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Practitioner Research at a Crossroad:

Reconsidering Action Research Courses in Schools of Education

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The popularity of practitioner research is at its height; its contributions to teacher's professional development have become widely recognized and it is gaining a prominent role in many teacher education programs (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Price & Valli, 2005; Zeichner, 2009). However, while the fundamentals of practitioner research have not changed in the last two decades, the educational context in which action research is conducted has drastically changed with the current strong emphasis on testing as a means for accountability.

With the reincarnation of standardized testing driven by *No Child Left Behind* and the more recent *Race to the Top* legislations, teachers are seen as conduits of outside experts. Although the teachers are held accountable for their students' educational "improvement" and "significant gains" on standardized tests, their role as co-constructors of knowledge has been dismissed and their control over their practice, curriculum, and assessment has been minimized (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Ravitch, 2009). Practitioner research is pushed to the background and it is assumed that "none of the conditions which support and sustain investigation – time, facilities, preparation, ethos, or reward structure – exist in public schools" (McDaniel, 1988-1989, p. 5). Moreover, many school practitioners feel that their administrators and school board members do not consider action research as relevant to current priorities of school reform.

Goodlad et al. (2004), contrasted the concepts of "reform" and "renewal." Reform is imposed by a remote authoritarian power without recognition of special local situations and needs and with the premise that teachers are technicians who are ready to follow experts' guide. As a result, the teachers abdicate their professional responsibilities because they realize that their voice is silenced in the reform discourse and their ability to make decisions is not trusted. Teachers retreat into the safety of their own immediate interests and their previous dreams of bringing about change in students' current and future lives are replaced with a sense of resignation and indifference (Pinar, 2004).

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Whereas reform is imposed from above, renewal is rooted in teachers' agency, thereby reducing the teacher's sense of paralysis and resignation. The key dimension of renewal is inviting teachers to participate in the educational discourse, take a role in setting the agenda for, and work toward change (Zeichner, 2003, 2009). Greene (1995) argued that teachers need "a heightened sense of agency" (p. 48) to assume an active role in the renewal efforts. Conducting action research becomes "a reaction against a view of practitioners as technicians who merely carry out what others, outside of the sphere of practice, want them to do" (Zeichner, 1993, p. 204) and thus provides educators with a powerful strategy for being active partners in leading school improvement (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Hopkins, 2008).

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Nevertheless, when teachers are constantly being the main target for blame for low test scores, reclaiming their professionalism requires that the public recognize that their pedagogical decisions, instruction, and judgment are research based. To regain the public trust in the research studies they conduct, teachers need to provide strong evidence to the claims they make (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011). This will also necessitate reconsidering what is taught in research classes in schools of education.

We argue that one implication is that action research courses and textbooks used in teacher education programs need to move beyond the traditional classification of research as either qualitative or quantitative. Viewing research from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives helps teachers understand the choices available and what meaning and implications each particular choice entails. This also means that assessment should have an essential role in the process of action research and should be an integral part of research courses and textbooks. Assessment data enable practitioner researchers to explore and demonstrate the effectiveness of the changes they make, the actions they take, and their impact on students' progress. Teachers face complex educational issues daily and each particular situation the educator faces requires creative and multiple ways of investigation. Addressing these issues requires a full toolkit with a wide array of different methods that allow teachers to make thoughtful and effective choices as they plan their students learning and modify and improve instructions as needed. It also enables them to provide effective and trustworthy feedback to their students and parents.

While there are many published textbooks on the topics teacher action research (e.g., Altrichter, Feldman, Posch, & Somekh, 2008; Holly, Arhar & Kasten, 2009; McNiff & Whitehead 2006; Mertler, 2012; Mills, 2010; Noffke & Somekh, 2009; Phillips & Carr, 2010; Robinson & Lai, 2006; Stringer, 2008), many of them fail to meet the needs of future practitioner researchers. Few of the books take advantage of both traditions of action research (qualitative and quantitative) to enforce rigor research-based professionalism. Similarly, very few textbooks dedicated to action research make assessment an integral part of educational action research. The main problems with the books currently in the market are summarized below:

1. The majority of the textbooks on teacher action research equates teacher research with qualitative research and they do not address quantitative approaches at all (e.g.,

Anderson, Herr & Nihlen, 2007; Hinchey, 2008; Holly, Arhar & Kasten, 2009; McNiff & Whitehead, 2011).

2. The few books that include both qualitative and quantitative approaches still strongly emphasize one or the other approach rather than provide a balanced coverage of both perspectives. For example, in a book by Stringer (2008), quantitative approaches are covered in 8 pages. Hendricks (2012) devoted 14 pages (pp. 129-142) to quantitative research and tests are only briefly mentioned in his book. Mills (2010) provides a short description of several quantitative data collection techniques but the analysis process is mostly devoted to qualitative data analysis and interpretation. Phillips and Carr's book (2010) has two-and-a-half pages about quantitative data (pp. 25-27). Although Sagor (2010) does address quasi-experimental and descriptive approaches, as well as independent and dependent variables; statistical data analysis approaches, such as correlation or *t* test are not included in the book. One of the exceptions is the book by Mertler (2012) that addresses quantitative approaches more comprehensively. However, his book contains only few paragraphs on the topic of assessment and testing in the school (pp. 141-143).
3. Books that are inclusive and balanced often are not directly geared towards the specific needs of the school practitioner. In such books, action research is usually presented as one approach among many. (e.g, Creswell, 2011; Denscombe, 2010; Mertler & Charles, 2011).
4. Mixed-methods books for students in education address both qualitative and quantitative research approaches, but they include only a brief discussion about action research (e.g., Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Other mixed-methods research books do not address education specifically, nor do they mention action research. For example, a well-respected mixed-methods book by Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) lists the audience for the book as "graduate students who have some experience with both qualitative and quantitative research" (p. xx). The terms *action research* or *practitioner research* are not listed in the book's index. Similarly, the seventh edition of *Research Methods in Education* by Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2011) is too long (around 600 pages) and is not an appropriate text for educators who are interested in studying their own practice.

After examining what is offered in the current practitioner action research textbooks, we propose a new approach to action research courses and textbooks that deemphasizes the traditional dichotomies of qualitative and quantitative approaches and move beyond the theoretical "either/or" choices. The decision about which methods to use – qualitative, quantitative, or mixed – should be made by practitioners based on the nature of their research questions, the focus of their studies, their particular settings, and their interests and dispositions. The complex educational issues that teachers face require a full toolkit with a wide array of different methods that allow teachers to make thoughtful choices.

Additionally, to reinforce teacher autonomy and decision making, knowledge about creating and effectively using assessment tools is essential. Assessment information can be a valuable data source as educators explore the success of their practice, including examining their teaching strategies, exploring a new curriculum unit, or evaluating a school-wide program. Action research courses should incorporate discussions about designing and evaluating multiple assessment tools. This will allow students to gain insight into the contributions of each method of

assessment for understanding their students' achievement and obtain a more holistic insight into each student's learning and growth.

It is the responsibility of schools of education to support the empowerment of their current and future teachers by assuring research-based professionalism. To ensure that practitioner research remains a viable part in the teaching practice and presents an alternative to teacher deskilling it is essential that schools of education evaluate the way action research is taught. Instructors of research courses and writers of research textbooks should recognize and respond to current educational environment impact on teacher research. To achieve these goals, research courses should reinforce the empowerment of the teaching profession by assuring research-based professionalism. This means that through rigorous research and assessment skills practitioner researchers gain personal and professional accountability towards parents and community members. Viewing research from quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods perspectives helps preservice and inservice teachers understand the choices available and what meaning and implications each particular choice entails. Additionally, knowledge about creating and effectively using multiple assessments should be included in action research courses to enable educators to improve their practice through action research.

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