

## **ACTION RESEARCH AND COACHING**

Jan Robertson

This article has been adapted from Chapter Five of *Coaching leadership: Building educational leadership capacity through coaching partnerships*, by Jan Robertson. Available from : [sales@nzcer.org.nz](mailto:sales@nzcer.org.nz)

### **Abstract**

When leaders set long-term goals and begin to work surely and consistently towards those goals by monitoring progress, reflecting on and evaluating actions, and developing new plans of action in the light of that reconnaissance, they have moved into cycles of action research. This article outlines how action research is closely aligned to the process of coaching. It begins with a brief definition of action research. This is followed by a look at the theoretical construction, principles and methodology of action research. The way in which action research operates within the framework of the model of leadership coaching is then outlined.

NOTE: In the book “Coaching leadership” the action research chapter ends with a case study of how two principals aligned action research and coaching to achieve a shared vision for their schools.

## **ACTION RESEARCH DEFINED**

Action research is a process involving cycles of action, which are based on reflection, feedback, evidence and evaluation of previous actions and the current situation. Data are gathered, and these inform future decisions and actions. This type of research is favoured by people who want their research findings to have an impact on the situation or context as the intervention takes place, and it sees the practitioner as researcher. The process of research and action thus results in people using the “findings” of the action research—the theory—at the time of the research. “Action learning” is closely aligned to, and indeed part of, action research. However, with action research (or “theory of practice”), close links are made between theory and practice, and the findings are often shared in a written form.

## **THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTS**

Action research can be traced back to the sociological work of Kurt Lewin (1948). Lewin believed that it was not only important but ethical that emancipation and change were the direct and immediate outcomes of research processes. He observed that although people are often very clear about the “what” outcome they hope to achieve when conducting research or development projects, they tend not to be so clear about *how* to reach that point. The action research process is extremely powerful in allowing them to do this.

The process begins, according to Lewin (1948), with the researcher setting down a “general idea” of what he or she wants to achieve, for example, “Develop a learning community” or “Develop a conductive education philosophy”. The next step involves gathering information about the present situation, which allows the researcher to formulate “an ‘overall plan’ of how to reach the objective, and [to make] a decision in regard to the first step of action” (Lewin, 1948, p. 205). This stage is followed by a series of phases, each involving “circles” of action, evaluation, reflection, fact-finding, modifying the original plan and planning the next action. Lewin likens the process to a spiral staircase, where the steps ultimately lead to achievement of the desired outcome.

Lewin's (1948) description of action research has particular resonance with the coaching processes used to facilitate effective leadership. As Oja and Smulyan (1989, p. 9) state, action research provides educationists with opportunities "to gain knowledge and skill in research methods and applications and to become more aware of options and possibilities for change [and to] become more critical and reflective about their own practice." Many other theorists and researchers propound action research as a powerful means of building learning communities and influencing practice (see, for example, Cardno, 2003; Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). One of the major benefits of action research is that the practitioners not only pose the research questions but search for and try out their own answers to those questions. Because the research is practitioner driven, it promotes the development of professionals and the body of knowledge on which they base their actions. In today's rapidly changing educational climate, it is important that leaders study their own practice and construct the new knowledge needed to answer their current questions and solve their own problems.

## **GUIDING PRINCIPLES**

The guiding principles of action research appear over and over in the literature. These principles posit action research as an intervention, as self-evaluative and collaborative, as site based and concerns based, as transformative, and as agentic (i.e., acting with agency). Another principle is that action research provides a link between theory and practice.

### ***Intervention***

Like action research, coaching is an intervention because it requires people to stop and look critically at the reality of their worlds. For Cohen and Manion (1980, p. 174), the benefits of action research come from "a close examination of the effects of ... intervention", of reflecting on the information "thrown up" by the intervention, and then determining how understandings elicited from that reflection can be used to advantage personal and professional development and practice. They go on to say that action research as intervention involves several key components:

[It is] . . . *situational* . . . concerned with identifying a problem in a specific context and attempting to solve it in that context; it is usually . . . *collaborative*—teams of researchers and practitioners work together on a project; it is *participatory*—team members themselves take part directly or indirectly in implementing the research; and it is *self-evaluative*—modifications are continuously evaluated within the on-going situation, the ultimate objective being to improve practice in some way or other. (emphasis original)

There is some dissension in the literature as to whether the intervention aspect of action research process should focus on an issue, problem or assessment of current practice (see, for example, Alcorn, 1986; Kemmis, 1985) or on a desired goal (see, for example, Lewin, 1948). As Winter (1989, p. 13), asks, “Do you start by implementing a change? Or do you start by analysing current practice in order to formulate a desirable change?” He answers these questions with another: “Does it matter which comes first?” My research has demonstrated that when educational leaders undertake action research as part of the coaching process, they generally start with the vision they wish to achieve for the development of their institution.

### ***Self-Evaluation and Collaboration***

The practitioner-as-researcher aspect of action research is deemed an intrinsic *part* of the “general ideal of professionalism” (Winter, 1989, p. 4) for educational leaders, rather than as an addition to it. There is an assumption here that, in their research role, leaders become “capable of determining their own performance on the basis of self-reflection” (Elliott, 1991, p. 27). They also contribute to the development of a critical learning community when they come together to explore their new learning and understandings and to share their experiences (Robertson, 2000). “The possibilities for critical self-reflection and critical collaboration should not be bypassed . . . if those involved truly wish to initiate change and sustain improvement” (Cardno, 2003, p. 25).

### ***Site Based and Concerns Based***

Action research is site based because it is carried out where the leader is actually working rather than on an island of professional development some place removed. It is concerns based because it focuses on the issues and difficulties that arise in everyday practice.

### ***Transformative and Agentic***

Action research is a particularly powerful tool for professional and institutional development because it leads people to a point where their actions are informed by new understandings (transformation) and a desire to improve the conditions in which they are working or living (agency). They come to see for themselves that they can act otherwise, and they have a heightened sense of self-efficacy. Action research fulfils Fullan's (1993) call for educationists not only to base their practice on a strong value system but also to be change agents within their institutions. This is how, he says, they become transformative rather than reproductive agents of existing social patterns.

Carr and Kemmis (1986), in focusing on the emancipatory power of action, take a similar stance. They stress the need to “develop a systematic understanding of the conditions which shape, limit and determine action so that these constraints can be taken into account” (p. 152).

The words of these researchers have particular implications for educational leaders who undertake action research. For them, such research must involve critiquing the societal and political contexts in which their leadership is being carried out. The research must allow them to view matters from a variety of perspectives—to have “the capacity to look at things as if they could be otherwise” (Greene, 1985, p. 3). In this regard, leaders engaged in action research to effect change in their institutions need to seek out diverse opinion so that not only are the most dissonant voices *heard* but the responses are actively *sought* (Fullan, 2001).

### ***Link Between Theory and Practice***

The coaching model outlined in this book is based on the precept of theory informing practice and practice informing theory. This link between theory and practice is important for the development of an education theory that “fits” the complex, constantly evolving context in which educational leaders work. It also aligns well with the development process in action research, which endeavours to lessen the gap between espoused theories and theories-in-action—to “transform . . . the situation from what is, to something . . . better” (Schön, 1983, p. 147). This consideration does not imply a rejection of all *a priori* theory, but an

understanding that theory and practice must be linked for “both the advancement of science and for the improvement of human welfare” (Whyte, 1991, p. 8).

There is some disagreement as to whether action research as described thus far constitutes *real* action research. According to Stenhouse (1975), research can only be called research if its findings are made public. Ebbutt (1985, p. 157) concurs, stating that “if action research is to be considered legitimately as research, then participants in it must be prepared to produce written reports of their activities.” Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) take a contrary view. They argue that because action research assists the participants improve what they do, there is not a need for them to write up and disseminate their work: “. . . action research provides a way of working which links theory and practice into the one whole: ideas-in-action” (p. 6). Oliver (1980) also sits on this side of the debate, claiming that the purpose of action research is “to promote a continuing process of professional development” (p. 395). Robertson (2000) holds more the middle ground, demonstrating in her research that there can be action research for theory and action research for action.

Another facet of the theory versus practice debate is whether practitioners can develop theory. The answer to this rests on the belief in the credibility and importance of the professional knowledge—the theory—that practitioners create through their practice (Argyris, 1982, 1999; Schön, 1983; Sergiovanni, 1991). It is this type of professional theory and knowledge—or, more particularly, co-constructed knowledge developed through critical reflection on practice and related information—that is essential in a rapidly changing leadership context. Coaching validates practitioner theory development.

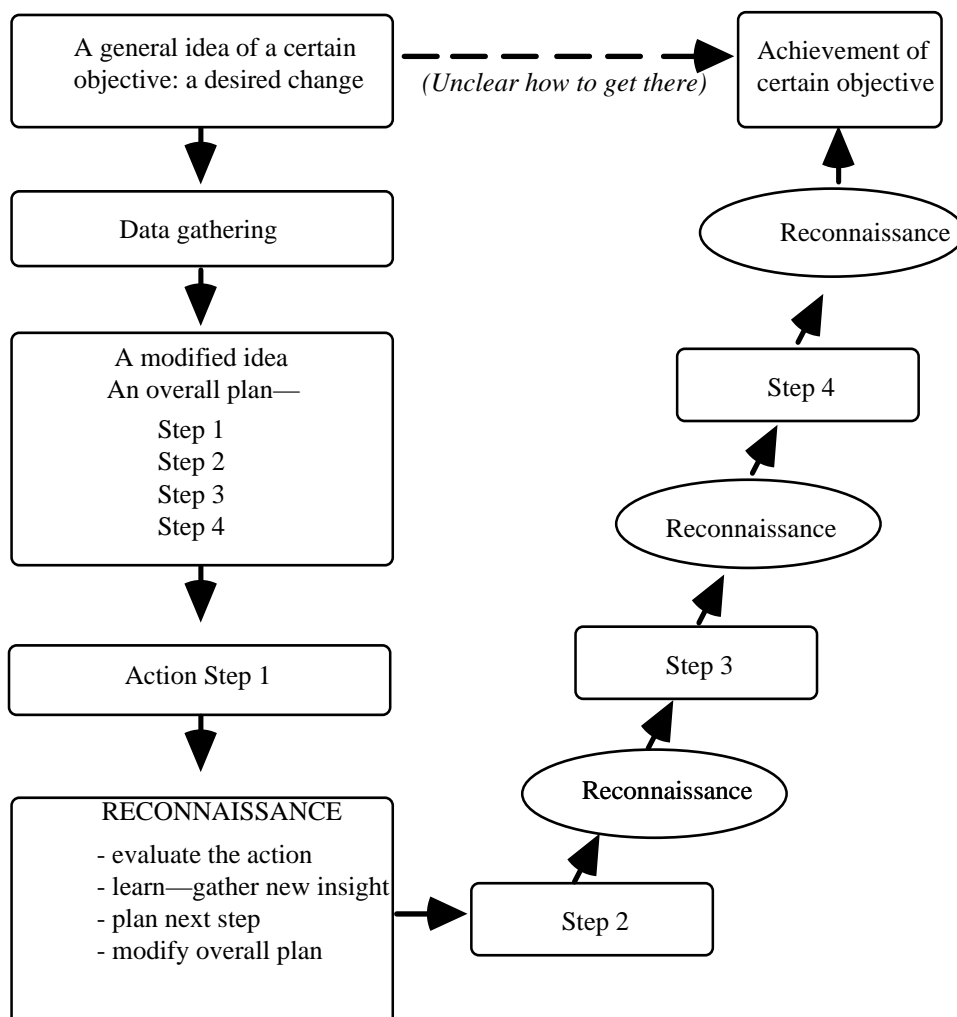
## **ACTION RESEARCH IN ACTION**

Within the framework of leadership coaching, action research involves several steps. These are identification of a need or vision and the related goal setting, data gathering, developing an initial action plan, implementing action, reconnaissance on that action, modification of the action plan, and then further agreed action. The last step provides the beginning step for a new cycle of research, and the process continues in this cyclical way until the leader achieves the

desired outcome. (The role that the coach (as critical friend) plays in this process is detailed below.)

The cycle is presented in diagrammatic form in Figure 1. The representation given here draws on the conception of action research that developed out of the research studies. It also is premised on the action research processes described originally by Lewin (1948), particularly the notion that although practitioner-researchers start with a perceived outcome, how they will get there cannot necessarily be pre-identified. Within the coaching framework, it is the *reconnaissance* after each action that helps leaders decide what step(s) to take next.

**Figure 1: The action research process**



**Note:** Developed from the coaching research studies conducted by Robertson (1995) and from Lewin's (1948) conceptual framework for action research.

**A) Needs Identification and Goal Setting**

This step begins with leaders identifying a need or vision arising out of their practice and then articulating that need or vision in terms of a goal they wish to achieve. The goal should be stated as a succinct statement that provides direction for the action research. When setting research goals, educational leaders need sufficient time to think about and define exactly what it is they want to achieve with their coach. Here are some examples of goals that leaders have set:

- To lead the staff positively through the upcoming review.
- To standardise assessment throughout the institution.
- To develop a five-year education plan.
- To establish resource-based learning across all rooms.
- To develop the institution's profile so that there is ownership by faculty, council and senior management.
- To lead my staff into the area of data gathering in a non-threatening way.
- To set a better system of appraisal in place.

**B) The Initial Plan**

Setting a goal is one thing. Reaching it is another. The initial plan allows leaders to bridge the gap by setting out the means and methods whereby they will carry out their actions. The plan usually includes gathering data to gain a better understanding of any issues relating to the achievement of goals or to help point out future directions for action. Here are some examples of first steps leaders might take:

- Coaching partner will first observe me take a staff meeting and then assist me in getting all staff on board.
- Look at areas such as organisation of time (class, staff, administration, secretarial, cleaning, environment).
- Interview each staff member separately to get agreement on performance agreement contracts.
- Hold one-day workshop for deans to develop initial ideas for profile document.
- Month 1: Set up hui. Involve Board and community members.

### **C) First Action and Reconnaissance**

Leaders then carry out the first action of their plan. (In the coaching situation, this may occur with or without the observation and feedback of the coach.) They then reflect on the outcomes of the action and decide what direction(s) to take from there (reconnaissance). Those directions may require modification of the ensuing steps in the initial plan.

### **D) Second and Subsequent Actions**

Leaders now move on to their second action and period of reconnaissance and plan modification. They continue this process until they arrive at, or near, the desired outcome.

## **COACHING ACTION RESEARCH**

The collaborative nature of coaching is a key feature in leading leaders into action research processes. Coaches, as critical friends, help to keep their partners focused and moving systematically ahead to achieve their goals. Leaders can all too easily get sidetracked by the minutiae of their everyday work, which limits their ability to assess progress towards goals. Coaching reminds leaders to monitor their action plans and related time-frames. Coaches also keep their partners firmly focused on the bigger picture of education and leadership, rather than the management tasks that make up much of their day.

The leaders involved in the research studies (see Robertson, 2005) were quite specific about how their respective coaches could assist them with feedback. Examples include the following:

- *Monitor introductory process and see if goals are clear.*
- *Evaluate the degree of change.*
- *Assist with evaluation through reflective interviews with staff.*
- *Observe an executive team meeting.*

One leader said the best way her coach could assist her was to act as her conscience. The goal she had set herself was a personal one: “To see something through to the end.” One of the most important influences of the coaching leadership process was that leaders set long-term

goals and worked consistently towards them, in a way that developed ownership and shared responsibility from those with whom they worked. The coach acted as the critical friend, providing support and challenge, to enable the leader to maintain focus and momentum in the school improvement journey. The leaders stated that to have a colleague working in these professional, supportive ways, showing interest and commitment to their change process, was rare and valued.

## References

- Alcorn, N. (1986). Action research: A tool for school development. *Delta*, 37, 33-44.
- Argyris, C. (1982). *Reasoning, learning and action*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Argyris, C. (1999). *Knowledge for action*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Cardno, C. (2003). *Action research*. Wellington: NZCER.
- Carr, W., & Kemmis, S. (1986). *Becoming critical: Education, knowledge and action research*. Lewes: The Falmer Press.
- Cohen, L., & Manion, L. (1980). *Research methods in education*. London: Croom Helm.
- Ebbutt, D. (1985). Educational action research: Some general concerns and specific quibbles. In R. G. Burgess. (Ed.), *Issues in educational research: Qualitative methods* (pp. 152-174). London: Falmer Press.
- Elliott, J. (1991). Action research, practical competence and professional knowledge. In Ortrun Zuber-skerritt (Ed.), *Action learning for improved performance: Key contributions to the first world congress on action research and process management* (pp. 26-45). Brisbane: AEBIS Publishing.
- Fullan, M. (2001). *Leading in a culture of change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Fullan, M. G., with Stiegelbauer, S. (1991). *The new meaning of educational change*. London: Cassell.
- Greene, Maxine. (1985). The role of education in democracy. *Educational Horizons*, 63 (Special issue): 3-9.
- Kemmis, S. (1985). Action research and the politics of reflection. In D. Boud, R. Keogh & D. Walker (Eds.), *Reflection: Turning experience into learning* (pp. 139-163). New York: Kogan Page.
- Kemmis, S., & McTaggart, R. (1988). *The action research planner* (3rd ed.). Geelong: Deakin University.
- Lewin, K. (1948). *Resolving social conflicts: Selected papers on group dynamics*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Oja, S. M., & Smulyan, L. (1989). *Collaborative action research: A developmental approach*. Lewes: Falmer Press.
- Oliver, B. (1980). Action Research for inservice training. *Educational Leadership*, 37(5), 394-395.

- Robertson, J. M. (1995). *Principals' partnerships: An action research study on the professional development of New Zealand school leaders*. A doctoral thesis. Hamilton: The University of Waikato.
- Robertson, J. M. (2000). The Three R's of Action Research Methodology: Reciprocity, reflexivity and reflection-on-reality. *Educational Action Research*, 8(2), 307-326.
- Robertson, J. (2005). *Coaching leadership: Building educational leadership capacity through coaching partnerships*. Wellington New Zealand Council for Educational Research Press.
- Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. New York: Basic Books.
- Sergiovanni, T. J. (1991). *The principalship: A reflective practice perspective* (2nd ed.). Massachusetts: Allyn & Bacon.
- Stenhouse, L. (1975). *An introduction to curriculum research and development*. London: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Winter, R. (1989). *Learning from experience: Principles and practice in action-research*. Lewes: The Falmer Press
- Whyte, W. F. (Ed.). (1991). *Participatory action research*. California: Sage.