Editorial

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EDITORIAL

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This issue of *Educational Action Research* sees articles from Finland, Norway, Estonia, UK, USA and Australia offering global insights into a range of contexts, focuses and types of action research.

Reason and Bradbury state that 'action research is a family of practices of living inquiry that aims, in a great variety of ways, to link practice and ideas in the service of flourishing' (2008, 1). The papers in this issue demonstrate just this point. Whilst all of them focus on action research within educational contexts, varying from early years childcare through to university settings, and from practitioner to superintendent levels of seniority, they have been structured around the different contexts for the research – first universities, then school and leadership contexts for action research.

The focus for the 'action' in these research projects ranges from the improvement of learning through pedagogical innovation, improvement of teachers' counselling self-efficacy, school improvement, leadership development, facilitation, teaching action research itself, and re-politicising university students. The types of action research used include practical action research, reflective action research with a critical friend, first and third person action research, participatory action research, and 'accidental' action research. This range illustrates both the breadth of the *'family of practices'* (Reason and Bradbury 2008) and the sometimes messy and organic nature of action research.

The first four papers are based in university settings, encompassing engineering students, teacher trainees, early childhood students and a widening participation recruitment team. In 'Motivating first-year engineering students through gamified homework', Kulhanek, Butler and Bodnar present their research on the use of gamification in engineering education in the USA. The development of gamification through the curriculum was found to enhance the students' empowerment, feelings of success, and learning outcomes. Two years and two cycles of action research grounded in ongoing student feedback were the keys to success. The action research not only produced pedagogical improvements for the students, but also a commitment from the research team to 'the need for continual dialogue to take place on any future implementations'.

The paper by Bendtsen et al., 'Student teachers' experiences of action research-based projects: two cases within pre-service teacher education in Finland', explores trainee teachers' experiences of action research during their programmes. The authors state that including action research in the curriculum was intended to create an 'inquiry stance' within the teaching profession, ensuring continuing professional development. Whilst the action research was a positive experience for the students overall, there were variations in experiences between cohorts who were training to teach different age ranges. The degree of autonomy and support the students had in their wider studies impacted on the attitudes and aptitude adopted towards the action research projects. Interesting dilemmas arise around giving 'enough' support (scaffold), agency and practical challenges. The

authors conclude that for action research in pre-service teacher education to be success-ful, there has to be a careful balance of scaffolding and individual influence and agency. These are important consideration for everyone supporting communities, students, prac-titioners and new researchers to undertake action research projects for the first time.

From a UK university setting, Webster-Deakin takes the reader on her journey through methodology and positionality. In her paper, 'Exploring the fluidity of relationships and methodology as an "insider" action researcher', we see an open, reflexive account of the iterative and potentially messy nature of action research. The author describes how she wanted to undertake participatory action research, but this was not possible in the context of university partnerships with schools. The honesty that '*I was in fact enforcing my vision for the research over their needs and concerns*' reminds us of the importance of reporting what went wrong in order for others to learn. The project changed to action research, and to great effect. The researcher found this change paved the way for successful research that transformed her role from outsider to insider as she co-inquired with university colleagues. The impact of making these choices was not only learning about how to deliver widening participation sessions in schools, but also how to research and learn together across professional boundaries.

Lau and Body's paper, 'Community alliances and participatory action research as a mechanism for re-politicising social action for students in higher education', sets out to re-politicise social action in a UK HE context. The students involved, all studying Early Childhood, were supported to run their own action research projects with children aged 2–10 in local communities. Not only did the students learn about participatory action research, they also became more concerned about local issues, becoming advo-cates for children's voice, and, increasingly, volunteering themselves. This is a potent example of a localised practice (teaching students about action research) rippling out into communities with a potentially long-term legacy of increased social action. Central to the process, the authors state, is the authentic democratic space enabled by participatory action research. As a result, they call for new partnerships with higher education, com-munity organisations, children and young people, and rightly so with the evidence of '*greater engagement, a shift in thinking and a repositioning of themselves as both learners and citizens, as well as a connection between the research and wider social and political processes through an identification of children's agency and rights*'.

The fifth and sixth papers in this issue are directly concerned with the practice of education in schools. In their paper, 'Hinting as a pedagogical strategy to promote prosocial behaviour', Fogelgarn, Burns and Lewis from Australia provide a detailed account of the power of teacher talk in developing prosocial classrooms. Their findings are compelling, offering detailed insights into the impact of teacher talk and the potential to facilitate moral behaviour through intentional teacher talk. Equally fascinating is their reference to 'accidental action research'. Whilst the teacher talk project was encompassed in a thoroughly planned Achievement Improvement Zone initiative, within this, two serendipitous forms of data collection occurred that enabled the depth of action research reported. The first 'happy accident' was the detailed recording of notes, which was a spontaneous activity to enable feedback to the teachers observed. Secondly, the research team decided to review all these notes over a longer period of time than originally

planned. This illustrates that whilst careful research design is of great importance, researchers must also be open to chance occurrences and the potential they might offer. A reflexive, iterative and 'messy' process akin to that of Webster-Deakin.

The sixth paper, 'The counselling self-efficacy scale for teachers: action research' is from Estonia. In it, Seema explains that teachers in Estonia are expected to provide counselling for children and colleagues with no training or materials to support them. The complexity of navigating a teaching and counselling role is only compounded by the lack of support. As a result, the author set out to develop a scale to measure teachers' counselling competence, supporting the teaching of educational counselling within one university. What transpired, however, was the development of a scale that measures counselling self-efficacy in teachers, exceeding initial expectations. The scale was found to support self-reflection, motivation, confidence and understanding of counselling itself. This research once again shows the potential of a micro project to effect wider change, supporting teachers across Estonia to support children and colleagues to have greater wellbeing. The action research process is described as a 'transformative' learning experience for the researcher, which has additionally bolstered her competence and self-confidence. This reveals the layers of transformation possible within an action research project – transformative for the researcher as well as the community of practice.

In the next two papers, from Anderson and Cook and Henriksen and Aas, we visit the world of leadership development; the former in the context of Early Years leadership in the UK and the second in superintendent leadership in Norway. In 'Developing Early Years leadership: examining the practice of facilitation in and through action research', Anderson, with Cook's critical friendship, gives a fascinating insight into the Early Years Leaders second person action research cycles wrapped within her own first person action research on her practice of leadership facilitation, demonstrating how intricate and nuanced action research is able to be as these projects intersect. This paper reminds us of the power of the communicative space of action research inquiries – both of Anderson and of the leaders – and of the importance of articulating architectures of practice as per Kemmis and McTaggart.

The thread of critical friendship continues in the leadership study of Henricksen and Aas, 'Enhancing system thinking – a superintendent and three principals reflecting with a critical friend'. Here, critical friends support colleague leaders to reflect on action achieving double loop learning through 'management dialogue'. The critical friend role was found to be a catalyst for systematic reflections on leadership practices, which stimulated system thinking. Not only did the research preserve the time and space for reflection, but also aided the leaders' metacognition. The authors' work has shown the potential of dialogical practices such as action research to bridge the divide between superintendents and principals, municipalities and schools, supporting school development through trust and relationships.

The concluding paper in this issue is a review of the 5th edition of Stringer and Aragon's *Action Research* written by Greenwood. There is high praise for the philosophical, methodological, practical, investigative, and evaluative aspects of action research practice presented in the book. These are also reflected in the range of papers included in this issue of *Educational Action Research*. From the same philosophical routes, we see a family of methodological practices: first and second person, action research, practitioner action

research, and accidental action research. Each paper presents its own practical challenge in its own unique context with varied approaches to data collection and analysis. And all yield important investigative and evaluative aspects of practice and action research itself.

Greenwood critiques the text on two main grounds. One is that all the projects presented seem well resourced and gifted ample time and, secondly, that most of the organisations involved are mainstream and do not tackle some of the more underserved populations or significant problems in society. The papers in this issue tackle important topics, which have significance for the participants, for wider communities of practice and, in many cases, society at large. However, they too are grounded in relatively educational contexts. This is important work: good education is the foundation stone of wellbeing for everyone in society. There are also other communities action research attends to and supports; as Greenwood states, 'climate change work, landlessness, refugee camps', the list would go on. We are proud to celebrate action research in educational contexts, its legacy and roots, and we continue to look to celebrate new and more diverse settings for action research, with all the challenges they bring, and to welcome more members of the action research practice family.

Reference

Reason, P., and H. Bradbury. 2008. "Introduction." In *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research*. 5th ed., edited by P. Reason, and H. Bradbury, 1–11. London: SAGE publishing.

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