# SUSTAINING ACTION RESEARCH: A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR INSTITUTIONAL ENGAGEMENT BY ANNE BURNS, EMILY EDWARDS AND NEVILLE JOHN ELLIS

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## ABSTRACT

The volume *Sustaining Action Research: A Practical Guide for Institutional Engagement* by Burns, Edwards and Ellis looks at Action Research (AR) and similar participant-oriented approaches from a new perspective. Rather than adding to the growing literature of AR research reports and accounts provided by individual teachers or small groups of teachers, the volume looks at how, beyond the micro level, educational leaders can initiate, support, and sustain AR at their institutions and influence educational developments at meso and macro levels. The book provides teachers, teacher educators, mentors, and educational leaders with a wealth of activities that, in themselves, create an AR cycle, moving from the local context of the microcosm of a classroom up to the institutional and, ultimately, the national and even international level. The volume looks at education from a socioecological perspective and convincingly establishes a solid link between theory and practice, where the individual experiences of classroom practitioners are scaffolded by relevant research and the AR process is both reflected on and celebrated at key stages. The presentation is user-friendly, the information is up-to-date, and the resources are both varied and easily accessible.

The volume on sustaining Action Research was published in the series titled *Research and Resources in Language Teaching* whose explicit aim is 'to integrate the latest research in language teaching and learning with innovative classroom practice' (p. xi). The organisational principle is the same for each volume: Part 1 describes current research and its implications for classroom practice, Part 2 focuses on providing a rich set of activities that can be instantly used in practitioners' teaching practice, Part 3 contains suggestions on methodological applications, while Part 4 returns to the issue of how the materials in the book can support professional development and Action Research. This structure creates a full, uninterrupted cycle by presenting how research can scaffold practice and how practice can feed back smoothly into research.

The novelty of the present volume lies in the fact that rather than describing and reflecting on the experiences of individual teachers or small groups of teachers carrying out AR (an expanding field in the literature), it focuses on the institutional systems where AR might be carried out. Educational organisations are perceived 'as the creators, initiators and supporters of sustainable AR, in partnership with the teachers' (p. xi). This change in perspective is important, since it is by far not evident that there is always managerial support for teacher research in contexts where the majority of language teachers globally work (Xerri and Pioquinto, 2018). Burns,

Edwards and Ellis (2022), therefore, focus on providing support for those who wish to facilitate AR within their institutions both by initiating AR and making it sustainable while following the thinking and utilising the resources presented in the volume with great flair and methodological rigour.

In Part 1, the authors lay the theoretical groundwork. They start by defining AR as a research approach and describe how it can lead to transformative practice as well as continuing professional learning and development. The concept of sociocultural ecological theory is introduced as it provides a suitable framework in which the various interacting levels in educational contexts can be described, namely, microsystems, mesosystems and macrosystems. These are helpful for the reader to understand the interrelated levels of the teaching context (p. 13). The issues of teacher agency and teacher identity are discussed and the concept of 'sustainability', a key term for the book, is defined as 'the extent to which development continues or is sustained over time for the teacher(s) involved in AR' (p. 25). A brief discussion of the challenges teacher researchers often face (e.g., lack of time, lack of confidence in doing research, and lack of resources) is followed by ideas on how a positive and supportive institutional framework can be created even under challenging circumstances. Finally, before introducing the activities in Part 2, the design phases for supporting and sustaining AR are laid out.

The six activity sets in Part 2 correspond to the six design phases and provide a structure aligned with the sequence of how AR is usually carried out: needs analysis for AR, designing and planning AR, implementing and supporting AR, sharing AR with the school community, sharing AR with the broader community, and planning the next steps for AR (p. 31). The activities themselves are structured in the same fashion. The introduction provides a summary of the activity and its aim(s), while the "connections to research" box describes the research issues that are directly related to it. This is followed by the description of the procedure, the resources, and often the extensions and variations that allow the adaptation of the activity to the local context.

While it is beyond the confines of a book review to provide a detailed account of all the activities that form the bulk of the volume (205 pages out of 297), it is still possible to highlight several aspects that make it an essential resource for those looking for guidance on how AR can be initiated, facilitated, and sustained in educational organisations. The activities are both straightforward and well-designed, and incrementally build up research and project management competencies (e.g., designing surveys, analysing the data gathered, creating flowcharts, using databases). The resources contain not only books from established publishers but also online resources and open-source volumes including essential reading, such as Smith and Rebolledo (2018), as well as freely available interviews, videos, and podcasts. There are activities that link AR to the professional development goals of the institution, others take us through the steps of creating a timeline for an AR initiative or look at the financial resources required for it. Taking stock of the hindering factors or barriers that AR practitioners may encounter as well as the supporting factors or facilitators that may make the job easier is a crucial task from the point of view of sustainability and is duly highlighted as such. Further activities deal with AR project planning and its regular review as well as its alignment with institutional needs, with the ethical principles for research also included.

As an emerging teacher-research mentor, I was particularly interested in the activity related to the dimensions and indicators of quality teacher mentoring (pp. 135-138) as well as the need for reflection in AR, for which a rich set of methods is offered (p. 166). It was satisfying to see that the affective aspect, namely, the emotional experiences of AR are also included, making a special point of celebrating AR successes. Sharing AR with the broader community is likewise dealt with by a set of activities from poster presentations to the writing of research reports and narrative accounts and even fully-fledged academic articles.

Part 3, titled *From Application to Implementation*, contains further ideas and discussions on how AR can be included into classroom practice and how pursuing systematic inquiry can lead to the development of research cultures. Returning to the ecological view of the teaching context and based on the activities presented in Part 2, the authors, once again, look at the micro, meso and macro levels, emphasising the cooperative and collaborative nature of AR. Various scenarios are considered, for example, a situation when there is only one teacher at an institution who is interested in AR. At this micro level, the good news is that the person with such an interest is not alone since there are a number of partners and stakeholders, such as students, AR mentors, and critical friends as well as the teacher's manager or principal. The meso-level suggestions focus on how the whole institution where AR is conducted can get involved and, especially, how institutional leaders can plan and sustain this type of teacher research. The macro level concerns 'communities of practice across institutions' (p. 253) which move beyond the local to regional, national and even global initiatives (for example, the UK-based organisation, Cambridge Assessment English supports international AR programs through national associations in the UK and Australia). The potential enabling factors are listed down followed by boxes that present the benefits and challenges of each ecological level.

Finally, Part 4 looks at how institutions that have set up and sustained AR initiatives can move one step further and come full circle by investigating the AR that they have initiated. The authors emphasise that 'This kind of research is 'insider' research, where those internal to the institution, organisation or social structure systematically inquire into their 'ways of doing things', usually with a view to improve, change, enhance and understand them the better' (p. 261). Part 4 also contains a useful description of other participant-oriented approaches followed by examples of how this reflective stage of AR may be carried out at the micro, meso, and macro levels.

Altogether, *Sustaining Action Research* is a ground-breaking volume with its consistent focus on how educational leaders can be supported in their efforts to initiate, facilitate, and sustain AR in their organisations. The authors manage to connect theory and practice by leading the reader through an impeccably structured cycle. They also present a convincing case that, broken down to manageable tasks and activities, AR is both doable and enjoyable. More than that, it can be made sustainable when there is sufficient level of institutional engagement providing support for teachers' continuing professional development, which leads not only to transformative practice at the level of the individual AR practitioner but to the reaching of the educational organisation's development goals as well.

The book should serve as indispensable reading for teachers, teacher educators, and educational leaders that are considering starting on a journey of AR and aim at doing their best to make such initiatives sustainable.

## REFERENCES

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