

Action Research conceptualised in seven cornerstones as conditions for transforming education

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Abstract: This article traces the philosophical and theoretical roots of Action Research to rescript its promise for site-based educational formation, reformation and transformation. The process of historicising Action Research through an extensive review of the extant literature, enabled us to establish seven cornerstones that captured the essence of the critical conditions: the practices and practice architectures, that give coherence and comprehensibility to Action Research as necessary for sustained and sustainable change in education. Framing these practices and practice architectures as cornerstones sets down important benefits for contemporary education requiring critical inquiry, rethought purposeful action and systematic responsive development. The cornerstones: contextuality, commitment, communication, collaboration, criticality, collegiality and community, were derived from viewing Action Research from its historical principle committed to democratic way of working. It is our position that the cornerstones account for, acknowledge and extend traditional perspectives and descriptions; and assist practitioners deepen understandings about the conditions necessary for opening up generative possibilities of Action Research in ways that do not neglect or lose sight of its core historical connections and democratic virtues.

Keywords: Action Research, community, democracy, inquiry, practice architectures, site ontological

Investigación-Acción conceptualizada en siete pilares como condiciones para transformar la educación

Resumen: Este artículo sigue las raíces filosóficas y tóricas de la Investigación Acción para reescribir su promesa de una formación, una reforma y una transformación educativas situadas. El proceso de construir la historicidad de la Investigación Acción a través de una revisión extensiva de la investigación existente nos permitió establecer siete claves que capturaron la esencia de las condiciones críticas: las prácticas y arquitecturas de la práctica, que dan coherencia y hacen comprensible la Investigación Acción son necesarias para el cambio continuo y sostenible en la educación. Enmarcar estas prácticas y arquitecturas de la práctica como claves trae importantes beneficios para la educación contemporánea que requiere investigación crítica, acción repensada y con sentido, y un desarrollo sistemático sensible. Las claves: contextualidad, compromiso, comunicación, colaboración, criticidad, colegialidad y comunidad, se derivaron desde la observación de la Investigación Acción desde su principio histórico comprometido con formas democráticas de trabajo. Nuestra posición es que las claves explican, reconocen y extienden perspectivas y descripciones clásicas; y ayudan a quienes realizan la práctica a profundizar su comprensión sobre las condiciones necesarias para abrir posibilidades generativas de Investigación Acción sin desatender o perder de vista sus conexiones históricas centrales y sus virtudes democráticas.

Palabras clave: Investigación Acción, comunidad, democracia, investigación, arquitecturas del a práctica, ontología situada

Introduction

Action Research has a long of history in the field of educational sciences. Its basis has emerged from philosopher's ideas and views on democratic values in society (see notably, Dewey, 1916;1997). For newer generations, education forms an important pathway for guiding, negotiating and fostering these values: values open to critical inquiry, rethought purposeful action, and systematic responsive development. Throughout this history we have witnessed how Action Research has arisen as essential for fostering a critical inquiry stance in education. This is a stance necessary for provoking teachers and leaders to reflect critically and act responsively, with the view to forming, reforming and transforming their educational practices. In recent times, education has been described as being about helping "prepare people to live well in a world worth living in" (Kemmis & Edwards-Groves, 2018, p.14). This view highlights a double purpose of education as addressing the reciprocity between individual and collective goals with formational and transformational aspirations for both. These goals are captured in this definition of education by Kemmis, et al. (2014b, p.26) who stated:

Education, properly speaking, is the process by which children, young people and adults are initiated into forms of understanding, modes of action, and ways of relating to one another and the world, that foster (respectively) individual and collective self-expression, individual and collective self-development and individual and collective self-determination, and that are, in these senses, oriented towards the good for each person and the good for humankind.

Finding the critical connections between Action Research and education has been at the forefront of thinking by Carr and Kemmis (1986), who suggested that education is about critical praxis, requiring a person to demonstrably "make a wise and prudent practical judgement about how to act in this situation" (p. 190). Here the practices of education, and so educational Action Research, must demonstrate an observable commitment to human well-being, the search for truth and the respect of all others (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). On this view, education is witnessed in the praxis and practices of people: this position has critical yet fundamental implications for understanding and practicing Action Research in contemporary times.

In recent years, in a climate where education is scrutinised intensely in terms of accountability, standards and performativity, educational Action Research has enjoyed a resurgence as an approach for transforming education practices. However, amidst this endeavour there has been a tendency in some jurisdictions to dismantle the foundations of Action Research by valorising hybridised practices where specific components or activities are packaged into bundles of segmented strategies, arrangements or methods¹ (Carr & Kemmis, 2005) or pushed as policy directives (Somekh & Zeichner, 2009) for implementing Action Research. Such tendencies exsanguinate the rich embodied heart of Action Research, reducing it to being considered as short-term time-bounded professional development

1 For instance, shorter term professional activities like dialogue circles, reading circles, inquiry learning, collegial learning and so on.

“projects” to be undertaken, or as just another activity to be checked off. This move has ultimately risks severing Action Research from its deeply historical foundations: foundations that established it as a way of approaching education and educational change (Edwards-Groves & Rönnerman, 2021).

Action Research has been recognised for its critical importance for student learning, teacher and leader practice development and school-based change. But our intent in this article is not to redescribe the fundamental purposes, processes or models of Action Research (or its derivatives), these are well reported and theorised by others (see especially, Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Kemmis et al., 2014b; Revans, 1982; Rönnerman, 2022; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009; Zeichner & Noffke, 2001). Nor is the purpose to report on specific Action Research projects undertaken by individual educators or systems². Rather our purpose is to give a theoretical contribution to the field of Action Research by retracing the genesis of Action Research in education to strive for deeply coherent understandings of the practices, conditions and influences of participating, and what this means for reinstating its core democratic values open to critical inquiry, rethought purposeful action, and systematic responsive development in education. We intend to present seven cornerstones, not separately of one another, but as conditions that facilitate democratic transformation towards the site. This to avoid the trap of falling into a technical view of Action Research. We believe in the global time of schooling, Action Research is an easy way out for policymakers to grab (c.f. Somekh & Zeichner, 2009) in the believe doing the right choice for the professionals. But Action Research is more than a one-size fits all. Action Research is about professionals getting involved in inquiries for a better place to learn for both students and teachers. It must be internal, turned to the site. For this to happen we argue the conditions, presented as seven cornerstones are important to be aware of, and furthermore how they all are shaping and shaped by its practice architectures (will be outlined further down).

We will begin the article by defining Action Research followed by a short presentation of the theory of practice architecture, a theory we use as a lens for analysing our arguments. The next section is a try of historicising Action Research, and give four principles that have been around Action Research for almost a hundred years. After that each of the seven cornerstones are presented. The article will be closed by a discussion of its contribution of viewing Action Research, not as a technical activity, but as professionals driving the transformation of education by being in education and open to their agency.

Defining Action Research

As a backdrop we turn to Carr and Kemmis’ (1986) early definition of Action Research arguing that it is a critical and participatory approach for practitioners seeking to improve

- a) aspects of [their] own practice,
- b) [their] understanding of [their] practice, and
- c) [their] understanding of the situation in which [their] practice takes place (p.164).

These goals form an important fundamental about the nature and purpose of Action Research: that is, it is not simply enough to change an aspect of practice by doing “a project”. But

2 See full descriptions or reports of recent Action Research projects in, for example, Edwards-Groves & Davidson (2017) and Rönnerman (2022).

understandings about the practices, the site and the circumstances which influence the practice must also accompany the endeavour. Kemmis and McTaggart (1988, p.1) later drew out more explicitly the social, collective and participatory ambitions of Action Research in this crystallisation:

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 or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out.

Decades later, findings from our own research (see Edwards-Groves & Rönnerman, 2013; Edwards-Groves & Rönnerman, 2021; Rönnerman & Edwards-Groves, 2012) further identified a fourth promising goal to add to Carr and Kemmis' (1986) earlier characterisation. That Action Research, when conceptualised as a stance and practiced as a "way of being an educator" (Edwards-Groves & Rönnerman, 2021, p. 87), has the potential to be generative of professional transformations of an individual's identities, practices and positions that extend beyond the life of the "the project" and in that way transform education. To explain, Action Research supports aspirational practitioners seeking longer term change and development to their own and others professional circumstances to improve possibilities for career progression where the benefits of participation (at one point in time):

- d) extend beyond "the life of the project" to generate educational leading capacities (Edwards-Groves & Rönnerman, 2021, p. 62).

Our focus centres on how these four aspirations (a-d) of Action Research *in practice* can be constructively reframed around seven identified cornerstones (contextuality, commitment, communication, collaboration, criticality, collegiality and community; outlined in a later section) that give rise to sustainable transformation for individuals and collectives in schools. This is particularly possible when the aspirations and practices of Action Research are understood as an educational stance generative of practices that recognisably go beyond the life of the actual, generally provisional time-bounded, project.

Next a brief introduction to the theory of practice architectures that provides the theoretical basis of the paper will be presented. In the subsequent section we trace some philosophical roots of Action Research to rescript its promise for educational formation and transformation for contemporary times. It maps the historical landscape of Action Research as a foundation from which to understand the nature and the conditions of promise and possibility that Action Research provides for learners and leaders of professional learning.

Theoretical framing

In this article we use the theory of practice architectures to frame Action Research as a practice. The theory of practice architectures is a social theory which draws close attention to the history and site ontological conduct of practices and the cultural-discursive, material-economic and social political arrangements that influence and shape practices. These arrangements or conditions are described as practice architectures (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008; Kemmis et al., 2014b). Practice architectures are the shaping, organising and influencing arrangements that form conditions that hold a practice (for instance teaching, pro-

fessional learning, leading or researching) in place. The intricate connection between practice architectures and practices is drawn out here by Kemmis et al. (2014b, p.31), who define practice as

a form of socially established co-operative human activity in which characteristic arrangements of actions and activities (doings) are comprehensible in terms of arrangements of relevant ideas in characteristic discourses (sayings), and when the people and objects involved are distributed in characteristic arrangements of relationships (relatings); and that this complex of sayings, doings and relatings ‘hang together’ in a distinctive project.

According to the theory of practice architectures, to identify the distinctiveness of practices the particular sayings, doings and relatings that form and hold the practice together in a project (or intention) must be recognised and understood by the practitioners involved at the time. Practices are always mediated (enabled and constrained) by practice architectures or conditions that influence how a practice of one kind or another happens among people in particular sites like in meeting rooms or classrooms in a school. Furthermore, practices unfold temporally in real time, and are always prefigured, although not necessarily pre-determined, by historical conditions like political and intellectual traditions in a field or like the circumstances (remarkable or mundane) that are present at the time (Kemmis et al., 2014b). That is, a practice happening in the here and now is always:

- informed and influenced by the past (language, actions, interactions, relationships, activities, policies, traditions and culture);
- in motion experienced in the sayings, doings and relatings that simultaneously generate the activity, discourses and interactions between people (as interlocutors) that unfold through physical space-time (Schatzki, 2002), and configured by the physical set-ups and resources and power relationships ‘in play’ at the time; and
- contingent on and influenced by other practices and practice architectures then and there (like teaching is influenced student learning needs and by professional development or policy directives and political discourses).

So, according to the theory of practice architectures, to understand Action Research as it is practiced today it is necessary to consider how the practices and practice architectures are inextricably connected to its broad history set down in the past by philosophers, theorists and indeed by practitioners of practices.

Historicising Action Research

Historically, Action Research has been part of the evolution of practices in many cultures across the world, developing and responding to particular local, social, political and economic conditions. So historicising practices, such as Action Research, requires understanding the genesis of the traditions and practices that shape its conduct which exist and evolve in history as practice traditions (Hardy & Edwards-Groves, 2016; Edwards-Groves & Rönnerman, 2021; Rönnerman, 2022). As such particular practice traditions prefigure, as well as inform, practices as they adapt, through their enactment, to changing times, participants and locally experienced circumstances.

Democracy and education have been intricately connected for well over a century. In particular, the work of the progressive and philosopher John Dewey (1859–1952) has been foundational for thinking about democratic ways of working and learning in modern education. In 1916, Dewey claimed that “education is a social process, is growth and that education is not preparation for life but is life itself” (cited from Säljö 2022). This single sentence shows how more than a century ago Dewey argued for education to be considered as manifestly enmeshed in everyday life and development. To be sustainable, education must harbour democratic values, and at stake is education itself. At that time, his pedagogic creed (1897) turned attention away from solely an emphasis on either the individual (Rousseau, 1712–1778) or society (Durkheim, 1858–1917) to bring into balance a view of education whereby learning for individuals is inextricably related to being in community with others. In his view, notions of sociality, community and communication are brought to bear on education practices that must, at the same time, strive for the formation of active and informed citizens for a democratic way of life.

Paulo Freire is another important philosopher and educationalist striving for democratic values. In his renowned book ‘Pedagogy of the oppressed’ (1970) notions of critical theory, action and activism emerged as monumental standpoints in and for education and its progressive development in places. His viewpoint stressed that education is only educational if it demands an active and emboldened citizenship that relies on both the individual and society: on both individual and collective action and activism. In Freire’s terms, this position for committed action and activism forms critical understandings necessary for preserving, yet advancing, Action Research as contemporary education development practice: one that contributes to an active social citizenship and communitarian ways of being. These create conditions necessary for empowering human agency of local peoples seeking to change their local circumstances.

In parallel with Dewey and Freire’s thinking about education, are ideals that rise from continental traditions such as *Bildning*³ and folk enlightenment (specifically recognised in Northern Europe). These historical traditions place virtue in democratic, communitarian and activist ways of working (Ponte & Rönnerman, 2009; Rönnerman & Salo, 2012). They are traditions which shape practices that both aspire and transpire principles of education that create possibilities, and indeed practice architectures, for democratic, communitarian and activist ways of working. Like Dewey and Freire, *Bildning* and folk enlightenment attend assiduously to the fundamental recognition of “place” in education and its development. Intrinsically, therefore, theorising, researching and transforming education practices through Action Research practices requires a site ontological approach whereby critical understandings about the conditions that influence what happens in particular site emerge as necessary considerations for the action to be meaningful and enduring. For Action Research as a democratic education practice, it needs to be understood from within the context from which it is practised. Consequently, through critical and purposeful inquiry and action it must connect to, take account of and respond to the historical and local conditions and circumstances present in local sites and situations. In the following section we present four distinctive principles that have been around for a long time.

3 *Bildning* is Swedish and can be translated into English as *bildung* or *cultivating*. It has its roots in the Continental tradition of Education (c.f. Ponte & Rönnerman, 2009)

Four central principles: Tracing the red thread

For decades, Action Research has made waves across the education and professional development landscape around four central principles, that even today influence how action research is understood and practiced:

Inquiry for learning was acknowledged early by Dewey (1916) as the fundamental way for individuals and collectives to focus on establishing more grounded solidified knowledge about one's own practice, arguing that to be able to change practice one must understand it from the situation from where the practices occur. *Inquiry remains one of the most central principles of Action Research.*

Real life action/experiments, exemplified by the work of German American psychologist Kurt Lewin (1890–1947), proposes that all stakeholders in educational circumstances must gather as partners to participate in processes of site-based inquiry that included planning, acting, observing and evaluating actions. *Understanding the realities of practices of all practitioners in local sites and circumstances sits at the core of Action Research.*

Critical theory emphasises ways that critical and emancipatory dimensions of learning are manifest through purposeful, intentional and strategic action along with individual and collective activism among people. This provides a trajectory for individuals and collectives to be able to transform their immediate and longer-term situations (e. g. Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Freire, 1970; Sachs, 2004; Zeichner & Noffke, 2001) making possible self-determination, self-expression and self-development (Kemmis & Edwards-Groves, 2018). *Approaching practice with a critical and discerning eye committed to focusing on what actually happens in the day-to-day realities of life, opens up spaces for self-determination, self-expression and self-development.*

Democratic dialogues form a practice espousing that opening communicative spaces (Habermas, 1987) among personnel at a workplace, where they meet to reflect and discuss what happens in practice is essential for forming, reforming and transforming practices (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). Dewey emphasised that learning takes place in the company of others particularly when groups of people reflect on, discuss and interrogate their shared experiences. He, as did Carr and Kemmis (1986), Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) and Rönnerman et al. (2015), stressed that researchers, teachers and students become equal partners while meeting as interlocutors in conversations (Dewey, 1916; Gustavsson, 1996). *Participating in open critical dialogues is the core of Action Research as it creates possibilities for those present to share and critique experiences and challenge each other's thinking about what is learned and happening in focused ways next.*

The critical stance that underpins these ideas provides a platform for Action Research by suggesting that it is the issues and concerns influencing one's own circumstances which are the very provocations that stir people to action and reflection on those actions in critical and transformational ways. That is to say that Action Research, across time and places, is not associated with docility, but a certain kind of practice that espouses dynamism and activism, practices which necessitates being critical and participatory (Kemmis, et al., 2014b). Action Research has had an enduring influence on education and development, exploring the dualism between theory and practice, between research and practical action, between reflection and action, between individuals and collectives, between schooling and education. Action research has according to Somekh and Zeichner (2009) a discursive power because it embodies a collision of terms as it is a combination of “generating research knowledge and improving social action at the same time” (p. 5).

The next section of the paper enlivens the traditions and philosophies that prefigure, yet embody, contemporary professional learning practices. It will draw out what we describe as seven Action Research cornerstones. The cornerstones: contextuality, commitment, communication, collaboration, criticality, collegiality and community, were derived from an extensive review of the literature that led us to view Action Research from its historical principle overwhelmingly concerned with being a democratic way of working and not just doing. We argue that these cornerstones are intertwined and dependent on one another, and by that fulfill the conditions for Action Research to take place in which the four principles (presented above)

are possible to build further on here and now. We find history important because of a noticeable hybridisation, fragmentation and even decontextualisation of Action Research whereby Action Research has been reduced to strategies, policies or just simply a research method, movements rejected by Carr and Kemmis (2005) and unpacked by Somekh and Zeichner (2009). Whilst we recognise that Action Research and its derivatives have been shaped and reshaped as ideas and practices travel through history responding to local sites, issues and circumstances, we notice a monumental shift towards using slimmed down glossed versions of what we consider to be the foundational interrelated cornerstones of Action Research.

To explain, in some jurisdictions Action Research (as an overarching concept) has been recruited as a silver bullet for education development. But it is evident that some approaches to it have been pared-back to such an extent that core understandings of its genesis are sidelined, and connections to its fundamental principles for transforming practices in local sites lacking. More problematic is the morphing of some key terminology describing action research to trendy vernacular as part of targeted publicity campaigns for attracting its pay-for-use in organisations (including departments of education) has fundamentally shifted understandings away from its core principles and processes. Further, the tendency to popularise elements of Action Research into a formulaic recipe for success, ultimately puts at risk its overall efficacy for generating sustained or sustainable change in schools. That is, there is a propensity that when the “packaged-up project” is completed, default or entrenched prior practices return, making any shift in practice susceptible to being short-lived or negligible in the longer term.

Cherry-picking popular terms to suit particular political or bureaucratic agendas, simply does mean change is imminent or even possible. It is our view that it is basically misguided to think that if a group of teachers are, for example, re-organised or re-labelled as a “community of practice” or “an inquiry community” or a “professional learning community” that their practices will change (in some mysterious ethereal way) without all necessary conditions (or practice architectures) that will support its conduct in place. This importation of such ideas and terminologies into the everyday discourses of professional change also rise against the deeply grounded intentions of, for example, Lave and Wenger’s (1991) and Wenger (1998) considerations of communities of practice, and what practices constitute development in a highly effective professional learning community. Furthermore, the propensity to represent such movements *as* Action Research, has emerged as a simplistic nominalisation which acts as persuasive devices for engaging groups of practitioners “in the project”. In many cases, rather than being employed as a longer term systematic processual approach that genuinely supports teachers to take a more critical stance towards their professional circumstances and development, superficial applications hover above the realities of the local sites and conditions. Indeed, notions such as professional learning communities, communities of practice, collegial learning or inquiry learning have become such clichéd, overused phrases that real solutions to site-based change and development are cast into doubt. And not very seldom are externally implied by policy or delivery of policy that we believe will not transform education. Rather Action Research is internal and conducted by professionals to use their agency in the site in contribution to transformation.

Answering questions related to site-based change and development must attend to the practice architectures, and the practice traditions that shape educational action and change over time. Thus tracing the red thread that form the connections between past and present practices leads us to heed the caution raised by Dewey (1938) that new movements and new

practices do not simply supplant tradition (as suggested above), for these “may develop its principles negatively rather than positively and constructively” (p. 20). This brings us back to our core argument calling for renewing Action Research in ways that gives credence and elevation to the primacy of its historical roots through the seven cornerstones we describe next, and so legitimising current practices, interpretations and purposive actions. We contend that facing contemporary issues and concerns in a range of educational circumstances through recognising the cornerstones of Action Research counters the superficiality of some current renderings that may indeed risk the stance required to be, and develop as, an educator (Edwards-Groves & Rönnerman, 2021).

Seven cornerstones that bring coherence to the foundations of Action Research

The aim of describing each of the seven cornerstones that follow are twofold: to (1) show the historical thread that holds the idea(l)s, aspirations and practices of Action Research together in site based education development (Kemmis et al., 2014b); and (2) show that they are precariously and delicately balanced where “each is “integral”, in the sense that it is an indispensable aspect of the other” (to borrow from Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 221). The cornerstones: contextuality, commitment, communication, collaboration, criticality, collegiality and community, form constituent practices and practice architectures for each other. Although the cornerstones are inextricably connected and made comprehensible in light of the realities of a kaleidoscope of interdependent practices as they are encountered in real life happenings, they are deliberately organised in a way that we consider to be decidedly temporal. For example, in our view one cannot truly get to being a “community” without the other cornerstones as conditions for development in place. We begin with “contextuality” since it is the site and it is the particular distinctive “contextual configurations” (Goodwin, 2000) that enable and constrain what actually happens in places among people then and there.

Contextuality: a cornerstone for site based education development

Responsivity to the particularity of sites and circumstances in education relates to Theodore Schatzki’s (2002) notion of site ontologies. According to Schatzki (2002), then Kemmis et al. (2014b), contextuality is a position that draws attention to the distinctiveness of contexts and their peculiar, nuanced, historical and ontological situatedness (and local happeningness) of the practices that come to pass in particular places at particular times. As Goodwin (2000) proposed, it is in contexts where the simultaneous use of talk and action in interactions between people that creates the context for the doing of practices. Put simply, context matters. Furthermore, “What works in one setting does not always work in another” (Timperley, Kaser & Halbert, 2014, p.4). So, a site ontological view of Action Research foregrounds and presupposes and shapes the here-and-now of Action Research, where the site is important, which also leads us to believe there is no “best practice” to copy from another site or to be mandated by any external stakeholder. It rather concerns how practices unfold over time in

ways that are prefigured and transformed through and in interactions that take place at particular sites.

Commitment: a cornerstone for (individual and collective) change

Commitment in action research can be understood in two interconnected ways. It firstly relates to an individual's commitment to and collective interest in a project or program of change (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Secondly, it connects to the related concept of educational praxis. Commitment forms a keystone for the viability, durability and legitimacy of Action Research as a practice; that is, Action Research is not possible unless there is an overt commitment to the processes and practices of change (even those that are contested and messy). Commitment to changing practices requires a strong sense of the site at the outset. In a fundamental way, an aspiration of education has always been to act in morally committed, ethically informed and prudently practiced ways (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Kemmis & Smith, 2008). This requires deliberateness in one's actions and practices (and so their sayings, doings and relatings, Kemmis et al., 2014b). Taking a praxis approach to education and educational change and the practices which comprise it, means understanding one's own individual praxis. In Action Research we view commitment to change and development as re-professionalising teaching and teacher learning, since it moves beyond the epistemological and technical dimensions of the work of the teacher to account for the practical wisdom and moral judgements required to act in the moment (Edwards-Groves, 2008).

Communication: a cornerstone for participation and intersubjective meaning making

Communication is the centrepiece of the human experience. It is a part of sociality that comes to life as people encounter one another through their interactions in practices of one kind or another. In professional life, communication is given shape by arrangements, or practice architectures, such as reflection groups, deliberative dialogues, collegial conversations, coaching conversations, peer-group mentoring or staff meetings (which are not activities to be taken as action research on their own). These communicative formations have, for many decades, formed a central dimension of Action Research and professional learning in different contexts. These approaches reflect a commitment to communication, building upon Dewey's advocacy for democratic ways of working (1916) whereby sociality is considered a pivotal practice in educational work. Alongside Dewey's dialogic principles are communicative practices (such as study circles, research circles and dialogue conferences) that can be traced back to the Nordic traditions of folk enlightenment and bildning (Rönnerman & Salo, 2012; Rönnerman et al., 2008). Emanating from these traditions is an alignment between the key idea that dialogue is instrumental for learning and the work on communicative space and communicative action developed by theorist Jürgen Habermas (1987). Educational theorist Etienne Wenger (1998, pp. 72–73) drew importance to three interrelated communicative practices “mutual engagement”, “joint enterprise” and “shared repertoire” for what we understand in contemporary times, for establishing the necessary conditions for professional

collaborations in critical participatory Action Research (Kemmis, et al., 2014b), and so grounds for ‘communities of practice’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991) to develop.

Collaboration: a cornerstone for collective action

Collaboration and collaborative learning have long been regarded as a self-improving and democratic way of working in education, particularly with respect to teachers’ professional development (Edwards-Groves & Rönnerman, 2021; Kemmis et al., 2014a; Nehring & Fitzsimmons, 2011; Stoll et al., 2006). It is possible when interpersonal communication is open, fair and equitable and there is individual and collective commitment to developing practices for the best of intentions in a particular context (a site). Collaborative endeavours form a dimension of social life fundamental for democratic ways of working. As an education practice collaboration for the societal good is steeped in traditional ways of learning that rests on the recognition of the inherent value of workers coming together to learn together about their professional work. This connects directly to *bildning*; that is, a “free” process of gaining general knowledge and of (folk) enlightenment that underlines the importance of interaction, discussion and dialogue in knowledge creation, or in Sörlin’s words (2019, p. 212) “we need to know more together”. As such, collaborating within groups is a dynamic and democratic way to promote and develop participants’ knowledge and experiences (Larsson & Nordvall, 2010), and confidence to be critical, evoke contradictions and resolve tensions.

Criticality: a cornerstone for critical inquiry and activism

Critical inquiry and critical reflection are given primacy in contemporary professional learning especially critical participatory Action Research (Kemmis, et al., 2014a). These two dimensions of professional development work form cornerstones for critique and action, and open the way for activism in education. Dewey (1933) captures this eloquently when he says, “we do not learn from experience... we learn from reflecting on experience”. Here he suggests that it is not simply the action or experience alone that provides the foundation for learning, but that it is the reflection *on* those actions and experiences that act as shaping practices for informing future actions. For instance, research circles (Holmstrand & Hämsten, 2003) emerged in Sweden in the 1960–70 s as a practice aimed to develop deeper understanding about the political conditions affecting the working lives of people and what was happening in the industrial sector. These traditions are deeply entrenched in the need for the critical examination of conditions that shape practices, and have been taken up for progressing professional thinking and practical action in critical reflective practitioner research (e. g., Schön, 1983).

Collegiality: a cornerstone for professional sustainability

Collegiality and collegial learning can only come from deep engagement with critical ideas with others (Smeets & Ponte, 2009). From this perspective, criticality, collaboration and communication enable collegiality to develop as an evolutionary process; that is, collegiality is not a priori for Action Research but if the conditions of communication, collaboration and

criticality are present it has the potential to emerge from it. Furthermore, these ideas about collegiality and learning together form conditions necessary for professional learning and action research that have travelled over time and through practices associated with professions like teaching. Practices that enable collegiality have long been associated with Action Research, particularly in continental traditions that we have described elsewhere (see also Ponte & Rönnerman, 2009; Rönnerman et al., 2008; Rönnerman & Salo, 2014), notions that Dewey first emphasised early in the 20th century. Collegiality emerges in an advocacy for the school as a democratic organisation where Dewey considered it essential not just teach about democracy but let the work be conducted in democratic ways; that is, through communicating and collaborating with others collegiality is possible. In Dewey's proposal, educational leaders, teachers and students (collectively) are called to review the validity of their subjective knowledge and to test their assumptions through discussions and analysis through collaborating in a shared communicative space.

Community: a cornerstone for democratic ways of working

Spaces for professional learning and educational Action Research can only legitimately be described as a community when communication, collaboration, critical reflection and collegiality in response to site-based contexts or conditions are present. Together these cornerstones create practice architectures (or cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political arrangements) that make being a community possible: that is, they prefigure but not necessarily predetermine what happens. A community forms over time; and so realistically a community (or sense of it) does not happen instantaneously (like simply following a script, a recipe, a model or a cycle). It requires practices and practice architectures that enable it to 'become' what it ascribes to be *in practice*. So, we argue that communities are always a process of becoming, and as Edwards-Groves (2013) showed, participating in a group or community of professionals learning together is a dynamic intersubjective ever-evolving practice that "re-form(s) and renew(s) itself and its particular social arrangements in a continual process of endless becoming" (p. 24). To this we add, once a sense of community is accomplished by attending to each of the other cornerstones, then relational trust can be secured (Edwards-Groves & Grootenboer, 2021; Edwards-Groves et al., 2016). On this, working in community with others further provides what Kemmis et al. (2014a,b) describe as creating necessary conditions for critical, participatory Action Research.

In summary: Seven cornerstones of action research

Each cornerstone, described briefly above and summarised here, can be traced to its own historical traditions, and constituted by its own particular practices that have shaped their existence over continents and decades. The cornerstones form an interconnected platform for considering the historical significance of the kind of contemporary in-practice individual and collective criticality needed for Action Research. These are practices which seek out, challenge and critique research and evidence through participatory approaches that empower teachers to *act in*, *act on*, and *act for* their own professional development. Importantly, we

argue that each cornerstone is a practice architecture (or shaping condition) for the other; that is, each is ‘integral’ to and forms an indispensable intrinsically connected part of the other.

1. **Contextuality:** a cornerstone for site based education development
2. **Commitment:** a cornerstone for individual and collective change
3. **Communication:** a cornerstone for participation and intersubjective meaning making
4. **Collaboration:** a cornerstone for collective action
5. **Criticality:** a cornerstone for critical inquiry and activism
6. **Collegiality:** a cornerstone for sustainability
7. **Community:** a cornerstone for democratic ways of working.

It is our view that a sense of community can only be developed if those persons present are responsive to particular contexts there and then; and are genuinely committed to communicate and collaborate with one another over time. Further, being free and open to criticality rests on one’s experiences of collegiality, collaboration and communication with others. Each of these are ideas that connect to theoretical and practice premises of democratic ways of being espoused by the folk enlightenment.

To conclude, Action Research is not the same as collaboration, nor is it the same as for instance professional or collegial learning, communities of practice, critical reflection or teacher inquiry. Rather, we suggest, Action Research is formed by a constellation of integrated and interrelated practices derived from a broad history of distinct education traditions: to form what we describe here as the cornerstones of and for Action Research. We stress that it is through participating in contextually relevant and responsive practices that are open for groups of people with a shared commitment to learning, communicating, reflecting and collaborating with each other as colleagues, that collegiality and criticality emerge sedimented in true communities of practices.

By conceptualising the seven cornerstones in contemporary language and ideas as we have, we reinvigorate and reinstate what was old, not new. It is our belief that these cornerstones connect contemporary practices of Action Research *as* situated professional learning, and to some of the historical idea(l)s from which they have emerged. We consider each of the cornerstones to be practice architectures for the practices of Action Research and professional learning. They are a guide, not a blueprint (to borrow from Stenhouse, 1975) that reframe current representations of Action Research that not only accord strongly with Deweyan democratic principles, but (at the same time) form virtues for education and its development *in practice*.

The contribution of the understanding the cornerstones of Action Research

In this last section, we argue there is no need to invent new concepts for Action Research, rather there is a need for participants to form deeper understandings of the historical traditions and their constituent practices already well established and defined. We have aligned this historical connection with the formation of the seven cornerstones. These principles of the cornerstones are not new, but rather are re-framed historical ideas which bring coherence to understanding the core conditions for educational Action Research that for over a century has

been shown to be an educational stance generative of practices that recognisably go beyond the life of the actual, generally provisional time-bounded, project. By connecting the cornerstones to the four principles of Action Research presented previously, we argue for the importance of looking back at history by using the knowledge already there, act presently for a better education for students and teachers and strive for a sustainable future by being able to transform education being better adjusted to knowledge production from within practices,

Yet there is a need to heed the caution expressed by Rönnerman and Salo (2014), who argued it is easy to get lost in practice when decontextualised appropriations and misappropriations make it difficult to get one's hands on what the innovations actually mean for one's own practice. And as Green (2009) suggested, the discourses of practice are so ubiquitous that the integrity and meanings are often lost in language through the conflation, overuse and misappropriation of ideas. For example, some innovations (like inquiry circles or dialogue groups) masquerade as action research, subsequently reinventing action research and its constituent practices as the *flavour of the month* where the rhetoric around their implementation reduces their relevance to espousements or clichés: for example, we are a community of practice because we work at the same school. Ultimately, we argue the need to look intensively beyond the rhetoric. This would open up the possibility to reclaim the essence of democracy in Action Research as a space for systematic attention to the site which creates conditions for learning and leading in education development. These conditions make contextuality, commitment, communication, collaboration, criticality, collegiality and community possible.

In many ways the central ideas captured in this paper are not new. Where we differ, or perhaps extend understandings about Action Research, is that these cornerstones framed as assemblages of coherent and logically organised bundles of core idea(s) are intrinsically related to one another in practice; each form shaping conditions (practice architectures) or perhaps pre-conditions for the other. Recharacterising the dimensions of Action Research as interconnected cornerstones recognises these as core virtues of action research that both espouse and demonstrate democratic ways of working. As a practical example, taken together the cornerstones, formed the foundation for the particular generative conditions that action research affords its participants, and indeed, how the practices encountered in action research lay grounds for leadership development (Edwards-Groves & Rönnerman, 2021). As Kemmis said (2009), Action Research is a practice-changing practice, and therefore as a practice forms history-making action where its conduct is always prefigured by other practices.

Historising Action Research generated a virtuous activity that rightly makes the historical work of philosophers, seminal educational theorists and intellectual traditions meaningful to contemporary proponents of site-based formation, reformation and transformation. Specifically, this provided the impetus to assemble to cornerstones as conduits to history, and representations of the conditions and core principles of Action Research. By using the theory of practice architectures as a theoretical and linguistic resource for understanding and analysing practices presented a fresh perspective on the transformative nature of Action Research as professional learning that goes beyond its immediate influence on teaching and improvement. Its interest in history provides an account of practice that enables the analyst to trace it prior to and beyond the life of the (action research) project. Notably,

These historical traces are not “just history”, “the past”, “what's done and dusted”: somehow divorced from present conditions and circumstance. Rather, these historical traces are key elements, key parts of the architecture of practice,

the ‘practice architectures’ which we recognise as influencing current practices... Acknowledging and valuing how current day practices, and their associated doings, sayings and relatings, are not just site-based but deeply historically embedded, enables us to better understand the conditions for practice, and how more productive conditions might be brought about in practice, and supported in policy. (Hardy & Edwards-Groves, 2016, n.p)

Tracing Action Research back to its roots and meaning in education, means historicising practices (Hardy & Edwards-Groves, 2016). It shows how particular practices are prefigured by history; coming to exist in practice over time in ways that form historical traces that leave remnants from the past on moments in the present.

To conclude our argument, we assert a need to retain the term Action Research, but to bring it with integrity to new generations, this must accompany deeper understandings about its historical traditions, concepts and terminology. We endeavoured to do so by historicising Action Research based on seven clearly identifiable cornerstones that capture the concepts, traditions and terminology more faithfully and in ways better adjusted to knowledge production from within practices.

Conclusion

In this article we have argued that framing the understandings about the nature of Action Research for educational formation, reformation and transformation in terms of the seven cornerstones, contributes to contemporary interpretations and practices derived from strong historical foundations. It is our position that the cornerstones account for, acknowledge and extend traditional perspectives and descriptions to deepen understandings about the generative possibilities of Action Research in ways that do not neglect or lose sight of its core historical connections and democratic virtues. To conceptualise Action Research only as a project suggests an unwarranted provisionality, and promotes unwanted limitations to its robustness and possibilities for site based education development and transformation. Therefore, there is a need to find a more trenchant grounding to invest in Action Research if critical inquiry, rethought purposeful action, and systematic responsive development in education is sought. Particularly in response to the current intensification of educational accountabilities, we argue that this move shifts the conversation to be about the need for educational systems to invest in Action Research as an approach to developing and sustaining a durable transformative culture in education.

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