

*Full Length Research Paper*

## **Cul-de-sac from diehard traditions: The demise of action research in teacher education**

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Reflective practice has become the global prime educational trend expected of education practitioners but some teacher educators tend to stifle its development. It is strongly believed in critical pedagogy, the theoretical framework of action research theorists that reflective practice is inherent in an introspective disposition and is developed through participatory action research. Reflective practice is the contradistinction of routine practice and is focused on the interrogation and subsequent improvement of one's own practices. A qualitative research was carried out with nine lecturers at a teacher education college about their experiences in supervising students who embark on participatory action research. The interview participants were selected using the snowball sampling technique. The data generated were analyzed by employing the Johnson-Christenson method. The results point to that the teacher educators categorically denounce participatory action research and are not conversant with the techniques to develop reflective practice through action research. They tend to stifle reflective practice by being prescriptive on 'transactions' of research practice and work practice based on their own experiences which Dewey refers to as 'miseducative' experiences. It is recommended that the teacher educators should be conscientized about how action research has the potential to promote the development of reflective practice.

**Key words:** Reflective practice; participatory action research, critical pedagogy, 'miseducative' experiences.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The current global thrust in developing the requisite attitudes, knowledge and skills in educational practitioners is through nurturing an introspective disposition in them. Introspection involves the interrogation of own practices with the aim of improving on own practice. Embedded in introspection is reflective practice which is believed to contribute immensely to solving one's workplace problems. In teacher education,

reflective practice is explicitly dealt with when students embark on action research. Thus it is the onus of the teacher educators to facilitate the embarking on action research by the students. Some teacher educators in Zimbabwe are not comfortable with action research and tend to stifle students' interest in embarking on such a research. The teacher educators did not do action research during their studies but traditional research.

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Traditional research is hinged on traditional education which Dewey (1938) conceptualizes as being focused on bodies of information and skills that are passed from one generation to another. Thus the teacher educators who are for traditional research have research techniques that are static. The teacher educators are expected to be progressive and consider the employment of the learners' experiences within the fluid learning environment of the learners. Action research incorporates experiential learning and is inclined to what Dewey (1938) termed progressive education. Notwithstanding the value of action research in contemporary education, some teacher educators inclined to traditional research tend to stifle the learners' interests in action research.

## Background

Action research was introduced in Zimbabwean teacher education curriculum in 2009 by the University of Zimbabwe which is the accreditation institution of the diplomas in education. Before then, the teacher education students were expected to embark on only one type of research project which is traditional research. The over-arching goal of involving teacher education students in academic research is to prepare them to become creators of knowledge about the education phenomenon. The noble purpose of embarking on research is slowly dissipating in teacher education students since some students are made to develop an attitude of embarking on researches solely for the fulfillment of course requirements. They are made to take research as an end in itself. The teacher educators who are traditionalistic would want the student teachers to have experiences similar to the ones that they had even though the experiences would have become obsolete. Such experiences are what Dewey (1938) described as the miseducative experiences. Thus there are research projects that were done some time ago which are circulating viciously for a very deplorable purpose. They are being reproduced verbatim for the fulfillment of a course requirement of some teacher education students. The circulating research projects that are copied word for word are metaphorically referred to as "zvitunha" which means corpses. The projects are literally "dead" for nothing substantial is got from them. It seems these "academics" in the making are conscious of how retrogressive their practices are.

The students who embark on action research find themselves in some sort of a quandary. Some of the lectures are opposed to action research. These lecturers are what Ganzel (1998) refer to as the resistant educators. Dewey (1938) describes them as traditional educators who consider phenomenon as being static. The traditionalistic lecturers have adultistic tendencies that are characterized by behaviours and attitudes based on the assumption that educators are better than learners and are entitled to act upon the learners without their

agreement (Checkoway, 2010; Bell, 1995). Thus the educators who are adultistic wield power over the learners and they tell the learners what to do and not do (Fletcher, 2006). There is disempowerment and repression of the learners (Bell, 1995). The traditionalistic educators do not readily accept innovations since they have *ephebiphobia*, fear of the youths. They are afraid to be put in a zone of incompetence (Tate and Copas, 2003).

## Purpose of the research

The purpose of the study was to explain the attitudes and practices of the lecturers that tend to stifle the students' embarking on action research. Embarking on action research in teacher education is being promoted in many education institutions the world-over. In the United States of America, action research was formally introduced in the 1950s and is becoming a global contemporary trend for practitioner development (Ferrance, 2000). In Zimbabwe, the action research situation is worrisome in that its inception is amid socio-cultural, academic and political misconceptions. The unpacking of the misconceptions could help in designing intervention programmes for educators to facilitate students' embarking on action research. Thus action research could part of the panacea to making efficacious socio-economic reforms which require introspective and reflective practitioners. Such a caliber of practitioners can at best be developed from the focus on researches such as action research.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research problem

There is a strong suspicion that the educators' attitudes significantly contribute to students' choice of action research as the research option. Thus implicitly, educators either promote or stifle reflective practice in the student since reflective practice is inherent in action research. In Zimbabwe there is no explicit policy on reflective practice and action research formalizes reflective practice. Evaluation of the extent of reflective practice in teacher education is implied in the quality of the students' action research projects. In the wake of the situation in Zimbabwe, the research problem focused on how teacher educators in Zimbabwe stifle the development of reflective practice in the student teachers.

### Miseducative experience

Miseducative experience is the set of conditions or procedures that impede continuing professional development and closes the student teacher off from continuous learning (Woodson, 1990). A miseducative experience stymies the growth of meaningful experiences. Some experiences are miseducative if they are disoriented from the learners' 'natural' experiences and cannot be readily transferred to the real life experiences of the learner (Dewey, 1938). Thus the educator can create a miseducative experience if the learners are denied the opportunity to be involved

in meta-cognition which enables them to anchor new knowledge onto prior experiences. In the diagnosis of the enclaves of a miseducative experience in education, Dewey came up with two modes of education which are the traditional and progressive education. Even though miseducative experiences can be detected in both modes, by and large they are inherent in traditional education since it does not incorporate enough experiential learning. Traditional education is rather insulated from the purposeful interactions with the world that give meaning to the world. The teacher in traditional education is concerned mainly with the impartation of 'refined' knowledge which in some cases is alien to the life experiences of the learners. The knowledge and skills that are considered requisite are handed down from the past when the teacher employs monological techniques. The learners are expected to be malleable, docile and receptive. Dewey contends that students must be made to feel a sense of purpose in their learning to avoid mental slavery which is characterized by pursuance of the purposes of the teacher.

### Reflective practice

There are some traditions in teacher education that the traditionalists cherish since there is a culture that defines the acceptable ways in which goals and problems should be approached. One such tradition is the traditional research. In maintaining some traditions there are some routines that should continue without interruption and reality is perceived as unproblematic (Ferrance, 2000). Dewey (1933) made a distinction between reflective action and routine action. Routine action is that action which is guided by tradition, authority and the official definitions within an educational setting (Boud et al., 1996). In routine action, one considers means as problematic but takes for granted the ends toward which they are directed (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988; Schon, 1987). On the other hand reflective action entails active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it and the further consequences to which it leads (Dewey, 1933:09). Reflective practice can be promoted when student teachers are afforded opportunities that allow students to think about their learning, their own lives, and the world around them. The learners become responsible for their own learning (Strong et al., 2001).

### Action research

Action research is a quest for knowledge about how to improve on practice. The teacher researcher embarks on research to improve teaching skills, techniques and strategies. The value of action research is in the change that occurs in everyday classroom practice. Action research can be viewed as a tool for classroom practice reform (Ferrance, 2000).

Action research is a form of applied research which is done by practitioners to try to solve immediate problems in their working environments (Hoberg, 2001). An encompassing definition of action research is given by Kemmis and Mc Taggart (1988:05).

Action research is a form of collective self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social and educational practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out. Thus action research bridges the gap between practice and research. It is within the framework of critical theory where there is stress that real-life testing should not be separated from scientific theory. The student teacher is encouraged to become a teacher-researcher. Thus action research becomes one of the field-based experiences of the pre-service teachers that needs to be encouraged to avoid miseducative experiences. There are three types of action research that namely; participatory action research,

practical deliberative and technical action research (Schulze et al., 2002). The type of action research ideal for the student teacher on teaching practice in Zimbabwe is participatory action research.

### Participatory action research

Participatory action research has a critical intent that motivates action and interaction at all its stages and hence becomes particularly important in the development of theory (Masters, 1995). It does not begin with theory and end with practice but creates theory (McNiff, 2013; Hoberg, 2001).

Participatory action research deliberately recognizes that "individualization is not possible without socialization, and socialization is not possible without individualization" (Habermas, 1992b:26). Thus the students individually and collectively try to understand how they are formed and reformed as individuals, when they work together (or with lecturers) to improve processes of teaching and learning in the classroom. Thus through participatory action research the student teachers are enabled to examine their *knowledge* understandings, skills, and values) and interpretive categories (the ways in which they interpret themselves and their action in the education phenomenon. The student teachers get a handle on the ways in which their knowledge shapes their sense of identity and agency and to critically reflect on how their current knowledge frames and constrains their action. Participatory action research is important in the sense that student teachers can only do action research "on" themselves, either individually or collectively. It is *not* research done "on" others (Kemmis and Mc Taggart, 2000).

The student teachers who are engaged in action research examine the *social practices* that link them with others in educational interaction. It is a process in which student teachers explore their practices of communication, production, and social organization and try to explore how to improve their interactions by changing the acts that constitute them, that is, to reduce the extent to which participants experience these interactions (and their longer-term consequences) as irrational, unproductive (or inefficient), unjust, and/or unsatisfying (alienating). Participatory researchers aim to work together in reconstructing their social interactions by reconstructing the acts that constitute them (Ferrance, 2000).

One of the aims of participatory action research is help student teachers recover, and release themselves from, the constraints of irrational, unproductive, unjust, and unsatisfying *social structures* that limit their self-development and self-determination (Hendricks, 2006). It is a process in which people explore the ways in which their practices are shaped and constrained by wider social (cultural, economic, and political) structures and consider whether they can intervene to release themselves from these constraints or, if they cannot, how best to work within and around them to minimize the extent to which they contribute to irrationality, lack of productivity, injustice, and dissatisfactions (alienation) as people whose work and lives contribute to the structuring of a shared educational goal (Kemmis and Mc Taggart, 2000).

The other aim of participatory action research is to help people recover, and release themselves from, the constraints embedded in the traditions through which they interact-their language (discourses), their modes of work, and the social relationships of power (Ferrance, 2000). It is a process in which students deliberately set out to contest and reconstitute irrational, unproductive, unjust, and/or unsatisfying (alienating) ways of interpreting and describing their world, ways of working and ways of relating to others.

The third aim of participatory action research is to help student teachers investigate reality in order to change it and to change reality in order to investigate it (Hendricks, 2006). In particular, it is a deliberate process through which practitioners aim to transform their practices through a spiral of cycles of critical and self-critical

action and reflect

Participatory action research does not regard either theory or practice as preeminent in the relationship between theory and practice; rather, it aims to articulate and develop each in relation to the other through critical reasoning about both theory and practice and their consequences. It does not aim to develop forms of theory that can stand above and beyond practice, as if practice could be controlled and determined without regard to the particulars of the practical situations that confront practitioners in their ordinary lives and work. Nor does it aim to develop forms of practice that might be regarded as self-justifying, as if practice could be judged in the absence of theoretical frameworks that give them their value and significance and that provide substantive criteria for exploring the extent to which practices and their consequences turn out to be irrational, unjust, alienating, or unsatisfying for the people involved in and affected by them (King and Nel, 2002). Thus, participatory action research involves “reaching out” from the specifics of particular situations, as understood by the people within them, to explore the potential of different perspectives, theories, and discourses that might help to illuminate particular practices and practical settings as a basis for developing critical insights and ideas about how things might be transformed (Kemmis and Mc Taggart, 2000). Thus, participatory action research aims to transform *both* practitioners’ theories and practices *and* the theories and practices of others whose perspectives and practices may help to shape the conditions of life and work in particular local settings.

### Critical pedagogy

Critical pedagogy is the term that critical theorists use for critical theories of education (Higgs and Smith, 2002). The term pedagogy means the theory and practice of teaching (Higgs and Smith, 2002:38). The term “critical” in critical pedagogy is a valued educational goal. It urges teachers to help students become more skeptical towards commonly accepted truisms (Popkewitz and Fendler, 1999:217). Critical pedagogy refers to the theory and practice of education as understood by the critical theorists (Higgs and Smith, 2002:88; Wiesen, 2014; 21<sup>st</sup> Century Schools, 2010).

According to McLaren (1987) cited in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Schools (2010), critical pedagogy resonates with the sensibility of Hebrew symbol of “tikhun” which means to heal, repair and transform the world. In other words, the education systems provided in schools the world over is faulty in one way or the other. According to critical pedagogy, schools and teaching do not educate learners at all. In schools, learners learn to accept the power structures of their society (Degener, 2007; Higgs and Smith, 2000:89).

Critical pedagogy emphasizes on the critiquing of what happens in the schools. Thus it can be considered as a domain of education and research that studies the social, cultural, political, economic and cognitive dynamics of teaching and learning (Freire Project, 2010; 21<sup>st</sup> Century Schools, 2010). In the context of this study, critical pedagogy is considered handy critiquing the dominant, conservative, and traditional research.

### Empirical investigation

The qualitative research methodology was employed in the generation of data. The research paradigm that guided the study was social constructivism. A paradigm is a world view or a basic set of beliefs that guide action (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011; Guba, 1990: 17). The social constructivist paradigm is closely intertwined with interpretivism which develops subjective meanings from the respondents’ experiences (Creswell, 2007: 20). Thus the focus of the research was to seek an understanding of the world in which the respondents live. The research design for this study was phenomenology. A research design is a plan, recipe or blueprint

that describes the conditions and procedures for generating data (Schulze, 2002: 04; Mouton 2011:42).

The aim of phenomenology is to understand the lived experiences of the respondents. These lived experiences were expressed empirically (that is as free as possible from theoretical constraints), in the respondents’ own words (O’Leary, 2010:271; De Vos et al., 2011:295). Thus phenomenology attempts to penetrate illusions of situations of experiences in order to get to the reality underlying that illusion (Higgs and Smith, 2002:67). The researcher was interested in the essence of a situation or experience (that is what the situation is all about). In phenomenology, researchers generally use interviews (Hoberg, 2001:52). Nine lecturers who sampled purposively were interviewed and their responses were audio-taped. The lecturers had all their supervisees doing traditional research. In interviews there are generally two voices of interpretation of situations or experiences. The voices of interpretations are of the respondents and that of the researcher. The respondents’ interpretations of experiences in their own words are known as the *emic* interpretations. The method of Johnson and Christensen which is about the thematic approach was used for the analysis of the interview transcripts. The method is analytic on the *emic* (respondents’) interpretations of experiences and thus provides the basis for more accurate *etic* interpretations (that is the researchers’) interpretations (Johnson and Christensen, 2008:356; Slavin, 2007:356; Steyn et al., 2004:56; Hoberg, 2001:68).

## RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The research findings show that the ways in which the teacher educators stifle students’ interests in embarking on participatory action research can be considered in three types of miseducative conceptions and practices that are; academic, socio-cultural and political.

### Academic miseducative conceptions

When asked about her perceptions on participatory action research, one of the lecturers remarked, “*At times you are made to wonder whether students have the capacity to produce any knowledge, some theories are ever relevant to our situation*”. The lecturer showed some orientation in technical rationality which gives supportive or disputative reasons about an issue when making reference to some theories or age-old experiences (Schon, 1987). In other words she is not inclined to phenomenological thinking which encourages educators to put all theories aside. According to phenomenology the educator should consider reality as it is (Higgs and Higgs, 2000). Reality is contextual so the context of the student teacher is important. In fact the teacher educator was implying that the important knowledge about education was created long ago. The implication is that the student teacher cannot generate even procedural knowledge about his or her teaching of particular learners.

One of the lecturers who were interviewed remarked, “*I have been in teacher education for the past twenty years. What do you think this action research thing can do to teacher education?*” The remarks by the lecturer imply that he had established some immutable truths in teacher education. The lecturer is not an adherent of the

“principle of falsification” which contends that there are no truths that are absolute. The number of years in teacher education could be misleading. One is likely to be biased to think that the number of years is commensurate with the quality of teaching. If the lecturer has been doing the same things over and over again, then he has professionally speaking, one year experience. Experience should not be considered as what happens to the lecturer but what the lecturer does with what happens to him. If the lecturer had investigated his teaching experiences each and every year, he could have developed professionally to the extent that he would appreciate the role of participatory action research to professional growth.

One of the lecturers also declared, *“I wouldn’t like my supervisee to choose action research. It is a mere waste of time. The so-called cycles show that one is in confusion”*. The response by the lecturer shows that some lecturers are obstacles to the professional growth of the students. The lecturers should be seen to be promoting critical pedagogy to show that they are experienced.

The other lecturer opined, *“Action research is a cul-de-sac in academia. The student who does it cannot do research at university level. One would be lacking the basics of research.”* The lecturer is very much likely to propagate such academic injurious opinions to the students. This could be worse than what Dewey (1938) referred to as the miseducative experiences

One of the lecturers declared, *“The findings are useless since they are subjective and cannot be generalised.”* The assertion that action research findings cannot be generalised is common among critiques (De Vos et al., 2003). The objectivity that is claimed by the logical empiricists is simply an ideal. It is very hard to come by objectivity in any research. What is important in all research work is systematicity. A perfect example of the importance of systematicity is the research by Jean Piaget the psychologist. He systematically studied only three children and generated theory that is almost universally accepted. If the teacher-researcher systematically studies his/her practice with the pupils he/she may come up with theories that could be used in other similar situations.

The other lecturer pronounced, *“But what is boring about traditional research is that some students look for a ‘chitunha’.* *It’s very disheartening to mark a research project that you previously marked.”* The remarks by the lecturer imply that there are some students who do not produce original work in the research projects. There is a lot of cheating that goes on about research projects that are traditional. Participatory action research has the potential of minimizing cheating. The student teacher is compelled by the requirements of participatory action research to generate authentic data. The interviews can be audio-taped and the observations can be video-taped. The authentic data generated most likely lead to

producing original research projects. The student teacher thus learns by doing. Ferrance (2000) considers participatory action research as learning by doing. Through participatory action research, the students also learn how to learn. This phenomenon of learning how to learn is referred to by Brookfield (1985) as ‘mathetics’. One learns how to learn when one learns by doing.

### Political miseducative conceptions

One of the lectures remarked, *“Don’t forget that action inception of action research is donor funded. Some donors have ulterior motives. So the action research thing should be considered with some dose of skepticism.”* The lecturer was exposed to colonial education and is skeptical about the virtue of participatory action research.

Some teacher educators often have the trouble with the political dimensions and the basic notion that education can be hurtful to particular students (Groenke and Hatch, 2009). The student who would have been indoctrinated “well” would embrace the education ideologies as good since their support of ideologies makes them succeed in education. Thus the educators once exposed to colonial education think that the donor funded programmes in a politically closed state work to reproduce a “rational irrational education” (Groenke and Hatch, 2009). The lecturer was to some extent a victim of the halo effect and technical rationality. Not all programmes funded by some foreign organisations could be insidious.

### Socio-cultural miseducative conceptions

When asked about how they viewed action research, one of the lecturers postulated that they found it irrelevant to their situation. *“I find it confusing, irrelevant and boring. It’s out of the works of the so-called contemporary innovators who want to derail the veteran academics”* The lecturer is adultistic and traditionalistic and as such does not readily accept innovations since he has *ephebiphobia*, fear of the youths. He is afraid of being put in a zone of incompetence (Tate and Copas, 2003).

One of the lecturers posited, *“Action research throws me in the incompetence zone. How can I teach students when I am still learning”*. The remark implies that the lecturers need intensive coaching on the theory and practice of action research. Lecturers could be resisting action research due to lack of knowledge. According to Hoberg (2001: 124), “The best way to understand action research is to do it.” The lecturers are encouraged to embark on action research themselves in order to be able to advise the students on how to carry out action research.

The other lecturer remarked, *“Nothing new is going to come out of action research. You only re-invent the*

*wheel. I have seen it all in teacher education.*" The implication of the remark is that one should not labour with investigations since all important theories have been discovered. The implication is however fallacious. Theory is always generated from particular practice. This is what critical theorists refer to as praxis (Higgs and Smith, 2002). In fact all the theories there are have been generated from particular contexts and have then been generalised. That is why some theories have been found not perfectly applicable to some situations. There is then a dire need to investigate those finer nuances that do not fit perfectly in the generalized theories.

The lecturer's view is the antithesis of the view by Ferrance (2000) who says that research done by the students, in the setting with which they are familiar helps to confer relevance and trustworthiness to a study. Thus the study on which the student teacher embarks on is about the immediate problem in his/her working environment creates contextual knowledge.

## Conclusion

Action research in teacher education colleges has the potential to realize many goals at institutional, national and global levels. There are three types of action research and of these, participatory action research is ideal for student teacher in Zimbabwe. The overarching thrust of participatory action research is reflective practice that promotes introspection which subsequently promotes professional growth. The development of student teachers' interests in participatory action research in teacher education colleges is being stifled by some miseducative perceptions and some die hard traditions. The miseducative perceptions can be put in three categories that are; academic, political and socio-cultural. The lecturers are generally traditionalistic thus being conservative when it comes to the student teacher to make a choice of the type of research to embark on. The lecturers tend to be prescriptive and show adultistic tendencies. By and large some lecturers discourage their research-supervisees to embark on action research.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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