in Noffke, 1997, p. 317). Action research has become an increasingly popular means for practitioners to engage in research into their own professional practices. It has gained a reputation as a process for building knowledge, enacting change, and increasing teacher professionalism (Noffke, 1997).

One way in which action research projects have been categorised is by their being technical, practical, or emancipatory (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). For Carr and Kemmis (1986), all action research projects should be "systematic investigation[s] of social or educational practice… participatory or collaborative, and… employ the spiral of self-reflection" (p. 201), yet not all variants of action research contain each of these essential elements.

The focus of technical action research is the development of "efficient and effective practice, judged by reference to criteria which may not themselves be analysed in the course of the action research process" (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 202). In other words, an action research project may be classified as technical when the research questions for the research project have not been developed by the practitioners involved, but by others; the criteria used to judge the quality of the findings is not itself subject to critique; and the findings of the research are primarily intended to inform the research literature, not to improve the practice of the participating practitioners. Technical action research is often instigated by an outside facilitator (e.g., Judah & Richardson, 2006). Another way of thinking about technical action research is as its being "action research for research purposes" (Robertson, 2000, p. 307). Nonetheless, there are some potential benefits. A technical action research project may produce changes in practice, and may support the

practitioners in developing their capacity as researchers, but it will not necessarily be collaborative—an essential element of action research for Carr and Kemmis (1986).

When “outside facilitators form cooperative relationships with practitioners, helping them to articulate their own concerns, plan strategic action for change, monitor the problems and effects of changes, and reflect on the value and consequences of the changes actually achieved” (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 203), *practical* action research is taking place. This type of action research can be termed “action research for action purposes” (Robertson, 2000, p. 307). While this form of action research is collaborative, and does allow for research into the concerns of the practitioners themselves, it does not create “a self-reflective community” (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 203)—another important element of action research. A self-reflective community is created when a group of practitioners comes together to reflect, not only on their own professional practices, but on the practices and functions of education more widely (Carr & Kemmis, 1986).

The third type of action research described by Carr and Kemmis (1986) is *emancipatory* action research. Here, “the practitioner group takes joint responsibility for the development of practice, understandings and situations, and sees these as socially-constructed in the interactive processes of educational life” (p. 203). In addition, emancipatory action research includes attention to the spiral of self-reflection through the development of “self-critical and self-reflective community” (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 205). Carr and Kemmis (1986; 2005) promote emancipatory action research as a tool for teachers to interrogate more widely the often taken-for-granted status of their own professional and educational practices. They advocate for an emancipatory form of action research that seeks to both *improve* practice, understandings of practice, and the context in which practice takes place; and *involve* all of those affected by the practices under consideration in the action research process (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Carr and Kemmis (1986) endorse emancipatory action research as a means for working towards greater social justice in education.

Action research for social change

The term “social justice” is frequently used in educational circles. It seems that “[a]ppeals to justice still have the power to awaken a moral imagination and motivate people to look at their society critically, to ask how it can be made more liberating and enabling” (Young, 1990, p. 35). As I have written elsewhere (Sandretto, 2004b), it is a slippery term—meaning different things to different people. One view of social justice is that it “is primarily concerned with the development and maintenance of an educational system committed to meeting the needs of all students in order to assist them in reaching their full potential as defined by the students and their families” (Sandretto, 2004a, p. 33). Another way of thinking about social justice is as “a verb as well as a noun, principles as well as action” (Walker, 2003, p. 122).

Emancipatory action research projects, such as “socially critical action research” (Tripp, 1990), make explicit links between technical or practical concerns of classroom practice, with attention to the wider social implications of those practices. An action research project concerned with seeking greater social justice could focus on the ways in which pedagogy is socially just, in terms

of ways students are provided with equitable learning opportunities (Moje, 2007). Or, it could examine the sorts of changes that need to be made to classroom literacy practices in order to better develop more critical forms of literacy (Cooper & White, 2006). It could also focus on student learning outcomes, or consider which students are doing well in schools.

Some action research projects have been critiqued for their lack of attention to social justice issues (Carr & Kemmis, 2005; Zeichner, 1993). There are fears that some current incarnations of action research are merely masquerading as their more emancipatory cousins, and are actually focused on providing evidence to support policy directives, or to encourage compliance with government programmes (Carr & Kemmis, 2005; Groundwater-Smith & Dadds, 2004; Kemmis, 2006). If we agree that "education is a political practice" (Freire, 1998, p. 72), we might conclude that action research can be and should be inherently political work. For Kenneth Zeichner (1993):

> The reality… is that the political and the critical are right there in front of us in our classrooms and other work sites and the choices that we make every day in our own work settings reveal our moral commitments with regard to social continuity and change whether we want to acknowledge it or not. We cannot be neutral. (p. 201)

As educators, we are well aware that some groups of students are doing better in our schools in Aotearoa New Zealand than others (Alton-Lee & Praat, 2000; Caygill & Chamberlain, 2004). Stephen Kemmis (2006) advocates for the use of action research as a means for "telling unwelcome truths" (p. 474), and encourages critical examination of the status quo or common educational practices. Therefore, we can use action research as a means for improving educational practices within individual classrooms *and* consider more widely the effects of those practices.

Finally, action research projects have the potential to enact social change (Tripp, 1990). When action research projects fall into the category of emancipatory action research─where they are driven by the concerns of practitioners, and conducted systematically and self-reflexively─the outcomes can be wider than just changes in classroom practice:

> Action researchers can examine their own educational practices to discover ways in which they are distorted away from these values [of social justice]; they can also examine the situations and institutions in which they practice to see how they are constituted so as to prevent more rational communication, more just and democratic decision-making, and productive work which provides those involved with real access to an interesting and satisfying life. (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, pp. 193─194)

Action research projects can focus on ways in which the routines and procedures of the classroom and/or school may maintain injustices for particular groups of students. For example, a project might consider ways in which students are not given a voice in their learning (which potentially perpetuates a cycle of disinterest and lack of academic achievement).

Considerations

There are also a number of considerations researchers need to be cognisant of when developing, conducting, and reporting on an action research project. This section briefly outlines considerations of ethics, quality, and accountability.

In terms of ethical considerations, the issue of *free and informed consent* is vital (Robinson & Lai, 2006). If a practitioner/researcher is associated with an institution that has an ethics committee, those protocols can be followed. These usually involve submitting an application that outlines the research, and any potential harm to participants. It usually also details the process the researcher will follow to obtain consent. If an action research project is located solely within a school setting, the practitioner/researcher will need to obtain consent from the school, as well as from all the potential participants—usually students—and, depending on their age, their guardians/parents. Finally, the researcher will need to ensure the potential participants are neither feeling pressured nor coerced to participate. An action research project concerned with issues of social justice will seek to conduct the process of action research in socially just ways, and, as such, will be cognisant of issues of power—particularly between teachers and students. For example, practitioners/researchers will have to carefully consider the principle of student research participants being able to withdraw from the project at any time, and balance this against a desire for all student learning outcomes to improve. If students remove themselves from the project, they may be electing to miss the opportunity of improved learning.

Another ethical consideration is that of the *prevention of harm* (Robinson & Lai, 2006). In practitioner research, harm to participants can result from dissemination of research results, or from participation in the research process. Each action research project is unique, and different methods will be needed in order to answer the research questions of that particular project. The researcher must balance the potential harm of any particular research method—classroom observations, for example—with the need to ensure trustworthiness of the research results. Kevin Kumashiro (2004) reminds us that "[s]ome methods of research can also perpetuate oppressive (patriarchal, racist) social relations between teachers and students, depending on how the data are collected and analysed" (p. 12). Therefore, practitioners/researchers need to keep these considerations in mind as they develop their projects.

Action researchers need to be aware that the effects of the research may extend beyond the borders of the classroom. When making results public, it will be important to consider issues of *confidentiality* and *anonymity*. Practitioners who are becoming more skilled and capable researchers may wish to be co-authors in publications and conference presentations. In an action research project with which the practitioner is the researcher *and* the author of the results, these issues will always be difficult to resolve, as the participating schools and students will be identifiable. Action researchers concerned with issues of social justice need to "*re-present* their findings in ways that invite the reader to ask troubling questions about what is being reported" (Kumashiro, 2004, pp. 12—13, original emphasis). In other words, an action research project concerned with issues of social justice should not only consider the topic under study, but also consider the possible effects of the dissemination of the results.

A number of other ethical issues involving power can arise, including *conflicts of interest*, and even *intellectual property rights* (Hill & Robertson, 2006). These issues can be particularly salient when practitioners collaborate with outside institutions such as a university or the Ministry of Education. For example, the members of a teacher inquiry group exploring critical literacy found a conflict of interest when it came time to publishing some of their results (Luna et al., 2004). They had to address issues of authorship, which, for the academic researcher involved in the project, had ramifications for tenure, but for practitioners/researchers in the group there were concerns as to "whether publication in an academic journal is an effective form of social action" (Luna et al., 2004, p. 69).

When taking ethical issues into consideration, it is important to always keep in mind the ethical maxim of "do no harm". One means of addressing ethical concerns is through open communication and transparent processes such as the collaborative development of the findings (Fraser, 1997; Zeni, 1998). In addition, where possible, researchers should involve participants in ethical decisions that may affect them (Robinson & Lai, 2006). Action researchers will need to consult widely with regard to the development of projects, and follow the ethical protocols from their settings.

Another important consideration in the development and implementation of any research project is that of quality. Quality in research refers to the extent to which a reader can place some degree of confidence in the research results (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). A judgement on the quality of any particular action research project involves an examination of the process *and* the product(s) of the research (Capobianco & Feldman, 2006). To consider the quality of the *process* of an action research project, Hilary Bradbury and Peter Reason (2006b) discuss the "choice points" (p. 344) in any given research project. While there are many moments, in any given action research project, where the researchers need to carefully consider the ethical implications of the choices they are making, Bradbury and Reason (2006) propose eight choice points. Amongst these are: careful examination of the relationships among the group members, and consideration of the practical outcomes of any given project.

The quality of any project can be enhanced by the use of a critical friend. By asking someone who is outside the research project to comment on it, the researcher is asked to reconsider and reflect critically on the process and product of the research (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006a). Of course, the use of a critical friend does not guarantee the quality of any given project (see also the section on Limitations), and ethical issues such as confidentiality need to be carefully considered and discussed when inviting a critical friend to join an action research project.

One way of considering the quality of the product or findings of any research project is to ask about its validity. Validity as a measure of the quality of qualitative research projects has fallen out of favour, as it is typically associated with quantitative research, or research that uses statistical methods to make its claims, such as in the sciences (Feldman, 2007). There are, however, broad definitions of validity that may be useful for action researchers: "An account is valid or true if it represents accurately those features of the phenomena that it is intended to

describe, explain, or theorise" (Hammersley, 1992, as cited in Feldman, 2007, p. 23). Feldman (2007) advocates for clear articulation of the research process, including the thinking behind the data collection: "how and why data were collected… [and] what counts as data" (p. 30), as a way of enhancing the quality of an action research project. In addition, action researchers need to be able to demonstrate *why* a particular intervention or action worked─and not just claim that it did.

Finally, in any research project it is important to be *accountable*: "We should be accountable to those involved in the research as well to those who trust the results of the research; we should account for the outcomes as well as the processes that lead to those outcomes" (Day et al., 2006, p. 452). In the Aotearoa New Zealand context, Russell Bishop and Ted Glynn (1999) provide a useful framework that, although particularly concerned with research in Maori contexts, can be applied to research in any context. Bishop and Glynn (1999) provide a series of questions that address issues of initiation, benefits, representation, legitimation, and accountability─that researchers can use as they develop, conduct, and disseminate their research findings. For example: "Who initiates the project? How were the goals and major questions of the study established? Who is the researcher accountable to?" (Bishop & Glynn, 1999, p. 129).

Strengths

There are a number of strengths associated with action research methodologies. One of the key strengths is that, by grounding the research in the realities of classroom practice, there is the potential to "bridge the knowledge-practice gap" (Noffke, 1997, p. 321). In other words, action research projects have the potential to enable practitioners to "walk their talk" or enact their beliefs in their practice (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Carr and Kemmis (1986) claim that "action research is a deliberate process for emancipating practitioners from the often unseen constraints of assumptions, habit, precedent, coercion and ideology" (p. 192). Engaging in action research projects may provide practitioners with opportunities to examine their often tacit beliefs.

Action research to (re)consider one's practice can also be considered a form of praxis (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). According to Paulo Freire (1999), whose work focused on ways in which to support illiterate adults in reading in critical ways, praxis is "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (p. 33). Praxis involves the careful consideration of our theories and our practices: "Theory building and critical reflection inform our practice and our action, and our practice and action inform our theory building and critical reflection" (Wink, 2000, p. 59). In addition, practice and the development of knowledge are inextricably linked: "without practice there's no knowledge" (Freire, as cited in Bell, Gaventa, & Peters, 1990, p. 98). As a means of bridging the knowledge-practice gap, action research projects may focus on ways in which practitioners can reflect on their current professional practices, and take action to bring about more equitable outcomes for all students (Tripp, 1990). Therefore, action research may give practitioners more control over their practice, and encourage them to carefully consider the match or mismatch between their professional practice and their beliefs (Noffke, 1997).

Well-designed and carefully-executed action research projects not only have the potential to effect change at the local level in terms of classroom and school-wide practices, they also have the potential to influence educational policy (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1998). The findings generated by practitioner research can add to the "broad array of evidence and data" (Luke, 2003, p. 98) necessary for the development of educational policy that has the potential to shift current educational disparities. As well as informing policy formation, "action research… [can be] a powerful vehicle for communicating the ways in which education policies affect the complex realities of the daily lives of teachers and children in schools to the larger public" (Rust & Meyers, 2006, p. 73). Action research projects dedicated to issues of social justice can "highlight areas and opportunities for policy reform" (Rust & Meyers, 2006, p. 84).

Limitations

Any research methodology has its limitations. Collaboration has been promoted as an essential aspect of quality action research projects (Capobianco & Feldman, 2006; Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Collaboration is often viewed as involving other practitioners and researchers (Capobianco & Feldman, 2006), but it can also mean involving students (Groundwater-Smith & Dadds, 2004). Some action researchers have gone as far as to claim: "all those involved in the research process should come to participate equally in all its phases of planning, acting, observing and reflecting" (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 199). This claim is overly idealistic when considering the very real constraints of conducting research in busy schools. As with the ethical considerations discussed in this essay, it is suggested that the amount of collaboration amongst team members should be explicitly discussed and negotiated throughout any project.

Collaboration in action research is not, however, without its critics (Hargreaves, 1994; Waters-Adams, 1994). In his reflections on a collaborative action research project, Stephen Waters-Adams (1994) proposes that, in some projects, personal inquiry may need to precede collaborative inquiry. That is to say, once practitioners have begun to reflect on their own practices, they may see the need for collaboration, rather than implementing or mandating collaboration from the outset.

Andy Hargreaves (1994) warns us about "contrived collegiality" (pp. 191–192). Contrived collegiality can be involved in practitioner research that is focused on predetermined, fixed projects that are of interest to administrators or policy-makers, rather than on projects that are developed out of practitioner concerns and interests, and linked to wider contexts. This is the type of action research that Carr and Kemmis (1986) refer to as *technical* action research.

Concerns with collaboration are primarily concerns about power and power-sharing. As Morwenna Griffiths asks, "Is one person's co-operation and consensus another's coercion and constraint?" (Griffiths, 1990, as cited in Griffiths, 2003, p. 101). While the intention may be to collaborate, the potential participants may not interpret it in that way. Therefore, while collaboration can enhance an action research project, *how* it is developed and implemented will

take time and a concerted effort. Again, open and transparent communication holds a great deal of potential for addressing these issues.

Concluding thoughts

Action research has the potential to create knowledge for action that practitioners, as well as researchers and policy-makers, will find useful. Action research conducted by teachers has been viewed as "a reaction against a view of practitioners as technicians who merely carry out what others, outside of the sphere of practice, want them to do" (Zeichner, 1993, p. 204). While action research projects that are focused on issues of practice are important, it is also important to connect those micro concerns to macro issues of social justice. Action researchers such as Kemmis (2006), Noffke (2005), Weiner (1989), and Zeichner (1993), urge practitioners engaging in action research to develop projects that allow them to undertake "personal renewal *and* social reconstruction" (Zeichner, 1993, p. 214, emphasis added). In other words, practitioners are encouraged to engage in action research projects that engage and enrich them professionally, as well as that strive for greater social justice. Ultimately, educational action research is concerned with the improving of what goes on in classrooms and schools, and as such it is "inherently moral and political work" (Feldman, 2007, p. 22).

It is important, however, to avoid the assumption that we will get it right once and for all. As Nicholas Burbules (2004) explains:

> Despite our tendency to view learning and growth as an ever-climbing upward journey, I think a truer perspective is cyclical: that education is often about returning again and again to certain existential and intellectual problems, sometimes in new ways or with particular insights, but not with a sense of ever *solving* them or making them go away. (p. 9, original emphasis)

Therefore, we might consider action research as being a long-term means of continuing to critically examine our practices as educators, rather than as a means to an end.

This essay has been prepared with the aim of giving aspiring practitioners/researchers an introduction to theoretical aspects of action research. Different types of action research have been described; some considerations have been highlighted in relation to developing and conducting action research; some strengths and limitations explored; and, perhaps most importantly, the reader has been encouraged to consider using action research as a tool for enacting social change in educational contexts. The essay concludes with some additional resources that may be useful in developing an action research project concerned with social justice.

Best wishes for your future research endeavours.

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Young, I. M. (1990). *Justice and the politics of difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Zeichner, K. M. (1993). Action research: Personal renewal and social reconstruction. *Educational Action Research, 1* (2), 199─219.

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Additional resources

Atweh, B., Kemmis, S., & Weeks, P. (Eds.). (1998). *Action research in practice: Partnerships for social justice in education*. London: Routledge.

This edited volume describes a number of participatory action research projects that sought to bring about social justice in education. The following chapters may be of particular interest: those by Atweh, Christensen, and Dornan, on students as action researchers; McKibbin, Cooper, Blanche, Dougall, Granzien, and Greer-Richardson, on a project that sought to increase parent participation in an urban inner city high school; and Davis and Cooke on parents as partners for change, in a project on the development of a healthy school environment.

Gorski, P. C., & Ed Change. (2007). *Teacher action research*. Retrieved 12 July, 2007, from http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/tar.html.

This website describes teacher action research (TAR) as a means of achieving equity and social justice. The site includes stages of TAR, an example of a TAR project, and ways of initiating a TAR project in a school setting.

Griffiths, M. (1998). *Educational research for social justice: Getting off the fence*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

This text provides a set of principles that can guide researchers interested in planning and implementing educational research for social justice.

Tripp, D. H. (1990). Socially critical action research. *Theory into Practice, 29*(3), 158–166.

This article describes socially critical action research, with examples from practitioner/research projects.

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