Reclaiming Action Research from Practice to Policy – the Case of Lao PDR

Keophouthong Bounyasone, Faculty of Education, National University of Laos, Vientiane, Lao PDR

Lars Dahlström, Department of Education, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden

Ngouay Keosada, Faculty of Education, National University of Laos, Vientiane, Lao PDR

Ann-Louise Silfver, Department of Education, Umeå Centre for Gender Studies, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden

Abstract

Action research offers promising ways of changing educational practice, policy and philosophy at its core. Despite this, action research is too often used as a technical rationality used for evaluating small scale classroom practices. In this article, we discuss a new model for thinking about and doing action research which we argue addresses the full potential of action research for educational change. The model is developed based on experiences from teacher education in the Lao PDR with inspiration from teacher education reform in post-apartheid Namibia. We propose to use action research as the starting point from which to combine cross-cultural dialogue with a critical pedagogy of place as a means to productively tie together global educational discussions and debates with local knowledge and needs. By doing this we find ways to challenge current global and local power relations and promote teachers to be critical inquirers in charge of producing knowledge for local, national and global purposes.

Keywords: action research, teacher education reform, human rights, Lao PDR

1. Introduction

In this paper we present a new foundation for action research in Lao PDR focusing on developing practitioner inquiry which encourages teachers to step out of common sense perspectives of educational practice, which supports students’ natural eagerness to learn for understanding, and strengthens emancipatory connections between society and formal education. The paper emanates from our previous cooperation as students and tutors in a PhD programme organised in cooperation between National University of Laos (NUOL) in Lao PDR and Umeå University (UmU) in Sweden.

*Corresponding author, e-mail: ann-louise.silfver@umu.se
The PhD thesis *Cultivating Educational Action Research in Lao PDR – for a better future?* (Bounyasone & Keosada, 2011) is an important background document to the present paper in which we, based on the research presented in the thesis, develop an argument for how action research can become a tool for educational change in Laos as well as in other countries in both the global south and the global north. The paper also makes reference to Critical Practitioner Inquiry (CPI) a concept developed in Namibia after independence in 1990. CPI was one of the key components of a reformed teacher education in post-apartheid Namibia focusing on teachers-as-researchers in democratic educational reform (Dahlström, 2002, Dahlström & Zeichner, 2009, Zeichner, Kakunde Amukushu, Maukenga & Shilamba, 1998).

Action research was, in the case of Lao PDR, introduced to the educational sector as Participatory Action Research (PAR) through a donor project in 2000 (Stephens, 2007). Bounyasone and Keosada (2011) carried out an analysis of the introduction of action research in their thesis work, studying how PAR travelled from a reform policy to practice within teacher education. Their study concludes that action research, as an educational approach introduced by donors, has been reduced to a technical rationality characterised by a rigid model shaped and maintained through a cascade approach with inborn reductive passages in the reform processes.

Action research is still on the reform agenda in Lao PDR and because of that we want to present a tentative theoretical outline for an alternative to the way action research has developed so far in Lao PDR through the PAR project.

2. Traditions of inquiry and practice

Action research has in principle developed internationally according to three different perspectives or traditions since it entered into the field of education in the 1940s through the social psychologist Curt Lewin (Bounyasone & Keosada, 2011, Carr & Kemmis, 1986, Diniz-Pereira, 2002, Elliott, 1991, Noffke & Stevenson, 1995).

A common tradition follows a technical approach that emphasises an adherence to abstract templates, sometimes characterized as an action research cycle or spiral, regarding both the way action research is carried out and reported. Academics are often perceived as external experts in this approach to action research which is also favoured by organisations such as the World Bank (Diniz-Pereira, 2002). This also influences other international donor agencies worldwide that follow global doctrines of educational development. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Lao PDR, a country heavily dependent on international aid and external financial support in its efforts to develop its education system, has followed this mainstream tradition.

Another tradition, often referred to as a practical approach to action research is more concerned with solving teaching and learning problems in classrooms. This tradition is also common and follows locally developed models that partly counteract formal technical ways of carrying out and reporting action research projects by focusing more on solving experienced problems. This tradition is often located at schools and driven by groups of teachers as collective school projects, sometimes supported and influenced by academics and their scholastic perspectives.
The third tradition to action research is a critical approach that can work as a counter-hegemonic approach making it less common. Critical approaches to action research look beyond the classroom as they often build on the notion that what happens at school and in a classroom is influenced by and connected to contextual issues such as the social and cultural structures in the local community, the educational traditions, national policies, as well as national and international political and economic circumstances. Therefore, action research within the critical tradition combines teaching and learning processes with critical situational and contextual analyses as a way towards empowerment and critical consciousness amongst educators and their students through their educational praxis.

Based on this outline of different action research traditions we find a paradox related to the action research presented as participatory action research in Lao PDR. This paradox is related to the international background of PAR. PAR as an international concept comes from the tradition of a critical approach based on Freire’s educational philosophy presented in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970/1993, see also Diniz-Pereira [2002] and Somekh [2006]). The study by Bouyasone and Keosada finds a different outcome of the introduction of PAR in Lao PDR, an outcome that is closer to a technical approach to action research. This situation might create confusions as PAR is globally presented within a conceptual framework of a critical tradition, but operationalised in Lao PDR following a technical tradition.

However, we can also look at the situation with action research in Lao PDR as part of a different problem; namely that action research came as part of the support from international donors to the educational sector in Lao PDR. The PAR project was introduced as a donor project and as such it became an inevitable part of the reform discourse geared by the hegemony of the global forces. Ball (2006: 48) describes this as “policy ensembles, collections of related policies, [that] exercise power through a production of ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’, as discourses”. This hegemony has been called the Global Educational Reform Movement (GERM) by Finnish scholar Pasi Sahlberg. He describes it as a market-driven and competitive educational reform movement that reduces educational achievement to measurable outcomes from standardised knowledge tests published as scores, and in the process dismantling the collective professionalism of schools and teachers. Furthermore, he claims that this hegemony overlooks the broader learning of social skills, attitudes, moral values beyond reproduced and isolated subject matters, generating individualism, fear, distrust, and competition (Sahlberg, 2010).

In summary, educational action research can mean different things. As a rough characterisation we can describe action research that follows the technical approach as a way by educators to officially respond to external demands and to their own interest to create individual surplus value through administrative acknowledgements, but with less effect on educational practice. Action research according to the practical approach can often create improved practice at local levels but has little influence on national policy levels and mainstream ideologies which can even be detrimental to the improved practices at local levels when national policies reach grassroots level. Action research following a critical approach has a potential to create fundamental changes both at practical and policy levels, but is often seen as a threat by education managers and policy makers and is
therefore seldom allowed to develop further beyond specific projects even though it often creates broader and critical understanding of education and society amongst participants. Furthermore, all action research perspectives can influence and be influenced by academic thinking in positive or negative ways, but also run the risk of being co-opted by external managerial, academic, or market interests, especially in so called participatory approaches.

In this paper we want to elaborate on a new foundation for action research in Lao PDR that is closer to the original idea with PAR, as a way to generate a critical and socially authentic perspective on education. This foundation is based on a merger of more recent ideas with ‘forgotten’ but still relevant educational experiences as a possible alternative to the present situation.

3. Building foundational perspectives

Bounyasone and Keosada (2011) suggested in their thesis an alternative way of conceptualising action research. This conceptualisation is mainly based on cross-cultural dialogue and a critical pedagogy of place. Cross-cultural dialogue emanates from the Portuguese scholar Santos’ theorising (2007) and is used as a way to broaden the educational base for future elaborations on action research by including “forgotten, non-inclusive, or marginalised contributions from different historical and cultural locations that have had an impact on education in Lao PDR” (Bounyasone & Keosada, 2011: 68).

A critical pedagogy of place is inspired by the writings of Gruenewald (2003) and combines a critical pedagogy of decolonisation with place-based re-inhabitation. Furthermore, Bounyasone and Keosada (2011) used an approach to analyse their own action research activities to investigate power relations in the classrooms that will be referred to. We will also include Critical Practitioner Inquiry (CPI) as another approach to action research with significant contributions to a different foundation for practitioner research. These conceptions and approaches are the starting points for our present elaborations.

It is also in view of Stephens’ (2007) assessment of action research as an educational approach strongly influenced by Western individualistic ideas, and the problems arising when such an approach is used in a context characterised by collective thinking and authoritarianism, that we want to introduce a different view. Action research can be something different from what Stephens and others claim, namely that action research is simply another neo-colonial activity and reduced to a part of the global travelling reform agenda (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). Action research developed and practiced from a critical perspective can work both as a marker of collective self-reliance and resistance against global as well as national policy intrusions on educational practices and therefore make a difference for education and beyond. However, in order to reach to this point, another elaboration is needed which addresses a “humanistic baseline” from which subsequent change efforts should spring, as elaborated below based on Santos (2002, 2007) work.

3.1. An allowance of humanistic perspectives

Within global educational movements important concepts for humanity, such as human
rights, democracy, emancipation, and equality, are often taken for granted as unproblematic. Many claim to know what these concepts mean and represent, at least from a Western perspective. This situation needs to be reflected on also in a country like Laos which has people’s democratic republic as part of its official country name and which further relies on international support to the extent that Laos does. Santos (2002, 2007) for instance, problematises Western claims by showing that the common understanding of concepts such as human rights are to a large extent locked into Western paradigmatic thinking that today is becoming a universal truth through the globalisation of Western cultural expressions. By using the example of Santos we want to forward the case that also a concept like action research has to open up for alternative and broader conceptions if it is to make a difference in a country like Lao PDR.

Santos demonstrates how human rights in the universal declaration of 1948 are reduced to fit into the individualistic rights perspective of the capitalistic world and by that undermining the core of constitutive human values, what he calls ‘ur-rights’. These constitutive and founding human values have to be restored through a cross-cultural dialogue that starts in a recognition of the rights that have been suppressed by colonial and imperial Western conceptions building on the following premises, here summarised from Santos (2007: 29-35):

- The right to knowledge that implies the right to knowledge as emancipation grounded on a new epistemology from the non-imperial South.
- The right to bring historical capitalism to trial in a world tribunal for its mass depravation, cultural impoverishment, and ecological destruction and to bring about counter-hegemonic globalisations.
- The right to a solidarity-oriented transformation of the right to property through the establishment of a new social domain that is socially and politically anchored beyond a state centred collectivism as well as beyond a profit-oriented individuality.
- The right to grant rights to entities incapable of bearing duties, namely nature and future generations by removing the reciprocity between rights and duties as installed by the Western conception of rights.
- The right to democratic self-determination both as a collective and individual right for internal as well as external self-determination through an established participatory democracy.
- The right to organise and participate in the creation of rights through the construction of a theory for a radical conception of democracy and a post-imperial reconstruction of human rights centred on undoing the massive acts of constitutive suppression upon which Western modernity was able to transform victor’s rights into universal rights.

Santos’ definition of present day globalisation is related to the hegemonic Western process, as globalisation “is the process by which a given local condition or entity succeeds in extending its reach over the globe and, by doing so, develops the capacity to designate a rival social condition or entity as local” (Santos, 2007: 6-7).
The consequence of this globalisation process is that certain aspects of the social, cultural, and productive human models are played out as hegemonic conditions for consumption and ownership with the effect that this type of globalisation is an expression of an uneven appropriation of resources. However, Santos also recognises a counter-hegemonic type of globalisation that he calls insurgent cosmopolitanism to which he also ascribes cross-cultural dialogues.

Globalised ideas about education have followed the hegemonic process that Santos describes in relation to human rights and reduced it to individual rights. The hegemonic educational process has become accentuated even further after the collapse of the second (socialist) world and after the introduction of the Education For All (EFA) doctrines in 1990. As a consequence, we see a need for cross-cultural dialogues as part of a new foundational option for action research in Lao PDR. Bounyasone and Keosada (2011) started such a dialogue by considering aspects of Buddhist thinking such as mindfulness, connectedness, and impermanence (Chuaprapasilp, 1997). They also included meaningful learning and socially productive education from Celestin Freinet in France, a former colonial power in the then French Indochina which included present day Vietnam, Cambodia, and Lao PDR (Legrand, 1993/2000). Furthermore, they included educational ideas formulated by Shatskii from the early socialist revolution in Soviet Russia represented through ‘the complex method’ that took integrated learning activities far beyond the classroom into the local society (Partlett, 2005).

3.2. Recognizing local perspectives

A critical pedagogy of place offers a framework for educational theory, research, policy, and practice, according to Grunewald (2003). He further asserts that “articulating a critical pedagogy of place is thus a response against educational reform policies that disregard places and that leave assumptions about the relationship between education and the politics of economic development unexamined” (Grunewald, 2003: 3). Critical pedagogy of place is a merger of two educational discourses: ‘critical pedagogy’ and ‘place-based education’.

Critical pedagogy has developed mainly from the work of Paulo Freire in Brazil and other third world countries building on his seminal book Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Freire, 1970/1993). It is the aspect of ‘situationality’, i.e. the importance of space and place in Freire’s critical pedagogy, and its attention to social transformation that connect it with critical pedagogy of place as “places are social constructions filled with ideologies” (Grunewald, 2003: 5) that need to be decoded and decolonised. Freire called this process conscientization, i.e. to become aware of the powers affecting every person’s situated understanding and experiences. Furthermore, critical educators need to recognize traditional cultural knowledge such as indigenous knowledge, elder knowledge, ethnic knowledge, and local knowledge as forms of moral authority in their emancipatory attempts to avoid further colonisations and ecological degradation.

Grunewald combines critical pedagogy with place-based education to create a new standpoint and approach called critical pedagogy of place. While the focus of critical pedagogy has been to combat human oppression, the focus of place-based education has been connected to the common responsibilities humanity has towards nature and the environment. These responsibilities as played out through ecological place-based education
emerge from the specific attributes of place, and from their multidisciplinary, experiential, and reflective practices. We want to note the radical aspect of this approach, as Gruenewald (2003: 7) expresses it:

*This idea is radical because current educational discourses seek to standardize the experience of students from diverse geographical and cultural places so that they may compete in the global economy.*

The current educational reform discourse concerned with competitions, testing, and marketizations that aim to cast national educational systems in the same mould to satisfy the global managerial accountability actually neglects placed-based skills, experiences, and knowledge. This reform discourse develops ahistorical and placeless cultural and individualised perspectives that in the long run will create a lack of togetherness and commonality and a threat against the social fabrics of society. Therefore, critical pedagogy of place is an attempt to redirect the current educational attempts to make education a servant of market forces in a competitive world with a few winners, many losers, and an ever deteriorating ecological base for life.

Critical pedagogy of place recognises contextual situational knowledge such as indigenous, elder, ethnic, local, and ecological knowledge as part of a basis for a counter-hegemonic educational movement in the service of future generations yet without voice:

*Given the cultural complexity of decolonizing and rehabititating places, especially in an educational climate that is increasingly focused on quantitative, paper-and-pencil outcomes at the expense of any conversation about what it means to live well in a place, developing a movement for critical, place-based education practices is a difficult proposition. Yet, critical, place-based pedagogies can help to reframe and ground today’s tiresome debates over standards in the lived experience of people and the actual social and ecological contexts of our lives.*

(Gruenewald, 2003: 11).

### 3.3. Challenging the power nexus

An analytic perspective for action research was jointly developed as part of the preparations for the PhD studies that Bounyasone and Keosada were undertaking. The action research was carried out by Bounyasone and Keosada at NUOL, their ordinary place of work, as a way to challenge the common sense about participatory action research in Lao PDR. The analytical perspective was based on a discussion about the National Constitution of Lao PDR (Government of Lao PDR, 1991) and a document produced by NUOL called the “Concept Paper” (Ministry of Education & Teacher Development Centre, 1994) in combination with field studies and previous experiences. The research revealed a contradiction between the ambitions of the studied policy documents and the practical realities in the teaching and learning processes concerning especially ethnicity and gender as ethnic minority students and female students were generally marginalised (Bounyasone & Keosada, 2011). This led us to jointly establish an analytic perspective to investigate aspects of power in relation to ethnicity and gender and to develop alternative practices that could create participation and empowerment amongst marginalised groups.
We identified two analytic fields where power was played out. The first field, called space and visibility, was defined as the field for different actors in the teaching and learning process to use the social and intellectual space available to make themselves visible and their voices heard. This field was generally occupied by the teacher and male ethnic majority students and we wanted to open up this field also to ethnic minority students and female students. The second field, called information and truth, was defined as the field where information could be transformed to individual and collective knowledge and where information operated as hegemonic truth or shared reasoning. This field often rested with the teacher and the textbook as undisputable and hegemonic truths. Our intention was to open up this field for experienced-based and shared reasoning by students and to develop alternatives to the previously hegemonic truth. Bounyasone and Keosada(2011, p. 151) conclude in their analysis:

*Our overall assessment of the action research inquires is that it is possible to change the social patterns of power distribution in the classrooms, even under rather limited conditions and time frames. We still believe that more fundamental changes are only possible when more continuous efforts are carried out within a modified educational context that includes a broader view on how learning is developed and changes in the way that students’ learning are assessed and examined.*

3.4. Expanding inquiry beyond the classroom door

A fourth component of a new foundation for action research in Lao PDR comes from the African continent as Critical Practitioner Inquiry (CPI), a critical action research approach with a background in activities at a refugee camp for Namibians in the Kwanza-Zul region in Angola. In this rather mountainous and isolated area in Angola the liberation movement South West Africa People’s Organisation (SWAPO) had set up an education centre for Namibian children living in exile. Due to the initial lack of educational facilities and material students resorted to the common chorus chanting after the teacher, usually untrained secondary school students who had fled their home country Namibia. However, after some time the teachers started to collect their own stories of daily life in the area, with some assistance from ‘outsider within’ educators. The stories were multiplied and stapled together as readers for the students. When a tentative programme, the Integrated Teacher Training Programme (ITTP), started for the teachers at the centre the same type of ‘situationally’ based educational material were produced as part of the training (Dahlström, 2002).

After Namibia’s independence in 1990, the ITTP continued for a few years in the northern part of Namibia following the same approach, but this time connecting the educational material to the schools in the surrounding villages. A teachers’ magazine, called the Frontline Teacher, was also produced as part of the programme. This magazine was distributed to schools in the whole country with the assistance of the Namibian National Teachers’ Union (NANTU).

It was in 1994, when a new national teacher education programme, the Basic Education Teachers’ Diploma (BETD), started at the four colleges in Namibia that the CPI concept was introduced. It was introduced as an alternative to so called ‘fundamental...
that still prevailed in Namibia even though the apartheid and bantu education systems were officially dismantled (van Harmelen, 1998). CPI was seen as part of the efforts to create a new knowledge base of education founded on practitioners’ own inquiries. It was developed as an educational approach that addressed unconventional educational issues and a more dynamic relationship between educational theory, practice, and understanding. Therefore CPI also became a threat to the ‘common sense’ about education as a delivery system.

CPI in Namibia developed following three interrelated tracks. Critical Inquiry became integrated into the BETD programme as one of the professional themes that ran through the whole programme. This track was connected to the pedagogical studies in Education Theory and Practice (ETP) and the School-based Studies (SBS) that was extended beyond the previous area of practicum. It was through the connections between ETP and SBS that CPI was to be realised through the three years of studies as a focus on school students’ subject knowledge learning during the first year, a study of contextual issues affecting schooling during the second year, and a combined development work during the third year. The inquiries and actions during the three years of studies were written up as a CPI report towards the end of the studies and became an important part of the student teachers’ examination. Furthermore, the collections of student teachers’ CPI reports were supposed to be integrated into the work of the following groups of student teachers as an attempt to create a natural progression in the field of teacher education in the country and as a basis for an educational knowledge base (Dahlström, 1999).

The second track was an adaptation of CPI to the BETD in-service programme, meant for acting teachers who wanted to upgrade their professional knowledge. The in-service version of CPI was given the name ‘practice-based inquiry’, due to the close connection with the daily classroom practice in the programme. The aim of the practice-based inquiry was to create a closer link between the educational goals of equality of access to education, equity through the overcoming of educational disadvantage, the raising of quality of educational provision, and the development of education for democracy through democratic education (Ebbutt & Elliott, 1998).

The third track of CPI in Namibia was related to the post-graduate staff development activities for teacher educators. These activities were based on the notion that the majority of teacher educators and other government staff involved with teacher education after independence had a background in the previous system and needed a new start to be able to cope with the new philosophy of education based on a democratic and nonracist education system. Therefore, staff development activities were planned and carried out in parallel with the development and implementation of the BETD, the new
national teacher education programme to prepare teachers for the nine years of basic education in Namibia. The staff development activities were organised mainly on higher diploma and masters levels and followed the CPI mode of delivery. This included inquiries into the practitioners’ areas of professional operations from a contextual perspective informed by critical pedagogy that challenged the ideas of educational practice taken for granted and aiming to support a consciously developed conception about education and society that also would contribute to a new national knowledge base of education as recognised by Mayumbelo (1996: 8-9) in connection with the BETD student teachers’ CPI reports:

There is a need to build a bank of indigenous local knowledge in Namibian education. The pre-service teachers’ reports are a beginning in that direction […] Through their availability to a wider audience we hope that new insight will be shared, new theories will emerge and a better collective understanding of the forces underlying and shaping Namibian education will develop.

The CPI developed in connection with the BETD programme in Namibia and when new and old forces were allowed to stop the BETD programme the promising future of CPI and the development of a new and critical knowledge base of education were also stopped after nearly twenty years of national efforts that all along had an uphill journey because of the opposing national as well as international educational legacies. Aspects of critical knowledge still remain with the individual and collective experiences and will in due time generate the knowledge and skills the Namibian education system deserve, even though temporarily defeated by conservative forces inside the Namibian education system under the international influence by the World Bank. The new front of CPI as part of a counterhegemonic movement moved to Ethiopia as a Masters course for university teachers and to Lao PDR as an ingredient in a Professional Master for teacher educators organised by Stockholm University in Sweden in cooperation with Umeå University and NUOL in Lao PDR. It also affected the work of Bounyasone and Keosada in their efforts to analyse the practice of participatory action research in Lao PDR.

4. Merging into a critical foundation for practitioner inquiry

A new foundation for action research is possible in Lao PDR. This foundation can emerge from a combination of congruent aspects of the four components addressed above: cross-cultural dialogue, critical pedagogy of place, challenge to the power nexus, and critical practitioner inquiry. This foundation is presented with an adaptation from Asplund’s (1979) discussions of discursive, conceptual, and practical levels. The discursive level is related to policy statements and expressions of intentions, the conceptual level represents relevant educational approaches, while the practical level is where approaches are transferred to practical efforts. Asplund’s tentative model can be used for different purposes and Bounyasone and Keosada used it to explain policy backlashes, i.e. how new policies are understood and practiced following previous discourses, conceptions, and practices and therefore creating a counterforce to change. Here, we will use the model as a way to demonstrate how the different levels and aspects from different places and times can
merge into a forward looking foundation for practitioner inquiry and critical praxis.

As stated initially, we do not want to develop another straitjacket for educational practitioners. Instead we want to create a supportive educational foundation for practitioner inquiry that will encourage practitioners to step out of common sense perspective of educational practice, support students’ natural eagerness to learn for understanding, and endeavour to emancipatory connections between society and formal education. A tentative outline of such an educational foundation is presented in Figure 1.

This foundation is an attempt to symbolise the need for a serious connectedness between the different levels of humanistic discourses, educational conceptions, and the level of practical efforts. This connectedness has to be recognised if we want to move education beyond the present common sense that reduces educational efforts like action research to technical rationalities or activisms without further meaning, beyond self-fulfilling dogmas.

The Lao national curriculum offers an interesting opening for developing locally relevant content and pedagogies as it leaves 20 percent of the total curriculum open to local adaptation (Ministry of Education, 2000). This localisation of the curriculum can be used to develop alternative ways of planning and organising the teaching and learning processes. Bounyasone and Keosada (2011) suggest a Critical and Educative Action Research Network with the aim to build a reversed flow of initiatives that starts in local school clusters and is furthered to regional and national levels through the involvement of Pedagogical Advisers (PAs), regional teacher education colleges, and a national ministerial unit. This network starts in local action research projects with the aim to integrate local artefacts, local knowledge, etc. into the teaching and learning process as a way to make education more locally meaningful. The locally produced learning material is evaluated and then forwarded to PAs and teacher education colleges across the country, where the material can be integrated into the preparations of teachers before the ‘good examples’ are
forwarded to the ministerial level and integrated as part of a locally based knowledge base into future study material within the school system.

The present suggestion of a critical foundation for practitioner inquiry is a further development from what Bounyasone and Keosada has suggested. This foundation can develop a broader and integrated perspective on which the teaching and learning process can rest within the framework of a localised curriculum. The idea is to forward an education approach that is explicit about the educational choices taken at each level in the foundational model in Figure 1.

The action research projects are preferably collective involving more than one educator. A collective perspective becomes more flexible and powerful by including more ideas and aspects. The foundational model includes the three levels of consideration and it is our view that action research projects should include all levels to create a holistic perspective. The model needs not to be used in a hierarchal way, even though it includes both general ideas and practical actions. However, the model should be applied in the spiral manner common to the ways that action research can be carried out, meaning that each level is revisited both for evaluating and developmental purposes.

The level of humanistic discourses is often absent in the daily practices of education. This level is normally transformed to general statements in policy documents if included into national education systems (Bäcktorp 2007; Silfver, 2010) and have very seldom a direct influence on the teaching and learning processes in classrooms and lecture halls. We think otherwise and the universal constitutive values that are represented at this level should actually guide the teaching and learning process in the same way as ethnicity and gender equity guided Bounyasone and Keosada in their action research projects at NUOL, presented and analysed in their thesis (Bounyasone & Keosada, 2011: 116-136; 147-151). The universal constitutive values go beyond local societies, nations, and humanity as it exists today and include also future generations and nature as implicated by Santos (2007). Therefore, practitioners need to seriously consider what it is they want to accomplish with their action research inquiries in relation to universal constitutive values.

The level of educational conceptions presents a number of possible approaches and focuses. Cross-cultural dialogue accepts historical influences beyond the mainstream that can vitalise educational processes. Critical pedagogy of place is concerned about the decolonisation and rehabilitation of local knowledge. The challenging of the power nexus develops an acceptance of ‘alternative’ perspectives that the participants in the educational process carry along. Critical practitioner inquiry brings the contextual perspectives into the educational process and has a potential to bring new types of knowledge into the field of education. These conceptions are not exclusive but can be integrated into new and combined approaches that respond to the prioritised universal constitutive values in the action research projects.

The level of practical efforts is where the teaching and learning processes are carried out based on the chosen universal constitutive values and educational approaches. Before actions are taken at this level further consideration are necessary through revisits to the other levels with the aim to create consistency in the efforts under consideration. Furthermore, collective action research projects demand all along educational discussions that can be started at any of the three levels in the model. Discussions can be started at the
discursive level e.g. related to a concern about equity and equality, ideas about democratic involvement in the education process, or the relationship between formal education processes and local knowledge and skills. Discussions can also be started at conceptual levels when different educational approaches are considered or suggested as a way to develop the teaching and learning processes. These discussions can be related to the perspectives suggested in the model or to other ideas brought in from practitioners. The practical level can be another starting point for discussions. Such discussions can have many different backgrounds, such as a general dissatisfaction with the present practices, observed problems related to the educational processes in the classroom/lecture hall, or problems related to the teaching profession.

An action research project that follows the presented model includes the following general steps. The initial discussions between the practitioners are carried over to all levels in the model. There will probably be a need to collect further information and data (e.g. from the community, literature, students/educators, officials) while considerations are made and developed. A small scale pilot project might also be a good opportunity to sharpen the considerations and ideas at all levels in the model, before a more long term critical action research project is implemented while still an allowance for revisits and adjustments are made. A crucial aspect of any project is a careful documentation of the development process starting from the initial discussions, through the level considerations, and including the new critical praxis that has become part of the practitioners’ professional knowledge. The documentation can be done in the form of a critical project diary including also individual reflections as the involved practitioners take turns in the documentation. Such critical action research projects are not something that are started and ended once and for all when reported to educational authorities. These critical action research projects rather develop into locally based and continuous professional development amongst practitioners with the aim to develop education into the human activity it should be to further the constitutive values that make up humanity.

5. On a reflective note

Action research landed in the educational sector in Lao PDR as participatory action research more than a decade ago. It was introduced as a national remedy for student-centred education that still is part of the global reform agenda, especially in countries dependent on external financial support from international donor organisations. While student-centred education has to a large extent been translated to group work, participatory action research has been reduced to a rigid and often repetitive way for teachers and student teachers to put together a report for external evaluation (Bounyasone & Keosada, 2011, Chounlamany & Khounphilaphanh, 2011).

This paper is an attempt to show that action research can become something more educative than a rigid managerial approach within Lao PDR. However, our critical foundational model for action research can also be adapted to other situations. The essence of the model is to integrate the three levels of humanistic discourses, educational conceptions, and practical efforts to a holistic approach for educational development that is driven by practitioners like teachers, student teachers, or teacher educators with a potential to create a broad base for practitioner knowledge. Our model is by purpose
general in its description to avoid that it becomes another prescriptive way of doing action research. The local conditions and contexts related to practitioners’ possibilities to use the degrees of freedom available to forward their own praxis for the sake of universal constitutive values will decide how the model can be used and what it will accomplish as a way to human emancipation.

References


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i ‘Outsider within’ is a concept taken from Griffiths (1998) and used by Dahlström (2002) to describe the specific situation for an ‘outsider’ who has got sympathetic ‘insider’ knowledge and skills.

ii ‘Fundamental Pedagogics’ was part of the education philosophy that emerged under the apartheid notion of difference according to race when the National Party had come into power in South Africa towards the end of 1940s. Fundamental Pedagogics was defined as a ‘true’ scientific theory and therefore undisputable under Christian National Education. It was based on a combination of a positivistic idea of truth, behaviourism, and specific needs of different racial communities.