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Exemplarisch praktijkonderzoek. Suggesties voor een praktijkgerichte onderzoeksbenadering

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Summary

Central theme is the way a social researcher deals with research questions originating in actual practice and solved in the perspective of improvement of practice. This theme has been worked out in six chapters in which a specific research approach is presented.

In the introductory chapter the background of the study is characterized. Important features are: the author's experiences in conducting action-research and his experiences in a national institute for developmental research in supporting practitioners (educators).

The case study used is a research problem dealing with questions and issues local planners encounter in their planning educational programs. Because these questions were related to the transformation of a centralized to a decentralized policy, this case is referred to in the text as the 'decentralization project'. A short description of this project is given.

In chapter two the emphasis is on exploring the issues a researcher has to deal with in developing an adequate research design. Distinction is made between the research process and the research product, the research process being defined as the production of knowledge. Various types of research- or knowledge products are distinguished. The present concern is a product which could improve the activities of relevant actors in the domain of decentralized planning. The concept 'actor' is used here as an acting entity, which may refer to a person, a group or an organization. The research product is characterized as 'a repertory of actions'. The focus on developing this type of knowledge product has important consequences for the research process. It is contended that there is no single, universal way or method for social research. The important features of this particular research product are presented and their implications for the research process are outlined. One of the conclusions is that the product should be developed in collaboration with the actors/users. Criteria by which the quality of the research process can be judged are formulated. Before a rough outline of 'practice-oriented' research is given, indications are given as to how to initiate this type of research.

Like the other chapters, this chapter concludes with an illustration drawn from the 'decentralization project'. In the next four chapters, four essential activities of this research are worked out.

Central theme in chapter three is the so-called developmental framework of the research. The framework has two important functions: the

conception and representation of the research product. For developing this framework the researcher uses the following concepts: actor, research-theme (the subject-matter of the research), and research-domain (the social context of the actors). Three elements of the conception and the representation of the research product are. components, reference points and action alternatives. In decomposing the research theme the researcher utilizes a number of concepts called components. With these components the researcher develops 'a repertory of actions'. This takes place by developing reference points by which an actor orients himself prior to initiating an action and by developing an appropriate action alternative. In the early stage of the research process it is the researcher's responsibility to look for the relevant components of the framework. In order to find these the researcher should utilize different perspectives. The practical know-how of the actors acquired thus far, the goals and intentions of the actors are essential ingredients in addition to theoretical insights.

Chapter four deals with the creation of insights coming from a practical setting. It is underlined that this process is not so much a process of data collection, as a process of data construction. It is essential for the researcher to realize that he has to deal with two search-processes: his own and that of the actors in their practical setting. In the latter process actors try to develop their own 'repertory of actions'. In order to develop his research product the researcher should link both search-processes in various ways. One type of linkage is to cooperate intensively in a number of practical settings. An important criterium for selecting a specific setting is that a 'repertory of actions' can be developed in that specific setting. Through supporting, observing and describing the process in the respective settings the researcher develops his 'data'. In doing this he can use a variety of techniques varying from training to interviewing. It is insufficient for the researcher to play a neutral, objective role. He should share his information with the actors and contribute actively towards the solution of their questions.

Chapter five is devoted to the so-called 'elaboration activities'. The function of these activities is to improve the quality of the research product. Through these activities the researcher tries to prevent the separation of process and research product. It is explained that 'elaboration' is related to the validation of the research product. 'Practical relevance' is a central criterium. Five operationalizations of this criterium are given, namely: actor-orientedness, manageability of the knowledge product, constructing capacity, the range and efficiency of the knowledge product. Suggestions are presented about the way to carry out the 'elaboration activities'.

This chapter concludes with some remarks on the way the researcher

could analyse and integrate his findings. This process is compared with processes of analysis used in qualitative methodology.

Chapter six deals with the activities of dissemination of knowledge. These activities are considered to be an essential part of the research process. The main function is to stimulate optimal utilization of the research product. Ideas and insights from literature on implementation are used. It is stressed to organize these activities from a user perspective. Furthermore it is emphasized that dissemination has a communicative as well as a structural aspect. The researcher should among other things pay attention to various types of actors as potential users of the product and to the conditions under which the knowledge product can be used. This aspect has important consequences for the research process.

In the epilogue some issues needing further study are outlined.