

The Challenge of Action Research  
Book Review of the UNESCO-Book *Action Research  
to Improve Youth and Adult Literacy – Empowering  
Learners in a Multilingual World*

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Action research is part of the methodology of the social sciences since 1946, when late great Kurt Lewin coined the term (Lewin, 1946). For many educationalists, action research regards a challenging methodology. The methodology incorporates the needs and aspirations of discriminated groups in society through their direct participation in setting the research aims, in carrying out research and in drawing conclusions on how their needs and aspirations are to

be served. It is a progressive methodology that reinforces endeavours of educationalists to reform and improve educational arrangements and performance for groups at high risk of low performance in education. It is based upon dialogue in learning communities, as known from Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed and as applied by Ramon Flecha and his consortium in their INCLUD-ED project (Freire, 1972; Flecha, 2015).

The UNESCO-book offers a comprehensive outlook on action research for the purpose of literacy campaigns and adult education. It includes twelve case studies in relation to such campaigns in multilingual Africa, Asia and Oceania. Reading and writing capacities of the local population is to be improved under complex multilingual conditions of a wide spectre of local and native languages. Besides, access to education is all but guaranteed for many people, particularly in far away villages, and appropriate educational arrangements are often not available.

For professionals and volunteers, who are committed to the aims of UNESCO in the field of lifelong learning, action research is often the best choice they can make. The UNESCO-institute that published the book on action research is highly committed to the mission of UNESCO in the field of literacy campaigns in the countries concerned.

These case studies regard, among others:

- 1) Literacy campaigns and the promotion of bilingual and multilingual education,
- 2) The development of literacy curricula and the production of educational materials that respond appropriately to the needs of local communities,
- 3) The empowerment of illiterate women,
- 4) Training the trainers.

In the case districts, traditional policy makers and teachers had set out curricula for learning French or English and, maybe, the most widely used regional language, written in Latin script. As far as the UNESCO-institute has ever followed this dead-end street, it was far before the cases of the book, i.e. far before the mid-nineties of the previous century. Basic knowledge was and is that it needs full understanding of the community where a literacy campaign is to be set out. Full understanding regards the aspirations, needs and development perspectives of the communities, e.g. in agriculture and other fields of future prosperity, as well as gender and family relations. These factors make out the special and cultural context of the languages they use and therefore the context of campaigns to improve the reading and writing of the languages that are relevant to them. Gender and the emancipation of women are relevant in relation to local and regional development perspectives and in family relations.

Action research as applied for the cases of the book show how the relevant local knowledge and practice is fed in into the literacy campaigns in a bottom-up way or in a mixed top-down and bottom-up process.

The advantages can be summarised as follows:

- 1) Such action research is certainly a feasible, productive, cost-effective and timely method for the full understanding of a community that is not well known to researchers from urban and academic communities.
- 2) Such action research offers insights that are comparable to those of ethnographic research.
- 3) Such action research is grounded on the direct involvement of all stakeholders and new stakeholders from the community. It therefore reinforces the awareness among these members of the community as needed for an effective literacy campaign.

The cases that are discussed in the book offer most interesting examples of such action research. It is certainly to be continued in regions where there is an obvious and strong relation between community development, the emancipation of women, grass-root multilingualism, adult education and literacy campaign, as in Africa, Asia, Oceania and other regions that were covered by the book. As other fruitful fields one may think of literacy courses and campaigns targeted at illiterate and lowly literate immigrants or those targeted at (functional) illiterates among the native population. The latter regards at least ten to fifteen per cent of the native population in all countries. Further interesting cases that were presented in the INCLUD-ED book referred to above and in my book on pupils at high risk in mainstream education regard e.g. good Roma education in Spain, Hungary, Slovenia and Slovakia, high performance education for immigrant minority children in The Netherlands, Sweden and Germany, effective rebound arrangements for most challenging pupils in France, and targeted measures to reduce discrimination, bullying and harassment in Italy and the UK (Muskens, 2015).

So, let's keep to the challenge of action research in educational reform and performance.

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