Developing and changing practice in special educational needs through critically reflective action research: a case study

CHRISTINE LLOYD

Address for correspondence:
Dr Christine Lloyd, Faculty of Education, University of Surrey Roehampton, Froebel College, Roehampton Lane, London SW15, UK. Tel: 020 8392 3384. E-mail: C.M.Lloyd@roehampton.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to critically evaluate the use of action research as a tool for developing critical reflection which has the potential to lead to change and development in practice in education, in particular, in the area of special educational needs (SEN) and inclusion. In order to support and illustrate the critique, a case study of a group of Dutch practising teachers and education professionals engaged in studying for a master’s degree in SEN is used. The three-year programme of study followed by the group was a practice-based programme of professional development, with heavy emphasis on action research throughout. For this particular group action research was an entirely new concept, and indeed many of them expressed considerable scepticism about its validity as an approach to research, or for that matter, professional development, at the beginning of the programme. The whole group were working in areas associated with SEN where the need to change practice was an urgent imperative, due to changes in education policy and the rapid move towards inclusion in The Netherlands. Having been responsible for the development and teaching of the programme for several years, I decided to make a case study of one cohort of students in order to carry out some more structured and detailed evaluation of the impact of the programme on practice. I also wanted to reaffirm the general impression I had gathered from continuing student evaluation and feedback, that their work, and in particular the action research they had carried out, had led to genuine development and, in some cases, fairly radical change in their professional practice.

KEYWORDS
Action research, reflective practice, inclusion, collaboration, empowerment
In order to contextualize this examination, it is important first to make clear the extent of the changes which have taken place in SEN.

Since the 1980s, policy and practice in special educational needs throughout Europe have undergone a massive change in orientation. The central and most fundamental change has been the move away from segregated provision of education for pupils identified as having SEN towards integrated provision in the mainstream. This radical change has been inspired, for the most part, by a recognition of the rights of all children to a full and equal educational opportunity – although those of a more cynical outlook might say that the impetus for change has been driven, for the most part, by economic expedience. The result for teachers, in both the mainstream and segregated sectors of education, has been the requirement to change and develop their practice very rapidly, to meet a wide range of new and very challenging demands.

More recently, policy for SEN in Europe, and indeed internationally, has begun to reflect the extremely challenging demand for yet further change to a system of genuinely inclusive education and inclusive schooling. This is reflected in the Salamanca Statement (1994), which was issued after a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco) sponsored world conference on special needs education, access and equality which was attended by more than 300 participants representing 92 governments:

The challenge confronting the inclusive school is that of developing a child centred pedagogy capable of successfully educating all children, including those who have serious disadvantages and disabilities. The merit of such schools is not only that they are capable of providing quality education for all children; their establishment is a crucial step in helping to change discriminatory attitudes, in creating welcoming communities and in developing an inclusive society. (Salamanca Statement, 1994, pp. 6–7)

Inclusion as a right, full access and participation, and planning and policy of high-quality education designed to provide excellence for all children have increasingly become central imperatives in education policy throughout Europe. The implications for practice and for practitioners in segregated special education, in mainstream education and in the whole range of educational services which support pupils identified as having SEN are enormous.

These changes in policy for SEN have given rise to growing discussion and debate about how policy and practice might be developed to focus, in the first place, on integrating pupils with SEN into mainstream settings, which has led to the closure of a great deal of segregated special provision. This has often proved very problematic, and it is possible to identify a lack of willingness, or indeed ability, to change the everyday practice of education to achieve integration.

The rhetoric surrounding the move towards policy for integration for pupils with SEN has led to a new kind of educational discourse of which changing the labels of both professionals and children is a part, while practice remains very much the same (Oliver, 1992). Oliver maintains that in spite of what appears to be a great deal of change in policy in the area, children with special educational needs still get an inferior education to everyone else. He says that the rhetoric of integration as process serves to obscure and mystify the fact, but that this reality, nevertheless, remains.

Oliver’s view is supported by Dyson, who points to what he sees as the very unsatisfactory results of integrating pupils with SEN into mainstream settings:
The more difficult special education has found it to transform the mainstream schools into something more responsive and appropriate to the needs of vulnerable children, the more it has fallen back on reproducing itself in a mainstream setting. It has, in other words, colonised rather than transformed the mainstream. (1997, p. 153)

The more recent policy demands to move to inclusive education, which require, as discussed above, that all pupils irrespective of ability are able to participate fully alongside their peers, have exerted further pressures. The problem for Dyson, and indeed many others researching and writing about integration and inclusion (Barton, 1993; Oliver, 1992, 1997; Lloyd, 1994, 1996, 2000; Slee, 1995), is that rather than developing inclusive approaches to practice in mainstream education, the integration of pupils with SEN has served to perpetuate and reinforce segregated practices, placing the impetus for change on the pupil, or pupils, being integrated. This has also, inevitably, led to responsibility and blame for any lack of success being placed on the pupil, or pupils, who are seen as being unable to fit in or as taking up too much of the teachers’ time, thus disadvantaging the other pupils; or as being unable to cope and needing protection in the form of removal from the mainstream. Many factors can be seen as having contributed to this, including a fundamental misunderstanding and confusion about the concepts of integration and inclusion, and indeed the term SEN itself, and the implications for developing and changing practice (Lloyd, 1996; Skrtic, 1995; Barton, 1995; Oliver, 1997; Slee, 1995).

In the first place, there is a lack of consensus about what constitutes an equal educational opportunity (Lloyd, 1994, 1996, 2000). Added to this, there is a failure by many to recognize that all pupils have a right, enshrined in national and international legislation, to full access to and participation in education, irrespective of ability. There is also confusion and a lack of agreement about what is meant by, and how to identify, a special educational need. These factors, and perhaps more importantly, a resistance from practitioners to change and develop their professional practice to meet the demands and challenges of inclusive education, have led to extremely variable and often poor practice in the area. It is not appropriate within the scope of this paper to enter into a full discussion of these problematic and controversial issues; however, a far more detailed discussion can be found in an earlier article published in the International Journal of Inclusive Education (see Lloyd, 2000).

This paper is concerned with the practitioner resistance, mentioned above, and with exploring and reflecting upon the fundamental ingredients of a programme of professional development which supports and enables practising professionals to genuinely change and develop their practice. A model of professional development aimed at developing what Giroux calls ‘transformative intellectuals’ (1990, p. 196) who engage in a continuing process of critical reflection on their practice with a view to improving it. Professionals who, informed by genuine critical theory, engage constantly in challenging and enquiring into the practice of their profession with a view to reshaping and developing it to be more equitable and empowering. Giroux sums up this model as follows:

As intellectuals, teachers need to redefine and change the fundamental nature of the conditions under which they work . . . teachers must struggle to create the ideology and structural conditions necessary for them to write, research and work with each other . . . As intellectuals who combine reflection and action in the interests of empowering students with skills and knowledge, teachers need to address injustice and to become critical actors. (ibid., p. 197)
Such an approach can be seen as crucial to the development of genuinely inclusive practice in education, for it recognizes the need to challenge and criticize the status quo, to actively engage in researching together with colleagues and pupils the conditions which preclude access to equal educational opportunity and to redefine and change educational practice to make it more just and equitable.

What, then, are the necessary tools to enable educational practitioners to develop such an approach to their professional practice?

**ACTION RESEARCH AS A TOOL FOR DEVELOPING CRITICALLY REFLECTIVE PRACTICE**

The programme of study which was undertaken by the case-study group referred to in this paper was deliberately designed to enable participants to engage in the process of actively researching and investigating educational problems, with a view to deepening understanding and developing and improving their own professional practice. A programme of professional development aimed at developing critically reflective practitioners able to meet and respond to the challenges of rapidly changing policy in the area of SEN in which they were all working. Action research was considered to be essential to the programme because it involves ‘action disciplined by enquiry, a personal attempt at understanding while engaged in a process of improvement and reform’ (Hopkins, 1993, p. 44).

Such processes are, in the words of Kincheloe, clearly essential to the development of critical reflection on professional practice. Critical action research in education also

... celebrates human self direction ... it expands the role of the teacher. The teacher moves from classroom technician to active political agent as she or he views education as a vehicle to build an egalitarian community ... it sees the school as an agent of democracy which is dedicated to an ethic of inclusion and negotiation. As a democratic agent the school seeks to uncover those forms which thwart participation. (1993, p. 21)

Kincheloe regards critical action research as the embodiment of the democratic principle, leading to empowerment, enlightenment and emancipation: ‘Critical action research allows teachers to organise themselves as communities of researchers dedicated to the achievement of their own, and ultimately their students’ enlightenment’ *(ibid.,* p. 23).

In view of the earlier discussion about the current problems of effecting change to enable inclusion and full participation for pupils with SEN, it can be seen that it is absolutely appropriate, indeed essential, for teachers to use such a model of critical action research as a tool for changing practice and as a means to enlightening and empowering themselves and their pupils and other involved agencies in order to develop genuinely participatory inclusive education for all. Such a model can be seen as crucial for development towards Giroux’s idea of teachers as ‘transformative intellectuals’ (1990, p. 196), discussed earlier as essential for the development of genuinely inclusive practice in education. According to O’Hanlon:

Teachers who engage in educational research are making judgements about the orientation of their research ... They are making judgements about the efficacy and effectiveness of certain practices in teaching ... they are using their power to promote, follow up and investigate ... They are questioning the ideological basis of certain educational practices. (1996, pp. 102–103)
These processes are essential if traditionally held views about the education of pupils with SEN are to be challenged rather than reinforced and reproduced in mainstream settings, and if new attitudes and approaches are to be encouraged and developed and real change in practices effected. For genuine change to come about educational practitioners need to become aware of their own practice, to critically reflect on it and to be prepared to identify and recognize areas in need of reform or change (McNiff, 1988).

It is important to recognize, however, that action research has been criticized for its lack of academic rigour and is regarded by some as having little legitimacy as a research methodology. In attempting to address this criticism, Altrichter (1993) proposes six quality criteria which must be met in order to ensure that action research is both rigorous and valid:

1. the collection and analysis of a variety of data from a range of sources and perspectives;
2. the interlinking of reflection and action through a cyclical approach;
3. a recognition that this approach to research is subjective and value laden and is not concerned with the search of objectivity;
4. a recognition that the process of research is not about finding solutions so much as deepening understanding and identifying areas for further research and development;
5. action research is concerned with the development of professional competence and collaboration, and peer evaluation should be used as part of the process of critical reflection;
6. the interactive dissemination of findings for critical scrutiny and professional debate is essential.

Action research which meets the criteria presented above can be seen to be an extremely valuable and powerful tool for bringing about change and developing professional practice. Indeed, Elliott (1996) sees it as essential in the development of schools as flexible, dynamic learning environments and as crucial to the project of genuine school improvement. Carr and Kemmis (1986) point to genuine critical action research as empowering practitioners to change, and indeed to take control of, the development of educational practice themselves:

Action research recognises that thought and action arise from practices in particular situations, and that situations themselves can be transformed by transforming the practices that constitute them and the understandings that make them meaningful. (p. 185)

Given the earlier discussion about the pace and scope of the changes in the area of SEN and the resistance with which policy for inclusion has been met, the need for teachers and educational professionals to feel empowered to change and develop themselves and their daily practice in order for policy to be implemented is clear. Action research can be seen, then, as an essential means for practitioners attempting to meet these demands in their daily practice to come to greater understanding of the problems and issues involved and to explore ways in which they can themselves bring about real change and development.

A model of quality, informed educational action research, as defined above, was therefore used to inform and underpin the design of the programme of study because:
— it is concerned with challenging, critically reflecting on and evaluating practices in education, and the policies, theories and values which inform them, with a view to changing and improving them;
— it is a collaborative, participatory approach to research which is dependent on the full engagement of all participants for its validity;
— it aims to empower, make more equitable and more democratic the processes and practices of education;
— it opens up its findings to other professionals for critical reflection and debate in the search for greater understanding and with a view to informing further research and enquiry;
— it can be seen as an invaluable and essential tool for the development of informed, critically reflective practitioners, and therefore as a crucial element of programmes of professional development.

THE CASE STUDY

I chose a case-study approach to this piece of research because it seemed to be a particularly appropriate method for providing data to evaluate the quality of an educational experience. I had no intention of collecting large amounts of quantitative data in order to try to make grand claims about the benefits of one approach to professional development over another. My starting-point in designing the programme of study had been a clear commitment to the value of developing critically reflective practice through action research. The aim was to enable the participants, who were all practitioners in the area of SEN, to develop and change their practice to meet the demands of the new policy in the area discussed earlier. The purpose of the case study, therefore, was to explore and attempt to understand better the processes of developing as a critically reflective practitioner, engaging with quality action research, and with a view to effecting change in practice in SEN. I wanted to collect a range of qualitative data from and with the course participants themselves, and I wanted them to engage with me in the processes of critically evaluating the findings, with a view to developing deeper understanding of the processes in which they were engaging. The data were collected and analysed over a period of three years and gathered using a range of tools, including open questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, open discussions, e-mail ‘conversations’ and critical analysis of the assignments and findings of the research carried out by the students.

The Programme of Study

The three-year modular programme, leading to a master’s award, consisted of the following modules.

• Education Studies for International Students

An introduction to SEN in the UK, including a study week in the UK, with opportunities to visit a range of schools and appropriate practice situations; and an introduction to the model of the critically reflective practitioner and to action research. The assignment for this module was to set up and evaluate a small practice-based enquiry, using action research.
• **Special Educational Needs in the European Union (EU)**

This module included visits to at least two other countries in the EU for practice-based visits and lectures about SEN policy. The assignment for this module was to produce a portfolio of critical reflections on EU policy for SEN using the countries visited, The Netherlands and the UK, as the basis for the critique.

• **A Comparative Research Portfolio**

The central focus for this module was a critical examination of comparison as a tool for research and enquiry. Students were asked to identify an area of their own practice in need of development or change and to research it using action research methodology and comparison with practice in the same area in the UK. The module was supported by a carefully planned and structured two-week study visit to the UK.

• **Special Educational Needs: Access and Entitlement**

This module centred on the central current issue in SEN, namely inclusion. Theoretical perspectives relating to SEN as a disability issue; the politics of SEN; social construction and creation of SEN; SEN as an equal opportunities issue; and, of course, the whole integration/inclusion debate, were critically examined. Students were expected to contribute to the module by means of small-group seminar presentations linking the theoretical issues to their own practice.

• **The Educational Research Project**

The final year of the programme of study was devoted to planning, implementing and evaluating a small-scale piece of practice-based enquiry using action research. Lectures, action research workshops and tutorials supported the work throughout the year. The report of the project, including critical reflections on the process of their own professional development, was submitted for assessment.

**Selection of the Case-Study Group**

The student group chosen for this research was the fourth cohort to follow the programme and consisted of 15 Dutch teachers and education professionals working in segregated special schools, support services and mainstream primary schools. The group included classroom teachers, support teachers, headteachers and advisory teachers. To qualify for the programme of study they had to be practising in an area of SEN, to have an appropriate level of competence in English and to have a Dutch advanced diploma in SEN or the equivalent.

I chose this particular cohort of students as my case-study group because the programme had reached a stage where the modules were well developed and had all been trialled and evaluated with previous groups. It seemed therefore that careful systematic evaluation and critical reflection at this stage would be both valid and valuable and would provide useful and informative feedback for further development.
Early discussions with this cohort, and indeed previous groups, identified that they had no previous experience of action research or indeed of genuinely practice-based models of professional development. Their expectation of professional development courses was that they should be lecturer-centred, with the lecturer as ‘expert’ responsible for providing them with models and strategies to try out in practice in order to solve problems. They had not experienced professional development which began with them critically examining their own practice with a view to identifying problems and actively developing problem-solving strategies.

Data Collection

(Since the collection and analysis of data was a collaborative enterprise between myself and the students, the plural pronoun will be used from this point in the discussion.)

In order to collect data we used the following strategies:

- A critical examination of the programme of study (all modules) in the light of the criteria for quality action research identified by Altrichter (1993).
- An initial professional needs analysis relating to the intended learning outcomes of the programme of study.
- An evaluation of each module, related to the intended learning outcomes of the module.
- A compulsory section in the assignment for each module in which students were asked to critically reflect on the processes of their own professional development.
- A questionnaire at the end of the programme of study to the whole cohort.
- Semi-structured interviews with three students who had identified major impact on their practice as a direct result of the programme.
- A follow-up questionnaire one year after completion of the programme for the three who had been interviewed.

Evaluation and Analysis of Data

The evaluation was underpinned by three questions, each of which will be examined below.

1. How far did the action research carried out by the students meet Altrichter’s (1993) quality criteria?
2. What was the impact of carrying out action research on professional development and, in particular, on developing more critically reflective approaches to practice?
3. What was the impact of carrying out the action research on the professional practice of the students, particularly in the area of SEN and the move towards inclusion?

1. How far did the action research carried out by the students meet Altrichter’s (1993) quality criteria?

The programme of study was designed to offer opportunities to meet and engage with all six of the quality criteria. The assignments set required the students to demonstrate this engagement and to critically reflect on the experience. The programme was therefore developed with four elements in mind:
a) An introduction to action research and an opportunity to work with it in practice, critically reflect on the experience and evaluate its scope and limitations before using it in the final module of the programme in the Educational Research Project. Thus at least two cycles of action research were experienced within the three years of the programme.

b) The international nature of the programme was seen as an enriching factor and the modules and the assignments were deliberately developed to capitalize on opportunities to use comparison; as a tool for critical reflection by the students on their own practice; as a means of providing a wider context in which to reflect on the theoretical perspectives underpinning policy in SEN; and as a way of engaging actively with a wider community of educational practitioners in sharing, evaluating and disseminating findings.

c) The need to challenge and engage with the controversial and very problematic issues currently being discussed and debated in the area of SEN, with a view to informing the students with greater understanding of the problematic nature of changing practice to provide more equitable, excellent and inclusive educational opportunities for all children irrespective of ability.

d) The whole programme was process orientated and made demands on the participants to share practice-based experience; to disseminate the findings of their research to colleagues for critique and discussion; to actively engage in their own learning through seminar presentations, workshop and small-group activities; and to actively encourage colleagues in their practice situations to engage with them in their learning processes, acting as ‘critical friends’ or collaborating with them in their research. The involvement of pupils in the research process was also encouraged where appropriate.

Examination of the data collected revealed a clear recognition of the need to gather data from a range of different perspectives, and indeed to gather a range of data from the researcher’s own perspective. However, there were difficulties in this process such as the amount of time the collection such a range of data takes and about suitable instruments to use to collect data. Carefully prepared semi-structured interviews were generally regarded the most successful and reliable means of collecting information. Another extremely useful tool, used by the majority of students in one form or another, was a reflective journal. Carefully structured reflective journals were used very effectively by one student as a method of collecting data from pupils, who kept the journals over a period of several weeks and then used them at the end of that time to reflect on their own learning processes and to identify change and development. Analysis of the module evaluations and end of programme questionnaires also reveals a recognition of the value of the cyclical process required to ensure genuine reflexivity:

‘I began to constantly question what I was doing and what I say about what I am doing.’

‘The course created a snowball effect for me as I used my evaluation of one project to work on another one.’

‘I am in a continuing process that I want to continue.’

Module evaluations and assignments referred, without exception, to the need to carry out further enquiry and investigation about the topics examined and researched.

The value-laden nature of action research presented great problems for all students in the case study and was a constant theme throughout the programme of study. The
central issue of concern was the validity of any research, which did not produce ‘objective’ findings. The dominant view in the group at the beginning of the study was that ‘real’ research was positivistic, scientific, objective and carried out by professional researchers. Although a clear progress towards an acknowledgement of the validity and value of subjective practice-based research can be identified through examination of the students’ evaluations in their assignments, it was certainly one of the most difficult aspects of action research for the students to work with. An issue raised by many of the students was the problem of establishing the legitimacy of the research approach with colleagues and, in particular, senior managers in their schools, and the potentially alienating effects of trying to establish a ‘new’ approach to research. These comments from two students summarize the difficulties well:

‘... my colleagues and the governing body were reluctant in the beginning... colleagues were angry with me as I developed myself away from the functionalist paradigm they felt happy in.’

‘There is one bothering problem for me: to be “the lonely long distance runner”, the person who is in the front, but loses contact with the pack in the pursuit. In my work I am the only person who, at the moment, is in favour of action research as a method to improve the practice of teachers.’

All the data collected demonstrated clear understanding of the aim of action research to develop greater understanding rather than to seek simplistic answers. Constant references were made, in all the data collected, to deepening understanding; acquiring new perspectives; feeling more empowered to take responsibility for change and development of practice; understanding the change process better; and challenging and changing attitudes.

The development of competence and the use of ‘critical friends’ and peer collaboration in the research undertaken was widespread in the group. Where collaboration worked well, it was seen as an essential tool for developing genuinely critical evaluation and was also useful in combating the resistance of other colleagues. It was also extremely important for the dissemination of findings. However, many members of the group found it difficult to find a colleague, or colleagues, who were enthusiastic to work with them because of pressures of time or a lack of sufficient interest. In some cases, colleagues felt threatened by the research being carried out and this led to a breakdown in working relations rather than to collaborative, supportive approaches. The use of other students following the programme of study as ‘critical friends’ proved to be a very useful strategy for those students who were unable to find a colleague in their practice situation prepared to work together with them.

The final criterion, disseminating findings for critical discussion by the wider community, has been met by the case-study group in a particularly exciting development which began during the last year of the programme. We held a conference on critically reflexive practice and action research and invited all past and present students. Papers and workshops about the action research projects they had carried out were provided by graduates of the programme and current students, including members of the case-study group. As a result of this conference, a group of students, including several from the case-study group, have set up an action research e-mail network in order to continue to share their work. Through the network a journal is currently being produced which will be used as a vehicle for further dissemination of their work.

Analysis of the data collected demonstrates that the whole group had a clear understanding of quality action research, and that they had critically evaluated their
work in relation to the criteria. This evaluation demonstrated that not all of them had met all the criteria, but where they had failed to meet them, they had used them to identify areas for further development in their practice. Another major issue arising from this analysis is that the development of genuine quality action research is an heuristic process, and therefore one must actively engage with it in order to learn about how to do it. Continuing evaluation against the criteria is an essential part of this process as it enables researchers to build on strengths and identify weaknesses to be addressed (Kincheloe, 1993; Carr and Kemmis, 1986).

Involving colleagues and pupils, and in some cases parents, was viewed by the majority of the group as an essential and crucial element of action research, particularly as the areas of SEN they were researching concerned equal opportunity issues. However, difficulties with encouraging and developing participation and collaboration in the action research were experienced by everyone. In the most extreme case, a student found himself alienated from the rest of the staff who felt threatened by his work because it challenged their notion of the teacher as expert taking control of the pupils’ learning. The research project was concerned with enabling a group of teenage pupils identified as having severe learning difficulties to take responsibility for handling money, thus empowering them to take more control over their own lives. Very effective collaboration with parents had been developed and the pupils themselves had taken a participatory role in the research, providing feedback and evaluation at each stage in a variety of ways. Colleagues, however, viewed the project with scepticism and eventually moved to a position of downright hostility, refusing to cooperate or support the project in any way in spite of repeated efforts by the researcher to involve them. By its very nature, action research challenges practice and for some colleagues this will inevitably be an uncomfortable process, which may result in alienation for the researcher.

The value of the reflexive nature of the action research process was clearly understood and all students identified recommendations for further action research arising from the research they had done. These recommendations also demonstrated that students had a clear understanding of the importance and value of disseminating their work to a wider audience for critique. The majority had already begun the process in their own practice situations and all were considering how they might meet the demand of reaching a wider audience.

As mentioned earlier, the most problematic criterion was, without doubt, the acceptance of the value-laden nature of action research and of subjective critical analysis as valid and valuable. I believe that meeting this criterion is a central part of developing as a genuine critically reflective practitioner. Engaging with the process of critically reflective practice requires that practitioners recognize their professional responsibility to change, develop and constantly strive to improve their practice. This is the process of developing ‘transformative intellectuals’ (Giroux, 1990, p. 196), mentioned earlier. Such a process demands the recognition of educational practice as value laden, problematic, controversial and open to critique. For the case-study group this was a new and very challenging idea with which they were confronted throughout the programme. By the end of the programme of study, all students had recognized the value of action research to their own professional practice and development and, as a result, had begun to place greater value on it, but there were still some major concerns about its validity and about the lack of objectivity in their findings.
2. What was the impact of carrying out action research on professional development and, in particular, on developing more critically reflective approaches to practice?

In order to address this question, I have concentrated on analysis of data collected from the end of programme questionnaires, from the follow-up interviews and from the section of the Educational Research Project where students were asked to reflect on the processes of their own professional development as a result of carrying out a piece of action research.

**The impact of action research on professional development**

Analysis across all the data mentioned above resulted in the following summary of ways in which the case-study group identified the direct impact on their professional development of carrying out action research.

They felt it empowered them to take responsibility for their own practice and for changing and developing it because it provided them with a bottom-up model of change. It changed their attitudes about SEN issues and also about research itself because they felt, for the first time, in the majority of cases, that they had a practical methodology which provided them with the power to make changes to their practice themselves. Action research provided them with a structured framework for critically evaluating their practice. This, in turn, made them more self-confident and able to articulate their ideas, which enabled them to share responsibility and to work more collaboratively with colleagues and with pupils. The focus on the processes of learning rather than just the end-products was also identified as an important and very developmental outcome of using action research. It also became clear to them that there are no ‘quick fixes’, education is an ongoing process and improving and developing it takes time, a lot of effort and commitment.

Without exception, all students identified that they had changed and developed in their practice and felt themselves to be professionalized by the process. Many who had been involved in education for some time felt a renewed vigour and interest. They all felt that they would continue to use action research in their practice and for many the challenge was to encourage others to engage with them.

**The impact of action research on the development of critically reflective practice**

The concept of critically reflective practice used to underpin the development of the programme and to make this analysis has been defined earlier in the paper and can be summarized as: a concern to critically challenge, reflect on and evaluate, practices in education and the policies, theories and values which underpin them, with a view to changing, developing and improving them. Certainly the analysis above indicates that, in carrying out action research, the case-study group had engaged with exactly these processes. The questionnaires asked them to define critically reflective practice in order to identify whether their understanding reflected the model above. Their answers included the following definitions:

- the study of daily practice to improve and develop it;
- collaborative reflection and evaluation;
- involving pupils, colleagues and others in evaluating my practice;
- constantly questioning what I am doing;
- putting my practice and that of others under close scrutiny;
- being critical about what I am doing and about what I say I am doing;
- sharing my experiences with other teachers and critically evaluating it;
- taking responsibility for changing and developing education.
These responses demonstrate a clear understanding of critically reflective practice and the processes of engaging with it. Several responses also identified a reflective journal as an essential tool to support the ongoing process of critical reflection.

Analysis of both the follow-up interviews and questionnaire, sent out one year after the end of the programme of study to three of the case-study group, highlighted the following important issues about developing critically reflective practice. One of the three responded that she now plans to allow for reflective moments. All three said they regularly ask colleagues and pupils for feedback. This was seen by one respondent as a way of preventing him from believing in his own assumptions. All three felt the need to continue to act as change agents, and for one the need to continue with the process of changing himself was identified. They all found themselves constantly questioning their practice, and for one a reflective journal continued to be a useful instrument which enabled the process of becoming more critical.

For the case-study group carrying out action research seems to have made an important and valuable impact on their professional development, which in the case of the students followed up, is still continuing to assist them in developing as critically reflective practitioners.

3. What was the impact of carrying out the action research on the professional practice of the students, in particular, in the area of SEN and the move towards inclusion?

In order to address this final, and perhaps most crucial question, I have relied chiefly on analysis of data collected from three students, who had identified a major impact on their practice in SEN as a result of the programme of study and who were followed up a year after completion of the award. As the purpose of my own research was to try to understand better the impact of the programme of study on practice, I deliberately chose three students who identified major changes as a result of the research they had carried out for my follow-up enquiry. For the purposes of this paper, their names have been changed to Janneke, Theo and Jos.

Janneke’s Educational Research Project was an investigation to identify what context enables genuine learning in mathematics for bilingual pupils (in this case, children of asylum seekers from many different countries awaiting permission to settle in The Netherlands). She was particularly interested to investigate the development of a stimulating context in which the children could learn mathematics and, at the same time, experience the new language (Dutch) in a meaningful way. Her research project involved collaboration with colleagues, comparative research in the UK, discussions with parents (using an interpreter) and observations, interviews and discussions with other members of the school team. In her analytical conclusions of the project report, she summarizes the impact on her own practice in the following ways:

‘I started as a teacher who looked for the recipe for practical solution and became a critically reflective practitioner. I often experience the dilemma of my old views and this new changed attitude. Reflection upon my motives is valuable and I realize that this will be an ongoing process in the future . . . I realize that the fact that I transformed (and will continue to do so!) means that I internalized the view that professional development is not about being successful, but about learning.’

For the general practice in her school she identifies the following gains:
— a transformed approach to learning and teaching mathematics;
— improved collaboration and exchange of information among colleagues;
— a more process orientated rather than end-product approach;
— confrontation of assumptions about children’s learning and capability;
— more respect for mother tongue learning and teaching;
— a recognition that the pupil’s ability may be underestimated because they are assessed by very Dutch assessment procedures;
— more recognition of cultural diversity as enrichment;
— much greater understanding about what is actually going on in the learning and teaching context;
— more understanding of the role of parents and the need to engage them actively in the education process.

In the follow-up questionnaire completed just over a year after completing the programme, Janneke identifies the following impact on her practice and that of her colleagues as a result of the action research project. She has been given half a day each week to work on action research projects and to coach colleagues, in her own school and in other schools. She is designing and leading workshops on action research as part of teacher training and in-service courses for teachers and has been asked to increase this work. Janneke is also actively engaged with other students from the case-study group in setting up the electronic action research network, mentioned earlier.

Reflecting on the continuing impact on her own professional development, she mentions that she continues to keep a reflective professional journal in which she reflects on the work she is doing and that, to inform this work, she continues to read about action research and critically reflective practice. In addition to this, she said:

‘I ask my colleagues and my pupils for feedback regularly in order to prevent myself believing in my own assumptions. I used to be afraid of this kind of practice but I learned during the last project that this way of communicating is very valuable and less threatening than I assumed – even stronger, it stimulates another culture in our team.’

Theo’s project was concerned with an attempt to encourage pupils with severe learning difficulties (SLD) to become more independent. The research centred on the introduction to the pupils of an electronic chipcard which they could use to shop independently. Theo began from the position that, in order to become more independent and empowered, the pupils/students would have to be active participants in the research. He also involved their parents/carers and wanted to work collaboratively on the project with colleagues. Major impacts identified in his Educational Research Project as a result of the action research he carried out were that pupils/students became confident with the chipcard and felt empowered by it. They were given the opportunity to speak for themselves and to make genuine contributions to the process of the project – e.g. they suggested keeping reflective diaries and journals for themselves when they heard that Theo was keeping a journal. The local newspaper interviewed the pupils/students, and there was a front-page article about the project as a result of which other schools and institutions became interested and wanted to use the same approach:

‘Our pupils/students have been on the front page of the local newspaper. They were very proud of it. I see this as being one of the many steps for empowering our pupils/students. Far more important to me is that the
pupils/students and the parents/carers also see the idea as empowering . . . They feel empowered because they have contributed to the project.’

For Theo himself, the major impact on his practice was as follows:

‘I have learnt in this project that I want to involve the pupils/students by giving them an active role when decisions have to be made. This role must be on equal positions. I developed myself into a teacher who advocates self-directed learning. I want to talk to and with the pupils/students, not about them. I am very convinced that the pupils/students can speak very well for themselves . . . I do not want to be a patronizing teacher, I want to develop myself as a facilitating teacher who wants to be a guide for his pupils/students by having a professional consumer dialogue with them. They are the consumers, so they will know best what is good for them.’

One of the major drawbacks of developing such controversial ideas about the roles and relationships of pupils and teachers which Theo experienced was that his colleagues were threatened by the project because it clearly disrupted the status quo in the school, and challenged long-held beliefs about teaching pupils with SLD. He experienced alienation and downright hostility at times from some colleagues. One year later, however, in the follow-up questionnaire, he identifies as a major impact on practice that colleagues in general now regard pupils/students with much more respect and that several colleagues now involve them in decision-making. Older students in the school are encouraged and supported in making their own choices about the programme of study they wish to follow. Like Janneke, Theo is involved in training courses for teachers and education professionals and has developed a course, based on the principles of critical reflection and action research, which is about developing effective teams. He also identifies a continuing impact on his own professional development, in that he is continually questioning his practice and his aims and values.

As manager of a collaboration network of schools set up to encourage cooperation and integration between the mainstream and special schools in his area, Jos decided to concentrate his action research project on developing collaboration between teachers as a first step towards wider collaboration. His project involved designing, implementing and evaluating a course for teachers that aimed to teach them the principles of collaboration and, at the same time, engage them through the activities of the course in the collaborative process. He identified impact on practice as a result of the projects at different levels. For the teachers themselves it enabled them to exchange ideas and opinions and they came to respect one another more. They were more able to deal with and to offer criticism, which led to the development of professional trust. They were more able to articulate their ideas and opinions effectively, and they built up confidence and dared to admit to failure.

Management in the network was originally negative about the project and the teachers felt unable to express their ideas and views; also they felt they would receive little support. By the end of the project, the teachers were able to meet with management and also to have a constructive meeting in which they aired their opinions, planned for future developments and discussed the possibilities for developing further collaboration. In terms of developing a collegial ‘whole-school approach’, the attempt to address the issue of homework in the collaboration project highlighted the necessity, and the difficulties, of developing a shared vision or philosophy, and greater understanding was gained of the complexity and problematic nature of developing a ‘whole-school’ approach.
For Jos himself, the impact was chiefly on his style of leadership. Instead of leading the project as the ‘expert’ or the ‘man in the know’, he tried to work as a coach to the team:

‘I managed to start a dialogue with the group of teachers and created a process through which they felt strong enough to innovate new ideas to experiment and reflect critically on their own practice . . . I experienced myself that it is possible to empower teachers to adopt an active role by using other methods than I had used to apply . . . During the project, I have been a coach of the change process.’

A year after the completion of the project, Jos, like Janneke and Theo, is involved in teaching in-service courses for teachers. In this case, he is providing training for teachers who are working as support for pupils with SEN in mainstream schools. He is using action research and enabling them to develop as critically reflective practitioners, using the same approaches which he experienced in his programme of study:

‘They mostly want to choose a “safe” kind of abstract subject, but then I give them the treatment, and when they leave the room . . . they are going to do things they really think important to do. To research something which is useful to them and their schools.’

Jos is also continuing to build collaboration within the network in which he is the coordinator using the ideas he developed in his project. Like Janneke, he is also involved in setting up the electronic action research network. He no longer keeps a professional journal because he found it too time-consuming; he adds, however:

‘. . . but I do ask people regularly to reflect critically on my work and to comment on it, to check if I keep up my standards.’

Developing Inclusive Practice

Celebrating difference as enrichment and the development of approaches to the curriculum and assessment which value what children can do rather than emphasizing what they can’t do; empowering pupils to take responsibility for their own learning and enabling them to participate more fully in society; and the development of collaborative networks of teachers who are able to engage jointly in problem-solving, can all be seen as prerequisites for the development of genuinely inclusive practice (Lloyd, 2000; Skrtic, 1995; Giroux, 1990). Thus all three projects discussed above can be seen to have contributed in some way to the development of inclusive practice in SEN. In all three cases, colleagues were also involved and have developed and changed their practice as a result of the initial research work, and in all cases the students have become providers of in-service professional development courses for teachers working in the area of SEN and the development of inclusive practice. It is possible, therefore, to make the claim that the programme of study made some impact on the participants’ professional practice which has, in turn, led to some developments and changes which can be seen as a moving towards more inclusive approaches in their own practice and that of colleagues.
CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this paper has been to critically evaluate action research as a tool for developing critically reflective practice, and to explore the potential of professional development underpinned by this model to change and develop practice, in particular, in the area of SEN and inclusive practice.

Having demonstrated that the action research carried out by the case-study group met the criteria identified as essential for quality action research, I have gone on to demonstrate the impact of carrying out quality action research on the development of genuinely critically reflective approaches to practice. However, the central issue that I wanted to explore was the impact on practice. For every member of the case-study group, all practising professionals in the area of SEN, there was some identifiable impact on their practice and, in many cases, on that of their colleagues also. In addition to the impact made on the practice of the three students discussed in detail above, other examples include:

- changing the curriculum of a school for the blind and partially sighted to develop more independent learning skills as preparation for inclusion;
- the development of a professional profile for support teachers working with hearing impaired pupils in mainstream settings;
- rethinking and reorganizing part of a school’s approach to learning and teaching to a model of active independent learning, with the teacher as enabler of the learning process;
- developing a whole-school policy on behaviour where two schools, a mainstream and a segregated special school, have been brought together in an integration/inclusion project;
- the introduction of a school policy for promoting parent participation (a fairly new idea in The Netherlands).

The impact identified on professional development as critically reflective practitioners by the whole group includes changed perspectives about the roles of pupils and teachers in the learning process – the development of self-critical analysis, not just looking critically at the pupils. There is an acknowledgement of the need to take responsibility for changing and developing practice themselves. A more systematic approach to evaluating practice has been developed, as well as a more questioning approach to practice. The importance of stimulating critical discussion with colleagues and a recognition of the value of collaborative reflection, evaluation and sharing experience is identified as a major change, as is putting practice under the scrutiny of others. Perhaps one of the most interesting comments relating to this area is:

‘I learnt to be critical about what I say I am doing, as well as what I am doing.’

What is most affirming about carrying out the case study is that it provided clear evidence that very real and important changes have taken place in practice and that the students have experienced a process of professional development which is still continuing, certainly in the cases of the follow-up group, a year later. All three teachers in the follow-up group are now working on teacher training and/or professional development courses themselves, and their courses are informed by models of critically reflective practice which involve using action research as a learning tool. In spite of recognizing its limitations, particularly in terms of time and the alienation factor, many of the case-study group referred to feeling empowered by the experience of
carrying out action research, and indicated a clear intention to continue to use it and to engage other colleagues. The development of the electronic action research network is evidence of the lasting impact of the programme of study on many members of the group.

The evidence produced by the case study is entirely qualitative, limited and very subjective. There are, however, very rich data, and the process of carrying out the case study has in itself generated a continuing professional dialogue with members of the group which provides continuing evidence of the impact of the programme of study. There is clear evidence from the data collected from the case study that this group of 15 educational professionals has begun the process of developing as genuinely ‘transformative intellectuals’ (Giroux, 1990, p. 196), discussed earlier as crucial if practice in SEN is to change and develop towards genuine inclusion. The action research based programme of study which they followed has clearly enabled their development as critically reflective practitioners, actively engaging in the process of understanding, developing and transforming their practice, and in the process, enabling them to empower themselves and, in some cases, their pupils.

This paper does not seek to make large-scale claims that action research is a panacea for changing practice in SEN. Rather it seeks to demonstrate that carefully planned and structured continuing professional development, which is underpinned by a model of critically reflective practice that requires participants to engage actively in carrying out and critically evaluating quality action research, can be a valuable tool for developing and changing practice in education and can certainly be seen as crucially important in the move towards inclusion.

REFERENCES


