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ACTION RESEARCH AND IMPACT STUDIES: POSSIBILITIES AND DILEMMAS

John Retallick

Introduction

In a recent book titled “Reflective Practice in Educational Research”, Evans (2002) from the University of Warwick distinguishes between routine, methodology driven researchers and what she refers to as the ‘analytical researcher’. This is analogous to the difference between the routine, technique-driven teacher and the reflective teacher or the restricted professional and the extended professional. She says:

In relation to educational research this is achieved by a cycle whereby researchers analyse what they do, evaluate their output, seek a better way of doing things where they feel one is needed, and then apply to their research practice as much of that better way of doing things as circumstances permit (p. 19).

One of her major arguments is that educational research often lacks ‘conceptual clarity’ about what is being researched and it is sometimes only through reflection that a researcher can begin to really clarify the key ideas and terms of the research.

I suspect that some impact research suffers from this problem because we are not too sure what it is that we are looking for when we begin the research. This was largely the case in the study I want to refer to in this paper where we had only a vague idea that we wanted to research the impact of a course but what was meant by ‘impact’ was not at all clear. So we looked upon it as an exploratory study and now, after completion of the study, I take this opportunity to reflect upon the results.

The Research Study

The study I wish to reflect upon here is titled “The Impact of a Professional Development Program: A Study from Pakistan” (Retallick and Mithani, in press). The research was carried out in the latter half of 2002 in two schools in Karachi and focused on the impact of one particular course, the Advanced Diploma in School Management (ADISM). The

course was designed for aspiring and practicing head teachers to introduce notions of improved educational leadership and management. It was a field-based, modular program that aimed to encourage participants to:

- Reflect critically on school management practices and explore possibilities to enhance the vision of their management practices as pedagogical leaders;
- Understand the organizational dynamics of schools as learning organizations;
- Develop action research and inquiry skills to undertake small scale research projects;
- Develop on-the-job professional development programmes for staff;
- Collaborate with other schools in the wider community; and,
- Develop skills for managing educational change for school improvement (Memon, 1998, p. 26).

A particular concern of AKU-IED in recent times has been researching and evaluating the impact of the programs and this is of increasing concern both here and in other places. For instance, Flecknoe (2002) points out that in England and Wales, Teacher Training Agency funded professional development for teachers must be evaluated for its impact on pupils in schools.

A Framework for Studying Impact

The impact of educational programs may be thought of as a subset of the wider field known as knowledge use or utilisation (Rogers, 1995). Knowledge utilisation encompasses; information dissemination and utilisation, innovation diffusion, interpersonal and mass communication, organisational change and improvement, and, policy and program development and implementation. Whilst distinctions may be made between diffusion and dissemination (Rogers, 1995, p. 7) they both refer to the planned or spontaneous spread of new ideas with a focus on the importance of communication:

Diffusion is the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among members of a social system. It is a special type of communication, in that the messages are new ideas (p. 5).

For the purpose of analysing impact, the term ‘consequences of innovations’ is useful and refers to “changes that occur to an individual or to a social system as a result of the adoption or rejection of an innovation” (Rogers, 1995, p. 405). The notion of consequences of innovations highlights the potential of impact to be unintended as well as intended. Of course change agents intend to bring about desirable consequences through adoption

of innovations, but there are many examples of unintended consequences or complete failure to adopt an innovation (see Rogers, 1995). The latter has particularly been the case with a great deal of educational innovations over the years.

Rogers (1995) points out that the consequences of innovations have been understudied in the past (as is the case with impact studies in education) and he calls for research that illuminates and explains consequences, not merely assuming that they will be positive. He further points out that the study of consequences requires extended observation over time or in-depth case studies rather than one-shot survey research.

In investigating the impact of AKU-IED programs it is important to consider the working knowledge of teachers and school administrators in Pakistani schools. The knowledge that they bring to their daily work is important because it underpins their practice and revealing that knowledge will help us to understand the basis of the practice. Conceptually, working knowledge can be thought of as having three components. The first is knowledge drawn from educational programs or educational enquiry i.e. research-based knowledge. The second is experiential or craft knowledge; that type of knowledge drawn from practical experience which is regarded as good practice in the profession. The third is local knowledge, that is, knowledge that is based on commonsense understandings of the local context. What is not sometimes understood is that research-based knowledge, which is usually the basis of educational programs, is filtered through the other forms of knowledge in the process of being applied. This is an important issue for impact studies and it means that researchers need to be mindful of the fact that what they see in operation in a classroom for example, is an amalgam of all three forms of working knowledge rather than pure research-based knowledge in practice.

Impact Evaluation

Impact may also be considered from the perspective of evaluation. Owen and Rogers (1999) take the view that “Impact evaluation is predicated on the not-unreasonable view that citizens at large should know whether programs...are making a difference” (p. 263). They argue that the public has a right to know that money spent in the public arena is producing effective social and educational interventions and that programmes, where possible, are meeting their intended goals and not leading to negative side effects. They suggest that impact evaluation has a strong summative emphasis in that it provides findings from which a judgment of the worth of the program can be made. Ideally then, impact evaluations are undertaken on programs that are in a mature or settled stage and have had sufficient time to have an effect.

They further suggest that impact evaluation is concerned with:

- determining the range and extent of outcomes of a program;
- determining whether the program has been implemented as planned and how implementation has affected outcomes;
- providing evidence to funders, senior managers and politicians about the extent to which resources allocated to a program have been spent wisely; and,
- informing decisions about replication or extension of a program.

Guskey (2000) argues that there are five levels of professional development evaluation that should be investigated in relation to impact:

1. Participants' reactions (i.e. Were they satisfied with the program?);
2. Participants' learning (i.e. What did they learn?);
3. Organisation support and change (i.e. Are the teachers being supported in their change efforts?);
4. Participants' use of new knowledge and skills (i.e. Is there evidence of change in classroom or school practice?); and,
5. Student learning outcomes (i.e. What is the benefit for students in terms of improved learning?).

Most evaluation of professional development programs is at level 1. only, i.e. did the participants enjoy or feel satisfied with the program? Deeper impact evaluation is more costly and time-consuming though potentially more illuminating. The most difficult and problematic, but perhaps the most important, is the final level i.e. impact on student learning and achievement.

A Study of the Impact of ADISM

The research produced two case studies, one of which will be reported briefly here. The main research question was: How and to what extent do selected ADISM strategies impact on mid-level managers and their school reform efforts? Action research methodology was chosen as the project is concerned with school reform and that implies change in a school. As Calhoun (2002) points out action research “can generate data to measure the effects of various programs and methods on student and staff learning” (p. 18). Action research is a cyclic process that is concerned with researching interventions whereby both action (that is, change) and research (that is, understanding) are simultaneously achieved. It is a negotiated approach to research where researchers and participants are partners in the process.

Each school was visited on four occasions over a 3-month period and this was followed by a group meeting of researchers and participants at AKU-IED. On each visit an interview was conducted and these were tape-recorded and transcribed. In the first interview a specific school reform strategy initiated by the participant and emanating from the ADISM program was selected as the intervention to be studied. In School A the strategy was reflective journal writing and in School B it was mentoring. I have chosen one excerpt from the case study of School A to illustrate the action research process in action.

The second school visit began with Ms X describing how she learnt about reflective practice during the ADISM course: “I learnt through our instructors as they were giving us lectures and explaining things. Secondly, doing my assignment on reflective practice and during that I went through many books on reflective practice and that really helped me with what is meant by reflection as such. I don't know still that I am very clear on reflection, but whatever I learnt it was through these sources. It was mainly through my assignment and of course writing my reflections during ADISM also.”

Ms X mentioned that there were some questions that helped her to reflect: “What had happened to me? Why had it happened? What action I took and why I took that action? These are some of the questions that at times clicked me to think about what was going on and I was not on a track before that. Still I'm not sure that I'm going right or wrong but I feel I am going slightly in a correct direction for reflection. This practice really helped me and it is helping me in different ways also. While I am reflecting on something it gives me a chance to think about whatever I have done and the response I receive from my colleagues or my head or whatever. It is helping me to think on those lines.”

When asked if ADISM had changed her practice in the area of reflection Ms X responded: “I can quote you an example. If I ask teachers to do something, such as a strategy we need to follow in class, I ask them to go through this strategy then give me your reflection or feedback about how that thing went in your class and how your students responded. That helps me to come to an assessment about this is something where we are going wrong and if we twist it or turn it like this we might go in a correct direction. I'm not sure if this is reflection or not but these are some of the things which we felt.”

We then read some of the teachers' reflective journals and discussion followed about the nature of the writing. It was found to be mostly a general overview of the whole week though some pieces concentrated on a particular episode which enabled the writing to be more specific and disclosed feelings about the situation. Two teachers were then invited to join the discussion. One teacher said: “Writing reflections helps us to see

ourselves in a better way, to observe something carefully and then reflect on it ... sometimes if we are facing some problems and we need some help from our head and things like that we can share with our heads. It's a better way that our heads could read this and see what problems we are having”.

The other teacher commented: “This reflective practice is very beneficial for me. Whenever I have something in my class I share it, it's a very good thing I think because sometimes we don't have time to come over here (to the VPs office) so just writing is good and we get a very prompt response”.

We then suggested a strategy that the teachers might like to try. This was our first action step in action research. The idea was for teachers to focus on a critical incident during the week rather than try to write about everything that happens. There were four questions teachers could use to probe the incident:

- *What happened?*
- *Why did it happen?*
- *What does it mean?*
- *What are the implications for my practice? (Hole & McEntee, 1999).*

We felt that following this protocol might help teachers to sharpen their skills of writing. We also provided an article that explained and gave examples of how teachers might address the four questions.

On the third school visit we began with discussion of the article on reflection. Ms X commented: “Yes, they have really worked on it ... though there was confusion over question 3 ‘What does it mean?’ and they were asking me to explain it but I was not sure about it”. Ms X was concerned about the focus on one incident: “I was thinking if I ask them just to write on one or two issues, how about their teaching and the problems they are facing in all different subjects. We have one teacher taking all the subjects and how will I know about what issues they are facing in their classrooms ... and if I am asking them to write about everything in such depth then it will be too much for them to write and for me also to read”. This was followed by a discussion of the purpose of reflective writing and the focus on meaning: “... by doing this we are going in depth and really getting teachers to think about their practice”.

Action Research and Impact Studies: Possibilities and Dilemmas

This excerpt from one of the case studies provides us with something we can reflect upon. It illustrates two things in particular. First, the research revealed a good understanding of what Ms X learnt about reflective practice during ADISM and how she had introduced the idea into her school. Second, the intervention made by the researchers to improve the reflective writing shows how an action taken in action research can help to shape and change a practice in a school. This combination of understanding and change is what constitutes action research.

The major point in question in this analysis is the appropriateness of action research method to do an impact study. In my view there are both possibilities and dilemmas inherent in this. Given that action research and impact are conceptually both about change and improvement there would seem to be considerable possibilities. Since action research is an ongoing process, not a one-off visit to a school, it would seem that it would be possible to observe the way that a program impact works its way through a school over a period of time. This was the case with the reflective journals where we saw the development of that practice over a couple of months.

However, action research is an interventionist method. It seeks both understanding and change. Therefore, the dilemma arises over the extent to which the understanding of impact is an artifact of the method itself. For instance if the researchers had not been in the school over those two months, would those developments with the reflective journals have actually occurred. Probably not, it is more likely that some other development would have occurred since such a practice is not static; it evolves and develops over time. But of course we know that any research process is likely to have an effect in the situation being studied, so for me it remains a dilemma.