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Beginning and Becoming

Hannah Arendt's Theory of Action and Educational Action Research

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Introduction

Action research in K-12 classrooms is a popular mode of professional development, but its scholarly roots run deep. Many academic and popular education publishers have several publications on improving practice with action research or practitioner inquiry cycles (Mertler, 2011; McNiff, 2005; Sagor, 2005; Stringer, 2008). There are also has several international journals about action research that are devoted to sharing the variety of practitioner inquiry models as well as engaging in theoretical and conceptual ideas of action research. In a recent article, Beaulieu (2013) reviews the way action research is defined and debated within academic circles. The close connection between K-12 teacher research inquiry and action research has led some to debate on the scholarly value of action research (Clausen, 2012), but Beaulieu's (2013) conclusions are that action research, regardless of its context, is focused on "improving the quality of human life" and is usually an ongoing, cyclical process (p. 33).

In this article, I share my experiences with attempting to improve the quality of life in my elementary classroom through action research using the lens of Hannah Arendt's theory of action and the *vita activa* as articulated in her work *The Human Condition* (1958). My experiences with action research, which I initially understood as simply a means of professional development, are quite diverse and have led me to the understanding that action research in the K-12 system is often grounded in a philosophy that is more focused on obtaining quantifiable outcomes (Klehr, 2012) than, as Beaulieu (2013) suggests, focusing on improving human life and relationships.

Hannah Arendt

Arendt's thought and work is complex, and this paper does not intend to address the entirety of her work or the criticisms against it. I have read and studied *The Human Condition* (1958) for several years, and the understandings and rendering of her ideas as they pertain to teaching and action research are my own interpretations. *The Human Condition* is seen as Arendt's most purely philosophical writing rather than political (Benhabib, 2000). Arendt, through historical and philosophical argument, attempts to bring into balance the life of action (*vita activa*) with the life of contemplation (*vita contemplativa*).

Arendt investigates the categories of the *vita activa* (labor, work, and action), which are activities that make us human as opposed to merely animals. Labor is the human condition of sustaining our biological needs. Labor is about the means for survival. Work differs from labor in that it is about the production of artifacts that provide "durability upon the futility of mortal life" (Arendt, 1958, p. 8). Work provides people with shelters, constructions, and organizations that lend permanence to human life. Action, for Arendt, is "revelatory" in that the person engaging in action discloses their essential being to others (p. 180). A crucial element of action is the fact that the end is unknown at the time of acting. In action, the end is "not pursued but lies in the activity itself" (p. 206). We are not "in control" of our action in the way that we are in control of our labor or work (Dunne, 1993, p. 12). Labor and work have very specified means or ends, whereas in action the means *and* ends are inextricable from one another.

Two important ideas that are conditions of Arendtian action are natality and plurality. Levison (1997) introduced natality as "Arendt's shorthand term for human initiative" and the basis of action (p. 439). Natality is the capacity that all humans have, whether they know it or not, to "begin anew" (Arendt, 1958, p. 9). In my work, I use natality as potential, a beginning. For Arendt, plurality means that we are equal yet inexchangeably unique individuals who live together in the world. In order to be human, in the *vita activa*, it is essential for us to be with others. Action and natality, while human qualities, according to Arendt, are not always actualized. There are times when certain circumstances lead to the suppression of action and natality. For Arendt, removing or preventing the capacity to act reduces us to something less than human.

Hannah Arendt is perhaps most well known for her controversial writings on the Eichmann trial and her response to school integration events in Little Rock (Benhabib, 2000; Pickett, 2009), but it was her ideas on the human condition that resonated with me. I left the classroom because of the increased pressure and focus on test scores rather than educational experiences. Dunne (1993) used Arendt's distinction between action and work (or making) to explore an alternative view to "the technical mastery over the conditionality of human life" that has come to dominate the way we live (p. 358). Dunne's use of Arendt's theory to argue against narrowly prescribed outcomes in education helped me make sense of my teaching experiences when I felt less than human. Arendt's views are of importance for my work as a teacher and teacher educator. Through her ideas of action, natality, and plurality, Arendt (1958) argues that humans are uncertain beings with the ability to act in new ways. These ideas are a useful and powerful lens to view the actions that teachers engage in to improve teaching, specifically action research, because it provides a space for teachers to demonstrate initiative (natality) and not merely comply with prearranged notions of research outcomes.

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Action Research and Arendt

Hannah Arendt's basic ideas about action, its unpredictability, its ability to reveal the self, its dependence on plurality, and the idea that the ends of action are within the process itself, are reflected in many writings on action research. Corey (1953) writes that those in schools should do studies about what needs to change in schools. He advocates for what he calls action research, "research that is undertaken by educational practitioners because they believe that by doing so they can make better decisions and engage in better actions" (p. viii). Corey places action research in the action or in taking risks and writes, "If the consequences could be guaranteed, no research [action] would be needed" (p. 39). Corey's conception of teacher research can be situated in Arendt's thought that action has no end, therefore unknown consequences. Coulter (2002) uses Arendt's three parts of the *vita activa* as a heuristic to define the different types of teacher research. Coulter writes that action, however, has been replaced by work and labor, and that schooling has contributed to the destruction of plurality and natality. I agree but also believe that institutions can and often do promote behavior through tyranny. That is, it is not only the replacement of action by work and labor but the isolation from one another and the separation of policymakers and practitioners that destroy the ability to act.

Noted action research theorist John Elliott draws upon Arendt's theory of action in his writing on resolving the dualism between theory and practice (Elliott, 2007). In his essay, he is "struck by the parallels" of Arendtian theory of action and his own account of educational action research because both focus on the value of process rather than only outcomes of research (Elliott, 2007, p. 209). Elliott (2007) writes that Arendtian action allows space for human freedom and the possibility for new beginnings that allow one to "transcend what is merely required" (p. 209). The pressure to "teach to the test" that occurs when test scores are given high regard in schools often leads teachers to do what is required in order to comply with what is valued. An important idea within Arendtian thought on the *vita activa*, as Dunne's (1993) and Elliott's (2004) work highlights, is the potential for action to become making or behavior. Arendt (1958) writes that we ought to "think what we are doing," meaning that we must understand the consequences of compliance (p. 5).

While not making connections to Arendtian thought explicitly and echoing Elliott's (2007) ideas, Somekh and Zeichner (2009) write of the "discursive power" of action research because it generates knowledge and improves action simultaneously (p. 5). The means and ends are not separate, and action research "erodes the boundaries between action and knowledge-generation" (Somekh & Zeichner, 2009, p. 6), which is similar to Arendt's writing about eroding the privileging of the *vita contemplativa* over the *vita activa*.

Somekh and Zeichner (2009) celebrate the potential power of action research. However, that power is lost when the action is controlled by someone outside of the context, such as top-down mandates of action research to meet district goals; knowledge-generation becomes knowledge-generation for someone else rather than for the practitioner. Somekh and Zeichner (2009) acknowledged this issue in their framework for analyzing action research. This framework offers eight dimensions to use when analyzing action research, which include attending to the purposes of action research, determining sponsors of the action research, and the sponsors' philosophy

toward teachers and learning (Somekh & Zeichner, 2009, p. 10-11). Using these three ideas of their framework helps determine if action research is being used by school systems to control teachers, which Somekh and Zeichner (2009) acknowledge does happen through mandating participation and pre-set goals. Flessner and Stuckey (2013) share the experience of a mandated action research program within one school through the lenses of politics, power, and time. While the authors maintain that the benefits of this mandated action research program outweigh the problems, they encourage increased dialogue around collaboration prior to engaging in mandated action research (Flessner & Stuckey, 2013).

Experiences with Practitioner Inquiry

I hope to demonstrate an analysis of action and behavior, both the subsequent power and the potential tyranny that can arise from action research when used by institutions to control outcomes. I believe these concepts have great practical consequences; if the capacity for practitioners to engage in action research aligns with Arendt's theory of action, we will see that attempts to co-opt educational action research into only quantifiable ends is a form of tyranny, with the potential for action research to become *behavior* rather than *action*. Previously, I shared these experiences in an article on the role of practical reasoning in teaching and teacher education (Sato, Kern, McDonald, & Rogers, 2010). I intend for this current analysis to more fully describe my experiences with a deeper Arendtian analysis and focus on the importance on her thoughts for action research.

Action

When I was in my second year as an elementary teacher in a large Midwestern urban school district, a large university and my teacher's union offered a yearlong class for graduate credit. This course, specifically targeted to second-year teachers across the K-12 continuum, would help me understand and complete my action research project that was required for tenure. We met monthly after school and finished work in the summer. We received presentations about some aspect of the action research process and then met in small groups to discuss our work. In this iterative process, we posed a question one month, collected data, and then shared and used the data to inform questions about our practices the following meeting. The small group discussions helped to clarify our essential questions and helped us make sense of the data. It took a few months to hone in on the question that I wanted to pursue: How might my students and I increase or improve our use of positive language in our classroom, especially in the context of compliment circles during morning meeting?

> When we speak or act, it is to begin, but to begin to be some*one*, not some*thing,* because action is the ultimate expression of our humanness.

In this first experience of inquiry into my classroom, my goal was to improve the relationship between my students and myself through the use of more positive language. This was measured in instances of positively phrased language and kind speech, but the goal was not a quantifiable increase in a particular academic outcome; it was about the improvement in relationships within a classroom space. Speech and action are inextricably linked for Arendt. Speech and action reveal our distinctness from one another, yet require that we live among each other. When we

speak or act, it is to begin, but to begin to be some*one*, not some*thing,* because action is the ultimate expression of our humanness. This is demonstrating our natality, our initiative (Levison, 1997).

Action occurs between people, not between people and things or objects. Arendt (1958) defines action as "the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter" (p. 7). Beaulieu's (2013) definition of action research to improve the quality of human life and Elliot's (1991) focus on action research to improve processes are echoed in Arendt's definition of action: There are words and deeds among people, not words and deeds directed toward a tangible end product.

Arendt's (1958) *web of relationships* or the realm of human affairs is where "we speak and act directly to one another and leave behind or create no products" (p. 184). A classroom space can be situated in the realm of human affairs and the web of relationships because it has no end "product." It is expressly dealing with humans. In these times of increased testing and accountability, some may disagree with that statement; however, it cannot be denied that classroom spaces are made up of human beings. And, according to Arendt, making something in the realm of human affairs, like *making* people better or worse, is a delusion. Yet, over time, the collapse of action into making, to determine ends for action, has occurred in human society to protect us from the uncertainty of action. This is an important idea in this era of predetermined outcomes for education (i.e., test scores) because an over-focus on outcomes, on making some*thing* tangible and quantifiable within a classroom, can negate humanity. In my action research project, I could not make my students use positive language or be kinder to each other. I could not create a test that would measure these types of human interactions. I could only act in ways that promoted these ways of interaction.

Since we depend of the web of human relationships, on plurality, for action, there is a certain fragility in action. This fragility stems from the fact that we do not know the end of our action. In our action, we intend to resonate with others. This intention is what Arendt refers to as *promising*; its counterbalance is *forgiving*. Both promising and forgiving played crucial practical parts in my experiences of educational action research. As second year teachers, we peers came to this action research course for many reasons, but we all engaged in inquiries that focused on our classrooms. Our promising lay in the intention to do *good* with that classroom inquiry. Forgiveness, a wholly new action that cannot be anticipated, releases us from the unintended consequences of our action. In Arendt's thoughts, promising and forgiving depend on plurality because we cannot promise or forgive ourselves; only to others can we promise and only others can release us from our action.

This action research course was centered on the discussion and support of small groups of second-year teachers with similar issues within the classroom. As a second-year teacher, I struggled with classroom management. I felt I had gotten into a cycle of focusing on negative behaviors, and I no longer wanted to be that teacher. In discussing classroom management, sharing my data, and having my experiences supportively acknowledged and challenged by my fellow teachers, I felt I was forgiven. This forgiveness released me from being "that" teacher, allowing me to put that part of my experience behind me and act in new, more positive ways. I left the course with a sense of power about my ability to inquire and to make changes to my

practice. I also gained a fundamental sense that if something was not working in my classroom, I should look at what I was doing.

Behavior

Two years later, I undertook an action research project to implement a "research-based" strategy into my classroom. I was in a high poverty school; my colleagues and I silently groaned each time a new "research-based" intervention curriculum was handed out, or a strategy was modeled. While this happened frequently, our teachers' progressive union would counter by offering professional development opportunities that were not top-down. The union created an optional professional pay program that provided ongoing professional development opportunities, including an action research dimension as well as a pay incentive, *ProPay*. By now very comfortable with action research, I had successfully completed my second-year project, attained tenure, and even became the informal action research mentor for my building's non-tenured teachers.

That year, my fourth year of teaching second grade, I encountered a few students who challenged me in new ways. Always concerned with the language I used to redirect behavior, I knew I needed to change something, but I did not know exactly what. I undertook the course in non-verbal classroom management, an option offered by the ProPay program. The course in classroom management was a three-day session with time built in for us to try the strategies, reflect, and return. The action research dimension required us to identify a classroom problem, collect data, implement a strategy, collect further data, and analyze our results from incorporating the strategy into our classrooms. I chose two strategies to use during my math time. One strategy had me print directions for independent work time on the board. I would only silently refer to them as students asked questions, increasing the wait time between instruction and independent work time to allow students to engage in the task independently. I was (and continue to be) excited about these strategies because they promote self-regulation and allow a teacher to observe students in independent tasks. These strategies increased the academic language spoken and heard in the classroom and decreased the focus on management language. I collected multiple sources of data: videotape analysis of students' task engagement and my use of the strategy, three observations of my teaching, behavior referral data, and personal notes on student engagement. I wrote a report describing the change in my classroom.

Unfortunately, my understanding of action research clashed with my institution's "evidence-based" accountability system. I sent my research report into the professional pay office for three blind scores—an average score of three meant a pay bonus. A few months later, the report came back—I had not received enough points to qualify for the pay. The feedback was positive overall but noted I did not have sufficient pre/post data. I could revise and resubmit, but I never did. I knew things were better in my practice. Evidently, the institution was not looking for improved engagement; it wanted better pre/post data about math achievement. It seemed the details of the strategies that I used, the reflections on classroom atmosphere, and the qualitative data I collected were not as important as the quantifiable data.

This experience of educational action research can be theorized with Arendtian ideas of power, tyranny, and behavior. Power for Arendt (1958) is used very differently, more positively, than

the common usages; it is a potential that "springs up" rather than a force to be used over others (p. 200). The only alternative to power is force through the means of violence. Arendt calls this tyranny. Arendt means physical as well as psychological violence, such as separation and isolation. Intentionally separating and isolating people "contradicts the essential human condition of plurality" (p. 202). Tyranny occurs when we are prevented from acting and speaking directly to one another.

In my experience of action research, ProPay's structure neither encouraged a sustained dialogue among teachers about our strategies and implementations, nor made room for conversation among the teachers and evaluators of the action research project to truly understand ProPay's goals. The institution delivered this common training in using action research solely as individual practice and implementation without community support. Numerous teachers participated in the workshop, but we never shared our questions, projects, or results. Perhaps unintentionally, we were isolated from each other and from the ProPay program's underlying goals. Isolation denies power its potential. Isolation tends to breed what Arendt calls *behavior*. Behavior stems from rules, it's "the passive adaptation of citizens in a society whose affairs are increasingly administered according to the standard of technocratic efficiency" (Dunne, 1993, p. 89), and environments that demand behavior compel people to do what is "merely required" (Elliott, 2007, p. 209) rather than what is needed.

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Perhaps there were several reasons the institution used my action research report to deny my pay increase. Maybe it expected *behavior* from me. Its direct comment about not enough pre/post data suggests my need to conform to most educational institutions' conceptions of research findings as only quantifiable data. Perhaps I did not fully describe qualitatively what was happening in my classroom, how I had included my students in this project or how I learned to respond to the students who challenged me verbally. Perhaps my highly reflective, but data-based report was not what they had expected. As a teacher I had created an atmosphere that allowed me to work with individual students and focus more on their academic work rather than on their behavior.

I would also argue that even though I was isolated from other teachers during this project within my classroom, power was springing up. Including my students in my research to improve the quality of our classroom took "the temporary agreement of many wills and intentions" (Arendt, 1958, p. 201), which is how Arendt described power. My students, through my speech and actions, were fully aware of what I was trying to do. This intent to improve our classroom environment through my research was my *promising* to my students. I made no claims to them or myself about what would come of my actions, and in this sense, I was holding true to Arendt's concept of action. In action research, we start "new unprecedented processes whose outcomes

remain uncertain and unpredictable" (Arendt, 1958, p. 231). The ProPay program desired a tangible outcome. I believed I fulfilled their expectations in my report, but it still wasn't the "right" kind of report. Initially, I was unhappy with its understandings and evaluation of my project, but I moved on because the evidence of the results I experienced every day in my classroom were enough for me.

Conclusion

Elliott (1991) writes that action research "was from the beginning more concerned with the quality of educational processes than with the specification of outcome measured" (p. 164). There is knowledge in action research that resides in the process of doing action research. When teachers see that ends are not separate from means, when knowledge in the process and outcome is valued, action research allows new ways of beginning and becoming in the classrooms. When the focus of action research shifts solely onto the end, the outcome, it moves teachers from being allowed to know and understand their actions in relation to others and their classrooms to production of an acceptable product and outcome. Setting defined ends or preconceived expectations for action research promotes Arendt's ideas of behavior rather than allowing for initiative or natality.

Increasing K-12 student achievement is a legitimate focus for action research, and using hard data and quantitative methods has its place, but the deep roots of action research do not spring from positivist research traditions (Corey, 1953; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992; Lewin, 1946; Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). Expecting practitioners who engage in action research to deliver only a quantifiable product is a disservice to the full capacity of action research. For action research to be truly transformative, to improve action, and to generate knowledge (Somekh & Zeichner, 2009), an individual must be able to engage with problems of practice in a non-coercive context. If, as I and others (Beaulieu, 2013) contend, action research is about improving the quality of human life and relationships, we must realize that, as Arendt (1958) suggests, we are not "endlessly reproducible repetitions of the same model" with reliable and predictable behaviors (p. 9). Action research in K-12 classrooms should offer opportunities for teachers to begin to become better teachers through the *process* of action research without predetermined outcomes.

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