

## Chapter 8

### Action research and democracy

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#### Abstract

In this contribution, we discuss a number of points of interest in the relationship between action research and learning democracy, based on our own experiences with action research. Action research can contribute to learning democracy when it evolves as a democratic practice. The core of this practice is the collaboration with those involved. This collaboration is inspired by a practical question that emerges from practices, that is analysed against the background of its meaning for the way in which it intervenes in people's specific situations and driven by the question whether it contributes to a greater realisation of humanity and social justice. The desired change in action research is therefore not initially intended as a solution for a specific problem, but as increasing the level of doubt about the interpretations of, and actions on, realities and situations. Casting doubt on existing realities and situations, therefore, requires that a variety of possible interpretations of the situations at stake are challenged. Supporting this communicative space, as well as the researcher's engagement to conduct the study, assumes a performative attitude so that the objective reality is also linked to the intersubjective reality and the social environment of the actors involved.

**Keywords:** action research; democracy; citizenship; learning democracy; interpretation

#### Introduction

This contribution explores the relationship between action research and learning democracy. Action research is often defined as emancipatory research, since it implies research in collaboration with practitioners and clients rather than research *about* them or *for* them. The goal of action research is the co-construction of knowledge (Gredig & Marsh, 2010; Pease, 2010). In that vein, generating knowledge is seen not only as a core task and dedication of researchers, but essentially entails a pluralistic concern (Nielsen & Nielsen, 2006). Action research is often applied in the field of education and social work, since it is argued that action research enables a more democratic and socially just society. The appraisal of existing situations as inhumane and/or inadequate in the light of a democratic society often serves as the starting point for action research. Historically, action research is rooted in social sciences that attempt to pursue a more humane and democratic society. In Anglo-Saxon contexts, Kurt Lewin is perceived as the spiritual father of action research. Other prominent perspectives imply the pragmatic philosophy of John Dewey, the interactionism as developed by George Herbert Mead, Jacob Levy Moreno's group work and John Collier's work as Commissioner of Indian Affairs (Feldman, 1994). In the German-speaking countries, reference is primarily made to the impact of Critical Theory, mainly inspired by the work of Jurgen Habermas. In this approach, action research represents the construction of 'critical research communities', based on the commitment to respond to a jointly encountered problem. From a more radical perspective, action research has the potential to create more space to stimulate a broader public debate, and entails an interrelation between action research and border social movements (Kemmis, 2001). Together with Critical Theory, Critical Pedagogy - particularly with reference to the work of Paulo Freire (1972) and Oscar Negt (1975) - is an important source of inspiration. In this respect, Critical Pedagogy primarily focuses on questioning existing realities and situations of marginalised groups in society. The relationship between the researcher and the research subject is an essential point of interest in this approach: this relationship should be seen as a subject-subject relationship in which the various actors position themselves towards each other in a process of mutual encounter, and in which various interpretations of the realities and situations in question become the subject of research and reflection. The point of departure in this approach to research is that society can be understood as the result of human actions, and can also be changed by human actions. Action

research can therefore be seen as a form of *cultural action*, meaning breaking through the norms that are firmly established in our culture, and as a form of *social learning*, i.e. the acquisition of 'sociological imagination', which allows us to link ones own reality with political (Nielsen & Nielsen, 2001).

In the light of the variety of the above mentioned theoretical sources of inspiration, action research currently 'includes a whole range of approaches and practices, each grounded in different traditions in different philosophical and psychological assumptions, pursuing different political commitments' (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, p. XXIV). The ways in which much importance is given to action research varies (Feldman, 1984; Altrichter & Gstettner, 1993), and the productivity of the research often depends on the way in which the co-researchers can develop reflexive potential to reconsider their concrete institutional context critically, realising the 'communicative space' required for the research (Wicks & Reason, 2009). In the field of education and social work in Flanders, action research has gained prominence since the late 70s.

In what follows, we focus on the possible contribution of action research to learning democracy. We will discuss our own experiences and insights acquired from two action research projects, that were set up within the youth welfare sector in Flanders (the Flemish speaking part of Belgium). The first study concerned the implementation of educational assistance in youth welfare, commissioned by the government to avoid more intrusive and more expensive interventions by developing a good and transferrable form of ambulatory assistance. The second study involved research into the reorganisation of the youth welfare sector, posing the question of how the various forms of care supply could be better harmonised in order to create a more demand-driven type of care. In this chapter, we throw light on the 5 basic elements that we have identified in an apt definition of action research, being developed during these studies: *action research is (1) a way of social interaction (2) in response to a problematic situation (3) in order to change the situation (4) in collaboration with the people involved, (5) while striving for the development of theory* (Bouverne-De Bie & Verhellen, 1995; Roose & De Bie, 2003; Roose & De Bie, 2009).

### **Action research: Research as a way of social interaction . . .**

The point of departure of our approach to action research, which is mainly inspired by Freire, is that social realities have been constructed and created by people, and are therefore also changeable. The basis of society and the humanity within this society is therefore perceived as inter-subjective interactions. Research can also be seen as being part of these interactions rather than a neutral activity (D'Cruz & Jones, 2004). This point of departure implies that knowledge cannot be in conformity to an existing order, but that knowledge is considered as socially constructed and must be considered with respect to the question of inter-subjectivity in the social order (Schuyt, 1972; 2009), referring to the different points of view from which a situation can be studied. The relationship between action research and democracy is also part of this viewpoint: does the research contribute to the confirmation of the social order, or to social change? And, if it concerns change: is this change supported by the researcher, who, in the name of science, proposes a 'new order', or does the research contribute to increasing the 'quality of interaction', i.e. the possibility to deal with competitive points of view and to pursue a greater equality of possibilities to act? This insight is in line with the terminology provided by Biesta (2011a), who addresses the question of whether the research contributes to a *socialisation approach* or to a *subjectification approach* to the democratic quality of society.

The point of departure of action, research, perceived as a form of social interaction, has consequences for the approach to knowledge, which is viewed as historically construed, and in which everyday life experiences as well as memories and future expectations, play a role (Negt, 1975). Considering knowledge as socially constructed implies that concrete insight needs to be

acquired in the structure of meaning of actions in particular settings. In our approach, action research therefore should be approached as *interpretative* research, in the sense that the researcher does not use an explicit (and previously conceived) observation or coding schedule for the collection, analysis and interpretation of data. In that vein, interpretative research – including action research - is closely related to a diversity of phenomenological approaches, such as symbolic interactionism (Schuyt, 1972; Bogdan & Biklen, 1998), cultural-historical approaches with an emphasis on the study of ordinary, everyday life, such as ethno-methodology and ethnography (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Angrosino, 2008), and critical approaches like social environment research (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009). In these approaches, the core research subject is everyday language and life experiences, and the life experiences of actors involved in the research process are also symbolic references to how they view social realities as well as social relationships in these realities. In that sense, experience is not only sensorial experience yet concerns an assessment of the socially constructed realities at stake that can only be established through the use of symbols that people have learned to use in social interactions and relationships. Experience is perceived as the account that is constructed by people while being inspired by what happens in their lives (Schuyt, 1982, p. 42). In other words, a reality is not unilaterally determined by 'facts', but is construed by researching events as the subject of research and knowledge (Glastra van Loon, 1970; 1980).

In the action research that we conducted in the youth welfare sector, respectively the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and International Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) were essential reference points. The research was therefore aimed towards the demand for equality in possibilities to lead a dignified human existence. Our research also devoted much attention to the historical and social analysis of these human rights frameworks, as well as to the examination of the meaning attributed to the UDHR and the CRC in everyday practices. The distinction made by Biesta (2011a) between a socialisation and a subjectification approach can be identified in our research, particularly in the conclusion of the second action research project in which we reveal that both the UDHR and the CRC are interpreted in very different ways, with a legal interpretation at one end of the spectrum and a socio-political interpretation at the other end (Roose & De Bie, 2007). In a legal interpretation, rights are used as an *end of dialogue*: the solution to concrete problems is embodied in the implementation of the law. In this approach, a political and social conception of citizenship are placed one above the other: active citizenship, understood as a sense of public responsibility, also forms a condition for political citizenship. In a socio-political interpretation, rights, on the contrary, serves as a *starting point to dialogue* (McGillivray, 1994). In terms of youth welfare, this interpretation implies the acknowledgment of the co-actorship of the children and parents in the creation of their situation (Roose & Bouverne-De Bie, 2007). In this approach, citizenship is not translated as an individual status, but rather as a practice to be realised through various activities and social relationships; a *citizenship-as-practice* (Lawy & Biesta, 2006). In case of our research in youth welfare, this citizenship-as-practice perspective meant that in our research a lot of attention was paid to, on the one hand, the way we approached children and, on the other hand, the search for defining quality criteria for care in dialogue with parents and children.

The children's rights approach was a central point of interest in the first study of youth welfare work, starting from the demand to improve the quality of youth educational assistance provided under the Belgian Youth Protection Act. The research was conducted within the particular region; the various actors of that region involved in the execution of the youth protection law were brought together in a 'steering group'. This steering group provided a communicative space in which a number of specific cases of children, being considered by the juvenile court and placed out of the parental home, were discussed. In search of the pedagogical concept of youth protection, the children's rights approach was explored in this study (Verhellen, 1978). Exploring this perspective led to criticisms on the result-oriented and heavily institutionalised approach of education in youth protection, which is a criticism that goes back to Reform Pedagogy (Vanobbergen, 2003). Yet this

perspective also provided the insight that youth protection cannot be seen exclusively as a way to deal with social problems, but that these problems are also created through the ways in which they are defined and approached. More attention for children's competence and agency, and to their entitlement to make meaning of their own situation, was seen as an essential component of a contemporary approach to problems. As the starting point of a broader series of studies concerning the rights of the child, this action research project was very inspiring for the development of the children's rights movements in Flanders (Verhellen, 1979). In the second and more recent study (Roose, 2006), an analysis of the meaning of these children's rights movements was used to analyse the concrete situation of children and parents. The tension between a legal and socio-political interpretation raised the question which conditions are required so children's rights would contribute to greater equality in possibilities to act for children. This question led to the development of quality criteria for care services, which were included in the subsequent research as 'sensitising concepts' (Blumer, 1954) for the analysis. This happened in collaboration with social services in the youth welfare sector, to figure out what these criteria could contain for the supply of services and how the realisation of quality could affect the situation of parents and children. This study was also supported by a steering group in which the various actors were brought together to create a communicative space.

### **. . . in response to a problematic situation**

Action research begins from concrete questions that are emerging from the social field wherein practices evolve. In the research projects that are discussed in this chapter, these issues entailed a demand for change in the youth welfare sector. In the first study, the question concerned the improvement of quality in offering educational support. The practical problem posed was that, while contemporary approaches to educational support do exist, they were not realised in youth care practices. The second study concerned the demand to explore and establish possible scenarios with actors involved in youth welfare to support them in the reorganisation of the sector, which had been pushed forward by the government. In both studies, this practical demand provoked the research. However, this practical question was not dealt with in an easy and linear way. In our research as well as in research mentioned in the body of action research literature, the first phase of action research is often to *stop*. As Wadsworth (1998, p. 3) stated, 'we do not begin to inquire until we actually suspend our current action because of the raising of the question'. Emancipatory action research runs counter to the 'illusion of taking action' (Senge, in Mensink, 2005, p. 30), since action researchers first attempt to make an in-depth problem analysis rather than seeking to solve any problem you are confronted with directly.

In our research, this meant that the given problem was analysed in its historical context. The first study was therefore initiated based on a historical analysis of the image of the child, which was rooted in youth welfare; the second study was initiated based on a historical analysis of youth welfare and the children's rights movement. During the first study, this analysis was still largely done from the point of view of the researcher, yet during the second study, the researcher coupled the historical analysis to a study done by the actors involved in youth welfare themselves from the perspective of their own experience. The findings of this study were presented to, and discussed with, the steering group. In both studies, the findings were also brought to the steering groups at regular intervals for a larger forum of researchers and practitioners, through study days and workshops. In our point of view, these historical analyses constituted an important basis to enact the action research projects: it allows the actors involved to expose and question their taken-for-granted, daily practices. The historical research approach therefore offers a 'suspension' of daily practices (Masschelein, 2012), but also provides a 'rear-view mirror' to reflect on newly assumed objectives or working styles. This embodies a dialectical approach to research rather than research evolving from a spectator view (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000), in which 'the individual and the social, and the objective and the subjective, are perceived as related aspects of human life and practice, to

be understood dialectically - that is, as mutually opposed (and often contradictory) but mutually necessary aspects of human, social and historical reality in which each aspect helps us constitute the other' (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000, p. 578). Hence, it is important to frame the research problem in its social and historical context, since 'it is necessary to understand practice as enacted by individuals who act in the context of history and in ways constituted by a vast historical web of social interaction among people' (ibid.)

Making up a historical analysis is not an easy task to fulfill, because of the risk to elaborate the problem analysis as a self-referential issue. Complex situations in the first place need a political answer, but can easily be translated into problems that, supposedly, require a methodical answer (Roose, Roets & De Bie, 2011). The critique on a methodical approach is that it is technical instead of relational (Parton, 2000). However, a relational approach also holds a risk of self-referentiality. For instance, a concept such as Constructive Social Work (Parton & O'Byrne, 2000) addresses the co-construction of problems and solutions. However, this construction remains embedded in the logic that there is a problem for research, or for social work, to resolve. In that light, action research can also become self-referential when it limits itself to reflexivity about the problem definitions at hand, instead of looking at what might be left out of the picture. Or as Trinder (2000, p. 237) argues, action research requires 'a greater degree of reflexivity among researchers, reviewers and practitioners to think about assumptions about the world which are taken for granted and what questions and answers are not addressed or precluded by particular pieces of research or particular research designs'.

In that vein, we argue that making a historical analyses is an important dimension in action research, because it allows the development of 'sociological imagination' (Mills, 1959), necessary to question taken for granted practices. This questioning is needed to connect the diversity of the interpretations of the same situation, and the contradictions in these interpretations, to the practical demand for change. The practical demand for change is often based on a means-end relationship, in which education, social work and/or a better method of social intervention is perceived as a means to achieve the intended goal, in this case better youth welfare as a means to greater equality in the development opportunities for children. The means-end relationship decontextualises research and practice, decoupling these activities and analyses from the contexts of the parents and children involved. Therefore, a critical approach therefore does not rule out that an imbalance of power will be established between those 'who know' and those 'who don't know' (Vanobbergen, 2003, p. 177). From a historical analyses, the impossibility of both critical research and critical education may become clear: unforeseen and unpredictable outcomes will also have to be taken into account, and the intentions that are initially brought forward in the human interaction seldom materialise as such. The only possible attitude therefore does not lie in the awareness of a programme, nor in giving the actors insight into their situation, but in the realisation that the question as to how the future will look or should look like cannot fundamentally be answered (Biesta, 2011b). It is precisely in the awareness of that lack of knowledge that space exists for the opportunity to dialogue and the possibility for emancipation of obvious assumptions.

### **. . . in order to change the situation**

The aforementioned shows that the desired 'change' in our approach to action research cannot be seen as an *innovation strategy*. In our point of view, action research implies that the desired change happens by taking the interpretations of actors seriously, based on the idea that people's interpretations are not 'what they are' or 'real facts', but are themselves the outcome of socio-historical processes. Hence, the question always remains whether the desires of people are also desirable from a democratic viewpoint (Biesta, 2011a). From a perspective of democracy as an ongoing experiment, learning democracy can not be seen as the achievement of a 'Bildungsideal' (Masschelein, 1991) or a state of emancipation which has to be achieved. Learning is seen as a

matter of uncertainty, and as a matter of learning to deal with the fear that goes with this uncertainty (Imelman, in Rang, 1986).

In other words, 'change' in action research may be considered as 'problematizing' the situation, through the realisation of a 'communicative' or 'open space' in which practices can be questioned with respect to their underlying assumptions and how they intervene in everyday life experiences. The continuous feedback of information is therefore an essential point in emancipatory action research, i.e. research that allows the actors involved to develop new definitions of existing realities. The interaction between 'research' (of the existing) and 'action' (of the awareness of the possible other definitions) raises the question about the position of the researcher. The researcher has to make the action possible, and can, more particularly, facilitate the dialogue between the actors, introduce knowledge that prompts the actors to reflect on their actions, and develop new theoretical concepts that result from the newly initiated dialogue, which may contribute to a better understanding of the realities at stake.

Facilitating the dialogue, implying the creation of a communicative space, was in our research translated into setting up a steering group. On the one hand, the researcher supported this steering group by taking the practical question, that was the starting point of the research, seriously and exploring this together with the people involved. Moreover, the underlying points of departure and expectations were analysed. On the other hand, the researcher also paid attention to the action component in the research, that being the heightening of the variety of ways in which the situation was problematised. These two tasks can be seen as a combination of both exploring the problem definition at stake, as well as a distancing from it (Bouverne-De Bie & Verhellen, 1995). In order to make this combination possible, we separated these roles in our research involvement. These two tasks were undertaken by two separate researchers that kept in close contact with each other. An essential element also implied the agreement with the actors involved that the research ventures would be directed by one of the researchers, in this case the researcher that had the task to distance the core perspective produced by the research from the problem definition at stake. In that light, an attempt was made to avoid the pitfall of implementing an instrumental approach.

The researcher contributes to the production of scientific and everyday knowledge which appeals people to give accountability for their actions and its impact on other people involved (Masschelein, 1998). Instead of the realisation of an objective, the point of departure therefore implies that the ways in which actions influence the concrete situation of the people involved, and the relationships between those people, are explored. During the first study on youth welfare, the question of the accountability for increasing government intervention in the situation of parents and children - certainly also supported by youth welfare - came into focus (Verhellen, 1978). In the second study, the accountability question was addressed in a concrete research procedure, in which the existing youth welfare services were analysed in various steps, ranging from a very broad initial analysis and thematic workshops introducing the clients' perspective to the discussions of concrete case histories. This research procedure enabled us to explore the accountability question, as an experience that widens the minds of the people involved and that incited change (Roose, 2006). Nevertheless, we figured out that the more specific the accountability question became, the more difficult it became for the actors to participate in the steering group. Some actors quit, and other actors indicated that they got caught in the tension between the emerging theoretical perspective and the pragmatism of their everyday practices, including the fear of opposing institutionalised procedures and funding conditions. For the researchers, the research became an experience that broadened their idea of action research, in a sense that the research team needed to question possible boundaries of their approach to action research. Ultimately, the research was finished. In the end, a study day was organised to raise the acquired insights, during which the research findings were presented and framed in a broader theoretical perspective. Notably, immediately after the

completion of the research, a number of actors requested further support from the researchers. This request was also granted.

In our point of view, the researcher's aim is to contribute to new theoretical insights about the problems involved and about action research as a research approach. The realisation of action research projects proves to be a difficult task, as action research evolves into 'that delicate place where the life-world meets the system. The practices of opening communicative space are therefore necessarily paradoxical and contradictory; the facilitator often needs to hold together qualities that are usually in opposition' (Wicks & Reason, 2010, p. 258). The action research projects that we carried out in youth welfare work really conveyed to us, as researchers, an awareness of the possibilities of action research in the realisation of democratic care practices, but also an awareness that it is necessary to cherish only very modest ambitions to embrace this democratic potential (Roose, 2006). With reference to action research, the expectations about realising its emancipatory potential are often very high (Boog, 2001). The key question, however, is what is meant by emancipation? If emancipation is understood as individual or organisational 'empowerment', this implies a notion of power as an unequal good that has to be shared more equally (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). This notion of power, in addition to the distinction between 'having power' and 'powerlessness', brings other dichotomies with it as well, such as the one between worker and client, scientific knowledge versus experiential knowledge, and researchers versus research subjects. The question, nevertheless, is whether emancipation should be seen as empowerment, and whether action research needs such endeavours (Masschelein, 1991). The possible contribution of action research to emancipation and learning democracy should, in our opinion, be seen as both more modest and possibly more fundamental; it is about 'the slow process of questioning of existing realities and the courage to take a critical look at our own role in its perpetuation' (Roose, 2006, p. 190).

#### **. . . in collaboration with the people involved**

The relationship between researchers and research subjects is one of the most crucial issues in action research (Boog, Coenen, Keune & Lammerts, 1998). It is an interactive relationship in which the participants in the research are not seen as objects of the research, but as subjects and co-researchers. The research method is characterised by double hermeneutics (Tromp, 2004) in which the researcher interprets the constructed reality, yet at the same time is dependent on the interpretations of the actors involved in that reality. At the same time, these interpretations influence each other (Röling, 1995).

The collaboration with the people involved is the ultimate criterion in action research with respect to the question of whether action research can fulfil its emancipatory aspirations. More specifically, the question is how the connection can be made between research and democratising processes, or, in other words, whether action research can be transformed into an innovation strategy and/or research method, or can be seen as a paradigmatic approach. In line with the ideas of Habermas, Moser (1975) perceived action research as an alternative research paradigm, referring to a 'participant perspective' and an 'observer perspective' as both essential characteristics of action research. He argued that action research must contribute to the development of theory in which both perspectives are connected to each other. For Moser (1975), the collaboration with the people involved has not primarily an ethical, but especially an *epistemological* meaning (Bouverne-De Bie & Verhellen, 1995). This perspective implies that there is an awareness that knowledge does not lead to power, but that it is an attribute of power. In that sense, collaboration with the people involved is a way to exert the power of the researcher, and to orient the process of knowledge construction towards the development of a public debate. In this light, the collaboration with the people involved can be viewed as a condition for the public nature of research. Following Habermas, the public nature of research is understood, on the one hand, as the public debate of social issues and, on the

other hand, the guarantee of the public nature of this debate by law as a result of formal democratic procedures (e.g. Tinnevelt, 2010). In that light, action research needs to be independent research. Especially in the second research project this independent character of the research was an important point of attention. The research was made possible in the framework of a PhD project, financed by the University.

One important question remains, that is to say; who are the people involved? In the action research projects that are the subject of discussion here, we also applied the basic premise that the people who had the opportunity to be involved were 'all actors involved in the situation'. In the implementation of the research projects, our investigations turned out that it was dependent of people who wanted to contribute to the action research. Action research in the field of educational and social work practices often evolves as research with practitioners, while the people whose situation needs to be improved as a result of the research, as well as the people who determine the institutional problem definitions that are at stake in the research, often stay out of the picture. Nonetheless, the perspectives of children and parents were included in our research on youth welfare by means of identifying and inserting a number of discussion points in separate sub-studies, and these findings were brought into the steering group discussions (Roose, 2006). The issue of the institutional problem definitions was included in our research through the emphasis on the independence of the researcher, which was guaranteed by means of the agreement with the practitioners involved that the findings of the research would result in the Phd dissertation of one of the researchers involved.

Nevertheless, the question of who should be involved in defining the scope of action research is often disregarded and remains paradoxical. In our research, for example, the identification of the questions that initiated the research as well as the creation of a 'communicative space' remained a joint responsibility of the researchers and practitioners involved. Paradoxically, however, this confirms the expectation that the research will offer a 'solution' for social problems that are emerging from the practices involved. The name 'participatory action research' (Cammarota & Romero, 2011; Foster-Fishman et al., 2010; Wong, Zimmerman & Parker, 2010) is also paradoxical. The approaches that have been brought forward under this name largely remain solution-focused and directed by presupposed, utopian-formulated objectives that are external to (the analysis of) the situation. Starting from these objectives, the use of action research therefore continues to exist primarily due to the demand for the solution-focused and utopian improvement of practices more than from the demand for a joint democratisation of existing practices.

A life-world orientation perspective (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009) possibly offers a different point of departure, as this approach can engender the perspectives and everyday participation of the people whose situation needs to be improved and allows us to analyse this participation in relation to the wider social, physical, economic, cultural, political and spatial environment including the ways in which this wider context limits or enhances their opportunities to participation (Hill, Davis, Prout & Tisdall, 2004; James, Jens & Sprout, 1998; Wyness, 2000; Biesta, 2011a, 2011b).

### **. . . striving for the development of theory**

Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) describe action research as 'low tech' research, in which methodological and technical rigidity are partly sacrificed in favour of the surplus of the research actions for the concrete situations and the question whether the research is meaningful in light of the problem at hand. They argue that 'it sacrifices methodological sophistication in order to generate timely evidence that can be used and further developed in a real-time process of transformation' (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000, p. 591). They state that theoretical development is not only recognised by a good methodology, but rather through its epistemology: 'research cannot be regarded as self-justifying, or justified solely by reference to internal criteria (for example,

methodological criteria); research is also a social practice, to be evaluated against criteria of the kind we have listed as the aims of action research - that is, in terms of the extent to which it contributes to confronting and overcoming irrationality, injustice, alienation and suffering, both in the research setting and more generally in terms of its broader consequences' (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000, p. 593).

The demand for the development of theory in action research implies that researchers have to determine their point of view concerning the question to which knowledge the research should lead, and whether problem-solving and practice-improvement (referring to the technical aspect of action research) and the analysis, along with the people involved, contributes to an awareness of human dignity and social justice (referring to the critical and emancipatory aspect of action research). We follow Habermas (1981), who pointed to the importance of language in this analytical connection, as the central symbol system in social interaction. From his point of view, language enables us to make the connection between a technical knowledge interest, focused on the management of social problems, and a communicative knowledge interest in which the existing reality is opened up based on the principle of inter-subjective comprehensibility. From the perspective of both speakers and listeners, language points to something like this in the 'objective world' (as the totality of whatever is the case), as well as to something in the 'social world' (as the totality of legitimate interpersonal relationships), as well as to something in the subjective world of the speaker (as the totality of the manifestable subjective experiences to which he/she has privileged access). The same network can also be analysed from the perspective of the social environment, or the background of the shared assumptions and procedures in which each piece of communication is embedded from the beginning. From this perspective, language fulfils the function of both cultural reproduction (or keeping traditions alive) and social integration (or coordination of the plans of various individuals in social interaction), and the function of socialisation (or the cultural interpretation of needs (Habermas, 1981, p. 7-8). According to Habermas (1981, p. 9); 'people who participate in communication processes (such as the researchers) must assume a performative attitude. This attitude makes it possible to alternate between third person, or objectifying positions, second person or conformative positions, and first person or expressive positions. The performative attitude allows a mutual orientation to validity claims (such as truth, normative correctness and sincerity), which are made with the expectation of a 'yes' and 'no' response (or a request to provide more reasons) on the side of the listener. These claims are made with the intention of them being critically assessed, so that an intersubjective recognition of a particular claim can serve as the basis for a rationally motivated consensus. At the same time, the speaker and the listener become involved in those functions that fulfil the communication processes in the reproduction of the social environment that they share, by assuming a performative attitude' (Habermas, 1981, p. 9). People are therefore approached in their capacity to learn, to ensure that a society ultimately learns to solve the problems that affect it, in a way that corresponds to an awareness of human dignity and social justice.

As we mentioned before, in action research this 'performative attitude' primarily leads to analysing the initial question that is emerging from practice from a historical perspective in order to connect it with a broader frame of reference, which implies in our research the UDHR and the CRC. The division of the role of the researcher must also be seen in this light, as well as the regular feedback of findings from the researchers to a broader forum of actors. However, in our research, the participation component still received insufficient attention, in light of the 'performative attitude' that is assumed by Habermas. Research that evolves as a democratic practice, after all, not only requires a connection between the 'objective' and 'social' worlds; it also requires a connection with the subjective world. From that point of view, the perspective of children and parents themselves remains an important 'black box': their perspectives were only brought in indirectly by the analysis of the researchers.

## Conclusion

In this contribution, we have discussed a number of points of interest in the relationship between action research and learning democracy, based on our own experiences with action research. Action research can contribute to learning democracy when it evolves as a democratic practice. The core of this practice is the collaboration with those involved. This collaboration is inspired by a practical question that emerges from practices, that is analysed against the background of its meaning for the way in which it intervenes in people's specific situations and driven by the question whether it contributes to a greater realisation of humanity and social justice. The desired change in action research is therefore not initially intended as a solution for a specific problem, but as increasing the level of doubt about the interpretations of, and actions on, realities and situations. Casting doubt on existing realities and situations, therefore, requires that a variety of possible interpretations of the situations at stake are challenged. Supporting this communicative space, as well as the researcher's engagement to conduct the study, assumes a performative attitude so that the objective reality is also linked to the intersubjective reality and the social environment of the actors involved.

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