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)


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