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### Action Research for/as/mindful of Social Justice

**Citation for published version:**

Griffiths, M 2009, Action Research for/as/mindful of Social Justice. in B Somekh & SE Noffke (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Educational Action Research*. 1st ed. edn, SAGE Publications Ltd, London, pp. 85-99.  
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9780857021021>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.4135/9780857021021](https://doi.org/10.4135/9780857021021)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

**Published In:**

The SAGE Handbook of Educational Action Research

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# The SAGE Handbook of Educational Action Research

## Action Research for/as/ mindful of Social Justice

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Print Pub. Date: 2009

Online Pub. Date: July 19, 2009

Print ISBN: 9781412947084

Online ISBN: 9780857021021

DOI: 10.4135/9780857021021

Print pages: 85-99

This PDF has been generated from SAGE knowledge. Please note that the pagination of the online version will vary from the pagination of the print book.

10.4135/9780857021021.n9

[p. 85 ↓ ]

## Chapter 7: Action Research for/as/mindful of Social Justice

Morwenna Griffiths

This chapter examines and explores the potential of action research to enhance social justice in education. It discusses different approaches and practices within the field of education in relation to epistemologies and principles underlying research for social justice. Implicit in many characterizations of action research is the potential to work for justice – in small-scale projects or for larger social and educational ends. At the same time, disquiet has been expressed by many action researchers about the co-option of action research for merely instrumental ends, or for purposes of social control rather than of social justice. The chapter addresses the question: when and how far is action research coherent with aims for social justice?

### Action Research and Politically Committed Research

Arguments rage over the issue of politics in action research. The term ‘politics’ here means a concern with power relations, decision making and action in large- or small-scale social worlds. Thus a concern for social justice is a political one. All sides claim the moral high ground. There are those who would see particular kinds of politics as basic to good action research, and others who would not want their research to be political at all. I myself take the position that all research which enhances social justice is to be welcomed, and indeed that it is a moral and/or political obligation for action researchers at some (but not all) points in their action research careers.

[p. 86 ↓ ] One reason that arguments rage is that most proponents of action research have strong ethical and/or political commitments which underpin their reasons for espousing it. However, the array of commitments underpinning different approaches do not necessarily coincide, and even where they overlap there is a difference of emphasis. Noffke (1997) has usefully suggested one way of distinguishing different approaches. She distinguishes those that are primarily concerned with the professional, the personal and the political. She takes care to stress that each of these will inevitably include the other two, and indeed, should do so (Noffke and Brennan, 1997).

The 1980s saw a burgeoning of overlapping but distinguishable approaches to action research that are, broadly speaking, concerned with social justice. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) provide a useful account of the different intellectual traditions within teaching and teacher education which gave an impetus to teacher research including action research. It is a movement which continues to refer to these traditions. Some of them are self-consciously rooted in intellectual movements that construct research as a form of social action related to democracy, the production of knowledge and social change. Accounts of such research include terms with highly political connotations, such as 'power', 'transformation', 'joint action', 'radical', 'social re-construction' and 'emancipation'.

## Social Justice as a Kind of Action

Some terms which attract general approval are what are called 'hurrah' words. Examples are 'freedom' and 'fairness'. Such terms mean different things to different people, depending on their various political and moral commitments. Therefore it is particularly important to be clear about their meaning.

In some ways, 'social justice' is bound to be a hurrah term because, put most simply, social justice characterizes a good society. It is an idea with a long history which influences its current meaning. Aristotle's conceptualization of social justice remains hugely influential on all subsequent Western political philosophy. Indeed his formulation remains relevant and useful today. In *Politics*, he first explains how individuals come to have a common interest, and then goes on to use the idea to define justice (Aristotle, 1980):

People ... are drawn together by a common interest, in proportion as each attains a share in the good life. The good life is the chief end both for the community as a whole and for each of us individually. (III, 6, 1278b6)

...

The good in the sphere of politics is justice, and justice consists in what tends to promote the common interest. (III, 11, 1282b14)

This he goes on to discuss in terms of distributive justice, that is, the right distribution of benefits in a society.

**[p. 87 ↓]** The themes of the individual and the community, and a fair distribution of benefits remain central to modern discussions of social justice. In contemporary philosophy and political theory, conceptions of social justice are dominated by John Rawls (1971) who provides a theory of justice as fairness. This theory is based on the social contract and distributive justice. His work remains an important source of modern thinking about justice. However, it is firmly rooted in a Liberal understanding of the legacy of the Enlightenment, especially its belief in rationally achieved consensus. This legacy has been subject to critique and reconstruction by other strands in political thinking during the latter half of the twentieth century.

Hannah Arendt introduces a focus on political action. For her the 'realm of human affairs' is not static. It is the sphere of actions, the *bios politicos* (1958: 13). The concept of 'natality' is central to her argument. As new people are born and enter the realm of human affairs, they ensure that society is never static. Rather, the situation changes in unpredictable ways. She says (1958: 190):

Action ... always establishes relationships and therefore has an inherent tendency to force open all limitations and cut across all boundaries ... [which] exist within the realm of human affairs, but they never offer a framework that can reliably withstand the onslaught with which each new generation must insert itself.

Such action is never merely individual for Arendt. Actions need to be argued for and carried through by distinct individuals in 'a web of relation' with others. Action and speech are closely related because of human plurality, which, she says, 'has the twofold character of equality and distinction' (Arendt, 1958: 175). She continues:

If each human being [were] not distinct, each human being distinguished from any other who is, was, or will ever be, they would need neither speech nor action to make themselves understood. ... With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world. (Arendt, 1958: 175–6)

Arendt herself had a negative view of politics as action for social justice. We do not have to agree with this: her perspective on action illuminates the concept of social justice. First, her arguments show that social justice is dynamic: a kind of action rather than a static state of affairs. Second, they point up the significance of voice and empowerment, since both equality and speech are essential for action. Third, they signal that knowledge about the realm of human affairs is always provisional.

Lyotard's postmodern critique of Liberalism shows the significance of local context for justice. In *The Postmodern Condition* (Lyotard, 1984) he developed an argument for 'incredulity toward metanarratives' (xxiv). By 'metanarrative' he means narratives of legitimation, such as 'the progressive emancipation of reason and freedom ... [and] the enrichment of all humanity through the progress of technoscience' (Lyotard, 1992: 29). He argued that these are just one way of understanding the world. Attention should also be paid to other narratives, the 'little stories', which are 'continuing to weave the fabric of everyday [p. 88 ↓] life' (p. 31). These are always told in specific contexts and for specific purposes and cannot always be understood outside those contexts. Their existence challenges the grand narratives of universalizable, generalizable knowledge, and develops 'a practice of justice' (1984: 66) which respects local differences.

Lyotard developed this position in *The Differend* (Lyotard, 1989) where he addresses the question of communication and difference; this is a question which matters in relation to understanding voice and empowerment. He focuses attention on cases where different social groups have unequal power. He shows how the power of one side may mean that the experience and understanding of the less powerful become

unsayable, and the only possibility becomes silence. He argues that justice requires that communication is continued, even though it is impossible to do it using the usual Liberal rules of rational argument.

Feminist theory has been a powerful source of critique and development of traditional perspectives on social justice. Different feminist epistemologies have significant philosophical differences but unite in pointing up the significance of perspectives in knowledge. Feminists have also theorized (and practised) the use of different expressive forms to communicate. For instance, Young (2000) criticizes the privileging of rational argument and deliberation and argues for more use of other forms of expression, such as narrative. In educational theory, Jane Roland Martin (1994) provides a critique of self-consciously rational discourse which silences other voices.

Nancy Fraser (1997) has shown that while an emphasis on redistribution is essential, it is only partial. Social justice also requires all members of a society to be given recognition. Some social groups are materially (dis)advantaged compared to each other. Redressing this requires redistribution. However, this is not enough to explain injustice. Some social groups are treated with (dis)respect – not given recognition. Iris Marion Young says there is a requirement for what she calls 'greeting' (2000: 58). As she points out, without acknowledgement of the other as a subject rather than an object, communication is distorted. Fraser (1997) has helpfully suggested using the analytical dimensions, 'cultural' and 'structural' to differentiate kinds of social groups. Some, like groups based on sexuality, tend to be cultural, of which some are in need of recognition. Others, like those based on social class, tend to be more structural, of which some are in need of redistribution. Race and gender score high on both dimensions and give rise to a need for both redistribution and recognition.

Fraser is careful to avoid fixing any group within its dimensions. She argues that any such descriptions remain fluid and provisional. Young explains the damaging, misleading effects of attempting to fix group identities (2000: 88–9):

Everyone relates to a plurality of social groups; every social group has other social groups cutting across it ... The attempt to define a common group identity tends to normalize the experience and perspective of some group members while marginalizing or silencing others.

Since each member of any group will also belong to other groups, no one solution will fit all.

[p. 89 ↓ ] Evidently social justice is a complex cluster of related concepts. I attempt to draw them together in a definition that includes redistribution, action, provisionality, locality, voice, recognition, and fluid identities. It is as follows:

Social justice aims at the good for the common interest, where that is taken to include both the good of each and the good of all, in an acknowledgement that one depends on the other. The good depends on mutual recognition and also on a right distribution of benefits and responsibilities. It includes paying attention to individual perspectives and local conditions at the same time as dealing with issues of discrimination, exclusions and recognition, especially on the grounds of (any or all of) race, gender, sexuality, special needs and social class. As the situation changes, it is likely that identities will change too. So it could never be achieved once and for all. Any solutions remain provisional.

The discussion in this section has been dense and compressed. So I conclude by drawing out what is most relevant to the theme of this chapter.

## Action Research and Practical, Revisable Knowledge

The argument so far shows that there are ways in which social justice and action research may be coherent ways of understanding the world. Most obviously, both are centrally concerned with action and both expect any conclusions to be provisional and revisable. Both of them also acknowledge the personal and individual within the social world. In this section I argue that they have other common features.

In different forms of action research a number of features recur, but any one of them may not be present in any specific case. There is no specific method or epistemological



position that characterizes all action research. To give just three examples, the research of Christianson et al. (2002) is informed by post-structural theories but Carr and Kemmis (1986) advocate critical theory. Whitehead (2007) proposes a new 'living epistemology' developed from dialectical theory. The different approaches are probably best described not as having any essential common feature but, rather, a family resemblance, in Wittgenstein's sense (1968).

Recurring features include:

In short, the emphasis is on uncertainty, fallibility and risky judgements made in particular material, historical circumstances.

## Action Research, Social Justice and Questions to Be Asked Frequently (QAFs)

Comparing the definition of social justice with the recurring features of action research it will be seen that one should fit easily with the other. Both of them depend on a view of practical knowledge as revisable and provisional. Both expect some kind of action as a part of the process. Both emphasize collaboration, the small-scale and context dependent, openness to other perspectives, and personal commitment. Some of the common features are tricky to implement in practice.

Collaboration is not easy, even when it is simply collaboration with like-minded colleagues. It becomes much harder to collaborate across real differences of perspective and background, as the relative paucity of reports of success in such research testifies. Similarly joint action is often tricky, requiring compromises and risks. For a successful joint action not only must there be agreement about at least some perspectives on, and understandings of, a situation, but also about what to do to improve it. It is not for nothing that politics is called the *art of the possible*.

Action research is always carried out in specific contexts. So 'little stories' are relatively easily constructed. However, it is harder to relate these little stories to grander narratives. Hollingsworth (1992) describes the process of a collaborative enquiry which

was able to relate the little stories to some grand narratives (i.e. literacy education theory, and feminism) but only after a considerable period. Conversely there are many reports of action research which invoke theory but which do not relate their little stories to it in any detail and depth.

Dealing with diversity in action research is particularly difficult. There are many reasons for this. One is mentioned above, in relation to collaboration. It is much easier to work with the like-minded. Further, it can be difficult and painful to uncover and confront your assumptions of normality. Hollingsworth (1992) describes this both in relation to feminism (p. 377) and also to race and social class (p. 391). Ann Schulte (2005) reports an unsettling self-study into her 'white privilege' and how it affected her work as a teacher educator. It can be especially difficult to create ways of engaging with diverse perspectives when working and living in a homogeneous culture (Johnston-Parsons et al., 2007).

**[p. 91 ↓ ]** To summarize: some features of social justice appear in many action research projects. At the same time it is not surprising that action research does not often reach its full potential for enhancing social justice. There are many obstacles and constraints. But the potential is there: as well as obstacles and constraints, there are also openings and opportunities.

It may also be that researchers would like to include more features, but find the idea daunting. My proposal is that researchers ask themselves questions about their research and how it supports social justice (or does not). These questions would point up what researchers are doing well in terms of social justice as well as indicating what the next steps might be. Doing action research is hard: it is time-consuming, it puts one's own practice into question, and it is always uncertain. On the other hand, social justice is important. So asking questions that indicate a step-by-step approach gives researchers the opportunity to move at their own pace towards it rather than despairing or burning out while attempting perfection.

The questions to be asked are a set of questions to be asked of oneself (or of oneself) in a reflective and exploratory frame of mind. While they can be approached at a depth manageable by the researcher, they are challenging. So they are not easily answered 'frequently asked questions' or FAQs. Rather, they are 'questions to be

asked frequently': QAFs. The focus of some questions will be on the method and process of the research. Others focus on its substantive content. The precise way the questions become relevant changes with the research being questioned. Indeed, given the provisionality of all knowledge, QAFs themselves are fluid, emergent and always revisable.

## Questions to be Asked Frequently

### Epistemology

Is there acceptance of continuing change, of no final answers, of provisionality? Is the end that the research was working for itself in question? How are conclusions presented?

Is there an openness to others' perspectives, however surprising or even unwelcome? Is there evidence of a willingness to put the selves of the researchers into question?

Is the research whole-hearted? Has it been personally enriching and exciting? Have there been tears and arguments? Despair and delight? What difference did these emotions make to the process and outcome of the research?

### Action and Effects

Whose actions are they and for what ends? Is it a joint action or just that of single individuals? Is it specific changed behaviour and/or is it a transformation of perceptions? What will happen next? What are the effects of the research?

**[p. 92 ↓ ]** Have barriers and constraints to action been questioned and assessed? Do these include: local, internal, structural (e.g. school, department), and/or large-scale structures (e.g. gender, technical rationality)? What counts as action for this research – and why?

## About Voice and Power

Who is included in the research? Was consideration given to including everyone with an involvement? So, for schools: not just the teachers, (say) but also the children, parents, cleaners, mid-day supervisors? For H.E.: not just the academic staff, but also support staff in various roles?

Was the research collaborative? In what sense? At what stage in the process? Why? Could anyone have done the research on their own? How did any collaboration make a difference?

Was everyone able to contribute confidently without compromising some part of their identity? Do the styles of communication take account of how the ground rules of communication vary by gender, cultural heritage, etc.? Do the modes of discourse (Chang-Wells and Wells, 1997) exclude some social groups? Is there an opportunity to have a say, using different modes of expression? What evidence is there about this?

Did the research take any unexpected directions when different perspectives were included? Were there misunderstandings and surprising differences of perception? How did they affect the process and outcomes of the research?

## About Recognition and Redistribution

Has individual difference and social diversity been considered? Is attention paid to all the axes of difference (including race, ethnicity, religion, gender, social class, sexuality, (dis)abilities)? Is recognition given to all?

Is complexity acknowledged – or are some groups being stereotyped? Are material and human resources allocated fairly to all sectors – both during the research and as a result of it? Does the research treat anyone as especially important or insignificant? Why?

# Using the QAFs to Question Approaches to Action Research

This section of the paper focuses on some major current approaches and practices in action research and how their underlying epistemologies and intentions relate to social justice. It uses a rough analysis of different approaches. But the discussion does not aim to provide an enduring categorization. Indeed it resists any [p. 93 ↓] such aim as tending to freeze previous creativity and to restrict it in the future. As Christine Battersby expresses it (1998: 13):

The identities I describe emerge out of patterns of movement and relationality ... in which the past is taken up into the present in ways that do not simply 'copy' a neutral 'real'.

The approaches I identify, I identify only for the sake of the argument of this chapter. They are 'temporary constructs' (Noffke, 1995: 323). They are (Battersby, 1998: 34):

a kind of idealized image or snapshot – that is used to arrest the fluid and the manifold into a temporary stability of form.

To change the metaphor, they are like constellations or the different geometric shapes that can be read in complex patterns, such as can be found in Islamic decorations. They merge, overlap and share nodes.

Research which explicitly announces itself as political action research, or as prioritising social reconstruction and transformation, may conveniently be described under one category as political action research. It includes a number of different (though overlapping) approaches. They include:

The methods and methodologies of action research which is not primarily political are similar in broad outline to those of political action research. This set of methods and methodologies is complex in its relation to social justice and politics. Within each broad approach are subsets which have aspirations towards contributing to 'improvement',

or towards a better, fairer society, but with the primary focus of the research being on other personal or professional issues. Sometimes these aspirations for social justice are explicitly stated. There is also action research which presents itself as being committed to being politically neutral in relation to the professional or personal issues being examined. [p. 94 ↓ ] I have drawn attention to these subsets with italics. Approaches to action research which is not primarily political include:

All of the political approaches to action research leave room for the QAFs to be asked explicitly. Indeed such researchers probably consider many of them explicitly. The different approaches, however, will highlight some questions while allowing others to be overlooked. A value of using the QAFs is that it shows this up, making it more difficult to ignore some aspects of social justice. Taking the set of 'epistemological' questions it can be seen that some approaches are thickly revisable or collaborative in comparison to others. For instance, the personal, conversational and collaborative approach proposed by Hollingsworth (1992) and Hollingsworth et al. (1997) demand the researchers' openness to revision of their dearest beliefs and attitudes. On the other hand, research focused on specific issues of gender and race may well leave most of the researcher's original values intact, especially if, as can happen, the research makes only one turn of the action research cycle. However, this latter research is far more likely to highlight issues of recognition and redistribution, which can be only thinly acknowledged in other approaches. Some researches have shown that they are willing to revise original ways of thinking radically, as well as specific revisions of action in successive cycles. One example is Carr and Kemmis's reappraisal of *Becoming Critical*, 20 years on from its original publication [p. 95 ↓ ] (Car and Kemmis, 2005). But particular pieces of research using Carr and Kemmis's approach are rarely so radical.

Approaches to action research which are not primarily political may have considered some of the QAFs but are unlikely to have considered many of them explicitly. For instance approaches such as Elliott's (1991, 2006) that emphasize the democratic significance of teachers' views being central to educational knowledge, are less likely to consider all the QAFs about voice and inclusion, or those relating to recognition and redistribution. However, it is clear that this kind of approach is open to exploration using those QAFs. Some of the approaches which are not primarily political are unlikely to consider QAFs explicitly but might be open to exploring at least some of them. For instance, Higgins (2006) uses a learning community or activity theory approach to

research. He remarks on the power relations between participating schools and the universities and on which sector 'owns' which decisions about the research. This is done in a very general way, but could easily be related to social justice issues of joint action, voice, recognition and redistribution.

There are plenty of examples of action research projects in which teacher's craft knowledge or professional self-identity are discussed without reference to such issues at all. All of these researchers *could* pay attention to QAFs, though no doubt finding only some questions readily in tune with some than their research focus. Only some of these researchers *would* consider doing so. Action research which is committed to political neutrality would not. For example, in their evaluation of teacher research, Furlong and Salisbury (2005) found a sizeable minority of teachers who were striving for strict neutrality in their research.

## Concluding That...

I come back now to the question posed in the introduction: what is the potential of action research to enhance social justice? The discussion in the previous section shows that all action research has potential but only some approaches will realize it. Just how they may (or will not) realize such potential is the subject of this section.

Action research can be focused directly on issues of social justice. These may be explicitly and reflectively related to the processes of research, such as the underlying epistemology, and its inclusivity in terms of collaborative practices and actions. This is *action research AS social justice*. On the other hand, it may be explicitly and reflectively focused on the outcomes of the research, in terms of voice, power, recognition and/or redistribution. This is *action research FOR social justice*. Research may be both of these, or it may move from one to the other over the course of time, especially if it is *MINDFUL OF* the whole range of social justice concerns. Action research may, however, be focused on other issues, yet be explicitly mindful of the social justice aspects of its processes and outcomes. This, too, is *action research MINDFUL OF social justice*. [p. 96 ↓ ] Such research uses at least some of the QAFs to assess itself, and position itself in relation to social justice.



These three kinds of social justice action research do not form a hierarchy. All three kinds are important to educational practice and to enhancing social justice. A researcher may move from one to another and back over the course of their professional career. As long as it is clear that all three kinds of research are valuable and have a significant part to play in enhancing social justice, researchers who are more comfortable in one or the other kind and are disinclined to move will, nevertheless, be ready to learn from the others. This ought to work against the tendency of social groups to define themselves against each other. Rather than having 'social justice researchers' and 'others', it is surely better for all researchers to see their work as coherent with social justice, while at the same time be challenged to improve on this aspect of it. What Heikkinen et al. say about truth can be adapted to describe the possibilities for social justice within action research (2001: 22):

The multi-paradigmatic situation [which] seems to exist among action researchers ... could be regarded as a productive situation, rather than some undeveloped stage of science.

Although there is no hierarchy between these three kinds of social justice research, there is one between all three of them and action research which makes no explicit reference to social justice. Such research could be explicitly mindful of social justice, given the opportunity and reason to do so. Alternatively, while it could be, it would not be because of a commitment to political neutrality.

There are many reasons for researchers not being explicit about social justice concerns in their work, not least in reports to funders, such as the report by Higgins (2006). It may be that, to a different public, such researchers are fully explicit about their reasons, but other researchers may be less so. Where this is the case, it is unlikely that reflection will be challenging and coherent with social justice as a whole. In the latter case the research might be termed 'pre-mindful'. The difference is analogous to the difference between ordinary professional practice and reflective practice using a systematic research and evidence.

Of more concern are the researchers who take themselves to be good professionals only if they are politically neutral in their research and practice. They are not mindful of social justice and would not want to be. Furlong and Salisbury's (2005) evaluation



of the 3,000 teacher research projects undertaken in the UK in the early 2000s was mentioned earlier. It shows clearly how many of the projects were focused on severely technical matters, such as the use of the interactive whiteboard. Whereas there was plenty of evidence of transformed technical practice there was much less evidence of transformed understandings of the political in professional practice. Of course, a focus on technicalities may be a very good starting point for wider reflection. A version of the QAFs would be useful here for critics of such a position. They would provide a framework for arguing in depth that action research is always to some extent, even when it aspires to be, neutral. [p. 97 ↓ ] It has been the argument of this chapter that social justice is complex, and that this very complexity provides an opportunity to turn more action research into better research *for, as* and *mindful of* social justice. It is an argument for a range of approaches and emphases. It is more helpful and productive to see how far, and in what respects particular action research projects are coherent with aims for social justice, than proposing a single best methodology.

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