Action research for educational reform: remodelling action research theories and practices in local contexts

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This paper explores how action research theories and practices are remodelled in local contexts and used to support educational reform. From an analysis of 46 publications from the period 2000–2008, five ‘variations’ in the globalized theory and practice of action research are identified: action research in times of political upheaval and transition; action research as a state-sponsored means of reforming schooling; co-option of action research by Western governments and school systems to control teachers; action research as a university-led reform movement; and action research as locally-sponsored systemic reform sustained over time. A common feature in these ‘variations’ of action research is the importance each demonstrates of working towards a resolution of the impetus for action with the reflective process of inquiry and knowledge generation, to generate new practices. The paper also offers a framework to enable the analysis of how action research differs in local settings within and across national boundaries. The paper ends by suggesting that the emerging variations of action research in many countries during the period 2000–2008 can be construed as an example of Appadurai’s ‘globalization from below’, in which teacher-action-researchers contribute knowledge and learning from multiple local sites about the process of effective educational reform.

Keywords: discursive power of action research; development of action research; ‘variations’ of action research; framework for analysis; ‘globalization from below’

Action research, as a proposition, has discursive power because it embodies a collision of terms. In generating research knowledge and improving social action at the same time, action research challenges the normative values of two distinct ways of being – that of the scholar and the activist. It has been our experience that, when embarking on action research projects in K–12 settings, there is often a suggestion that the term ‘research’ should be dropped; whereas in higher education settings we have come across similar discomfort with the term ‘action’. This can be understood as the discursive shaping of social action in a community by the ‘regimes of truth’ that control the values and behaviours of its members (Foucault 1972, 131). Working one in the United Kingdom, the other in the USA, we have both consistently resisted these pressures to call action research by another name, instead consciously using its discursive power. It is a characteristic of ‘Western’ culture that physical work and mental work are seen as the provinces of two different kinds of people.

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The poet Yeats, caught between impulses to promote Ireland’s cultural identity through both nationalist activism and the writing of poetry, symbolized the pattern and tension of human existence in a metaphor of interpenetrating ‘gyres’ or ‘whirling cones’ in which moving from the subjective/reflective to the objective/active could be traumatic (‘Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold’), but resolution between the two by holding the tensions in ‘unity of being’ was his ultimate ideal (Ellman 1960, 118, 231–243; Yeats 1961, 210). Using a metaphor of interpenetrating reflexive spirals of action and research, in this paper we will argue that it is precisely because action research deliberately mixes discourses – and thereby erodes the boundaries between action and knowledge-generation – that it is uniquely suited to generating and sustaining social transformation. Action research can make a unique contribution to educational reform because it challenges the body–mind divide that has fractured ‘Western’ conceptions of what it means to be human since the Enlightenment.

**Action research in a globalized world**

The boundary-crossing nature of action research also makes it a particularly well-suited methodology for educational transformation in the twenty-first century. The rapid changes experienced by every community in this time of globalization are the product of what Appadurai calls ‘a world of flows’ in which ‘ideas and ideologies, people and goods, images and messages, technologies and techniques’ are constantly in motion, despite the appearance of stable structures and organizations in each country (Appadurai 2001, 5–7). Higher education has become a marketplace attracting students internationally to study in the developed world, digital technologies import ideas that transgress the boundaries of traditional culture, and politicians in a wide range of countries import neo-liberal education policies in an effort to be seen to succeed in international comparative tests. Thus, globalization has created a context in which the oppressive practices of the imperial past can be replicated by the economic hegemony of the market and the ideological assumptions of international donor agencies (Dahlstrom 2008). Nevertheless, ‘the world of flows’ also provides a context for counter-hegemonic movements to flourish. Appadurai (2001, 16–20) calls for the creation of ‘globalization from below’ by means of grassroots efforts and the creation of ‘new forms of dialogue’ between policy-makers, activists and academics; and Rizvi builds upon Appadurai’s concept of the ‘social imaginary’ to argue that in all communities there is ‘a collective sense of agency’ (2006, 195) that re-orders and localizes ideas and policies that ‘travel through time and space’ (2006, 200).

Action research was developed in Europe and the USA in the first half of the twentieth century and its take up in many countries can be seen as a product of the ‘world of flows’; it is an idea – an approach to educational reform – that has travelled. But action research brings with it a democratic imperative to challenge oppression and nurture and sustain social justice. It is a methodology grounded in the values and culture of its participant-researchers and hence it is flexible to local agency. In this paper we focus upon different approaches to action research that have developed across the world, and explore to what extent it can be seen as a means of realizing Appadurai’s ‘globalization from below’.

**Reflections on the origins and development of action research**

Current action research practices can be seen to be shaped by its origins and early development. In this section we reflect on the work of some of the leading figures in
the development of action research in the twentieth century, drawing out key concepts and practices to inform our analysis of contemporary work.

Kurt Lewin, who is often credited with inventing the term action research, was an immigrant to the USA in the 1930s, a refugee fleeing from Hitler’s fascism. He was also a social psychologist interested in improving the social organization of groups and communities (Lewin 1946). When he founded the Research Center for Group Dynamics at MIT in 1945, and subsequently the journal *Human Relations*, jointly with the Tavistock Institute in London, Lewin was setting out a radical new direction for research in psychology. His vision of action research was as an alternative to the norms of decontextualized research; instead of focusing on surveys and statistical methods, action research’s purpose was to improve social formations by involving participants in a cyclical process of fact finding, planning, exploratory action and evaluation (Lewin 1948, 202–6). In recent years the radical nature of Lewin’s early contribution is often forgotten; he was a pioneer in a new form of social psychology that focused on improving the lives of ordinary people. It is important, too, that he was a psychologist; he was familiar with the work of Vygotsky in the Soviet Union before he left Germany, 30 years before the latter’s work was ‘discovered’ in the west (Stetsenko 2008). Lewin, like Vygotsky, was interested in the capacity of human beings to support each other’s learning.

Stephen Corey, the head of the Horace-Mann-Lincoln Institute of School Experimentation at Columbia University in the 1950s, was a leading voice for promoting action research in education in the USA. He and his colleagues at the Institute collaborated extensively with school districts and teachers across the USA in conducting studies of various school problems. Corey produced a number of papers and a book on action research in education (for example, Corey 1953) that discussed what he referred to as the method of ‘cooperative action research’ and reported on various studies conducted in US schools that were supported by the Institute. Corey was also a leading voice in contrasting action research with conventional academic research, such as in the following statement about the openness of the research process to the changing conditions associated with an inquiry:

In a program of action research, it is impossible to know definitely in advance the exact nature of the inquiry that will develop. If initial designs, important as they are for action research, are treated with too much respect, the investigators may not be sufficiently sensitive to their developing irrelevance to the ongoing situation. (Corey 1949, 519)

Lawrence Stenhouse was a historian whose educational work focused on the development of curriculum that he saw as the key determinant of students’ learning in school. For Stenhouse, ‘curriculum’ incorporated what today is more usually called ‘pedagogy’. It was both what the students learned (planned and unplanned) and the classroom practices of teachers and students. Stenhouse developed a concept of the ‘process curriculum’ (sometimes called the ‘enacted curriculum’) (Stenhouse 1975). He believed that curriculum development depended neither on specifying new courses of study nor on specifying learning objectives, but on working with teachers as researchers in joint exploration of the processes of teacher–student interaction and learning. In his work developing the humanities curriculum (in reality a curriculum for moral education), Stenhouse cast students in the role of developers of their own moral precepts and understandings through dialogue, with the teacher as a ‘neutral chairperson’ and facilitator. For Stenhouse, teachers’ work was the central and most important
driver of educational reform (Stenhouse 1985). He developed a vision of teachers producing case studies of research in their own classrooms as contributions to a growing library of knowledge resources to inform educational policy and practice (Stenhouse 1978).

Wilf Carr and Stephen Kemmis made an important contribution to the development of action research theory and methodology by locating it within the framework of critical theory, in particular in relation to the work of Habermas (Carr and Kemmis 1996). Lewin’s original drive to improve the lives of human beings was given a much more explicit ideological impetus towards promoting social justice and resisting oppression. Action research became a means of realizing the Habermasian ideal of democratizing the power differentials in social groups and institutions. Action researchers, working collaboratively, would be able to create ‘ideal speech situations’ in which communication between individuals would be free and open, unconstrained by considerations of power and status. Carr and Kemmis’s book described a vision for the future rather than a current reality, and they are on record more recently saying that some key aspects of their vision have not been realized (Carr and Kemmis 2005). Nevertheless, although ideology critique must now be seen in its historical context as fanciful in its reliance on the core Enlightenment concept of rationalism, Carr and Kemmis’ belief in ‘emancipatory values’ has continued to provide action researchers with a radical vision of possibility.

John Elliott, a colleague of Stenhouse, extended and transformed the concept of the teacher-researcher. In two curriculum development projects – the Ford Teaching Project, which focused on science in the primary school, and Teacher–Pupil Interaction and the Quality of Learning, which focused on teaching within the constraints of current assessment systems – he developed notions of multi-level action research (Elliott 1991). The purpose of the action research was to improve students’ education. Senior staff in a school carried out action research on their own roles as managers facilitating the classroom action research of their colleagues. The teacher-researcher engaging in classroom action research was facilitated by a university-based partner who carried out second-order action research into his or her own practice as a facilitator. Elliott’s contribution over 30 years has been in developing a comprehensive theory of teacher professional knowledge and teacher professional development/learning through action research (Elliott 2007). He has drawn on Gadamer’s philosophy to conceptualize action research as a hermeneutic process of reflection to develop understanding and agency in social situations (Elliott 2007, 105–108). Elliott’s theory of teaching as a practical educational science draws on the Aristotelian tradition of practical philosophy, in particular the concept of praxis that he defines as ‘moral action’ (‘Ethical values are realized in, rather than as a result of, praxis’) (2007, 107). His concern has been with improving education through action research that develops the situational understanding and moral agency of teachers.

A decade ago, in a historical review of the action research tradition, Noffke (1997) characterized action research work as encompassing three dimensions: the professional, the personal and the political. Her analysis pulled out interesting differences in the growing body of action research work and explored its developing trajectories. Noffke’s categories suggest differences in kind but not in value and importance, and she recognizes and acknowledges the range and variety of achievements. Yet, she emphasizes the overarching importance of the political:
These three dimensions all clearly deal with issues of power and control. In that sense, the public sphere of professionalism and the domain of the personal are also particular manifestations of the political. (Noffke 1997, 306)

Noffke’s work is crucial in establishing the wide range of the action research territory. She has continued to work with the power and complexities of the boundary-crossing values of action research, but her analysis encompasses the work of some who prefer to call their action research by another name. This inclusivity is maintained in the Handbook of Educational Action Research she has recently edited with one of the authors of this paper (Noffke and Somekh 2009). The Handbook illustrates how the developing tradition of action research has flourished and diversified over the past 20 years. Notably, it has become more fully theorized, drawing on a much wider range of contemporary thought and knowledge. The Handbook includes chapters, for example, on action research and capability theory (Walker 2009), Buddhism (Winter 2009), psychoanalytic theory (Carson 2009), complexity theory (Sumara and Davis 2009) and existentialism (Feldman 2009).

How is this paper positioned within the developing action research tradition?
In the analysis of current approaches to action research that we present later in this paper, we inevitably draw on our own definitions of its nature and purposes. To clarify any otherwise hidden assumptions, we now present a brief summary of our own standpoints.

Ken Zeichner
I first became involved with action research as an elementary school teacher in the USA in the 1970s both in terms of studying my own teaching and our staff collectively, studying our work as a school. Over the past 30 years or so, I have supported action research by student-teachers in the pre-service teacher education programme in which I work, action research by the elementary and secondary school teachers who mentor and assess the work of our student-teachers, and the action research of the graduate students who teach and supervise student-teachers in our teacher education programmes and who are learning how to be teacher educators. Additionally, most of all, much of my research during my career has involved study of my own practice as a teacher educator and of the teacher education programmes for which I am responsible. In recent years, many of the action research studies of my doctoral students have served as the dissertations they have submitted for their PhD thesis. My interest in action research in different contexts has been stimulated by my extensive involvement in discussions and practices concerning action research in a number of different parts of the world ranging from 10 years of work in Namibia supporting the action research of teacher educators and student-teachers to meetings with action researchers and scholars of action research in places like Chile Brazil, Australia, Thailand and Sweden.

Bridget Somekh
I started out as a teacher researcher working with John Elliott on action research projects focused on curriculum development. My first experience was of the power of
action research to transform my understanding of my work as a teacher; and of how it enabled me to give my students more empowering and engaging experiences of learning (constructing knowledge). Since the late 1980s my action research work has mainly been in the context of leading development projects; unlike Ken, I have never worked as a teacher educator with pre-service students, and my partnerships with practitioners have been on the basis of collaborating with them to undertake work for a sponsor, in many cases for a government agency. I have also had the opportunity of working as the adviser of a number of graduate students undertaking action research studies for a master’s or doctoral degree. Both these strands of work have taken place in a range of different socio-cultural settings: K–12 schools, university departments, healthcare and social care facilities in the British National Health Service, public services and private commercial organizations. Since 1990 I have also worked closely with teachers and teacher educators whilst conducting action research workshops in a number of countries, including South Africa, Venezuela and Singapore. I wanted to write this chapter with Ken as soon as I realized we share an interest in the remodelling process that takes place when action research ‘travels’ to different cultures and countries, particularly from ‘Western’ to ‘Southern’ settings through the current process of globalization (Somekh 2006, 31–61).

A framework for analysing action research practices in local-within-global contexts

The discussion of action research in the international literature that we present in the next sections of the paper has been informed by the analytic framework ‘Dimensions of Variation in Action Research’, developed by Ken in a paper presented at a conference we both recently attended in Taiwan (Zeichner 2007, 2008). There are eight dimensions in this framework:

(1) The purposes for which action research is conducted. For example, Noffke (1997) as referred to above outlined three different motivations for educators who conduct action research. First there is the motivation to better understand and improve one’s practice and/or the contexts in which one works. Second is the motivation to produce knowledge that will be useful to other educators. Finally, consistent with the democratic impulse that was originally associated with action research in the 1940s in the USA (Foshay 1994), there is the motivation to contribute to greater equity and democracy. These categories are not mutually exclusive. All educators who conduct action research are interested in improving their own practice. In addition, some of these are also interested in sharing their learning with others and/or in contribution to social reconstruction.

(2) The contextual conditions for action research. This dimension refers to the conditions under which action research is conducted. For example, educators conduct action research alone as individuals, as part of small collaborative groups or in school faculty groups involving everyone in a particular school. When research is done in the context of a group, the groups have varied according to their size, the basis for their formation, and whether they have an external facilitator or not.

(3) The philosophy toward teachers and their learning. This dimension refers to how educators’ learning is viewed within an action research community. Some communities replicate the hierarchical patterns of authority and the dim view
of teachers’ capabilities that permeate dominant forms of teacher professional development, while others display a deep respect for teachers and their knowledge and reject typical authority patterns that limit teacher autonomy and control.

(4) *Who sponsors the research?* Here there have been many different sponsors of research including educators themselves, school districts, teacher unions, colleges and universities, private foundations and governments.

(5) *Incentives for doing action research.* Here, beyond the intrinsic value of doing action research, there have been a number of external incentives provided for educators to conduct action research including paid time during the school day to meet in action research groups, opportunities to participate in conferences to present their research, access to university credits and to advances in salaries that often go with increased coursework, and to advanced university degrees.

(6) *Form of inquiry.* There are a number of different conceptualizations of the action research process that have been used by educators across the world (for example, McNiff and Whitehead 2003, 13). For example, some action research uses a version of the action research spiral and focuses on a single research question while other action research focuses simultaneously on multiple research questions (Gallas 1998).

(7) *Relationship of action research to other research.* Action research studies vary in the way that they relate to other research. Troen et al. (1997) describe three patterns that emerged when they examined teachers’ action research studies in a particular research community in the Boston, MA area. Some teachers used concepts, questions and ideas from other research as the starting point for their own research; others used them as a resource, usually consulting them later on in the process (McDonald 1986); and still others did not use them at all and did not make an effort to conduct their action research to other academic or school-based research.

(8) *Ways of representing action research to others.* Educators have represented what they learned in their action research to others in many different ways, including informal presentations within their schools, oral presentations at conferences, written research reports that are sometimes published, video and website documentation of their research and the use of theatrical performance techniques.

**Carrying out the analysis on which this paper is based**

This paper is based on an analysis of 46 publications dated between 2000 and 2008 that present action research carried out in a large number of countries. These included 34 papers published in this journal. This paper, therefore, reflects the diversity resulting from the aspiration of *Educational Action Research* to be culturally inclusive and work against the grain of ‘Western’ hegemony. Notes were made on each publication, in columns, under the headings of the analytic framework outlined in the previous section. The resulting table was then used to derive five ‘variations’ of action research.

In the process of carrying out the analysis it became clear that the framework needed to be expanded to take account of the impact of cultural differences. Each of the eight dimensions of the framework could be applied to the articles in the form envisaged by the notes in the previous section, but additional factors needed to be taken into
consideration. It was not a matter of adding new dimensions, but rather of stretching
the compass of each dimension to include factors relating to how the work of teachers
and schools was strongly shaped by the history, culture and politics of local education
systems.

The interpenetrating spirals of action and research
This section of the paper presents the five ‘variations’ of action research that we
derived from our analysis. Our focus is on the remodelling of action research theories
and practices, in response to local cultures in the ‘world of flows’ that Appadurai sees
as characteristic of globalization. This sometimes involves calling action research by
another name, while retaining its characteristic boundary-crossing between action and
research (e.g. ‘critical practitioner inquiry’ in Namibia). Our metaphor of interpene-
trating reflexive spirals of action research is drawn from the figure of interpenetrating
gyres that the poet Yeats saw, in Ellman’s words (1960, 231), as ‘the archetypal
pattern […] mirrored and remirrored by all life, by all movement of civilization or
mind or nature’. It signifies the creative tension in holding these two (oppositional)
trajectories of action and research in balance and continuous motion. This is the over-
arching dynamic within which the ‘variations’ are explored.

1. Action research in times of political upheaval and transition
The political nature of action research is very obvious when it is conducted in contexts
where there has been a radical change of government in the recent past. Major ideo-
logical reorientation in the publicly declared vision of a new political system brings
with it hopes for improvement that are nearly always unrealizable in the near future.
Action research, particularly when it draws upon critical and emancipatory values
(Carr and Kemmis 1986), provides a starting point for working to realize the vision.
In Namibia, action research work has been at the heart of educational reform since
independence in 1990. The focus of the work has been in building a new system of
teacher education that encourages teachers to engage critically with learning as profes-
sionals. As Mayumbelo and Nyambe explain:

Perhaps terms such as teacher empowerment are clichés in other countries. But in a
country like Namibia, where intellectual creativity and development were deliberately
stifled to suit a certain political ideology, they are powerful metaphors of liberation in
the widest sense of the word. (1999, 72)

An important feature of the work in Namibia has been its dual focus on empowering
teachers and building a local knowledge base. The theories and practices of action
research have been appropriated and incorporated in the national teacher education
programme for basic education (the BETD). Mayumbelo and Nyambe describe how
‘critical inquiry’ was adopted as ‘the official strategy to educate teachers’ in all three
years of the Basic Education Teaching Diploma during the 1990s:

In year 3 students undertook their own action research study. Throughout the BETD,
students were taught to be reflective ‘so that they become independent agents able to
respond to the vibrant and ever changing environments of their classrooms and society’.
(Mayumbelo and Nyambe 1999, 77)
The publication of action research studies by teachers, student-teachers, teacher educators and government staff involved in this early work was the first step in creating a local knowledge base for Namibian education (Zeichner and Dahlstrom 1999).

Dahlstrom gives an account of how the work in Namibia grew out of the Swedish Development Agency’s support for education in the Namibian refugee camps before independence (Dahlstrom 1999). He describes how ‘education was an important area of ideological struggle’ (Dahlstrom 1999, 49). More recently the reform work in teacher education in Namibia can be seen as an example of a locally-managed counter-hegemonic movement to give control over educational policy and practice to those at the grass-roots (Dahlstrom 2003). ‘Critical practitioner inquiry’ is a form of action research that emphasizes the need to adopt a critical stance to neo-liberal ideology and the dictates of international donor agencies and bodies such as the World Bank. By writing case studies of their critical practitioner inquiry research, teacher educators and teachers in Namibia have created a repository of local educational knowledge that is used in teacher education courses, very much in the way envisaged by Stenhouse. This work is a form of political action that claims teacher educators’ and teachers’ ‘preferential right of interpretation (whose voice counts)’ in Namibian education (Dahlstrom 2003, 468).

The theme of empowering teachers in a reformed education system emerges clearly in action research carried out in other countries that have experienced rapid political change. In South Africa, Winkler (2001) focused on a higher degree course designed to give teachers from the former Bantu education system qualifications commensurate with their experience. The teachers came from impoverished areas with poor job security, and it was challenging to decide whether educational ‘theory’ (from the ‘Western’ traditions) would be of any value to them and how to teach it in a way that would not devalue their own ‘practical knowledge’. Winkler’s action research revealed the need to engage with teachers in ‘theoretical work’ involving both reflection and confrontation. She reached no easy answers.

In Russia, Michalova, Yusfin, and Polyakov (2002) describe the process of identity construction involved in preparing teachers from the former Soviet Union to work in an education system reoriented to humanistic and democratic values. Teachers were required to cater for the needs of the individual child instead of working with the collective. Adopting the ‘alien’ concept of individual self-determination was stressful and challenging for teachers. Action research was introduced, in the context of a pan-European teacher education project, to support teachers in learning to become innovators supporting children in the process of self-discovery, rather than transmitters of certain knowledge and skills.

In Spain, Perez-Gomez et al. (2009) trace the development of action research from the Pedagogy Renovation Movements that grew up in the time of Franco’s dictatorship. These were led by teachers who formed links with other social movements in an attempt to liberate and transform schools, despite the constraints of the time. After the death of the dictator, action research was introduced through workshops led by John Elliott and the publication in Spanish of Carr and Kemmis’ book Becoming Critical. It built upon these radical grassroots movements and played an important part in the development of new education systems, nationally and in the autonomous regions. The Carboneras Document, which set out policies for the reform of primary education in Andalusia in 1987, established research as a teacher’s tool and gave teachers the role of independent professionals who develop by carrying out research into their own practice (Perez-Gomez et al. 2009).
2. Action research as a state-sponsored means of reforming schooling

During the second half of the 1990s there was a move in several countries in East Asia to introduce policies that formally adopted action research as a strategy for school reform. This can be seen as a response to a perceived need to encourage greater creativity and entrepreneurship in the workforce at a time of growing economic global competition. In Singapore, the Government’s vision for Thinking School, Learning Nation, introduced in 1997, was strongly influenced by De Bono’s work on the development of creative thinking skills. Here again, the professional development of teachers was seen as the key to reform. According to Salleh, the mission of the Teachers Network established in 1998 was ‘to build a fraternity of reflective teachers’ and to encourage ‘teacher-initiated development through sharing, collaboration and reflection leading to self-mastery, excellent practice and fulfilment’ (2006, 514). By 2000, the Teachers Network had introduced learning circles in which groups of teachers worked collaboratively to identify problems in their practice and develop strategies for improvement. Learning circles can be seen as a form of action research remodelled to fit the needs of local culture. From 2003 a number of other forms of action research were initiated in projects, action research in-service courses were provided for teachers, and groups of schools collaborated in running action research symposia (Salleh 2006, 515). Teachers’ action research was officially endorsed and encouraged by the Center for Research and Pedagogical Practice established in 2002.

Salleh provides a very detailed account of the process of remodelling that has taken place as action research has adapted to Singaporean culture. He describes how initially it encountered two structural constraints: the first ‘the culture of taking directive and initiative from the top’, which made it difficult for teachers to develop professional agency; the second ‘the culture of productive efficiency’, which made it difficult for teachers to take risks or acknowledge that making mistakes could be a productive learning experience. These two constraints, related to dominant cultural dispositions in the country, in Salleh’s view have had a detrimental impact on the nature of action research practised by teachers in Singapore. Yet, in drawing conclusions, he points out several positive developments observable in what might be called the second wave of reform activity. The first of these is the new policy initiative for experimentation in schools, and its slogan ‘bottom up initiative, top down support’. The second is the emphasis by policy-makers on communication with teachers, and ‘the importance of listening and negotiating with teachers’. The third development is the development of deeper understanding of the process of action research emerging from the Teachers Network’s evaluation of their learning circles programme. He draws on Bourdieu’s concept of ‘misrecognition’ to point to the contradictory principles and practices between action research and Singaporean culture; and seems to suggest that the remodelling process, which is a main focus of our interest in this paper, is likely to produce a new form of action research that retains the creative tension of balancing research and action while better suiting the culture of Singapore.

It is interesting that the kind of collaborative inquiry conducted by a group of teachers in learning circles in Singapore bears strong similarities to the Japanese approach of lesson study (see the paper in the present issue by Lewis). In its original form in Japan, lesson study was practiced very widely in the education system, with groups of teachers undertaking them as a form of self-review in their fifth and tenth years of teaching (Lewis, Perry, and Friedkin 2009, qx). Elliott and Tsai (2008)
suggest that lesson study ‘constitutes a practical appropriation of certain aspects of Confucian thought for the purpose of improving teaching and learning’. They argue that action research and lesson study become a focal point for the meeting of Eastern and Western thought through commonalities in their underpinning epistemologies in the philosophy of Confucius and Dewey; both making explicit links between knowledge and reflection on the one hand and action for the benefit of the common good on the other. A further remodelling of action research/lesson study has taken place in Hong Kong where the government has introduced Learning Study to support teacher professional development and curriculum reform. Learning Study incorporates Western phenomenographic methods for researching the variations in learners’ perceptions of concepts, and Elliott and Tsai believe that its appeal to Hong Kong teachers lies in its ‘reson[ance] with conceptions of learning that are deeply embedded in Confucian culture’ (Elliott and Tsai 2008).

3. Co-option of action research by Western governments and school systems to control teachers

In recent years, the influence of neo-liberal and neo-conservative policies on state school systems in many parts of the world (Apple 2001; Ball 2004) has created a situation where there has been an increased focus on treating teachers as technicians or educational clerks rather than as reflective professionals. Teachers’ ability to exercise their judgement in their classrooms and to maintain control of the direction of their professional development has been eroded (for example, Robertson 2008; Smyth 2000) in the face of these policies, such as ‘No Child Left Behind’ in the USA (Kozol 2005). School-sponsored action research in these times has sometimes been used to serve the purposes of the reforms in very narrow ways (i.e. only aiming at higher standardized test scores) rather than to support teachers’ ownership of the action research process and their exploration of issues of concern to them beyond raising test scores. In some cases, teachers have been asked to do action research to examine the effectiveness of mandated instructional methods and/or curriculum. There are several cases in the literature of efforts in the USA of what is called ‘school wide action research’, where all staff in a school are required to conduct action research and where the action researchers have felt that they have not had ownership of the research process. Not surprisingly, teachers have often reacted negatively to these disingenuous attempts at empowerment and have defined them as unwanted forms of control from school administrators (see Zeichner 2003).

4. Action research as a university-led reform movement

Universities in many countries are working in partnership with schools and governments to use action research as a strategy for educational reform. Often this is through innovative projects involving school–university partnerships; often it is through the work of graduate students who carry out action research in their own school as part of higher degree study. Looking at this work across many countries, it is clear that its nature changes to fit local cultures, just as does the work in Africa and the East Asia described above. But here our focus is on the politics of university-led action research partnerships. Universities have the benefit of standing outside the hierarchy of the education system for schools; so they have status within the system but not the power to lead its reform. They intervene, sometimes very powerfully, from the sidelines. We
begin by looking at two contrasting examples of university post-graduate courses, aimed at teacher professional development and system reform, and sustained over a long period of time: the first in a stable political system and the second in a system where political struggle took precedence in the university’s mission over its formal role in education.

In the first example, Altrichter and Posch (2009) describe the development over 25 years of a professional development programme for teachers at the University of Klagenfurt in Austria. Teachers enrol in the course for a period of two years, with three one-week seminars of intensive teaching and five regional meetings. They undertake action research studies in their own schools, focusing on their own professional challenges and planning and implementing a development project in their own classrooms. They present their on-going work to the interdisciplinary professional community made up of course leaders from subject disciplines in the university and course participants. A significant feature of the course is the good relationship developed between the university and the Ministry of Education over many years, resulting in the course being officially recognized by both. More than 300 case studies produced by course participants have been completed and published online, providing a substantial body of professional knowledge, with cultural resonances for teachers in German-speaking countries. Other courses have been developed to extend this work, including the PROFIL course that focuses on ‘Professionality in Teaching’. For this course, participants engage in action research with a focus on both classroom and school development. Case studies produced by course participants provide evidence of impact at the school level.

In the second example, Robinson and Meerkotter (2003) describe a Master’s in Education programme at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa that began in 1987 with an overtly political mission to support teachers engaged in ‘emancipatory’ action research within the Bantu education system under apartheid; and went through a process of transformation as the politics of the education system underwent radical change after the African National Congress won the election in 1993. The master’s programme has always had a ‘political commitment’ to developing teachers’ ability to ‘play a central role as agents for democratic change in South Africa’s educational institutions’ (Robinson and Meerkotter 2003, 449). A major focus of its work has been to raise awareness of the conflict between teachers’ political activities to support the development of democracy and the authoritarian culture of schools – and to combat this ‘schizophrenic’ duality. The course started out by serving a community in which school students had engaged over many years in political activities, including strikes (so that they missed out on schooling), and the university was itself ‘a powerful ideological battlefield’ (Robinson and Meerkotter 2003, 452). Robinson and Meerkotter present some of the action research studies published by master’s students, including their own studies produced while themselves students. They emphasize the overtly political nature of this action research, which they recognize to have been different from action research in other societies with stable political systems. In this sense their work is very similar to the work of Dahlstrom and teacher educators in Namibia discussed earlier in this paper. They emphasize that even after the radical shift to a democratic political system the university continued to have a responsibility to prepare teachers to resist oppression:

Emancipatory action research […] encourages a critical review of the changes in the education system, linked to a vision of social justice. Critical review and progressive
vision-building remain, we believe, the responsibility of all those involved in education and it is for this reason that we remain committed to the principles of emancipatory action research in South Africa. (Robinson and Meerkotter 2003, 464)

Other studies provide evidence of the role of the university in leading action research with the motive of radically changing the educational experiences of students and their teachers in political systems where conflict is endemic. This can lead to the university-based researchers finding themselves caught between the power of the state (in the form of the education system) and the struggles of an oppressed people: as the study in Israel by Karnieli (2000) shows, the most careful and sensitive efforts to combat oppression may be met by complex and confusing resistance strategies, because ultimately the university does not have the power to change the underlying conflicts embedded in the culture of the oppressed. In another case in the Middle East, where the university researchers had the backing of an international agency, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, Al-Qura’n et al. (2001) were able to establish a collaborative project that was effective in initiating fundamental, albeit small-scale, curriculum development. The project involved four teams of pre-service teachers, researchers, and staff of a cooperating school, who worked to develop new units for sixth-grade geology that focused on local Palestinian geology rather than the geology of Jordan (the legacy of previous occupation), and cast teachers in the role of ‘knowledge professionals’ planning curriculum as a team effort through ‘curriculum inquiry cycles [to improve] both the teaching and learning process’ (Al-Qura’n et al. 2001, 396). However, here too, the impact was necessarily limited by the short time frame and limited jurisdiction of the university.

In rapidly changing education systems in the East Asia, comparable culturally to those already described in Singapore and Hong Kong, two further studies show the importance of university-led research in curriculum development through action research remodelled to fit local needs. For example, Sahasewiyon (2004), as part of her doctoral study at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, worked in rural Thailand with 27 elementary teachers to develop local curricula to complement the national curriculum. This work was well placed strategically as it fitted new policies for local curriculum set out in the 1998 Education Act. This helped to secure the participation of teachers and enabled Sahasewiyon to feed recommendations back to policymakers. Local remodelling of action research was evident in the development of a unique form of action research with main cycles and branching subcycles that emerged spontaneously from the working methods of the Thai teachers. Like Al-Qura’n et al., Sahasewiyon’s action research drew on the tradition of curriculum action research from Stenhouse and Elliott.

Another study by Li-Peidong and Laidlaw (2006) in China focuses on the development of teaching to fit the new curriculum for the teaching of English at university level. The context of this work was China’s Experimental Centre for Action Research in Foreign Language Teaching in Ningxia Teachers University in North-West China. Current Chinese education policy requires native English-speaking teachers to work alongside Chinese teachers of English, and Li-Peidong and Laidlaw focus on the process of cultural accommodation and remodelling of action research values and processes that became a core focus for their partnership. Sites of inter-cultural learning included the tensions between the individualism of Laidlaw’s tradition of Living Educational Theory action research and the emphasis on collectivism innate in Chinese culture, drawing on the philosophy of Confucius. As with Salleh’s (2006)
study discussed earlier, the process of remodelling of action research to incorporate the strengths of both cultures is a focal point of the paper.

5. **Action research as locally-sponsored systemic reform sustained over time**

In some cases, action research has been organized by teachers themselves as a local and teacher-directed form of professional development for individuals and has then been incorporated into reform efforts on a broader scale within school districts. For example, the Classroom Action Research Program of the Madison Wisconsin Metropolitan School District in the USA (for example, Caro-Bruce et al. 2007, in press) began in 1990 as a small-scale effort involving a few teachers to conduct research around issue of minority student achievement, and later grew into an important part of the school district’s professional development offerings that became connected to district-wide reform initiatives such as improving the learning experiences of the rapidly growing numbers of new English learners and of students with disabilities. Despite the effects of national and local policies on deprofessionalizing teaching referred to above, and continuing budget cuts, this professional development programme has remained in place because of the strong support for it by local teachers.

**Conclusions**

In this paper we have described five ‘variations’ in the ways in which the global practice of action research has been localized in many part of the world. These ‘variations’ are indicative rather than definitive – in the sense that others will surely be identified. They include the role of action research in promoting greater social justice during times of political upheaval and transition (in Namibia, South Africa, Russia and Spain); its use by governments to promote school reform and teacher development (Singapore, Japan, and Hong Kong) or by school systems to promote the use of particular practices that contribute to the further deskilling of teachers (USA); the influence of universities in organizing and supporting local action research communities (Austria, South Africa, Palestine, Thailand and China); and the emergence of action research as a result of the grassroots efforts of teachers to improve their own practices (USA).

A common feature in these ‘variations’ of action research is the importance each demonstrates of working towards a resolution of the impetus for action with the reflective process of inquiry and knowledge generation, to generate new practices. W.B. Yeats’ metaphor of interpenetrating ‘gyres’ or ‘whirling cones’ that must be held in balance to achieve the ideal of ‘unity of being’ was derived in part from the ancient Chinese symbol of the Yin-Yang. Our analysis of articles about action research in East Asia shows that it is too simple to suggest that this inherent tension in action research is a problem only in ‘the West’. However, the importance of the metaphor lies in recognizing that action research aspires to bring about change and improvement through accepting the tension of working in both realms of human experience simultaneously. By sharing knowledge and experiences of action research – not just between East and West, but between action researchers in many countries and cultures – it is possible to contribute to ‘the world of flows’ knowledge and learning from multiple local sites about the process of effective educational reform.

In this paper, we have also offered a framework to enable the analysis of how action research differs in local settings within and across national boundaries. This
framework directs attention to the purposes for which the research is being conducted, the contexts in which it is conducted, the philosophy toward teachers and their learning that guides the research, who initiated or sponsors the research, what incentives if any, are provided to the researchers, the forms of inquiry used by action researchers, the relationship of the action research conducted to other research and how what is learned in the research is represented to others. In employing the framework to analyse publications from many countries we found that we needed to ‘stretch’ the compass of each dimension – acknowledging the political purposes of action research, its shaping by epistemological traditions, and the need for action researchers to position themselves strategically to have local impact. Like all models, the power of the framework lies in its simplicity and infinite flexibility.

Although we have identified several individuals who have been instrumental in the development of action research as a global practice in education, we have found clear evidence of the adaptation of dominant models of action research to suit different purposes in a wide variety of cultural and political contexts including some cases where action research has challenged the neo-liberal and neo-conservative forces that circulated the globe and have influenced all sectors of most societies including education. We suggest that the emerging variations of action research in many countries during the period 2000–8 can be construed as an example of Appadurai’s ‘globalization from below’. Action research can be seen as a potent methodology for educational reform precisely because its core principle of combining action with research inevitably challenges the routines of the status quo. It gives the teachers, who carry it out, a means to develop agency to bring about change; and the changes they introduce are locally appropriate within the globalized world they inhabit.

Note
1. The emphases described below have recently been moderated somewhat by the recent entry of the World Bank into the Namibian education arena (Zeichner and Ndimande 2008).

References


