Lessons Learned from the History of Collaborative Action Research in American Schools

Jean A. King

M. Peg Lonnquist

Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement (CAREI)
College of Education, University of Minnesota

March, 1993

A paper prepared for presentation at a symposium entitled School University Partnerships to Sustain Collaborative Action Research in Schools at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Atlanta, GA, April, 1993. The development of the paper was supported in part by the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools, supported by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (Grant No. R117Q00005-91) and by the Wisconsin Center for Education Research, School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the supporting agencies.

Educational action research--systematic inquiry by collaborative, self-critical communities of educators (adapted from Watt & Watt, 1993)--is a growth industry in the 1990's.[1] Practitioners and scholars alike are generating a substantial practice and related literature building on the fairly intuitive notion of trying something, studying its effects, and then trying it again. Examples of action research activity are numerous:

- Teachers in several communities are leading research collaboratives to study their ongoing practice (e.g., Levine, 1992; Youngerman, 1991; Watt & Watt, 1992);
- Numerous research collaborations between schools and universities (e.g., Georgia, Minnesota, Virginia, and Washington state and the province of Ontario) use action research as one mechanism for long-term school change;
- Participants in national projects, e.g., the Learning Labs sponsored by the NEA and the AFT's professional practice schools, are developing the notion of school-based inquiry;
- A number of school change approaches now available--e.g., the Middle Grades Assessment Program (Dorman, 1985); the Mathematics Assessment Process (Pechman, 1992); the Outcomes Accreditation model of the North Central Association (NCA, 1989); and the process used in the League of Professional Schools (National Dissemination Assocation, 1993)--apply action research ideas; and
- Publications related to practitioner research appear on a regular basis,

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[1] In this paper, we define action research as a collaborative and cyclic process that includes problem framing, planning, acting, observing, and reflecting in order to improve educational practice (see Carr & Kemmis, 1986). The formal acts of planning and observing in some cases distinguish action research from teacher research, which draws on teachers' study, experiences, and reflections, but not necessarily in a formal, cyclical, or collaborative manner. Our distinction here is meant to help us make sense of the process and potential of action research for changing schools as well as individual classroom practice within them.

including the 1993 NSSE Yearbook on teacher research (Hollingsworth & Sockett, in press); Educational Action Research, a new international journal; and book-length works (e.g., Kincheloe, 1991, McTaggart, 1991, Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993).

Despite such widespread interest, however, the fact remains that action research has yet to become an integral part of the culture of American schools. Not surprisingly, the multiple challenges facing action researchers have remained fairly similar from 1950 to the present. The purpose of this paper is to examine action research from the perspective of a critical friend, to document the lessons learned to date from the history of collaborative action research, and to frame at least briefly some organizational issues in applying the process in schools. Five sections address the following topics: the distinguishing characteristics of action research; a short history; lessons compiled from previous writings about action research; the appropriateness of seeking to embed action research in the ongoing practice of schools; and several issues to be considered if action research is to succeed in schools.

What Is Action Research?

An innovation must be clearly specified if people are to adopt, implement, and institutionalize it. In the case of action research, as with many other innovations (e.g., open education, outcome-based education), this creates a challenge because one person's action research can vary dramatically from someone else's. A recent review of writings about action research, however, suggests the following commonalities in action research approaches (King & Lonnquist, 1992):

- Direct involvement and influence in the real world experience of practitioners. Action research takes place in the ongoing practice of schools and cannot exist outside of it because, as part of its process, it creates change. It frames problems in practice, determines possible solutions to

them, enacts these solutions, and then studies the results, all in situ.

- A continuous cycle of research activities. King and Lonnquist (1992, p. 12) detail five steps common to action research approaches in articles published from 1946 to 1986: problem framing; planning; acting; observing; and reflecting. The reflection of one cycle becomes the problem framing of the next cycle, so that, once initiated, action research is technically an ongoing process.
- The active involvement of practitioners in the research process. These practitioners may be teachers, building-level or central office administrators, students, or even parents and community members who are immediately involved in the work of the school. Outsiders (e.g., university-based researchers or program evaluators) may, in some cases, facilitate the process, but practitioners necssarily play a central and critical role.
- Collaboration. In contrast to other research approaches, action research cannot be a solitary activity. While the form and extent of the collaboration may vary, practitioners engaged in action research work together as a group.

These characteristics distinguish action research from other forms of research that, e.g., do not directly effect change, do not interact with the practitioners being studied except as sources of data, or require no collaboration. It is important to note that action research is methodologically eclectic (McKernan, 1988), using whichever methods best answer the questions asked in a given study. Also, within the innovation of action research, variation is possible in the role of outside research experts (who may be in charge of the process or not), in the traditional or "practical" nature of theory generated (if any), and in locus of the practice studied. There is a basic distinction between classroom-based teacher research, through which teachers work to improve their individual classroom practice, and building- or program-wide action research, which studies practice across classrooms.

A Short History of Educational Action Research

If action research appears to be an idea whose time has come, a brief glance at its history suggests that this is not its first time in the educational limelight. The term was coined in the 1940's when the intractable problems of racism and poverty, to name only two, pointed to the importance of a long-term process for effecting meaningful social change. Even then, Kurt Lewin's idea of people coupling action with inquiry was not new. Indeed, it built in part on the writings of a Commissioner of Indian Affairs named John Collier and the work of pragmatic philosopher John Dewey and his progressive followers (Noffke, 1990). What was new, after Lewin labelled such effort action research, was its almost immediate application to the practice of mainstream, traditional education. At the very time that progressive education was suffering its death throes (Cremin, 1961), the writings of Stephen Corey (Corey, 1953), Hilda Taba (Taba & Noel, 1957), and Abraham Shumsky (Shumsky, 1958) developed the practice of action research as a way to change American teachers and schools. As Corey (1953) put it,

> We are convinced that the disposition to study, as objectively as possible, the consequences of our own teaching is more likely to change and improve our practices than is reading about what someone else has discovered regarding the consequences of his teaching.

Noffke (1990) and McTaggart (1991) have documented the fate of action research in the years following the launch of Sputnik in 1957. It is certainly true that when the research, development, and dissemination (RD&D) model and related national curriculum projects received extensive federal funding, attention shifted away from the rather homely, classroom-based change process. The labcoat replaced chalky pockets, and outside "experts" replaced inside do-ers. The mere notion of a "teacher-proof" curriculum points to the extent of the change. From one perspective,

> The action research movement collapsed under its own triviality; except for a few dedicated exponents moved by a group-dynamics vision of inservice education and teacher involvement, little talent supported action research (Clifford, 1973, p. 37).

Suffice it to say, however, that rumors of the demise of action research were highly exaggerated. Although a review of major reform efforts from the '60's to the '80's surely supports McTaggart's claim (1991, p. 5) that "action research was almost killed off," it did not, in fact, disappear. For teachers working in the progressive tradition, action research in the form of child study continued--and has always continued--apart from the comings and goings of national research movements. Noffke (1990, p. 208) notes that action research "remained a consistent and fairly frequent entry in the Education Index through the 1960's" and that such work continued in the '70's, for example, in community action programs and in language arts research. Its resurgence since the 1980's points to the perceived potential of involving practitioners in a formal process to create and document their own knowledge, whether in the classroom, the school, or in society at large.

Lessons Learned

An analysis of the history of educational action research points to four lessons learned in the fifty or so years since Kurt Lewin first used the term. Taken together, these lessons present both good and bad news for the long-term viability of an action research approach to school change.

The first lesson points to multiple versions of what action research might be. The question of what form it should take has generated considerable writing. King and Lonnquist (1992) distinguish between two general approaches:

- Traditional action research, in which university-based researchers lead a process that simultaneously tackles a local problem and generates social science theory; and

- Practitioner-centered action research, in which practitioners take charge of the research process for their own purposes, perhaps generating a form of theory useful to other practitioners.

Grundy (1982) identifies three types of action research--technical, practical, and emancipatory--each pointing to different philosophical commitments and potential outcomes. Advocates of emancipatory action research (e.g., McTaggart, 1991; Kincheloe, 1991) make strong claims about the relative merit of their approach, in which groups of practitioners with critical (in the sense of critical theory) intent come together to develop simultaneous action and enlightenment. As McTaggart notes (1991, p. 67, emphasis in original), "[Action research] will be emancipatory or it will not be called action research at all." To further complicate matters, people have written variously about where the work of action research might best be situated, i.e., in individual teachers' classroom practice (Stenhouse, 1975), within school communities (Reid, Hopkins, & Holly, 1987), or within collaborative groups of teachers and critical friends both inside and outside the school (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). While it may be unrealistic and unwise to expect one "best" form of an innovation, the multiple possibilities for action research suggest the complexity of this potential change.

A second lesson, emphatically clear amidst the burgeoning interest in action research, is the ongoing appeal of a practitioner-centered research process, despite the variety of forms espoused. The general outline of an action research approach (frame problem, plan, act, observe, and reflect) is fairly common, and many fields (e.g., operational research, organization development, and work democracy research) have embraced forms of action research in both developed and developing countries, literally around the world (Peters & Robinson, 1984). In education, the ongoing inquiry tradition of some progressive schools provides support for what Cuban (1992) calls a neo-progressive movement, within which action research finds a natural home. The notions of reflective

practice (Schön, 1983), teacher empowerment, and site-based decision-making, coupled with the increasing acceptance of qualitative methods, have provided additional grounding for action research. Further, the development of critical theory suggests to some the re-emergence of a social role for action research through which local practitioners can recreate themselves, their schools, and their communities (e.g., Carr & Kemmis, 1986, McTaggart, 1991).

The third lesson learned from the history of action research is one stated previously, i.e., that despite continuing support for the notion and a variety of approaches for its implementation, action research has not, to date, taken root in the practice of mainstream American education, nor are its future prospects assured.[2] The distinguishing characteristics of action research--direct involvement and influence in practice, an ongoing research cycle, the active involvement of practitioners in research, and face-to-face collaboration--find little place in the context of traditional education. In part this stems from long-held assumptions about educators' roles in research, i.e., that teachers and other school-based practitioners have no role to play in the generation of knowledge. Classroom teachers rarely learn the how to's of educational research, becoming at best consumers of research information created by people who typically work outside of schools, information that, from the classroom perspective, may have "the cutting edge of sponge" (Jones, 1989, p. 51). As a group, teachers are generally conservative and not prone to questioning tradition, either in schools or in society (Lanier & Little, 1986). They typically report

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[2] Noffke (1990, p. 208) raises an important issue when she writes, "It is as yet unclear exactly how prevalent the practice [of action research] was even in its 'heyday.'" While the volume of scholarly writing on the topic in the years surrounding the 1950's suggests that many practitioners engaged in action research, little documentation of widespread implementation at that time exists. The same issue is relevant today. Numerous publications point to both scholarly and practical interest in action research, as do the growing number of research collaborations sponsored either by colleges and universities or by independent groups of teachers. However, it is not entirely clear how widespread the practice of action research is, nor to what extent it is embedded in the ongoing cultures of the schools in which it is practiced.

seeing research as "distant, uninteresting, irrelevant, counterintuitive, unusable, or used to blame them for the failings of the larger educational and socio-political systems" (King & Lonnquist, 1992, p. 24). Small wonder, then, that action research is less than appealing for many educators.

The potential failure of action research, a process that routinely requires time, is also built into the structure of traditional schools. In these schools, isolated teachers, socialized to go it on their own, have little if any time in their workday to reflect on their practice, either alone or with colleagues. Unlike that of other professionals, teachers' work is not organized to allow time to frame problems, to collect data, or to make collective sense of what is happening in classrooms or schools (Goodlad, 1984; Zeichner, 1986). Bird and Little (1986, p. 504) write that "the most important resource for improvement is time with colleagues: time for [faculties] to examine, debate and improve their norms of civility, instruction and improvement." To date, school structures have not by and large changed to reflect these values, although an increasing number of people are noting this need. In the words of Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1991, p. 12), "Doing teacher research cannot simply be an additional task added to the already crowded teachers' day. . ." McTaggart (1991), however, holds little hope for the prospects of educational action research when he writes, "For the time being at least, teachers and principals may not have conditions which allow (or encourage) continuous engagement with action research projects" (p. 66).

The fourth lesson derived from the history of action research is partly an explanation for the third, but because of its potential importance to future efforts to institutionalize action research, deserves separate mention. The history of action research in this country points clearly to a continuing reluctance on the part of the research community

to accept as valid the notion that educational practitioners can create their own theory.[3] Can a physician in general practice, the analogous argument goes, conduct medical research of sufficient quality to merit its use by others? In a review of writing on action research, King and Lonnquist (1992) identify three responses to the claim that practitioners can generate "valid" theory through action research:

1) An outright rejection of the claim (e.g., Hodgkinson, 1957);

2) An argument that solving site specific problems is more important than applying the canons of traditional social science, i.e., that it is better to answer a meaningful question however poorly than to design a tight study to answer a less significant question (e.g., Corey, 1949); and

3) A rejection of traditional notions of validity, leading to a notion of "practical theory" that emerges directly from practice and makes sense to other practitioners (e.g., Stenhouse, 1988; House et al., 1989).

During "first generation" action research in the 1950's (McTaggart & Singh, 1986), the third response lacked epistemological and politicial grounding, and the eventual dominance of the well-funded RD&D model was virtually a foregone conclusion (although, as has been noted, the practice of action research nevertheless continued). Several decades later, the notion of practical theory is no longer rejected out of hand, although the development of philosophical and methodological support for such theory is ongoing (e.g., Hartsock, 1983; Harding, 1991).

This presents action researchers several choices. First, by focusing on specific problems within specific contexts, they can ignore the challenge of some researchers and

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[3] Traditional action research, in which university researchers control the research process and insure its "scientific" rigor, is in an important sense a category of applied social science and, as such, does not raise these issues. The critical question is who generates the knowledge, and when the answer to that question is, "the practitioner," traditional researchers may question the outcomes on several grounds.

work directly to improve educational practice. Improved practice, after all, will help children, regardless of what any researchers think. Why knock on the door of people uninterested in talking to you, especially if the results of your research are immediately useful? Second, compromising advocates can adopt a traditional action research approach that conforms to the standards of quantitative or qualitative science and draw back from questions of practical theory. By choosing to ignore these conceptual battles, however, action researchers may relegate action research to second-class status because of its applied nature. A third choice is to demonstrate the value of practical theory for improving practice. But how can action researchers "prove" that practitioner-centered action research generates "valid" theory when such a question unavoidably draws them into a world of philosophical debates about positivism, the status quo, and the very methods they may find of limited use? The fourth lesson contains a number of theoretical challenges for the development of action research.

To summarize, the experience of educational action research in this country since 1950 presents at least four lessons important to its continuing development. One of these (lesson two)--the ongoing appeal of a practitioner-centered research approach and its use in a number of quarters--is undeniably good news for supporters of action research, reflecting an increasing democratization of research. However, depending on how spin doctors handle the three remaining lessons, they can present either good or bad news. Lesson one, competing approaches to action research, suggests a variety of implementation options: good news given the diverse needs for current educational change; bad news given the potential confusion and lack of clarity in action research as an innovation. Lesson three, the fact that action research has not become part of the culture of American schools, points to future prospects: good news because there's room for growth; bad news because the factors that have kept action research out of traditional schools remain largely in place. That the final lesson, related to the validity of "practical theory" and the potential support of

action research by the research community, is a lesson at all is good news for those who want the work of action research externally validated. However, the short-term prospects for such support, in light of past history, may be less than bright, and others may well question the wisdom of seeking such validation.

To Institutionalize or Not to Institutionalize: That Is a Question

The bandwagon mentality of American educational reform is a fact of school life, and Fullan (1991, p. 18) points to the fairly obvious--but often overlooked--problem of schools' adopting innovations that do not work. Before adding a wheel to yet another bandwagon, therefore, we must discuss the issue of whether or not American educators should try to institutionalize the action research process. Two questions in particular require answers: What evidence suggests that action research is worth institutionalizing, and what are the potential results of its institutionalization?

How would we know if action research was an effective innovation? A fairly standard approach would be to conduct a review of existing research literature and sum across the studies, noting cases that supported the process and cases that did not. But, in the case of action research, herein lie multiple rubs. First, the broad range of conceptual interpretations and activities that can be labeled action research points to the difficulty of deciding what, exactly, might count as examples. The obvious contrast between traditional action research, which looks much like standard social science research, and practitioner-centered action research, which from the traditional perspective is less "rigorous," makes this point. Such a challenge, however, is typical of any complex innovation and might be handled, e.g., by identifying common characteristics of the process and using studies that examine their effects.

Second, because action research, unlike traditional quantitative or qualitative research, does not hold publication in refereed journals as a standard of excellence and

because many teachers have neither the time nor the inclincation to publish, its results may remain only in the professional communities that conduct the studies. Again, however, although questions of rigor might exist, such a challenge could be handled, perhaps by compiling unpublished, anecdotal materials from informal networks and journals that print teachers' research (e.g., the North Dakota Study Group on Evaluation monographs, The Teacher's Journal).

An additional problem, however, is more troublesome. Even if action research results are formally published, King and Lonnquist (1992, p. 2) note, "the very process of action research makes a comparison of studies using its method across time and place relatively meaningless." The mere act of review presupposes the existence of objective truths apart from the researchers who conducted the studies, a claim that advocates of practitioner-centered action research reject. The results of action research have "subjective generalizability" (Sockett, personal correspondence with Fred Newmann, 1992) and speak of local meanings that raise questions for readers, rather than providing definitive examples of "what works" in classrooms generally. For those espousing emancipatory action research, critical theory suggests an even broader frame. From this perspective, the notion of an interpretive literature on the implementation of innovations is meaningless. For example, McTaggart (1991, p. 36) attacks the theoretical position of Fullan (1982/1991) as "fundamentally flawed, and inimical to the idea of action research" because

> The interpretive approach accepts (and unwittingly confirms) the status quo in order to interpret it. Trying to understand conditions which might be conducive or oppositional to action research from the perspective taken by Fullan involves an obvious contradiction and is clearly unsatisfactory.

For McTaggart traditional "proof" is unacceptable, and emancipatory action research is worthwhile by definition because it is conceptualized broadly in terms of curriculum and social theory. The point to be emphasized here is that for one group of action research

advocates, the process of justifying the process's value requires a conceptual framework dramatically different from the interpretive frame often used to discuss the implementation of educational innovations.

Even though such concerns are very real, the question remains as to whether or not action research is an innovation worth pursuing. What are its likely outcomes in practice? Despite the conceptual and methodological difficulties of tackling this question, there can be no doubt that additional study of either a traditional or critical nature--depending on your viewpoint--is needed. However, a growing volume of anecdotal evidence and the results of case studies and other "second-order" action research[4] (e.g., Oja & Smulyan, 1989; Elliott, 1991; Lonnquist et al., 1992) suggest the potential of action research to affect individual teachers, with their finding the process "a source of professional renewal rather than burnout" (Watt & Watt, 1992, p. 5). Oja & Smulyan (1989, p. 207) report that

> Teachers engaged in action research emphasize that personal and professional growth result from participation in the process of collaborative action research. They frequently suggested that their understanding of the process was ultimately a more valuable outcome than the research project itself.

Noffke & Zeichner (1987, p. 3) note, "In almost every report of an action research project, claims are made by researchers and/or facilitators about the value of action research in promoting changes in teacher thinking." Additional research may suggest how such changes relate to individual empowerment and improved practice and to broader questions of practical theory and school improvement.

For some, however, even if action research is accepted as an effective innovation, the value of institutionalizing it in schools is questionable. From this perspective, the act of institutionalization could unwittingly and unavoidably alter the process. Put in simplest

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[4] Second-order action research is action research that studies the process and products of action research (Elliott, 1985).

terms, the dilemma of institutionalization is as follows: "On the one hand, the mere act of institutionalizing action research may unavoidably co-opt its process; on the other, as long as action research remains outside of the existing system, it may never become an integral part of teachers' practice" (King, in press). To the extent that influential people co-opt the action research process to their own ends, they pervert its ideal and limit its potential. Just as student councils in most schools enact democracy in only the most limited sense, action research projects hemmed in by institutional constraints could make a mockery of the process. Worst case scenarios come to mind: action research becomes a vehicle for teachers' acceptance of the status quo, creating research "proof" that schools are either doing fine or at least making the best of a bad situation; or powerful administrators influence action research efforts to create changes they desire. As McTaggart (1991, p. 51) writes, "Institutionalisation produces bureaucratisation and routinisation--hierarchy, inertia, and compliance with technical procedure."

To the extent that action research works only to reinforce existing practice or to implement programs mandated by people outside of classrooms, it will not be the vehicle of meaningful empowerment and change that is implicit in its promise. Again, in the words of McTaggart (1991, p. 52, emphasis in original):

> Action research <u>immediately</u> throws into question the capacity of the institution to fulfil its promises, to live up to its principles. It problematises the values of the institution by questioning both collective institutional practices and the context the institution affords for the constuction and reconstruction of practices.

Just how action research will look in practice depends largely on who is active in the research process and whose values predominate. Noffke (1990, p. 80) points to an ongoing, potent tension in action research between its use for social engineering, i.e., helping practitioners to "find" pre-determined "truths," and its use for the development of truly autonomous professionals. To the extent that classroom teachers are encouraged to

validate existing practice through action research or to change in ways that others determine, they may be the victims of social engineering. However, there is similar potential when emancipatory action research theorists demand that teachers to engage in broad-based social criticism. As Clandinin and Connelly (1992, p. 377) note,

> This view merely replaces one set of reform intentions with another: Teachers are now required to develop knowledge, undertake research, change, grow, reflect, revolutionize their practice, become emancipated, emancipate their students, engage in group collaboration, assume power, and become politically active.

The question of how action research helps educators to become autonomous, yet collaborative professionals, acting on their own values and beliefs to improve educational practice collectively, has yet to be fully answered. To date there are few examples of schools that have sustained a culture of inquiry using long-term action research, although efforts begun in the last several years (e.g., within members of the League of Professional Schools and schools using the NCA Outcomes Accreditation process) warrant longitudinal study. Is action research an innovation worth institutionalizing? Available evidence suggests that it is, although the outcomes of its continuation--both good and bad--are not yet clear.

Action Research in the Context of Organizational Change and School/University Collaboration

If educational change is, in the words of Fullan (1991, p. 66), a "learning experience for the adults involved (teachers, administrators, parents, etc.), as well as for children," then action research, with its repeated cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, qualifies as ongoing change. But what are the prospects of this research process becoming an integral part of educational practice, and what is the likelihood that schools, as organizations, might over time become centers of research and inquiry? Apart from

theoretical positions that question any use of the organizational change literature, there is the highly practical problem of knowing how, exactly, to proceed. As Louis (1992, p. 942) notes, "Research has yet to produce a unified and efficient empirically based theory of how and why school organization changes."

Based on what we now know, introducing action research as a vehicle for both creating and understanding change--as a learning experience for those involved in the change--makes intuitive sense. Action research is the innovation's innovation because, regardless of what change is proposed, it can help educators in a given context study what happens. Action research can be coupled effectively with virtually any other innovation and potentially alters the concept of "failure." An innovation has not failed if teachers identify what seemed to go wrong and apply that information in planning future use. Inclusion, site-based management, service learning, outcome-based education--any topic is researchable as long as practitioners open their change effort to systematic, cyclic, and collaborative study. Programs based on extremely different approaches can be candidates for action research. At the school level, for example, a group of primary teachers implementing a whole language approach for the first time might examine the process and effects of the change; another group might study the effects of a new basal reading series; yet another could explore the continuation of an existing literacy program. The results could provide in-depth information about how these programs function in a specific context and the content for significant professional dialogue.

Fullan (1991) distinguishes four broad steps in the process of educational change: initiation; implementation; continuation; and outcome. To consider the long-term viability of action research requires that careful attention be paid to each of these, which is beyond the purpose of this paper. For this symposium, we will discuss general issues related to initiation and implementation, with some reference to the potential roles of school and university partnerships. If we believe that schools should adopt and implement action

research, several points can be made.

Initiation. First, people must explicitly operationalize the innovation labelled action research so that they know exactly what it is they are trying to initiate and working to implement. On the one hand, the numerous forms of action and teacher research currently extant create a challenge. Are we, for example, talking about classroom-centered instructional improvement or school-wide change? Are we conducting traditional or practitioner-centered action research? Are we seeking to use a pedagogical innovation effectively or to address issues of inequity in our practice and in our community? Are we studying and reforming ourselves, our schools, or our society? The notion of mutual adaptation (Berman & McLaughlin, 1974) is virtually implicit in the action research process, as it adjusts to fit any situation. But practitioners learning action research methods must understand exactly what they are trying to do and feel confident about the process.

On the other hand, the potential problem of over-specifying an action research process--developing an action research cookbook for research technicians--cannot be ignored. We must not create either "easy hobby games for little engineers" (Hodgkinson, 1957) or high-minded social critiques (McTaggart, 1991), the results of which may not lead to meaningful professional dialogue and improved practice. University-based researchers could potentially play an important role in guiding practitioners through a pre-specified research process. However, we cannot ignore the dangers of cooptation and the dilemma of facilitation--the tension between pushing an outsider's agenda, on the one hand, and having the process die for lack of outside support and knowledge, on the other (King, in press).

Related to this need for specificity is another dilemma: the issue of quality. On the one hand, practitioners must understand the research process and visibly see its validity, utility, and feasibility in their ongoing practice. On the other hand, if practical concerns override those of technical accuracy, action research could, in a worst case scenario,

potentially lead to an undesirable end: misinformation and the justification of inappropriate practice. As House et al. (1989) note, there is a need for developing appropriate standards and norms for practitioner research qua research. A clear role of university-based researchers here would be to develop and apply such standards long-term. Minimally, university researchers could serve as consultants to school-based projects to insure that questions are answered in the best ways possible.

If we are serious about installing action research in schools, a second point concerns problems of attitude, knowledge, and skills, both of educational innovation generally and of school-based research. If action research is to succeed, we must acknowledge practitioners' sometimes negative attitudes toward educational innovation. The marvelous ability of schools to withstand change has led many practitioners to fold their arms, roll their eyes, and wait for "this year's innovation" (TYI) to pass, knowing fullwell that "next year's innovation" (NYI) is waiting around the corner (Guskey, 1992). In many schools, the total quality management cycle of Plan-Do-Study-Act is shortened to Plan-Do-Drop on an almost annual basis (Lyman, 1992). What would it take for action research to break this pattern? What would lead practitioners to adopt action research as a long-term innovation? In our work with teachers (e.g., Lonnquist et al., 1992), a compelling notion for the acceptance of action research has been its use as personalized professional development or, as one staff developer noted, the "cheapest form of meaningful inservice work available." The fact that practitioners choose their own problems, then work to improve their practice in a collegial and data-based process, in our experience, is appealing. Also compelling, teachers report, is the idea that what would once have been labelled "failure" becomes instead a collective learning opportunity. For their part, university faculty can help facilitate discussions and scan the innovation horizon for potentially useful additions to the ongoing dialogue.

Research attitudes, knowledge, and skills form another area of concern for the

adoption and eventual implementation of action research. As noted earlier, research methods are uncommon content in the preparation of teachers and administrators, and many practitioners today do not see action research as central to their professional role. It is, perhaps, an interesting adjunct for those who want to engage in studies, but not part and parcel of their daily work. Stenhouse (1975) and Rudduck (1984)--and John Dewey before them--would disagree, presenting an integrated notion of inquiry and instruction for everyone involved in schools: teachers, students, and (by extension) administrators alike. If practitioners are to initiate action research, they must see this connection and their potential role as researcher and learner, which for many would mark a dramatic change. They must also have sufficient research knowledge and skills to proceed. One possible role for university faculty is to teach action research as an integral part of ongoing professional practice for teachers and administrators in both pre- and in-service coursework. Practitioners, however, need not take a Ph.D. research methods sequence in order to engage in action research, and the question of how much knowledge of the research process is enough remains to be answered. One solution is a continuing and meaningful collaboration with university researchers that allows access to research expertise on a demand basis.

If the research skills needed by practitioners are of concern, so, too, are the attitudes and skills of university-based researchers who will join action research efforts. The increasing number of articles on classroom-based action research suggests the commitment of many academics to collaborative work with colleagues in schools. However, for other researchers, the action orientation of such research, with its focus on useful data, is problemmatic. What attitudes are required for a commitment to action research? What does it take to develop them? And what are the interpersonal skills needed when working with a group of practitioner researchers? Our experience suggests the importance of facilitating discussions and the willingness to accept a variety of points of view.

A third--and extremely obvious--point in thinking about the adoption of action research can be stated in one word: time. Virtually every educator with whom we have discussed the prospects of action research in schools immediately points to the limiting factor of time--for professional discussion, for reflection, for the framing of problems, for data collection, and so on. Without time, teachers may be justifiably reluctant to sign on to action research projects. One solution is to provide incentives for teachers to use existing time outside of the classroom for this purpose. For example, in the ongoing work of CAREI, even the small size of the honoraria we have been able to pay teachers provides sufficient incentive for many to continue. Further, a federal grant is currently paying a group of special education teachers (and social service and criminal justice professionals) in Minnesota to conduct action research on their practice. Given the challenge of finding substitutes who could successfully teach their students, the group elected to work afterschool, evenings, and on weekends. Somewhat to our surprise, the fairly minimal stipends, coupled with the opportunity to work together, encouraged 37 professionals to participate in making collective sense of their work. Course or thesis credit can be another type of incentive. To our minds, the notion of creating action research from the hide of already harried professionals is not, however, the best case scenario.

Another solution to the time problem is to create additional time for action research during the school day. One fairly obvious way to do this is by providing teacher release time. However, the teachers with whom we work report finding this increasingly difficult. Not only do they have the additional burden of preparing for a substitute, they sometimes have no guarantee that their students will be productive, and, when the teachers return, they may have to handle a bad situation their absence has created. Our teachers report being questioned by concerned parents about their classroom absences, and, in fact, one local school board went so far as to forbid teachers from engaging in professional development activities during the school day. If release time is not viable, then another solution--

restructuring the school day--perhaps makes better sense, particularly if it creates time for teachers to reflect on students and teaching. If students are actively engaged in learning with certain teachers, then other teachers in the building can be actively involved in action research-related work, even if only occasionally.

In supporting the initiation of action research as an innovation, then, we must be specific about what we are proposing; we must insure that those involved from schools and universities have the necessary attitudes, knowledge, and skills as well as access to those who know the process; and we must provide sufficient time for people to engage in the research. School-university collaborations can facilitate the adoption process by advocating action research and early on providing support and assistance to those involved.

Implementation. Once action research is adopted, the question becomes how to sustain and support its practice. Fullan (1991) has identified six themes in research on the improvement process following adoption: 1) vision-building; 2) evolutionary planning; 3) initiative-taking and empowerment; 4) staff development and resource assistance; 5) monitoring/problem-coping; and 6) restructuring (p. 82). These themes point to the potential that action research may hold for change in schools. Four are explicit in the action research process itself:

- Evolutionary planning. Action research is data-based, evolutionary planning, in which one cycle of research feeds directly into the next.
- Initiative-taking and empowerment. In action research, practitioners are empowered to take the initiative and both make and study changes in their practice.
- Staff development and resource assistance. Fullan (1991, p. 85) writes that "most forms of in-service training are not designed to provide the ongoing, interactive, cumulative learning necessary to develop new conceptions, skills, and behavior." When action research becomes a form of in-service

training, its ongoing and interactive process can lead to cumulative learning for those involved. Necessary resources are identified during the planning and reflection processes.

- Monitoring/problem-coping. The observation and data collection that are part of the action research cycle provide practitioners immediate information on how the change effort is going, and the reflection that follows enables people to think about and address problems that arise. One of the lessons of change is that "problems are our friends" (Fullan, 1993, p. 126), and action research greets them at the door.

The two remaining themes--vision-building and restructuring--have already been mentioned. If action research is to become part of the culture of schools, school visions at both the classroom and building level must broaden to include the process. Action research may facilitate long-term organizational learning (Louis, 1992) if practitioners, committed to its continuation, include research in their concept of professional practice. Restructuring, as was noted, may create the time necessary for people to conduct action research during the school day without detracting from student experiences and learning. Our work in Minnesota has emphasized the importance of idea champions within the school to carry it forward, as well as university support and encouragement over time. In the context of a school university collaboration, ongoing professional development related to action research makes good sense.

Summary and Conclusion

This paper has discussed a number of topics: the characteristics of action research; its development over the course of the last fifty years; lessons that have emerged from that history; the question of whether or not to seek to place action research in the culture of schools; and issues related to its initiation and implementation. Two important questions

remain: Why action research? And why now? It is no news that American schools at the close of the 20th century are under siege. One could win an easy bet that the opening paragraph of virtually any recent paper on the topic of school change contains some section of the litany of well-documented ills attending our public education system. Regardless of the unit of analysis--from the individual to the broadest level--Americans can take little comfort from this latest incarnation of the "one best system" Horace Mann sought to create over 150 years ago. However, one thing seems constant: the rather remarkable ability of schools to stay the same despite repeated assaults on their bastions.

At the same time that the school system is receiving such broad-based attack, however, people also acknowledge that now, more than ever, public education must play an increasingly important role in the next century. Demographic data point to daunting challenges that educators and the citizenry simply cannot ignore; statistics on violence, substance abuse, American workers, families in crisis, homelessness, illiteracy, and a host of other negative indicators suggest that things will get worse--if they ever get better. Another constant, then, is the urgent need for systemic change that will create schools to prepare our children for a world we can only begin to imagine.

These constants--the fact that our schools, despite continuing reform efforts, stay remarkably the same, even when we need them to change dramatically--point to the appeal of action research. On the one hand, action research is like Clark Kent, "mild mannered reporter for a great metropolitan newspaper." It is, at least potentially, a teacher-friendly process that can directly address educational practice in the classroom over time. It directly, actively, and collaboratively involves practitioners in creating and studying their own change--continuous improvement with ongoing support and less than continuous risk. As John Dewey suggested earlier this century (1929/1984), schools cannot remain the same if teachers, students, and other people who conduct their work continually engage in inquiry. On the other hand, action research can fairly easily become a super-hero, at least in theory,

by fostering long-term, meaningful change.[5] Those theorists who advocate emancipatory action research, for example, speak of radical change in schools and social transformation to create a better society through such research. Whether action research will create the means for school and university collaborators to "leap tall buildings in a single bound" is not yet clear, but some see blue tights and a red cape beneath its non-threatening exterior.

In a recent paper, Kruse and Louis (1993) describe five empirically-developed characteristics of professional community in schools: reflective dialogue; the de-privatization of practice; a focus on student learning; collaboration and the use of others' expertise; and shared values. Because the process of action research engages like-minded practitioners in a public and collaborative dialogue around issues of student learning, we would argue that it may, over time, be an active agent in the development of professional community. To the extent that school-university collaborations create a venue for this development, they may foster the type of long-term school change sought by commission reports. Work over the course of the next decade will help us see if action research can truly make a difference for schools.

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[5] The obvious irony of Superman's recent comicbook demise is noted. As a symbol, however, he can not so easily be done in!

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