Participatory research: possibilities and challenges

Mel Ainscow

A methodological stance

'The best way to understand an organisation is by trying to change it'

Kurt Lewin

Participatory research

- **Those within a given context investigating aspects of their own practice and thinking**

- **Taking account of the experiences and perceptions of different stakeholders**

- **Seeking to foster improvements in the specific context, whilst at the same time throwing light on how inclusive practices can be fostered**

Arguments for participatory research in education

- **Research has to address real problems in the field**
- **Traditional forms of research have failed to influence practice**
- **Research needs to provide useful knowledge**
- **There is a need to take account of the constraints within which practitioners operate**
- **Practitioners should be encouraged to see themselves as researchers**

Understanding and developing inclusive practices in schools

- **What are the barriers to participation and learning experienced by students?**

- **What practices can help to overcome these barriers?**

- **To what extent do such practices facilitate improved learning outcomes?**

- **How can such practices be encouraged and sustained within local authorities and schools?**

Moving practice forward

- **Involves processes of social learning**
- **Practice is largely inarticulate and reflects taken-for granted assumptions**
- **The development of a language of practice**
- **'Interruptions' to thinking**
- **Overlooked possibilities for moving practice forward**

Main conclusions

- **It is possible to infuse a critical dimension into a collaborative action-research project, so that issues of social justice are considered as practitioners shape their action**

- **The critical friendship of 'outsiders' is a way of keeping these issues on the agenda**

- **Such engagement is capable of bringing about significant changes in practitioner thinking which is reflected in new practices**

- **Where such changes take place, it is useful to think of them as the result of an 'interruption' to continuing practice which brings about a transformation from 'single-loop' to 'double-loop' learning**

The challenge of trustworthiness

Concerned with:
- Validity (e.g. how do we know what we claim to know?)
- Utility (e.g. how useful is the research to practitioners?).

Useful methods:
- Triangulation - comparing and contrasting evidence from different people within a particular context; scrutinising events from different angles by making use of a variety of methods for collecting data; using 'outsiders' as critical friends and observers.
- Exploring alternative explanations
- The use of 'group interpretive processes' as a means of analysing and interpreting data

For more information:

Mel Ainscow, Tony Booth, Alan Dyson and colleagues, *'Improving Schools, Developing Inclusion'* (Routledge, 2006)

Mel Ainscow and Mel West, *'Improving Urban Schools: Leadership and Collaboration'* (Open University Press, 2006)

Susie Miles and Mel Ainscow, *'Responding to Diversity in Schools: An Inquiry Based Approach'* (Routledge, 2010)