

# Chapter 1

## Introducing Critical Participatory Action Research

### Why We Wrote this Book

*The Action Research Planner* series has a long history. This is the sixth of a series that began in 1979 with a modestly produced version for education students at Deakin University in Geelong Australia. A course was offered as part of an ‘upgrading’ Bachelor of Education degree designed for practising teachers. The intention was to encourage teachers to conduct small action research projects, or preferably, to participate in larger ones, and to report regularly on their action research work and reading throughout the year through a course journal. Each student was also expected to write a critical review of another student’s work, and on an aspect of the action research literature. The early *Planners* were somewhat restricted by their need to guide assessment tasks required by a course. Nevertheless, the *Planners* became popular and were used in many projects in several professional fields and community projects outside Deakin University, with varying degrees of success.

As the *Planners* began to be used by a wider readership and without the support of other readings prescribed for the Deakin *Action Research* course, we re-worked the text to give a little more theoretical background and to take account of the growing literature discussing more critical approaches to action research, including Carr and Kemmis (1986) which had also begun its life as a text for students in the Deakin *Action Research* course. Twenty-first century volumes of the *SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* presented more refined versions of the idea of critical participatory action research (Kemmis and McTaggart 2000, 2005). These chapters described significant reconsideration of the concepts of educational practice, research practice, and participation. This twenty-first century thinking shapes the intention of this version of *The Action Research Planner* with its new sub-title *Doing Critical Participatory Action Research*.

*Doing Critical Participatory Action Research* provides a summary of the conceptual analysis that emerged in the contributions Kemmis and McTaggart made to the *SAGE Handbooks of Qualitative Research*. Our recent theoretical analyses, especially of the nature of practices and the way they are held in place by *practice architectures*, have also expanded the conceptual furniture of critical participatory action research, as we understand it. These analyses aim to provide critical

participatory action researchers with a richer language *of* and *about* practice, to throw light on the pre-conditions that shape current practices, often invisibly. In Chap. 3, following the new view of practices outlined by Kemmis et al. (2014), we outline the theory of practice architectures. This *Planner* also provides detailed guidance about how people can participate in critical participatory action research using an extended theory of critical participatory action research.

Reading beyond this version of the *Planner* is needed to reach a more elaborated understanding of the rationale for “action research as a practice-changing practice” (Kemmis 2009). The references listed in the *Planner* open a doorway to the large, rich and growing literature of action research. In fact, some might find the positions taken here declamatory because more detailed arguments are summarised rather than presented. We accept that because our aim in this volume is pedagogical—providing access to ideas rather than their extended justification. We believe we have presented a sufficient sampling of the ideas to get readers started on critical participatory action research theory and practice. We do not believe that an understanding of theory is a foolproof guide to participation in a practice. Rather, our view has always been closer to that of Paulo Freire (1982) who argued that in the case of action research we should be “learning to do it by doing it”, a theme we will explore. Nevertheless, we do take the view that the concepts developed in critical theory and practice will lead participants to richer understandings of social and educational practice and how to change it. Our view is that action research itself is a social practice, a practice-changing practice, which cannot ignore the theoretical terrain that might help participants to work from a critically informed perspective on social life. With Kurt Lewin, thought to be the originator of the term ‘action research’ in English, we take the view that “there is nothing so practical as a good theory” (Lewin 1951, p. 169). However, unlike Lewin, we now think that it is more helpful to think about theory not just as texts but as dynamic and changing, and as constituted *in* practices of theorising that orient us to the world in distinctive ways—so we continue to ask, “Are we seeing things as they really are?”

In the literature, the term ‘action research’ covers a diverse range of approaches to enquiry, always linked in some way to changing a social practice. The Reason and Bradbury (2006) *Handbook of Action Research* and the Noffke and Somekh (2009) *Handbook of Educational Action Research* give comprehensive guides to the field, including descriptions of the different major species of action research. Kemmis and McTaggart (2000, 2005) provide short overviews of some common approaches to action research and include a more detailed critique of different forms of action research. Continuing critique of those other approaches and reflection on our own work in the 1990s has led to our revised and more comprehensive view of critical participatory action research.

In this edition of the *Planner*, we have moved beyond thinking of action research as an approach to research and change which is best represented as a self-reflective spiral of cycles of planning, acting and observing, reflecting and then re-planning in successive cycles of improvement. We re-affirm that the purpose of critical participatory action research is to change social practices, including research practice

itself, to make them more rational and reasonable, more productive and sustainable, and more just and inclusive.

The *Planner* is structured in five chapters:

- Chap. 1 Introducing critical participatory action research
- Chap. 2 A new view of participation: Participation in public spheres are self-constituted, voluntary and autonomous
- Chap. 3 A new view of practice: Practices held in place by practice architectures
- Chap. 4 A new view of research: Research within practice traditions
- Chap. 5 Doing critical participatory action research: The ‘planner’ part

The aim of Chap. 1 is to summarise the general idea of critical participatory action research as it has emerged over a century. Our purpose is not to provide a history, but to introduce some of the key features and concepts that have been used to demarcate critical participatory action research as a particular movement in social thought and practice. In Chap. 2, we present a new view of ‘participation’, which we define by reference to Jürgen Habermas’s (1987) theory of communicative action, and especially his (1996) views about public spheres and communicative space. This conceptualisation outlines the way participation can be used to establish the legitimacy and validity of knowledge claims and action aimed at making social practices more rational and reasonable, more productive and sustainable, and more just and inclusive.

Chapter 3 describes a new view of social practice—the theory of practice architectures (see also Kemmis et al. 2014). This theory shows how practices are held in place and made possible by cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political arrangements found in or brought to the sites where practices actually happen. This view of practices follows Theodore Schatzki’s (2002, 2005, 2010) notion of *site ontologies*—seeing practices as shaped but not determined by the places where they happen. The theory of practice architectures can also help us to understand critical participatory action research as a practice.

Chapter 4 gives guidance about how to think about the ‘research’ part of a critical participatory action research initiative. Chapter 5 distils our new understandings of critical participatory action research into a guide for participating in such an initiative. It is only through active participation that readers can develop a meaningful understanding of the previous chapters and an authentic grasp of the theory and practice of critical participatory action research—and, we might add, an opportunity to make their own practices more rational, sustainable and just.

In Chap. 6, we provide some *Examples* of critical participatory action research initiatives we have observed. In Chap. 7, we also present a number of *Resources* for preparing and conducting different elements of an action research initiative, including guidance about forming a group to undertake a collaborative action research initiative, human research ethics for action researchers, protocols for how to proceed as a research group, principles of procedure for action research, keeping a project journal, gathering evidence and documenting, and reporting. We strongly recommend that you review these resources before you begin your critical participatory action research journey.

## The Changing Field of Action Research

Action research has a long history, dating back at least to the early twentieth century. It has been practised in many diverse fields—for example, the women’s movement, Indigenous land rights, green and conservation activism, disease prevention and in professional fields such as education, nursing, medicine and agriculture. Different kinds of action research have emerged across different fields for many reasons, often because of the nature of the problems they confront and the mismatch of dominant research methods with those problems. The differences can be political, practical and epistemological. Because of the diversity, action research sometimes occurs under different names, and may have different aspirations to those expressed in this book for critical participatory action research (Kemmis and McTaggart 2000, 2005). Nevertheless, many kinds of action research share some common key features. Each of the approaches described in the literature of action research rejects conventional research approaches where an external expert enters a setting to record and represent what is happening. Two features are apparent:

- the recognition of the capacity of people living and working in particular settings to participate actively in all aspects of the research process; and
- the research conducted by participants is oriented to making improvements in practices and their settings by the participants themselves.

This shift to owning a way of doing research is often regarded as a source of empowerment for participants—as Jeannie Herbert (2005) put it—“owning the discourse: seizing the power!” Critique of the many emergent approaches to action research theory and practice led the first two authors to develop the theory and practice of critical participatory action research that is the focus of this book.

As early as the 1980s, the diverse array of approaches to action research created the need for a frame of reference for examining them. All of the existing approaches contested traditional ways of conducting educational research, but how did they do that? They were often oriented to changing a social practice, but what kinds of change were envisaged? Did they escape the shackles of the existing traditions and discourses of research? As Kemmis (2009) described it, action research is “a practice-changing practice”. However we label it, action research is itself a social practice. One general point of convergence among action research approaches is a new understanding of relationships between researchers and researched—in other terms—rethinking the relationship between theory and practice, and between ‘theorists’ and ‘practitioners’.

Two major handbooks of action research, *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research* (Reason and Bradbury 2008) and *The Handbook of Educational Action Research* (Noffke and Somekh 2009), show how the field of action research has developed during the last 60 years.

### *The Things Only Participatory Research Can Do*

One of the strongest claims of critical participatory action research—as for other forms of *participatory research* (see Fals Borda and Rahman 1991) more

generally—is that participants in social and educational life can do research for themselves. Others may also research social and educational life, but participants have special access to how social and educational life and work are conducted in local sites by virtue of being ‘insiders’. Some in the research literature think that being an insider involves a penalty—not being able to see things in a disinterested or ‘objective’ way. By contrast, we believe that insiders have special advantages when it comes to doing research in their own sites and to investigating practices that hold their work and lives together in those sites—the practices that are *enmeshed* with those sites (see Kemmis et al. 2014). Indeed, we submit that there are five things that *only* participatory research—including critical participatory action research—can do:

1. Only participatory research creates the conditions for practitioners to understand and develop the ways in which practices are conducted ‘from within’ the practice traditions that inform and orient them.
2. Only participatory research creates the conditions for practitioners to speak a shared language, using the interpretive categories, and joining the conversations and critical debates of those whose action constitutes the practice being investigated.
3. Only participatory research creates the conditions for practitioners to participate in and develop the forms of action and interaction in which the practice is conducted.
4. Only participatory research creates the conditions for practitioners to participate in and develop the communities of practice through which the practice is conducted, both in the relationships between different participants in a particular site or setting of practice, and (in the case of a professional practice) in the relationships between people who are collectively responsible for the practice (whether as members of a professional body or as professional educators or as researchers into the practice).
5. Only participatory research creates the conditions for practitioners, individually and collectively, to transform the conduct and consequences of their practice to meet the needs of changing times and circumstances by confronting and overcoming three kinds of *untoward consequences* of their practice, namely, when their practices are
  - a. *irrational* because the way participants *understand* the conduct and consequences of their practices are unreasonable, incomprehensible, incoherent, or contradictory, or more generally because the practice unreasonably limits the individual and collective *self-expression* of the people involved and affected by the practice,
  - b. *unsustainable* because the way the participants *conduct* their practices are ineffective, unproductive, or non-renewable either immediately or in the long term, or more generally because the practice unreasonably limits the individual and collective *self-development* of those involved and affected, or
  - c. *unjust* because the way participants relate to one another in the practice, and to others affected by their practice, serves the interests of some at the expense of others, or causes unreasonable conflict or suffering among them, or more generally because the practice unreasonably limits the individual and collective *self-determination* of those involved and affected.

The fifth of these things is especially significant in critical participatory action research—it is what makes critical participatory action research ‘critical’. Among others, Carr and Kemmis (1986) criticised the positivist view of social research that aims at an ideal of ‘objectivity’, in which the researcher can claim to be a ‘disinterested’ observer, in the sense that her or his self-interests are not affected by the conduct of the research. Among others, Carr and Kemmis showed that positivist research, like other research, was in fact always value- and theory-laden; that is, that the researcher’s self-interests (her/his values and reputations, for example) play a substantial role in shaping the research, at every stage from the choice of their research questions, through their conduct of the research, to the ultimate reception of their findings by the research community in their field. Critical participatory action research therefore rejects the notion of the ‘objectivity’ of the researcher in favour of a very active and proactive notion of *critical self-reflection*—individual and collective self-reflection that actively interrogates the conduct and consequences of participants’ practices, their understandings of their practices, and the conditions under which they practice, in order to discover whether their practices are, in fact, irrational, unsustainable or unjust.

In critical participatory action research, far from being ‘disinterested’, participants are profoundly interested in their practices, in whether they understand their practices and the consequences of their practices, and in whether the conditions under which they practice are appropriate. The nature, conduct and consequences of their practices vitally affect their self-interests, and their self-interests may affect—and even distort—their practices, the way they understand them, and the conditions under which they practice. Even if they wanted to, participants in critical participatory action research could not claim to be disinterested in the practice and the consequences of critical participatory action research. (As it happens, the nature and consequences of their research practices affect and are affected by the self-interests of all other kinds of researchers, too.)

Interrogating our practices through critical participatory action research doesn’t always follow a neat progression of steps. It certainly doesn’t follow the usual steps of research design familiar in conventional scientific research that appears to start with articulating a research question, forming an hypothesis, arranging experimental or observational conditions that allow us to test the hypothesis, collecting ‘data’, analysing results, and arriving at an interpretation that links the new findings into a research literature. Nor does it always follow the steps of planning, acting, observing, reflecting, then re-planning, acting again, observing again, reflecting again, and so on that Kurt Lewin (1951) described as central to action research. Instead, in this edition of the *Planner*, we have tried to emphasise that critical participatory action research should be actively and proactively critical in the sense we have described. The practical effect of this view is that our interrogation of our own practices is often focused, by initial felt concerns, or felt dissatisfactions, or issues, that lead us towards two kinds of deeper causes in the nature and conditions of our practice: first, on the side of ourselves as participants, the causes of our felt concerns are to be found in the way we think, in the way we do things, and in our responses to the conditions in which we live and work; and, second, on the side of the conditions under which we work, those causes are to be found in the cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political arrangements that hold our practice in place

(arrangements we will describe in Chap. 3, ‘A new view of practice’, as *practice architectures*). Interrogating our practices (with the help of others around us) involves interrogating both ourselves and the circumstances in which we find ourselves—looking ‘inside’ ourselves and ‘outside’ towards the conditions that shape how we think, what we do, and how we relate to others and the world. Later in this Chapter, we will discuss further how interrogating ourselves and our circumstances can be *critical*.

Throughout this book, we refer to multiple examples of critical participatory action research. Some examples are described within the text and others are referred to within the text and elaborated in Chap. 6. The following example will be described briefly here and then woven throughout the text of this and subsequent chapters. You will find an extended account of this example in Chap. 6, as Example 1.

### **An Example: Recycling at Braxton High School, Canada<sup>1</sup>**

A critical participatory action research project about recycling was conducted in a small high school (550 students) in a large urban school district in Canada. It began with a core group of ten Grade 11 and 12 Science students (six of whom were also on Student Council), three science teachers, the principal, the head custodian (janitor), and three district consultants (one of whom is Rhonda Nixon).

The school principal, Matthew, with the support of Rhonda Nixon, initiated a student focus group to uncover students’ views of what engages/disengages them in their learning, what helps/prevents them being agents of change in their own and others’ lives, and what creates/erodes an inclusive school culture. The results highlighted that students were interested in, but unsure about how to address, issues of importance in their lives. Grade 12 students especially were concerned about increases in Greenhouse Gas emissions that could be mitigated by recycling. One Science teacher, Jane, shared focus group results with the Students’ Council. An interested subgroup from the Students’ Council (who are also part of the core critical participatory action research group) got together with Jane and designed a survey to assess recycling habits. Most respondents did not have a clear understanding of what to recycle, where to put recyclable items, or how to develop recycling habits.

Initially, the core group purchased recycling bins and planned how to raise awareness about how to use them. The students went class to class and created online messages to inform everyone about the bins. Then, students conducted interviews with a representative group of students, parents and staff to determine what was needed to grow and sustain positive changes in recycling habits. The students took up one suggestion—posting decreases in garbage production on the district web space; everyone in the school and district community could post comments, questions and recycling strategies.

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<sup>1</sup> School names are pseudonyms, as are the names of people in the descriptions of the cases, except that the names of the authors of this book appear, where relevant, in the descriptions of the examples.

A second district consultant connected the science teachers to the Centre for Global Education (CGE). At that time, the CGE had arranged a videoconference with a climate change expert, so they offered these students spaces in that conference. Six Grade 12 students met up virtually with students from surrounding districts who shared how they were improving recycling habits in their communities. With the support of staff from CGE and partners of CGE—*Cities For Green Leaders*, a local organization committed to “making cities green”, and *TakingIT-Global*, an international youth network committed to global social action—these six students contributed to a paper that was cowritten by students who had taken part in this videoconference about their projects, and presented it at a scholarly climate change conference in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

## **Action Research History: Different Kinds, Foci and Purposes of Action Research**

There is a range of different kinds of action research. Different kinds of action research address diverse problems or issues that arise in unique settings involving particular individuals, organizations or communities. Kemmis and McTaggart (2000, 2005) provide a brief overview of different kinds of action research. We provide an even briefer summary below.

### ***Different Kinds of Action Research***

*The beginnings of action research.* We have referred already to the way action research was brought into American and British social research by Kurt Lewin. While at the University of Berlin, Lewin became acquainted with, and drew upon, earlier efforts by Jacob L. Moreno, a German physician and social philosopher, who (in addition to inventing psychodrama and sociodrama) aimed for a transformation of social research from research involving observers of social life to research in which researchers became participant observers to research in which participants in social life conducted research for themselves. After Lewin and his family emigrated from Germany in the face of the rising harassment of Jews in Germany in the years before the Second World War, he worked in various US universities including Cornell, the University of Iowa, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In the US, he outlined his view of action research, and conducted various research studies involving participants in the research process. These included studies aimed at encouraging American civilians to eat more offal so the best cuts of meat could be reserved for US soldiers, and civil rights studies in which black Americans collected and published information about the exclusionary practices of different restaurants. Lewin (1951) likened action research to the work of bomber squadrons in the War: first, there would be a reconnaissance phase in which participants went out to

collect initial data, then there would be the formation of a plan, which was then put into action, then more data would be collected to see the effects of the action, and this data would be analysed to see whether the desired effects had been achieved. If not, a new plan would be formulated and enacted, and further data gathered and analysed. The process would be repeated until the desired effects were achieved.

This Lewinian view of action research and what, in earlier editions of the *Planner*, we called “a spiral of cycles of self-reflection” or “the self-reflective spiral” over-simplified the process, and, we now think, gave too much significance to the individual steps of planning, acting, observing, reflecting, re-planning (and so on) and their reiteration. Moreover, this Lewinian view of action research also—in practice—preserved the role of the *non-participant* researcher as a facilitator of the research process and the involvement of different kinds of participants in the research. This preservation of the role of the ‘outside’ researcher in action research has been a feature of a great deal of action research since the mid-twentieth century. It was also preserved in the kinds of action research that developed in social psychology and organisational development and research in Britain, initiated there after Lewin collaborated with researchers at the Tavistock Institute in London after the War (with Tavistock researchers founding the journal *Human Relations* collaboratively with Lewin’s Centre for Group Dynamics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology). Tavistock researchers developed a distinctive school of thought about the field of organisational development based on Lewinian ideas about action research, and these flowed into British industrial action research, and from there to Scandinavia where action research was also taken up in industrial and organisational contexts.

Kemmis (2012) is critical of approaches to action research that preserve a notion of the external researcher who provokes or facilitates or in some way manages the research process, and who maintains a kind of academic ‘disinterest’ about what occurs in the research. This ‘outsider’ location may mean that the academic facilitator of action research is insulated from the real-world consequences of participation in the research for other participants—whether in industrial, social or educational settings. While outside consultants and collaborators often can and do provide real and valuable support to participant researchers, we believe they can also, for the purposes of the research, *become* engaged participants alongside others in an action research initiative. They need not ordinarily be members of a community undertaking an action research initiative, or employees of an organisation in which an action research initiative happens, but they can be full participants in the life of the research. If so, they must remain critically alert, however, to a particular danger of self-deception: that they may be self-deceived about the extent to which their own self-interests and the self-interests of other participants overlap. (For more detailed advice about working with outside consultants and ‘academic partners’, see *Resource 8* in Chap. 7.)

Among the approaches to action research summarised below, participatory research and critical participatory action research share the central aspiration that the research should be the responsibility of participants alone, though participants also remain open to receiving assistance from outsiders where it is useful. A key question here is whether and the extent to which the self-interests of such outsiders

coincide or conflict with the self-interests of the other participants. In our view, this is a question to be asked by and of all outside researchers and consultants working with participant researchers.

*Industrial action research* Industrial action research has an extended history, dating back to the post-Lewinian (1946, 1952) influence in organisational psychology and organisational development in the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in Britain and the Research Center for Group Dynamics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the United States. It is typically consultant-driven with very strong advocacies for collaboration between social scientists and members of different levels of the organisation. The work is often couched in the language of workplace democratisation, but more recent explorations have aspired more explicitly to the democratisation of the research act itself, following the theory and practice of the participatory research movement. Especially in its more recent manifestations, industrial action research is differentiated from ‘action science’ and its emphasis on cognition taking a preferred focus on reflection and the need for broader organisational and social change. Some advocacies have used critical theory as a resource to express aspirations for more participatory forms of work and evaluation, but more usually the style is somewhat humanistic and individualistic rather than ‘critical’. Emphases on social systems in organisations such as improving organisational effectiveness and employee relations are common and the Lewinian aspiration to learn from trying to bring about change is a strong theme (Bravette 1996; Elden 1983; Emery and Thorsrud 1976; Emery et al. 1969; Gustavsen et al. 2008; Foster 1972; Levin 1985; Pasmore and Friedlander 1982; Sandkull 1980; Torbert 1991; Warmington 1980; Whyte 1989, 1991).

*Action science* Action science emphasises the study of practice in organisational settings as a source of new understandings and improved practice. The field of action science systematically builds the relationship between academic organisational psychology and practical problems as they are experienced in organisations. It identifies two aspects to professional knowledge: the formal knowledge which all competent members of the profession are thought to share and which professionals are inducted into during their initial training, and the professional knowledge of interpretation and enactment. A distinction is also made between the professional’s ‘espoused theory’ and ‘theories in use’ and ‘gaps’ between these are used as points of reference for change. A key factor in analysing these gaps between theory and practice is helping the professional to unmask the ‘cover-ups’ that are put in place especially when participants are feeling anxious or threatened. The approach aspires to the development of the “reflective practitioner” (Argyris 1990; Argyris and Schön 1974, 1978; Argyris et al. 1985; Friedman and Rogers 2008; Reason 1988; Schön 1983, 1987, 1991).

*Action learning* Action learning has its origins in the work of advocate Reg Revans who saw traditional approaches to management enquiry as unhelpful in solving the problems of organisations. Revans’s early work with colliery managers attempting to improve workplace safety marks a significant turning point for the role of

professors—engaging them directly in management problems in organisations. The fundamental idea of action learning is bringing people together to learn from each other's experience. There is emphasis on studying one's own situation, clarifying what the organisation is trying to achieve, and working to remove obstacles. Key aspirations are organisation efficacy and efficiency, though its advocates affirm the moral purpose and content of their own work and of the managers they seek to engage in the process (Clark 1972; Pedler 1991; Pedler and Burgoyne 2008; Revans 1980, 1982).

*Soft systems approaches* Soft systems approaches have their origins in organisations that use so-called 'hard systems' of engineering especially for industrial production. Soft systems methodology is the human 'systems' analogy for systems engineering that has developed as the science of product and information flow. It is defined as oppositional to positivistic science with its emphasis on hypothesis testing. The researcher (typically an outside consultant) assumes a role as discussion partner or trainer in a real problem situation. The researcher works with participants to generate some (systems) models of the situation, and uses the models to question the situation and to suggest a revised course of action (Checkland 1981; Checkland and Scholes 1990; Davies and Ledington 1991; Flood and Jackson 1991; Ison 2008; Jackson 1991; Kolb 1984).

*Participatory research* Participatory research (often called "PR") is an alternative philosophy of social research (and social life, *vivencia*) often associated with social transformation in the Third World. It has roots in liberation theology and neo-Marxist approaches to community development (in Latin America, for example), but also has rather liberal origins in human rights activism, in Asia for example. Three particular attributes are often used to distinguish PR from conventional research: shared ownership of research projects, community-based analysis of social problems, and an orientation towards community action (Chambers 1993; Fals Borda and Rahman 1991; Forester et al. 1993; Freire 1982; Hall et al. 1982; Horton et al. 1990; McTaggart 1997; Oliveira and Darcy 1975; Park et al. 1993; Rahman 2008).

*Classroom action research* Classroom action research typically involves the use of qualitative, interpretive modes of enquiry and data collection by teachers (often with help from academic partners) with a view to teachers making judgments about how to improve their own practices. The practice of classroom action research has a long tradition, but has swung in and out of favour, principally because the theoretical work which justified it lagged behind the progressive educational movements which breathed life into it at certain historical moments (McTaggart 1991a; Noffke 1990, 1997). Primacy is given to teachers' self-understandings and judgments. The emphasis is 'practical', that is, on the interpretations teachers and students are making and acting on in the situation. That is, classroom action research is practical not just idealistically, in a utopian way, or just about how interpretations might be different 'in theory', but practical in Aristotle's sense of practical reasoning about how to act rightly and properly in a situation with which one is confronted. 'Living theory' and 'living one's educational values' are concepts emerging from this literature

(Dadds 1995; Elliott 1976/1977, 1991, 2006; Goodnough 2008, 2010; Hoban and Hastings 2006; Sagor 1992; Stenhouse 1975; Somekh 2006; Weiner 1989; Wells 2009; Whitehead 1989).

*Critical participatory action research* participatory action research expresses a commitment to bring together broad social analysis, the self-reflective collective self-study of practice, and transformational action to improve things. Critical participatory action research is strongly represented in the literatures of educational action research, and emerges from dissatisfactions with classroom action research which does typically not take a broad view of the role of the relationship between education and social change. It has a strong commitment to participation, as well as to social analyses in the critical social science tradition which reveal the disempowerment and injustice created in industrialised societies. In recent times, it has attempted also to take account of disadvantage attributable to gender and ethnicity as well as to social class, its initial point of reference, and to issues of unsustainability in the contemporary world. The extension of action research collectives to include ‘critical friends’, to build alliances with broader social movements, and to extend membership across institutional hierarchies provides a way of enhancing the understanding and political efficacy of individuals and groups. However, the problem of how to create the conditions of learning for participants persists. People are not only hemmed in by material institutional conditions, they are frequently trapped in institutional discourses that channel, deter or muffle critique. Current thinking for critical participatory action research focuses on how to create (or recreate) new possibilities for what Orlando Fals Borda calls *vivência* (humane forms of social life) through the revitalization of the public sphere, and to promote decolonization of lifeworlds that have become saturated with bureaucratic discourses, routinised practices and institutionalised forms of social relationships, the characteristic of social systems that see the world only through the prism of organisation, not the human and humane living of social lives. This problem invites re-interpretation of the practice of public discourse through the ideas of communicative action, communicative space, public spheres, and the idea of research as a social practice with new kinds of participation (Carr and Kemmis 1986; Henry 1991; Kemmis 1989, 1991; Kemmis and McTaggart 2000, 2005; Marika et al. 1992; McTaggart 1991a, 1991b, 1991c, 1997; Zuber-Skerritt 1996).

### ***Changing foci of Action Research in Education***

Some examples of educational action research from recent decades include changes in educational institutions to redress:

- the exclusion experienced by disadvantaged students as a consequence of curriculum and teaching practices that served the interests of other students (action research programs and initiatives prompted by the union movement, the civil rights movement, and, in the US, Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society program),

- the exclusion of girls and women as a consequence of sexist approaches in schooling (action research programs and initiatives prompted by the women's movement),
- the exclusion of Indigenous students and students in poverty (action research programs and initiatives prompted by the civil rights and Indigenous rights movements),
- the alienation of students from schooling and the circumstances that lead to it (action research programs and initiatives prompted by a movement for democratic education),
- the mismatch between school curriculum and pedagogies and the knowledge and the kinds of learning people encounter in their lives outside or beyond school (action research programs and initiatives prompted by large-scale historical changes and new developments in established and institutionalised forms of culture, modes of economic activity, and patterns of social life—including, for example, the emergence of digital information and communications technologies, the internet and social media; cultural, economic and social changes brought about by globalisation; and international migration and the increasingly multicultural and multilingual composition of national populations), and
- climate change, loss of biodiversity and the environmental degradation and intergenerational injustice caused by unsustainable use of the Earth's resources (action research programs and initiatives prompted by the green movement and the global movement to address the causes of human-induced climate change).

As these examples indicate, action research initiatives in these areas were and are significant because they connected ordinary people—teachers, students, principals, members of school communities—with social movements changing the communities and societies around them. They made the global, local and the personal, political.

Project ideas like these—about steps to include previously excluded students, for example—often begin in classrooms with teachers and others interested in making small but significant changes: in 'making a difference' in their own settings. When these apparently small, local efforts connect up, however, across classrooms, schools, communities and societies, they can clearly be recognised as contributions not only to the education of the people involved, but also to wider social movements in the interests of the whole human community. In our view, these action research examples demonstrate two things (one or the other of which is frequently overlooked): (1) they demonstrate that action research initiatives are one kind of expression, in education and educational settings, of people's local responses to changing concerns prompted by global social movements; (2) they demonstrate that social movements are always also educational movements because they always involve the individual and collective self-education of people (not only but also in formal educational institutions) about the nature and consequences of historically significant changes in cultures, economies, the environment, and social and political life.

In the 1960s and into the 1970s, many teachers worked on ways to overturn passive, transmission-based approaches to schooling, in which students were reduced

to the roles of being passive receivers of knowledge. To aid them, they drew on the resources of progressive education familiar from the beginning of the twentieth century and made popular by John Dewey (for example, 1916/1966). They developed forms of schooling that came to be known as ‘activity-based’ approaches. They hoped to re-enliven the work of classrooms, to make schooling more engaging and educational. Leaders of these educational movements enlisted armies of interested teachers whose ideas of teaching came to include a notion that the curriculum should be negotiated with students, not just served to them.

In the 1970s and 1980s, many teachers worked—through action research—on issues of ‘the sexist curriculum’ towards anti-sexist curriculum and pedagogies. They also worked on approaches to education that would find ways to include working class and Indigenous students whose lives, cultures, material circumstances and social exclusion were unrecognised by ‘mainstream’ schooling that pretended it was blind to class, poverty, Indigeneity and gender.

In recent decades, students, teachers and school communities have worked to address green issues and the problem of human-induced climate change. They have brought about changes in the ways schools use energy, water and other resources, and changes in the way students understand themselves as connected, through their communities, to the natural world they inhabit, as members of one species that is interdependent with other species and on the physical world.

### ***Different Purposes of Action Research***

Beyond these differences in kind among approaches in action research, there are also differences in the different kinds of interests that action research projects serve. Carr and Kemmis (1986) distinguished three kinds of action research based on Habermas’s (1972, 1974) theory of knowledge-constitutive interests:

1. technical action research guided by an interest in improving control over outcomes,
2. practical action research guided by an interest in educating or enlightening practitioners so they can act more wisely and prudently, and
3. critical action research guided by an interest in emancipating people and groups from irrationality, unsustainability, and injustice.

In Schatzki’s (2002) terms, these three kinds of action research differ in their ‘teleoaffective structures’—that is, their overall structure and purpose as ‘projects’ for the people involved (their ‘telos’ or overarching purpose), which may also include different kinds of emotional investments and states (the affective element). Technical, practical and critical action research involve very different kinds of projects.

*Technical action research* In technical action research, the participant-researcher aims to control and improve the outcomes of her or his practice. The practice is regarded as a means to an end, capable of being improved to be more effective or efficient in producing known ends—improved test scores for students in a class, or

improved health outcomes as a result of a doctor's medical consultations, for example. The end is known (improved test scores or health outcomes); the task for the participant-researcher is to improve the means—her or his own practice. This may involve changing the way others are involved in the practice—the way students work, or the way patients administer their medications, for example—but the focus of attention remains on the practitioner her- or himself. The others involved are treated in the third person, one might say, as the objects of the practitioner's action rather than as persons who are as much subjects in the process as the practitioner. The participant-researcher is the one who decides what is to be done, what is to be changed, and what sense is to be made of the observations made. In technical action research, there is an asymmetric, one-way relationship between the participant-researcher and the others involved in or affected by the research.

*Practical action research* In practical action research, there is a sense in which the 'project' is also self-directed, but in this case others involved in the setting also have a voice. The practitioner aims to act more wisely and prudently, in order that the outcomes and longer-term consequences of the practice will be for the best—but those involved recognised that all the outcomes cannot be known in advance of the research. Such a stance requires treating the others involved not as objects but as subjects capable of speech and action, and as persons who will also live with the consequences of what is done. The practitioner thus addresses them in the second person (as 'you')—as an Other who is also a subject or self like oneself. In practical action research, not only the means of the practice are objects of change and development; the ends are also in question. Thus, the researcher-practitioner explores the outcomes and longer-term consequences of the practice to discover the kinds of criteria by which the practice should be evaluated—for example, to take into account parents' views about students' experiences as well as the views of the students, or to take account of the impact of health treatments on patients' families or communities as well as the impact on the patients themselves. The practitioner in such a case might still be the one who decides what is to be explored and what changes are to be made, but in practical action research she or he remains open to the views and responses of others, and the consequences that these others experience as a result of the practice. In this case, there is a symmetrical, reciprocal relationship between the practitioner and others involved in and affected by the practice.

*Critical action research* During the 1990s, a hallmark of the action research field was eclecticism—different groups of researchers, professional and social activists developed approaches suited to the problems they were facing in their work. The Lewinian idea of action research was often used as a reference point for 'method' and for legitimisation of action research as a form of research, but quite different rationales for and practices of action research had emerged in different disciplines. The sequestering under disciplinary rubrics of most of the literature referring to action research meant that there was little dialogue between groups of different practitioners and advocates. During the 1990s, however, there were increases in the visibility and popularity of the approaches. This was reflected in large increases in scale and attendances at World Congresses on Action Research that brought together

participants from many different disciplines and social practices. Emerging over the 1980s and 1990s was a vast literature of critique of modernity and the insinuation of capitalist, neo-capitalist and post-capitalist state and social systems into social life. The Global Financial Crisis of 2008 underlined again what the Third World and others trapped in poverty already knew: greed, competitive individualism, neo-liberalism and institutional procedures insulated from questions of morality produced disaster, especially for the most needy. This was a problem for everyone.

All of these influences created some impetus and possibilities for dialogue. The emergence and energising of critical participatory action research did more than create such a dialogue. It embraced other approaches, provided a frame of reference for comprehension and critique of itself and its predecessors, and invited a way of working which addressed rampant individualism, disenchantment, and the dominance of instrumental reason, the key features of the ‘malaise of modernity’ (Taylor 1991).

Critical participatory action research is identified most closely with the work of a group of staff at Deakin University in Geelong Australia during the 1980s and 1990s. The best known references to the work were prepared initially as resources for students, but later more obtainable versions were produced—*The Action Research Planner* and *The Action Research Reader* (both Kemmis and McTaggart 1988 and including translations and adaptation in several different languages). More widely published work included Carr and Kemmis (1986), and reflected the diversity and the roles different participants might play (McTaggart 1997, 2002).

In critical participatory action research, the reciprocity between practitioner-researchers and others in a setting is amplified still further: responsibility for the research is taken collectively, by people who act and research together in the first-person (plural) as ‘we’ or ‘us’. Decisions about what to explore and what to change are taken collectively. In this case, however, people explore their work and lives as socially constructed formations that may need to be transformed if their work and its consequences are irrational, unsustainable or unjust.

The structures and practices of schooling, for example, sometimes include ways of thinking and saying that are irrational, ways of doing things that are unproductive or harmful, or ways of relating to others that cause or maintain suffering, exclusion or injustice. The student who suffers bullying in a school, the student whose life experience is not recognised by a sexist curriculum, the student who is indoctrinated into irrational beliefs, the student whose life opportunities are diminished by forms of teaching that serve the self-interests of one particular group at the expense of others—all endure untoward consequences wrought by conduct and conditions that are in need of reconstruction.

In critical participatory action research, the aim is to explore social realities in order to discover whether social or educational practices have such untoward consequences. It does so by opening communicative space (Kemmis and McTaggart 2005) in which people can reflect together on the character, conduct and consequences of their practices. What is to be transformed in critical participatory action research is not only activities and their immediate outcomes (as in technical action research) or the persons and (self-) understandings of the practitioners and others

involved in and affected by a practice (as in the case in practical action research) but the social formation in which the practice occurs—the discourses (what we will describe in Chap. 3 as *sayings*) that orient and inform it, the things that are done (*doings*), and the patterns of social relationships between those involved and affected (*relatings*). Thinking of these social formations as (what we will describe in Chap. 3 as) *practice architectures* allows us to think of them as made by people, and thus as open to be re-made by people. People involved in critical action research aim to change their social world collectively, by thinking about it differently, acting differently, and relating to one another differently—by constructing other practice architectures to enable and constrain their practice in ways that are more rational (in the sense of reasonable), more productive and sustainable, and more just and inclusive.

Critical participatory action research is not as esoteric as it may sound. It is becoming more widespread every day, not because people are consciously taking it up as ‘research’ or as a ‘social-scientific methodology’, but because there is a more urgent need than ever before to understand the consequences of human activity and social practice. The Braxton High School example of critical participatory action research on recycling (described earlier) shows teachers, support staff, leaders and students working together as a small, local part of a vast network of people making change in the ways they live their lives to help reduce Greenhouse Gas emissions. Among many other examples are initiatives that involve diverse participants in a variety of community and institutional settings in changing social and educational practices to counter sexism, racism, or the injustices experienced by indigenous people.

The field of critical participatory action research is expanding and diversifying, in part to focus on particular kinds of social justice. Feminist action research has influenced the major areas described above as well as expressing its own particular critique of action research and conventional research. This literature affirms an approach to action research consonant with feminist praxis more generally (Hollingsworth 1997a; Maguire 1987, 2001; Brydon-Miller et al. 2004). Indigenous researchers too have described approaches to action research that emphasise inclusion, participation and voice in the social practices that involve and affect them. Collaboration is an important theme exemplified by the Australian Indigenous community of Yirrkala in their interpretation of Indigenous action research in the aptly named *Always together, Yaka gāna: participatory research at Yirrkala* as part of the local development of Yolngu<sup>2</sup> education (Marika et al. 1992). This account illustrates the synergies and complementarities between critical social science, participatory action research and indigenous enquiry later amplified in *The Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies* (Denzin et al. 2008). The Yirrkala example is described in *Example 5: Critical participatory action research in an Indigenous community* which you can find in the Chap. 7.

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<sup>2</sup>The Yolngu people are members of a variety of Indigenous tribes who are all speakers of the *Yolngu-matha* family of languages in North East Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory of Australia.

## Critical Participatory Action Research as a Disciplined Way of Making Change

We describe critical participatory action research as a ‘disciplined’ way of making change because many of the kinds of changes that occur in our lives are imposed, apparently random, or ill considered. Unexpected or imposed changes sometimes generate frustration, dissatisfaction or a sense of alienation for individuals and groups. When this happens, however, some people turn to critical participatory action research to reshape their lives and work—to change the arrangements they find themselves in, and to take an active and thoughtful approach to changing themselves, their practices and the conditions under which they practise. They do so with the aim of making their own individual and collective practices more rational and reasonable, more productive and sustainable, and more just and inclusive. To bring discipline to this task they search for evidence about how things are working and could be working better. With others in their settings, they collectively gather evidence, analyse and interrogate and interpret the evidence they collect, and reformulate their action in the light of their evidence, analysis and interpretation, successively, over time—writing their unfolding history as they make it.

Kurt Lewin (1946), sometimes described as ‘the father of action research’<sup>3</sup>, described action research in terms of a cycle of steps of planning a change, putting the plan into action, observing what happened, and re-formulating the plan in the light of what had happened. This way of thinking about action research was popularised in earlier editions of *The Action Research Planner* (for example, the fourth edition, Kemmis and McTaggart 1988a), especially in terms of what came to be known as the ‘self-reflective spiral’. Already, by 1988, we were well aware that the process of action research is only poorly described in terms of a mechanical sequence of steps. We described the spiral of self-reflection in terms of a spiral of self-reflective cycles of:

- *planning* a change,
- *acting* and *observing* the process and consequences of the change,
- *reflecting* on these processes and consequences, and then
- *re-planning*,
- *acting* and *observing*,
- *reflecting*, and so on... (Fig. 1.1)

Around the world, many people are now familiar with this ‘spiral of action research’. In reality, action research is rarely as neat as this spiral of self-contained cycles of planning, acting and observing, and reflecting suggests. The stages overlap, and initial plans quickly become obsolete in the light of learning from experience. In reality, the process is likely to be more fluid, open and responsive. For critical participatory action research, the criterion of success is not whether participants have followed the steps faithfully, but whether they have a strong and authentic

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<sup>3</sup> The real father of action research turned out to be Jacob L. Moreno (1892–1974) who developed the idea in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s. (See Altrichter and Gstettner 1991; Gunz 1996.)

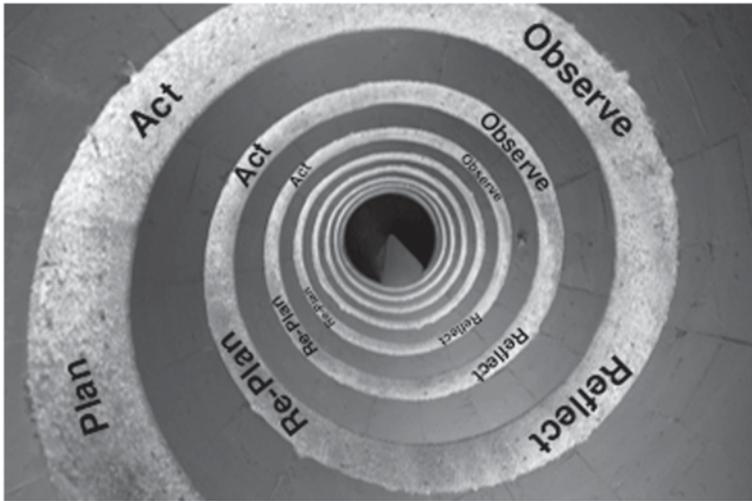


Fig. 1.1 The action research spiral

sense of development and evolution in their *practices*, their *understandings* of their practices, and the *situations* in which they practice.

Critical participatory action research works at its best when co-participants in the process undertake each of the steps in the spiral of self-reflection collaboratively. Not all theorists of action research place this emphasis on collaboration; they argue that action research is frequently a solitary process of systematic self-reflection. We accept that action is sometimes so for short periods, but nevertheless hold—as we shall argue in Chap. 2, describing a new view of ‘participation’—that critical participatory action research is best conceptualized in collaborative terms. We understand critical participatory action research as a social and educational process. In our view, people who undertake critical participatory action research do so with a clear and conscious commitment to the notion that it will be a social and educational process for each person involved and for everyone involved collectively. They understand and deliberately undertake it as a process of individual and collective self-formation.

Co-participants in critical participatory action research also understand that the ‘object’ of their research is social. It concerns human coexistence (Schatzki 2002), and the forms that coexisting with others can and should take, with a close eye to the consequences of how they arrange and re-arrange their collective affairs. In particular, of course, critical participatory action research is directed towards studying, reframing, and reconstructing social practices. Since practices are constituted in social interaction between people, it follows that changing practices is a social process. To be sure, one person may change so that others are obliged to react or respond differently to that individual’s changed behaviour, but the willing and committed involvement of those whose interactions constitute the practice is necessary,

in the end, to secure the change. Critical participatory action research offers an opportunity to create forums in which people can join one another as co-participants in the struggle to remake the practices in which they interact. As we shall see in Chap. 2, critical participatory action research creates forums in which rationality and democracy can be pursued together, without an artificial separation ultimately hostile to both. In his (1996) book, *Between Facts and Norms*, Habermas describes this process in terms of ‘opening communicative space’—a theme to which we will return in Chap. 2.

At its best, then, critical participatory action research is a social process of collaborative learning for the sake of individual and collective self-formation, realised by groups of people who join together in changing the practices through which they interact in a shared social world—a shared social world in which, for better or for worse, we live with the consequences of one another’s actions.

It should also be stressed that critical participatory action research involves the investigation of *actual* practices, not practices in the *abstract*. It involves learning about the real, material, concrete, particular practices of particular people in particular places. While of course it is not possible to suspend the inevitable abstraction that occurs whenever we use language to name, describe, interpret and evaluate things, critical participatory action research differs from other forms of action research in being more obstinate about its focus on changing participating practitioners’ particular practices. This contrasts sharply with the view of some action researchers who say they have an interest in classroom practice and whose first question is, ‘Which aspect of practice are we interested in?’ The answer to this question is often something like ‘assessment’, ‘consonant blends’, or ‘behaviour management’, concepts that are already abstract and fragmentary by comparison with the dramatic and manifold experience of classroom life.

Like other people, critical participatory action researchers may be interested in practices in general or in the abstract, but their principal concern is in changing practices in ‘the here and now’—they want to change ‘the way we do things around here’. In our view, critical participatory action researchers need to make no apology for seeing their work as mundane and mired in history; on the contrary, by doing so they may avoid some of the philosophical and practical dangers of the idealism that suggests that a more abstract view of practice might make it possible to transcend or rise above history, and to avoid the delusions of the view that it is possible to find safe haven in abstract propositions which construe but do not themselves constitute practice. As we will argue in Chap. 3, ‘A new view of practices’, critical participatory action research is a learning process whose fruits are real and material changes in

- what participants think and say (their *sayings*), and the cultural and discursive arrangements (like languages and specialist discourses) that shape the ways they understand and interpret their world,
- what participants do (their *doings*), and the material and economic arrangements that make it possible for them to do these things, and

- how participants relate to others and the world (their *relatings*), and the social and political arrangements that shape the ways they interact with the world and with others.

Through critical participatory action research, people can come to understand how their social and educational practices are *produced* by particular cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political circumstances that pertain at a particular place at a particular moment in history, and how their practices are *reproduced* in everyday social interaction in a particular setting because of the persistence of these circumstances and their responses to them. By understanding their practices as the product of particular circumstances, participatory action researchers become alert to clues about how it may be possible to *transform* the practices they are producing and reproducing through their current ways of working. If their current practices are the product of one particular set of intentions, conditions and circumstances, then other (or transformed) practices may be produced and reproduced under other (or transformed) intentions, conditions and circumstances. Focusing on practices in a concrete and specific way makes them accessible for reflection, discussion and reconstruction as products of past circumstances that are capable of being modified in and for present and future circumstances

## **The People who Typically Conduct Critical Participatory Action Research**

The kinds of people who conduct critical participatory action research to transform their practices, their understandings of their practices, and the conditions under which they practice have included:

- teachers in early childhood education and care, schools, vocational education, higher education, inclusive and special education, youth work, outdoor education, and other settings working on improving educational practices and the outcomes of education (for example, within and across classrooms and schools and other formal and informal educational institutions), and also as members of professional education associations and educational research associations,
- community educators working on literacy programs,
- nurses in a variety of primary health care, hospital and aged care settings,
- physicians working in contexts of disease prevention and improvement of clinical practice,
- a range of allied health professionals, including physiotherapists and occupational therapists, working to improve care and professional practice in hospitals and in private and community practice,
- farmers and rural communities transforming their agricultural practices, including through agricultural extension initiatives, and transforming the environmental impacts of their practices (for example, impacts on biodiversity),

- managers and workers transforming production and management practices in a wide range of industries and kinds of organisations, especially during times of major transformation of industries,
- community action groups taking concerted action to mitigate Greenhouse Gas emissions and other untoward impacts of their practices on the environment (taking action to address such things as, for example, improving air and water quality, producing food locally, reducing energy use, switching to renewable energy sources, reducing waste, recycling, addressing threats to biodiversity),
- anthropologists, social workers and educators working with communities for community cultural, social and economic development and change, including through community theatre initiatives,
- anthropologists, physicians and others working with communities to eliminate racism, free women from prostitution, and to end practices of genital mutilation,
- many activist groups working in social movements like the civil rights movement, the women's movement, the workers' movement, the peace movement, the anti-nuclear movement, the green movement and others, and
- growing numbers of international youth networks such as *Free the Children*, an organization started by Craig Kielburger who was a youth who worked alongside family friends to develop a web-based organization aimed at ending mistreatment and exploitation of youth internationally. See other such youth organizations in Lewis's (2008) *The Teen Guide to Global Action*.

There are many others. Even from this list, however, you can see that the idea of critical participatory action research has appealed to people engaged in many kinds of social practice. It is perhaps easy to see how the terms 'action research' and 'development' or 'improvement' are linked together. We are very wary of such links because 'development' and 'improvement' are vague concepts, and, perversely, can include some activities embodying assumptions that are really the antithesis of the idea of critical participatory action research. Think, for example, of the kind of 'development' that bulldozes mangrove communities where fish breed in order to build beachside apartments, or the kind of 'organisational development' that aims to give factory workers the illusion of consultation about how their work can be improved without significantly improving working conditions, or the kind of 'improvement' of urban environments that obliterates the finest period architecture of particular streetscapes. By contrast, critical participatory action research has the goal of helping participants to work together towards making their individual and collective practices meet the criteria of rationality, sustainability and justice—working together to make their practices

- more *rational* in the senses of being more reasonable, more comprehensible, more coherent, and more sensible;
- more *sustainable* (including for the long term and for future generations) in the sense that they are more productive, more satisfying, and less wasteful; and
- more *just* in the sense that they more inclusive, more solidary (fostering solidarity), that they avoid the injustices of domination and oppression (Young 1990), and they do not cause harm to or suffering among particular individuals or groups.

## ***An Example in Education***

As referred to earlier in the Braxton High School recycling project example, teachers, support staff, students, parents and staff from outside organizations learned side-by-side to make a difference to recycling practices in this school community. What was not highlighted earlier was the crucial role played by the involvement of the principal of Braxton High School in creating conditions for such shared leadership at the start of this critical participatory action research project.

### **The principal**

The principal worked alongside a district staff member to shift away from an instructional leadership style of mandating ‘best’ teaching practices to co-inquiring with staff into gaps between visions of optimal teaching and learning and realities in classrooms. He decided to gather student feedback through focus groups (see *Resource 6, Gathering evidence, documenting* for an explanation of focus groups) and to use that feedback to begin this co-inquiry with staff who then shaped their own curricular and extracurricular projects to address specific aspects of the results.

### **High school teachers and students shape extra-curricular projects that involve the whole school community**

Two biology teachers were surprised that students indicated that they cared about environmental issues, but that they didn’t feel they had the ability to effect change in local and global communities. These teachers worked with students to write a survey of current recycling practices of students, teachers, support staff (most notably custodians) and parents in their local community. Because the results showed that little recycling happened because of a lack of awareness about what could be recycled and where to put the recycled items, the students who were most interested in addressing this issue formed a leadership team outside of class. This team engaged other students, the administrators and custodial staff in planning a budget for new containers for recycled items and a “raising awareness” blitz to share what the containers were for and why it mattered to use them. In this way, staff and students were co-researchers of an environmental stewardship critical participatory action research project and the principal supported their efforts by turning over funds to them.

An English and Physical Education teacher co-wrote a proposal for a critical participatory action research project called “H.I.P.: Healthy Intramurals Project” after learning from student focus group feedback that many students felt intimidated by competitive fitness opportunities in the school and didn’t see any way to take part in sports aimed at social and physical wellness of

students. The H.I.P. project started with the two teachers inviting students to shape a budget and plan for opening up more opportunities for students to participate in varied fitness activities during breaks and after school.

### **High school teachers and students get involved in critical participatory action research through curricular projects that involve mainly students and some external organizations**

A key result of student focus group feedback was that students were struggling to balance their academic and personal lives. Some of the comments by especially grade 12 students were similar to this one: *I work to help my family and I want to do well in school, but how do I do it all? I am under so much pressure and feel stressed all of the time.* The principal worked with a teacher to design an English course to be self-paced. They chose to design a course differently to open up more choice in terms of time to complete the course requirements, to write the diploma, and to explore diverse supports (that is, more intensive one-on-one tutoring, access to additional tutors; flexible assignment designs and schedules) that were not typically part of the traditional English course work. This self-paced English 10 course became a critical participatory action research project involving multiple teachers, the 11 students who registered for the course and the students' parents. Finally, the Fashion 30 teacher decided to ask students how they could use their talents in creating clothing for youth to support youth locally and globally. The students and the teacher co-planned a fashion show that raised money for various youth organizations.

### **District staff get involved in school-based critical participatory action research projects**

District staff supported all of the above projects in various ways. The district lead researcher met with the principal to decide on some methods of data gathering to profile students' perspectives on engagement, disengagement and agency. She led the initial professional development sessions to review focus group results so that the principal could be one of the staff who dialogued about felt concerns that were connected to the students' feedback. Curriculum consultants supported teachers with planning projects that had strong curricular links to their issues and co-developed assessment tools and protocols (i.e., using Google survey tools, software for blogs and chat rooms in safe digital spaces, digital citizenship lessons based on district policies etc.) to monitor students' learning and the progress of the projects. District staff in Facilities Services and Purchasing advised custodial staff and school administration with names of external agencies to contact to purchase recycling bins and what to consider when installing them in the school.

**Table 1.1** Theorists' theories and practitioners' practices

	Theories	Practices
<i>Theorists</i>	Theorists' theories	Theorists' practices
<i>Practitioners</i>	Practitioners' theories	Practitioners' practices

## Blurring Boundaries: Theorists and Practitioners, Researchers and Practitioners

Some social and educational research—though usually not action research—aims at changing educational practitioners' practices so they will conform to educational theorists' theories about how practice should be conducted. This view of the role of educational research forgets or ignores that theorists' theories are formed by the theorists' own practices of 'theorising' (for example, their practices of reading and research), and that practitioners' practices are oriented and informed by their own educational theories (whether dignified by the name 'theory' or simply the categories through which the practitioners interpret their world). In fact, it is practitioners' theories that guide their practice every day. All practices have theories that guide them, whether those theories are formal or informal, implicit or explicit (see Table 1.1).

Action research treats theorists as practitioners and practitioners as theorists—both roles involve theoretical and practical activities. Action research is interested not so much in closing the alleged 'gap' between theory and practice; instead, we ask 'Whose theories, and whose practices is the alleged gap between?' In critical participatory action research, we are interested in closing the gap between the roles of theorist and practitioner—we aim to secure processes of research in which practitioners are theorists, and theorists are practitioners.

But it is not just educational theorists' and practitioners' theories and practices of education (or social work or nursing or medicine) that are involved in these reciprocal relationships. The theorists and practitioners involved are also oriented in their practices of research or action research by their theories of research or action research. The nested set of relationships is thus a little more complex.

Teachers are often led to think that it is researchers—usually from universities or research institutes—who have the most credible ideas about how their (the teachers') practices should be conducted. In this book, we take the view that *only* teachers can change teaching practices in local settings, even if they are following advice from elsewhere. In this book, we take the view that practitioners are the greatest resource of all for changing educational practice, and that, therefore, teachers' research is the most potent force for changing educational practice (see Table 1.2).

It is an open question whether these different theories and practices cohere with one another, for educational researchers or educational practitioners or both, in relation to education or research or both. Do the researchers and practitioners involved see research or action research as an educative process like other educational processes, for example? Or do they see education as, in some sense, a process of research—as John Dewey (1916) did? And how far does participation in education or the research process stretch—to include only theorists or teachers or also their

**Table 1.2** Researchers' theories and practitioners practices

	Theories	Practices
<i>Researchers</i>	Researchers' theories	Researchers' practices
<i>Practitioners</i>	Practitioners' theories	Practitioners' practices

students and others in the community who are also affected by the education and research processes?

In action research, the attempt is not to bring practitioners' practices into conformity with (external) theorists' theories, but to have practitioners be theorists and researchers, that is, to give practitioners intellectual and moral control over their practice wherever their practice is justified by sustained and critical individual and collective self-reflection. Their critical participatory action research, as a practice-changing practice, is a self-reflective process by which they remake their practice for themselves. And, as noted earlier, this process is a process of self-transformation—a process that transforms the sayings, doings and relating that compose one's own life and the collective life of a class or a school or a community—sayings, doings and relating that give our lives meaning, substance and value.

## Critical Participatory Action Research as a Practice-Changing Practice

In our recent work, we have attempted to secure critical participatory action research as something more than a research methodology (a theory about how to conduct research; for a critique of action research as “methodology”, see Carr 2006)—as something more than an instrumental means to the abstract goals of ‘improvement’ and ‘development’ that have become a kind of self-assuring mantra for all kinds of organisations in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The mantra of modernity—since the eighteenth century Enlightenment, in fact—has been ‘If a thing exists, it can be improved’. As César Cascante Fernández (2007) has argued, it turns out that action research—especially technical action research—has been coopted to serve the self-interests of institutions and organisations in different ways in different eras of social transformation since the 1980s (Cascante wrote particularly about Spain, but the point holds across the post-industrialised West): the 1970s-’1980s era of social democracy, the 1990s era of organisational efficiency, and the contemporary era of neoliberal corporate management in every sector of the economy and government. Part of our modern, Enlightenment way of understanding the world is to believe that more or less everything can be improved—this is the ideal of progress through science. In various forms, action research has been caught up in this ideal, and seen as a technique for (for example) school *improvement* or community *development* or organisational *development*.

We are not so certain that the direction of improvement and development over the last 50 years or so has always been ‘up’. In fact, some things once touted as

improvements and developments seem to have made things worse than before—the extreme forms of partisan news and commentary in some of the public media (an unanticipated consequence of reaching out to more diverse audience segments), for example, or new forms of employment that leave many workers in the West without sufficient hours of work and adequate working conditions (an unanticipated consequence of introducing more ‘flexible’ work arrangements), or new forms of multinational commerce that leave workers in the developing world without reasonable working hours or safe working conditions (an unanticipated consequence of economic development in some of the world’s poorest countries). Some kinds of school and curriculum ‘improvements’ in recent decades in the West have also had unanticipated untoward consequences, like overstuffed and standardised school curricula that fail to engage the assent and interest of many students, and standardised measures of student learning outcomes that isolate and undermine particular schools and teachers.

We can now see more clearly than before, perhaps, that there is a doubleness to the ideas of ‘progress’, ‘improvement’ and ‘development’. What count as cases of ‘progress’ or ‘improvement’ or ‘development’ for some groups, other groups may not regard equally or at all as cases of these things. Critical participatory action researchers aim to be aware of this doubleness, and alert to how irrationality and unreasonableness, unproductiveness and unsustainability, and injustice and exclusion can creep into things, even when we think we are making ‘progress’ or ‘improvements’ or that we are ‘developing’ things.

One way of understanding this doubleness—especially through adopting a *critical* perspective—emerged in our thinking about action research itself. In two chapters published in different editions of *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Kemmis and McTaggart 2000, 2005), we distinguished between attempts to make action research more research-like (which often occurs when people try to ‘improve’ action research as a particular kind of research *methodology*) and attempts to understand critical participatory action research as itself a *social practice*—a special kind of social practice that aims at transforming other social practices. Kemmis (2009) captured this shift by describing action research as a “practice changing practice” (p. 463). On this view, we have also argued (Kemmis and McTaggart 2005; Kemmis 2010) that action research in general might think a little less about the extent to which it contributes to *knowledge* (especially in these days when the extent to which university researchers contribute to knowledge is measured by the extent to which they publish in books and academic journals) and more about the extent to which it contributes to *history*—to changing, for the better, the world we live and practise in.

On the view that critical participatory action research is a practice changing practice, we can understand action research (or other forms of research) *not* as ‘standing above’ or ‘transcending’ other forms of practice, but on the same level with other forms of practice. Research, on this view, does not have a bird’s eye view or a God’s eye view’ of practice down here on the ground. On this view, critical participatory action research looks eye to eye with other practices. To change metaphors, critical participatory action research is in dialogue with other practices; it does not ‘talk

down' to them. In fact, it is the self-reflective dialogue of the subject with itself, whether the subject is an individual person or a collection of people.

On this view of critical participatory action research, we do not imagine it as a kind of research instrument that can be perfected so that it will give us exact or 'true' readings of states of affairs in the world. Instead, we think of it as a way of opening up space for dialogue and conversation about states of affairs in our worlds. We view critical participatory action research as a process for opening up communicative space—space for public discourse in public spheres. We explain this in Chap. 2 by outlining a new view of what 'participation' means in critical participatory action research.

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