SIGNIFICANT CHANGES IN EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE THROUGH ACTION RESEARCH

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Abstract: Traditional approaches to professional development are based on the assumption that it is enough to inform practitioners about the new possibilities often created and tested out of their professional context to bring about the changes. Unlike this, in action researches the active role of a practitioner is implied during all process of change, with the following starting points:

1. Education is a complex activity in which it is rarely possible to anticipate and regulate appropriate solutions.
2. For the realization of fundamental changes, having a positive social atmosphere and support to practitioners – agents of the changes – is of pivotal importance.
3. Learning is conducted through practitioners' action and (self) critical discussion in the context of practice communities or learning communities about the results of one's actions.
4. Practitioners are the most responsible for evaluation and presentation of their actions.

In action researches practitioners strive to improve their educational practice and develop ideas as creative potentials as well as ideas from other participants of the educational process.

Key words: action research, educational changes, learning community, learning community network

1. Introduction

I believe that most pedagogists, as well as the other experts, will agree that our schools are in a real need of change. Namely, the teacher-dominating classes where pupils' activities are neglected are hardly in accordance with the post-industrial age, which is characterized by constant changes and coping with the problems for which it is difficult to find unique solutions. Although we can agree that quality changes in schools are welcome, the real question is how to inspire them.

One of the possibilities for their implementation is teacher training. However, teacher training mostly consists of occasional gatherings of a group of teachers in order to learn about some new possibilities in education, and that can hardly contribute to significant changes in teacher's practice. As much as the teachers are ready for changes, there are numerous questions and issues which remain unresolved after the teachers are back at their professional environment. Marica Zovko, elementary class teacher testified to that during research interview:

> It isn't always easy. From that initial phase, initial understanding – yes, that is what I should try to change when I get back to the classroom, when I am back in the actual situation. Then one realizes that things do not really work that way. And if one has no willingness or support to give it more thought, to proceed, to talk about it… Because we all need somebody to talk to. When I get back from a one-day seminar, I have nobody to ask my questions to because you face questions and problems only after you have started implementing what you have learned. So, that is the way all my changes have started. I liked it when I had somebody to ask. That is where I found our learning community extremely useful. Changes are not simple, changes are not straightforward… it is not as we might initially see or perceive demonstration lesson and start thinking: this is the way it should be done. Changes do not happen according to some recipe. That is something I have learned. One

always needs to take an active approach… The worst is when one starts, gets to the problem and has to go back and start over. (M. Zovko, personal communication)

Hollingsworth and Sockett (1994, pp 2) claim that neither long courses nor postgraduate education encourage changes considerably, because teachers are offered theory instead of experience and wisdom stemming from practice. This problem has been observed by Kurt Lewin (1946, pp 36-37). Namely, he pointed out the importance of being familiar with the general rules about influencing specific conditions on possible results, stated in the form of „if-then" conclusions. However, this knowledge, although important, isn't enough for the practitioners to help them solve everyday professional problems, the solution for which greatly depends on the specificity of the situation in which they occur. In such situations, when there are no clear answers, the solutions provided by the practitioners themselves are much more important because they come from personal pedagogical experience (Schön, 1990). In spite of their expertise, practitioners have difficulty in assessing whether these creative solutions have the desired direction and intensity, so they tend to move in circle while trying. Academic community offers very little help, so it is important that the practitioners themselves assume the role of researcher (Lewin, 1946, pp 38). Therefore, it is not only important that the teacher's actions and methods are analyzed, it is also important that they do it themselves. (Stenhouse, 1975, pp 143). Action researches enable the teacher to monitor and publish results of their own teaching, which improves their educational practice and enriches pedagogical theory with new creative solutions.

2. Characteristics of action research

The idea of action research was devised in 1940s by Kurt Lewin and John Collier while they were trying to find out the solutions to the controversies which positivistic way of thinking couldn't and wouldn't resolve. In short, Bargal (2006, pp 381-383) states these characteristics of Lewin's approach to action research:[1]

1. Action research is the combination of comprehensive, sometimes experimental study, of the social issue and the effort to resolve that issue.
2. It implies a spiral process of data collecting in accordance with set goals and action which aims at the implementation of set goals and assessment of the results
3. Action research requires feedback about results of the intervention to all research participants
4. Action research implies constant cooperation between researchers and practitioners
5. A small group of practitioners plays a central role in decision making and bringing about changes
6. Action research takes into account values, goals and needs of all participants
7. Action research aims at creating knowledge, formulating principles of intervention, as well as creating instruments necessary for intervention and evaluation
8. In the framework of action research, it is particularly important to recruit, educate, train and support to the agents of changes (team leaders)

In the beginning, it was believed that teachers are not qualified enough to conduct the action research independently, so it was expected that they cooperate with professional researchers and practitioners (Lassonde, Ritchie and Fox, 2007, pp 5). Contemporary approach to action research sees the practitioners as independent researchers, not only associates in action research led by

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[1] Neilsen (2006, pp. 392-396) states that all these characteristics can be found in Collier's works.

certain institutions (Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Hopkins, 1988; Patterson, Minnick Santa, Short and Smith, 1993; Burnaford, Fischer and Hobson, 1996; Altrichter, Posh and Somekh, 1998; Macintyre, 2000; Mills, 2000; McNiff and Whitehead, 2006).

It is important to say that action research weren't immediately greeted with enthusiasm. Moreover, they were rarely conducted until the 1970s and were scarcely represented in expert literature. (Hollingsworth and Sockett, 1994, pp 5). There are different reasons which contributed to that kind of relationship towards a new idea. One of the reasons lies in the fact that the hierarchical model of education changes had the primary influence, and that model saw institutions superimposed to schools. Namely, the changes were devised outside schools and were given to teachers in written form. The teachers were then expected to implement those changes in their practice. The efficiency of these reforms was measured by different standardised procedures supervised by research institutions separate from schools. However, the teachers' feelings were rarely taken into account and they were mainly negative, including denial, resignation, loss of self-esteem, the feeling of pressure and degradation and mistrust toward the reformers (Hargreaves, 2004, pp 289). Despite the ample funds invested in these reformations, their effects were negligible and disappeared as soon as outside support, i.e. funds, stopped. (Hargreaves and Fink, 2003, pp 694).

3. Conducting significant changes through action research

Considering the recent attempt to reform the Croatian educational system, it is important to bring to light some of the characteristics of contemporary approach to changes, with examples coming from my personal, long-term engagement with action researches.

The process of change can be achieved in three interlinked stages: **initiation (motivation), implementation and institutionalization** (Hopkins, 2001, pp 39). The aim of this process is to reach the level of institutionalization, i.e. enable their duration. It is also important that these changes are self-sustainable (Hargreaves and Fink, 2003). That means that, above all, it is crucial to invest in teacher's expertise within schools who will than continue to use their potentials even after the financial support stops and after the coordinator stops supervising them.

> **Example 1.** Teacher Vesna Šimić (2008.) has, as a part of her action research, initiated an internet magazine Klik-klak (http://cvrcak.net/blog/Klik-Klak). The pupils of the local school in the village of Klakar were able to independently publish texts and photographies from their everyday life, thus creating an interesting magazine which attracted the attention of readers from different parts of the world. Soon after the research was completed (in July 2006), Vesna Šimić was elected principal of Vladimir Nazor elementary school in Slavonski Brod. Despite the fact that Vesna was replaced with the teacher who had no previous experience in editing a webzine, Vesna's former pupils have continued to edit their magazine and have been joined by pupils from other local schools. Today, there are eight pupil webzines operating under „Vladimir Nazor" elementary school in Slavonski Brod (see http://cvrcak.net/blog/).

Image 1.   **First grade pupil editing internet magazine**

We can conclude from the previous example that personal experiences of particular teachers which are fulfilled, evaluated and documented through action research, can inspire other teachers to try out similar ideas. Certainly, the fact that the teacher who initiated that idea became the principal of the school encouraged the continual publishing of the webzine. As a principal, she gave all professional and material support to the teachers who wanted to continue applying this innovation in their classrooms. Without the principal's support, the institutionalization of new pedagogical possibility would be questionable. This points to the importance of the principal's role, who should be responsible for stimulating innovative atmosphere, which naturally implies that one of the most important criteria for their selection should be their expertise in the teacher's role.

Changes in educational process can be perceived at three levels: **the use of new classroom materials and technologies, the use of new teaching methods and changes in values and the theoretical understanding of the educational process** (Fullan, 1991, pp 37). Significant changes include all three levels, with the third level being particularly significant, because it implies acceptance and elaboration of new educational philosophy.

> **Example 2.** In her action research, teacher Danijela Ljubac Mec (2008.) has tried to encourage pupils' independence in combined section of early primary school classes. At the beginning of her research, I video recorded her Croatian language class, where the teacher's domination was obvious (http://vimeo.com/3121258). Namely, all the activities were devised and conducted by the teacher herself, while the pupils only followed her instructions.

Image 2.   Teacher-dominated classroom

Image 3.   Classroom directed towards pupil

In the course of the action research, the teacher changed her educational practice where she put more emphasis on children's independence and initiative. (http://www.vimeo.com/2722890):

Monitoring my students in project classroom would often leave me with the impression that I was sometimes completely redundant in class. It seemed as if my students were finding their way in that process with such ease that after first ten minutes, they no longer needed the teacher to guide them... This led me to the conclusion that a well organized teaching and learning process can bring a lot of significant changes. These changes involve the teacher-student relationship, which has now become more partner-like. If students have trust in their teacher, if their communication is pleasant and full of understanding, students will be more cooperative. They will approach their assignments with greater ease. If students are under pressure and have a feeling that they have to do something because of a grade or as a punishment, they will lack intrinsic motivation that project classroom is based upon.

When we start paying more attention to our students, their thoughts, their look, smile, posture, when we pay more attention to non-verbal communication, we have paved the way for progress and success. I have realized that teachers sometimes don't have enough confidence in their students and think that they should have complete control over everything... But our classes are the best proof of how wonderful webbings can come into existence if we approach our students with an open heart and trust in their abilities (Ljubac-Mec, 2008, p. 131)!

At the end of teacher Daniela's research, it was clear that the changes didn't happen only in regards to teaching content and method, but the teacher herself has also accepted a new theoretical framework of a pupil-oriented school. In this case, we can speak about significant change, not only about the advancement of educational practice. *Therefore, significant change implies a new competent and theoretical framework, not only the changes in teaching content and methods.*

The sustainability of these changes is possible only if they become an integral part of a **school culture.** It is also important to emphasize that a change is essentially a process, not an event. (Fullan, 1991, pp 49). In other words, changes need to mature as a result of mindful effort of all the people within schools.

Example 3. In her action research, teacher Ivana Kljaić (2006.) tried to improve understanding, cooperation and agreement with the children with learning difficulties. Despite accomplishing significant changes in her teaching practice, Ivana had to face the fact that no substantial changes took place in her school, which affected her motivation negatively:

Important assumption in making changes was a personal decision to go for it, as well as professional support of my colleagues. However, the environment in my school often affected my motivation negatively, because most of the teachers didn't have similar needs.

Changes that the teachers are trying to make in their teaching shouldn't be their private matter, but should become part of the school culture: „If professional development of the teacher is essential to improve the quality of schools, then the role of school is to provide an atmosphere that would encourage life long learning and to satisfy the need for education of adults (Stoll and Fink, 2000, 211)." The collaboration which was achieved mostly via the internet helped me to realize my problems and to feel as a part of the community which is ready for learning. Although the web-based system for cooperation provided me with professional advice, they weren't always useful, but support from my colleagues helped me to go on even in those moments when I was ready to give up on my research...It all shows that during teacher training, especially for teachers-beginners, we should provide not only enough time, space and materials, but also emotional support and the feeling of belonging, assisted by team leaders and colleagues dedicated to learning. (Nias et al. in Stoll and Fink, 2000, 212) (Kljaić, 2006, pp. 115-116).

In spite of the fact that teacher Ivana didn't get appropriate support in her school environment, open to changes, she received support through the network cooperation. This points to the importance of today's means of communication which offer teachers the possibility of creating web-based learning communities. These communities provide the necessary emotional and professional support during an action research, which they wouldn't otherwise receive on their school. This means that professional culture suitable for making significant changes can be brought about on both school and interschool level, even in collaboration with colleagues from abroad, using contemporary technology, especially the Internet.

Instructional leadership has an important role in initiating changes. According to Stoll and Fink (2000, pp 150-151), it is based on optimism, respect for individuality, trust and careful, planned and encouraging actions. In our schools, this role can be assumed by the pedagogues, with the prerequisite that they don't have to handle administrative issues. To enable them to successfully guide the process of changes, it is important to provide comprehensive professional training and postgraduate study.

The most important role of instructional leaders is creating **practice community** (or learning community), which is based on the humanistic (Rogers, 1969; Maslow, 1971; Knowles, 1990) and social theory of learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1999; Wenger, E.,

McDermott, R., Snyder, W. M., 2002). Practice community is a group of people who share common interests, problems or passion, who deepen their knowledge end expertise within a certain area through communication and cooperation (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002, p. 4). Teachers and professional associates who take part in learning communities create a culture of learning without which we can hardly expect any changes in our schools.

Example 4. Teacher Mario Gavran was an associate in the project „Development of creativity in the whole-life teacher education". During this project he conducted an action research which was published under the title „ **Class journal as a possibility of encouraging pupils' creativity** ". At the end of his work, Mario explained the importance of learning community and cooperation with critical friends, which was partially carried out via the Internet:

For me personally, this past period was very difficult and stressful, yet very pleasant and exciting at the same time. While participating in learning communities, I have gained priceless experience of a critical approach to other people's performance as well as my own practice. Talking to critical friends in learning communities and forums were extremely valuable since this type of communication enabled me to open up towards other people and share my thoughts and feelings with them. The most difficult move for me was to open up and lay my own classes bare, to perceive myself in this process and get a clear perspective on all my flaws and imperfections. Until recently, I had spent a lot of time reflecting on how teacher was all alone in the teaching process, on how he or she had no one to share their positive or negative experiences with. I used to go home after classes, completely unaware of all the things that had happened there because I had no feedback information. During our conversations in learning communities, I finally got that feedback information, which was never superficial as most of our short, casual talks in the staff room tend to be. These were rather substantial suggestions from critical friends that would make an impression, make me think and encourage me to change myself and the way I run my classes. (Gavran, 2009)

Looking at the example of teacher Mario and picture 4, it is possible to perceive the differences between an ordinary teacher and a teacher-researcher. Namely, teachers-researchers question their methods and the process of knowledge acquisition to implement particular changes. Questions they pose in the process are intentional, i.e. serve to improve specific aspects of educational practice. In trying to improve educational practice, they collect data, i.e. feedback which would help them to critically observe their actions. Such feedback cannot be easily acquired during casual and superficial communication with their school colleagues. Instead, it is necessary to organize professional debates within learning communities, above all, on school level, which would provide teachers with the opportunity to critically observe their practice. In this way, they are becoming **reflexive practitioners** (Schön, 1983, pp 68; Miljak, 1996, page 28) who don't depend on established scientific theories and methods in their action. Teachers – active researchers are critically observing their practice, carefully think about their actions and in this way, they create adequate educational solutions and theories which are appropriate to the possibilities of their educational context, above all, to their pupils.
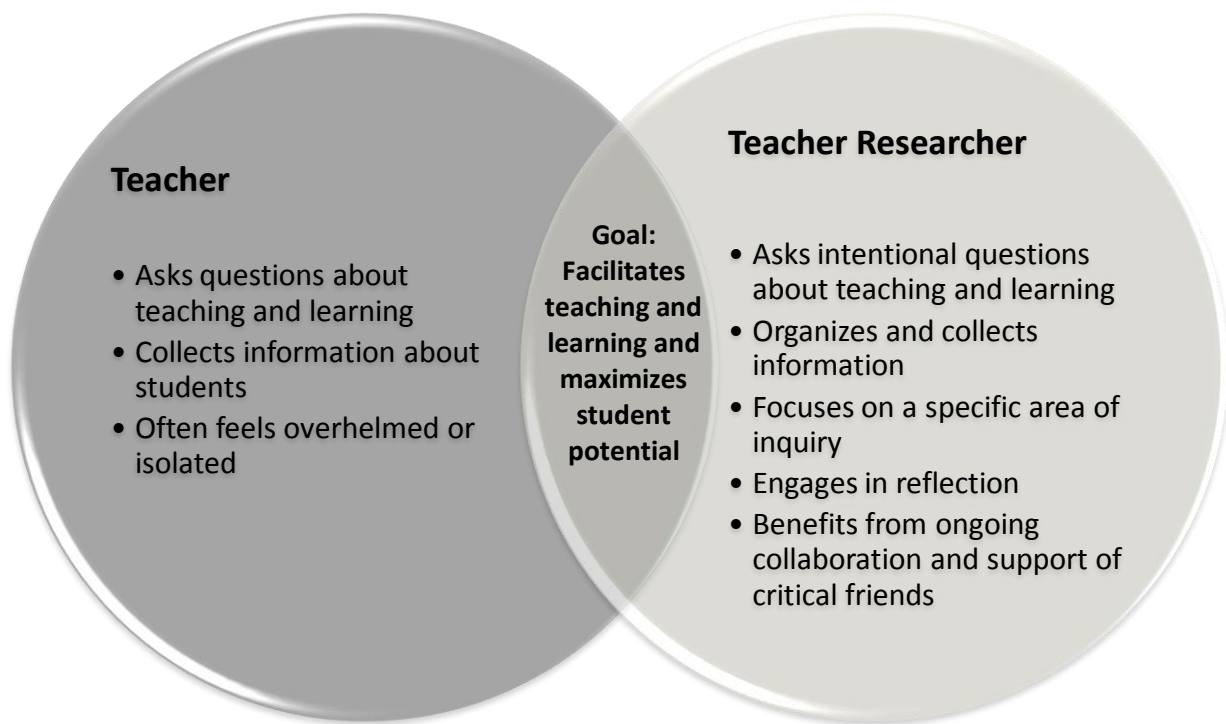
Image 4. **Difference between teacher and teacher-researcher**

(Lassonde, Ritchie & Fox, 2007, pp 7)

Changes are accomplished in complex social circumstances where parents, local community, technology, corporations, state politics and wider professional community play an important role (Fullan, 2000, page 582). It is important to notice that these circumstances often function as a support in making changes, rather than an obstacle or threat. Namely, a quality school is an essential prerequisite for social progress. Of course, wider community shouldn't be expected to offer solutions for reaching the quality of educational practice, because that is primarily a educators' concern. However, their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the achieved results should be taken into account.

Example 5. Some of the teachers I have worked with were trying to include parents and other people from the local community in the action research process. Parents were mostly satisfied with the changes that took place. At the end of Danijela Ljubac Mec's action research, one mother said the following: (http://www.vimeo.com/3027815):

It is so nice to see those posters on the Meteo-station..with animals...it's so nice! It's theory own work! When I come to the parents' meeting, Ivana comes to me and asks: „Have you seen it, mum?" She almost shouts: „See? It's me! So that's it! They really did something! They are happy because they achieved something! It exists somewhere, they did it with their own hands, which is the most important thing! We can help them at home with hundred things, but that's not it. I believe that team work helped her a great deal...Anyway, since the first grade, when she demanded to leave school until today...I say: It's 110 percent! She is an entirely different person! For me personally, marks are not the most important thing, other things are what matters. Not everybody need to be doctors or professors, but we must inspire what is best in each child. We need to find the way to do it, but I can say that this team work has all the credit! (Ljubac Mec, 2008, pp 112).

> On the other hand, the opinion of Danijela's colleagues about her research was completely different:
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> *Today, I felt pretty down when I heard that some of my colleagues thought I was doing some kind of children's play which was nothing new, something they had done twenty years ago.*
>
> *I am not sure whether I'm making a mistake if I'm trying to do something to improve my teaching!? Yet, I hope that what I do is good for the pupils (ibid 123)!*

To bring those changes to life in Croatian schools, it isn't enough that only a few teachers implement them. It is essential to create a social environment where such efforts are welcome. This means that changes cannot be made without a planned support of state and local institutions which are responsible for education. Bryk and associates (in Fullan, 2000, page. 583) established four key elements of the outside reform infrastructure on a wider social scale: politics directed towards decentralization, strengthening of local capacities, elaborate system for assessing educational practice (based on the philosophy of strengthening of local capacities and self-assessment) and encouraging innovations.

Creative atmosphere is the most important assumption for establishing sustainable changes. Naturally, over standardization and an outside evaluation of the efficiency don't support these changes. Hargreaves and Fink (2003, p 694) point out that only creative diversity can create prerequisites for the healthy development of the school system. In teachers' action researchers, the solutions they reached together with the pupils proved themselves to be the most adequate (example 6).

> **Example 6.** High school teacher Vehid Ibraković has conducted an action research where he tried to encourage students' creativity in plant production[2] classes. To realize his intention, he used familiar techniques such as mind maps, brainstorming, provocation, six universal question, etc. In spite of that, students' original ideas failed. Vehid commented on this in the following way:
>
> *School culture where creativity is valued insufficiently, as well as my own initial bad implementation of certain creative techniques were big obstacles.*
>
> *However, it seems to me that the problem might lie in the very techniques for encouraging creativity as well. Namely, these techniques are directed towards the creation of original ideas. However, according to Beghett (2007), creativity does not come down merely to originality, because it presents a combination of originality and adequacy. This means that creativity implies the creation of unusual, new, original, but also adequate solutions for the existing social issues Only after I gave the students a freedom of choice, they were able to define several problems relevant to them (arranging of compost place and the production of spices) which enabled them to find suitable solutions (Ibraković, 2009).*

Learning networks have an important role in spreading innovative ideas and quality practice, and they can be created on local and international level. For the creation of these networks it is essential to use up-to-date information-communication technology.

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[2] Plant production is a class subject in agricultural high school. At The Faculty of Agronomy in Zagreb that's a study where one explores „conditions and gives technological solutions to production of different plant cultures in different climatic environments of Croatian plant production area" (http://www.agr.hr/cro/nastava/dds/bilinogojstvo.htm).

> **Example 7.** From the beginning of 2003 the „Network of Learning Communities" is active in the area of Slavonija and Baranja, and this network provided the teachers from several elementary schools the possibility to learn and debate about their action research. For communication, learning and publishing of the results, the participants used different networking systems. We started with the system that can be found at http://mzu.sbnet.hr , where we were debating on the forum during several years and published texts in public articles.
> In the second half of 2005, we started using *Moodle* system for managing our courses and e-learning. Today, we are using the latest version of the *Moodle* system which can be found at http://pedagogija.net/kreativnost, and aims at the cooperation and teacher training within „Development of creativity in the whole-life education of teachers" project.
> In dealing with network cooperation and e-learning in which Croatian teachers were involved, we have gained plenty of knowledge and experience to start an international collaboration. The result of that collaboration is an international publication Educational Journal of Living Theories (http://ejolts.net) where our teachers and associates have the opportunity to publish their action research accounts.

Self-initiation of action-research networks is an example of creating a public sphere (Habermas, 1998). Public sphere consists of people who research, debate and try to solve particular social problems which the institutions of the system couldn't resolve in an appropriate way. The public sphere doesn't affect the social system directly (e.g. the government, administration), but has an indirect influence. The solutions reached by the informal groups of interested individuals (in our case, the network of teachers and action researchers) are an efficient alternative, which can be used by institutions of the system when dealing with different professional problems (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005, pp. 582-594).

4. Conclusion

From all quoted examples, it can be perceived that action researches represent an ideal opportunity for monitoring, evaluation and publishing significant changes in educational practice. Without a researching, the changes that the teachers and pedagogues are trying to make in their practice are insufficiently methodologically and critically evaluated. Apart from that, numerous valuable experiences that come from practitioners remain unnoticed by the wider pedagogical public (Matijević, 1990, pp 79). To resolve that problem, we have tried to create a system for supporting teachers and professional associates who want to conduct action research projects. Support for action researchers exists primarily on school level – within learning communities, as well as through the internet - by creating learning networks. It is particularly important to encourage teachers to publish their experiences in home and foreign publications. In this way, teachers can act locally, and, at the same time, contribute to the development of the theory of education on a global level.

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