

The pragmatic paradigm as a viable option for school-based research

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Opsomming

Die pragmatiese paradigma as 'n bruikbare opsie vir skoolgebaseerde navorsing

Onlangse nasionale en internasionale navorsingsverslae onderstreep die problematiek rakende onderwysstandaarde in Suid-Afrika. Dit is veral die lae geletterdheid en rekenkundige vaardighede wat afsteek. 'n Benadering wat talle probleme in die alledaagse onderwyspraktyk kan identifiseer en ondervang, is praktykgerigte, skoolgebaseerde navorsing. Voortvloeiend uit hierdie benadering word gerigte navorsing deur die onderwyser vanuit die hart van die praktyk onderneem in plaas daarvan dat dit van buite af deur politici en akademici gedoen word. Die doel van hierdie besinnende artikel is gevolglik om aan te toon hoedat 'n pragmatiese benadering tot navorsing, (in plaas van die tradisionele, formeel gestruktureerde benadering) 'n bruikbare moontlikheid aan die onderwyser bied om deel te neem aan skoolgebaseerde navorsing. Gegrand op 'n literatuurstudie word enkele wesenseienskappe van

*die alledaagse onderwyspraktyk geïdentifiseer om aan te toon waarom aksienavorsing 'n geskikte pragmatiese instrument is vir sodanige praktyknavorsing. Daar word aanbeveel dat die onderwyser die rol van die protagonis moet inneem en akademiese rolspelers as vennote moet betrek. Ten slotte word daar ook aange-
toon dat, hoewel die pragmatisme lynreg met die Christelike lewensbeskouing bots, die pragmatiese ingesteldheid inderwaarheid 'n inherente deel van die Christelike werksetiek uitmaak.*

1. Introduction

Recent national and international reports have shown that South African education is not up to standard. One of the main problem areas is the low level of literacy and numeracy among South African learners. Instead of leaving it to academics and politicians who are not part of everyday educational practice, this article suggests that the educational practitioner should become the research protagonist by applying school-based research. Consequently, rather than utilising the traditional formal approach to research, the objective of this article is to show how a more pragmatic approach, utilising the attributes of action research, could be a viable option for conducting research from a grass roots level. Based on a literature study, a few essentials from everyday educational practice are identified and matched with the attributes of action research to demonstrate its viability for pragmatic research. It is suggested that educators become the leaders of the research process, with academics acting as associates and advisors. Finally, it is argued that pragmatism is not acceptable in terms of the Christian philosophy of life, whereas pragmatic approach in actual fact forms part of Christian ethics.

2. Problem statement

Although 20.4% of the South African expenditure allocations were afforded to education in 2010-2011 (SAIRR, 2011:194), various reports indicate that education in South Africa is not up to standard. Some of the challenges are the literacy and numeracy skills of learners which are declining, as well as work ethics among teachers (and learners), which is not acceptable.

The Report on Annual National Assessment (ANA) of 2011 revealed a 35% literacy rate and a 28% numeracy rate among Grade 3

learners and added that these percentages have dropped from 36% and 35% respectively since 2007 (SAIRR, 2011:421). The Progress in International Reading Literacy (PIRLS) report of 2006 showed that South Africa's overall results on reading achievement rated last among 45 countries (UP, 2006:22).

Taylor's (2006) reports of 2006 on education showed that up to 80% of South African schools were dysfunctional. In the light of research reports this might be a result of a lack of self-discipline and/or work ethics among learners and teachers: Research conducted by the Centre for Development and Enterprise revealed that South African teachers spend less than 50% of their actual teaching time per week in class (SAIRR, 2011:421). In addition, it appears that many teachers do not understand their subjects or how to teach it (SAIRR, 2011:422). A report by Van Vuuren (1996:11) indicated that daily, an average of 227 000 school children find themselves in front of the television during school hours. As part of the endeavour to solve these problems, it has been suggested that teachers themselves need to conduct research in the educational environment in order to be involved directly in "the process of improving education" (Mertle, 2009:xix). International research in the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia and other countries has been conducted on the value of teachers conducting and disseminating their own school-based research (Koshy, 2010:3).

However, little or no literature is available explaining appropriate research tools available to the South African classroom practitioner. From a literature study on the dictates of modern educational practice, focusing on the sphere of day-to-day realities and their dictates to find answers to practical problems, it became clear that feasible solutions often come from within the school environment itself, rather than from the offices of politicians, officials or academics. Much of the traditional research conducted in education was often of little relevance or value to educational practice, resulting in a failure to have an effect on education (Mills, 2007:6). In addition, since the research has often not been relevant to educational practice, it has failed to address the educational practitioner's questions.

In terms of item 7 of the Professional Ethical Code for Educators, the educational professionals in schools are obliged to conduct research in order to stay "abreast of educational trends and de-

velopments” (Oosthuizen, 2001:86). However, not all educational practitioners have a proper appreciation for and understanding of research (Creswell 2012:3). Gall, Gall and Borg (2007:3) observe that research “still has relatively little influence on their day-to-day work”. They argue that, by contrast, surgeons who do not take cognisance of the latest reports on medical research will barely be able to continue their careers.

There are various reasons why teachers are not inclined to conduct research. In the first place, teachers contend that, in general, the teaching practitioner should rather focus on the application of teaching skills and strategies in a teaching and learning school environment than on paying attention to research (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009:3). These authors add that teachers are quite often fulfilling their roles as teaching “technicians” who are not supposed to be “problem posers” or to be “problem solvers”. Another reason for this inclination is to be found in the fact that, in the past, teachers did not have proper access to modern research tools to disseminate original knowledge they can take to the discussion table. Consequently they have to implement the findings to school-related problems of experts such as university professors who are outside the walls of the school building, alien to modern trends of the school environment.

A convenience sample consisting of 76 educational practitioners, who are postgraduate students on two campuses of a large South African university, confirmed that almost 47% of the respondents were not involved in any kind of research directed at enhancing educational practice in class. This kind of approach actually entails that schools of the future would operate “pretty much the same as they do now” (Gall, *et al.* 2007:3), which would mean a lack of development in educational practice. The purpose of research in general is to attain more knowledge about one’s working field in order to ultimately enhance one’s operational skills as a practitioner and to understand the ever-changing educational process in coping with its dynamics (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:3).

In view of the above, the objective of this argumentative article is to show why a pragmatic style of research may be appropriate for the teacher to use as instrument to solve the everyday practical problems of educational practice in order to improve the learning-teaching environment. In the process, the very essence of a prag-

matic paradigm of research as well as matching research strategies and instruments will be identified. The dictates of everyday educational practice, as determined by a literature study, will be compared with the essentials of the pragmatic paradigm. Finally, an attempt will be made to demonstrate how the pragmatic endeavours, which flow from pragmatism as a philosophical world view, could be utilised by the Christian teacher as a suitable vantage point from which to conduct school-based research.

3. *Pragma* as a conceptual-theoretical framework

The conceptual framework of this article is based on the Greek concept *pragma* as a paradigm for research. In this section, the essence of *pragma*-tism is analysed in order to identify the commonalities between the two derivations of the word *pragma* – pragmatism and pragmatic. In addition, it endeavours to explain why pragmatism as a philosophical world view is not acceptable in terms of the Christian world view whereas a pragmatic paradigm is highly acceptable.

The Greek word *pragma* basically means *dealing with things in a practical and sensible way; relating to fact* (Oxford, 2001:693). Rooted in the word *pragma* is the noun pragmatism as well as the adjective pragmatic (Greek: *pragmatikos*) which, freely translated, entails being practically inclined. Although these two words basically mean the same, they differ in their modern-day application in the sense that the *-ism* suffix adds a state or quality to the root word, *pragma* (Oxford, 2001:481). Pragmatism as an *-ism*, when applied as a world view, seems to over-emphasise the pragmatic to such an extent that it becomes the compass and the only norm that guides one's actions and perceptions about life. It becomes the vehicle which steers all actions and objectives in life. This implies that in pragmatism, "what works in a particular situation is acceptable" is regarded as the only norm. Consequently, pragmatism as a world view and philosophy about life does not fit into the Christian perspective where the norms are based on Biblical principles.

Creswell (2009:3) identified a differentiated advance to research related to diverse world views or epistemologies. This diverse approach to research implies that the very nature of research is not only individualised, but also contextualised. In the classroom this

implies that the teacher as researcher would not only assess the individual learner's academic performance as it manifests within the classroom, but would seek to understand the learner's performance as a manifestation of the learner's whole context within which the learner lives and functions, as a display in the miniature of what happens in the learner's world outside of the classroom and everything in that world which has an influence on the learner's performance in the classroom (Department of Education, 2008:14). Hence all aspects influencing the learner ought to be taken into consideration when making judgments and posing formal assessment descriptions, as in the formative and annual summative assessments and reports about each learner. Subsequently the teacher would also seek to find solutions for a learner's academic difficulties within the context of the learner and not only for the learner within the classroom.

The concept "pragmatism" is also related to the Greek word *praxis*, literally meaning *doing; practice as opposed to theory* (Oxford, 2001:693). The obvious implication here is that the pragmatist emphasises the practicality of doing something or acting on a given situation rather than theorising about a problem. Pragmatism as a philosophy of life can be traced back in history as far back as Protagoras (485-415 B.C.). More recently, some of the exponents of pragmatic theory were scholars such as Charles Pierce (1839-1914), William James (1842-1910) and John Dewey (1859-1952) (Landman, Kilian, Swanepoel, & Bodenstein, 1982:30).

John Dewey, for example, developed a pragmatic-empirical approach which entails that the truth about a matter has to be tested and proved in practice for validity. Continual experimentation and (often in combination with) practical experiences are seen as vital instruments on the road towards attaining knowledge to be applied in one's everyday (practical) living environment. To the pragmatist, the application of these instruments to everyday 'real-life problems' now has to be submitted to a progressive cycle of reflection consisting of 'common sense thinking' and conclusions (Landman *et al.*, 1980:29, 30).

Another basic essential of pragmatism is vested in the perspective that there is no absolute truth and that truth is relative – in other words, a kind of 'middle of the road' perspective which focuses on the here and now, the present, everyday world. For some of the

exponents of pragmatism such as Roger Bacon, the only truth is that which is to be found in the practical, passive experience and the constant adaptation to a particular environment (Van der Walt, 1980:39; Landman *et al.*, 1982:29, 30). This entails that pragmatism follows a contingent or situational approach in dealing with complex situations. The afore-mentioned authors concur about the fact that it is difficult, if not impossible, to work from broad-based theories, generalisations and pre-set agendas to solve the problems of complex situations and environments. Consequently, congruent to relativism which is a characteristic feature of their pragmatism, they proclaim that what proves to be true in one scenario does not necessarily hold true for the next. What proved to be effective in dealing with a particular problem a decade ago might not be as effective in the same situation ten years later.

Pragmatism stresses that in an effort to define truth, experience is to be regarded as the main criterion. In this regard, William James summed up: "Everything real must be experienced somewhere, and every kind of thing experienced must somewhere be real" (Huchingson, 1981:12). Consequently, they argue, since experience is always changing, so does truth – which implies that all beliefs are relative to the concrete experience. Intrinsic to the pragmatic world view is therefore that life itself is vested in a foundation of fallible probabilities rather than fixed certainties (Huchingson, 1981:12).

John Dewey, one of the adherents to pragmatism, supporting his approach to scientific inquiry by the afore-mentioned views, proclaimed that the quest for knowledge can only be free if it is not restricted by religious doctrine. Consequently he held that, historically spoken, humankind's dependence upon the supernatural had restricted the actualisation of their human potential – and that a dependence on scientific research rather than religious ideology, would actually contribute to a much better and more stable adjustment to their world (Huchingson, 1981:39, 40).

Whereas pragmatism is unacceptable from a Christian perspective due to its atheistic inclination, a pragmatic approach, in the sense of being practically inclined, is reconcilable with a Christian perspective. The pragmatic approach is acceptable to various Christian scholars who regard it as a key value of modern-day Christianity (Wilson, 1992:137). Biblical scholars such as Paul

Lehman (Huchingson, 1981:95), with his emphasis on *koinonia*, proclaims that since mankind stands in fellowship with God and each other, they become instruments that are called upon to contribute to the natural outcome of their communion (Vine, 1985:233). Lehman views these actions and contributions as “pragmatic resourcefulness required by God’s unyielding maneuvering” (Huchingson, 1981:95).

4. The pragmatic dictates of educational research

The very lenses the researcher is wearing are subjective. Research approaches are *inter alia* defined by the nature of researchers’ research experiences and their philosophical world views. The latter are regarded as the researcher’s basic set of views that guide his or her actions as they observe the world through their own particular lenses. This is connected to what Mouton (2001:138) labels as “the meta-science of research” or “science about science” and Creswell (2009:8) depicts as the four world views of research, namely the post-positivistic, the social constructivist, the critical theory or advocacy and the pragmatic.

Some of the imperatives of everyday educational practice call for a pragmatic approach in order to solve problems. They are, among others, the following:

(i) Practical problems in educational practice call for practical solutions

Even though qualitative and quantitative approaches each have their own merit, it is suggested that the mixed method approach holds optimal possibilities for research conducted by teachers in schools. It offers the educational practitioner the better of two worlds and it keeps all options open. Onwuegbuzie (2009:118) point out the usefulness of the mixed method in reducing, displaying, transforming, correlating, consolidating, comparing, integrating and assessing of importing data. This implies, on the one hand, that the researcher can use the quantitative approach to obtain objective, measurable data related to trends and relationships between variables and to submit this data to a statistically sound process so as to achieve an objective, numerical analysis. If properly conducted, such research helps to identify pertinent trends and relations. However, once these statistically verified data are available, it may

be necessary also to explore and understand how learners or educational practitioners feel about, perceive and experience the issue subjectively.

For example, after the teacher as researcher has performed continuous formative assessment and from this assessment has obtained the quantitative or numerical results or data about the learners in the class (in the form of the quarterly or semester reports), the reasons for the results can be established by exploring how the learners themselves experienced and understood the assessment and whether they understand and accept the results about themselves. This information can be obtained by talking to learners individually or together with the whole class; the same can be done with the other educators of the same learners. The same process can be followed with the parents as well, to obtain their opinions about their children's performance and the reasons thereof, as advised by education policy (Department of Education, 2008:12); also with the aim to help the parents understand the assessment procedures and to obtain their support for their children's academic progress at home.

The mixed method is not only pragmatic but also holistic and well suited for education since educational practice finds itself in a complex environment, which calls for a holistic, multifaceted, flexible approach. Education as praxis finds itself within the dictates of the social science where the intricate mental and physical demands of relationships between parents, learners and teachers have to be monitored from a holistic perspective.

Action research as a research strategy is also pragmatically and holistically inclined. Consequently, action research as a strategy runs parallel to the mixed method approach and can therefore ideally link up with the pragmatic-holistic stance of the mixed method approach.

Cohen and Manion (1994:192) explained action research as an on-the-spot research procedure, which is directed at solving concrete, real-world problems manifested in an immediate state of affairs. This step-by-step research process is constantly monitored by means of a variety of mechanisms, including questionnaires, diaries, interviews, case studies and others with the purpose of obtaining feedback relating to the questions in order to modify and

adjust and redefine where needed. Mills (2007:5) applied the former definition to education praxis in saying that it entails any kind of systematic research conducted by educational practitioners such as teachers and school principals within the boundaries of educational practice relating to the operation of the school and the effectiveness of learning-teaching practice, in order to enhance insight into it, and consequently, into the positive effectiveness thereof.

The action research strategy originated from Lewin's action-reflection cycle, which was refined to what is today known as action research (McNiff, 2002:40). This cyclic strategy of planning, acting, observing the results and reflecting is sequential in that the first cycle is followed by the implementation of progressive cycles in pursuit of finding the ultimate solution to a practical problem.

During continuous assessment in the classroom, the teacher as action researcher ought to first reflect on the reasons for the results, and if the teacher finds that any individual learner displays any difficulty in understanding the instruction or if the learner reacts poorly to the assessment itself, then act on the initial assessment by adapting the instruction method and/or instruction material and/or the assessment as necessary. Thereafter the teacher should observe the results of the adaptation, again reflect on reasons for the results, and again adapt if necessary, in this way performing cyclic research as a pursuit of finding effective solutions to each learner's difficulty or problem.

Within the framework of the mixed method approach the action research strategy appears to be the optimal strategy due to its inclination to find practical solutions to problems using all available actions. Action research has shown to embrace basically all methodologies and approaches to research (Pine, 2009:67). Although it is basically concerned with the qualitative research approach, it is not limited to it (Henning, Stone & Kelly, 2009:4; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:445). Action research has indeed been described as the most applied and practice-based design of all research designs. (Creswell, 2012:576).

Action research emphasises the *how to* approach rather than the philosophical inclination (Mills, 2007:6). Action research is practical and problem solving by nature. The practical nature of this strategy for research is to improve one's own practice or that of the

institution (Koshy, 2010:8). Within the realm of action research, educational practitioners endeavour to identify the practical problems in their classes, determine the suitable data collecting strategies, analyse the data obtained and finally develop action plans based on the outcome of the inquiry.

The pragmatic emphasises that which works properly within the context of the particular situation and time (Creswell, 2009:9, 10). Many approaches, including the quantitative and qualitative, are used for collecting data rather than only one research approach. It is for this reason that the pragmatic world view favours a “mixed method” approach, in which a variety of approaches are incorporated in the research strategy in order to obtain the information needed to solve a problem pragmatically. Since mixed methods are rooted in the meta-science of the pragmatic world view, it basically seeks to find practical answers to those problems educational practitioners constantly have to deal with – it is suitable for finding practical answers to practical problems in the everyday realities of the educational praxis.

Being practical, is to be pragmatically inclined which is acceptable in terms of a Christian approach. As early as the third century, Origen, one of the first Biblical scholars of the Greek Church, emphasised practicality as one of the essentials of the Christian faith. Referring to the Letters of James in the Bible, the theologian Barclay made the statement that if faith is called faith, existing outside of works, “such faith is dead” (Barclay, 1960:5). In addition, he referred to sections from James 2 and held that the book of James was against “profession without practice and words without deeds”. He adds that this inclination towards the practical application of the Christian faith is not limited to the Letter of James, but that it merely resonates a universal emphasis in the New Testament: In Luke 3, John the Baptist called on the believer to bring forth fruits flowing from repentance; Jesus encouraged his followers to live in such a way that they bear good fruit by which they will be known by the world (Barclay, 1960:84, 88).

(ii) Educational practice calls for a focus on the individual

The mixed method approach linked to action research not only entails large study populations suitable for detecting generalised trends within a school, but is at the same time suitable for detecting

the experiences, inner feelings and perceptions of the individual learner. As described above, the teacher can explore how the learners themselves experience and understand the assessment and whether they understand and accept the results about themselves, as possible reasons for the observed trends in the school.

While learning and teaching as an activity rotates around the collectivity of an institution such as a school or class, it also has to focus on the individuality of each individual learner. This implies that although many of the activities in a school are collective by nature, they also simultaneously focus on the individual learner.

The collectivity of inclinations such as, for example, violence in schools needs to be detected in a quantitative manner in order to apply collective school policies and strategies in order to curb the violence. Such a policy imperative for adopting a school code of conduct to regulate learner conduct on a collective basis is found in section 10 of the SA Schools Act (SA, 1996(b)). However, at the same time, the uniqueness of the individual learner's experiences, feelings and emotions, which have become victim of such violence, has to become the focus of research – in education it simply needs to be accommodated as well. Not only is the protection of the individual (or a small minority) viable from an educational point of view, it is also a Constitutional imperative. The SA Constitution not only emphasises the rights of children (plural) but also elevates the child in its individuality. Section 28(2) of the South African Constitution determines that the best interests of the child (singular) are of vital importance in every aspect concerning the child (singular) (SA, 1996(a)).

The necessity to focus on both the collective and the individual calls for the flexible research approach, which is accommodated by the attributes of the mixed methods approach and the action research strategy.

The above ties in with a Christian perspective. From this perspective, each child is regarded as an individual, uniquely created by God (Coetzee, 1940:17). Each individual is unique in his or her creation, and not only differs from all other creatures, but also from all other human beings (Coetzee, 1952:107). This entails that each child has its own physical and mental characteristics, abilities,

talents and gifts which have to enfold under the guidance of parents as primary educators and teachers as secondary educators. Moreover, the practicality of the everyday classroom environment calls on the teacher to pay attention to the practical needs of each individual learner. Each individual learner's shortcomings need to be identified and addressed by the teacher, while at the same time, his or her full potential needs to be detected and developed. In order for the teacher to serve the best interests of such a wide variety of individual learners, a flexible approach and differentiated strategies in the classroom are required.

(iii) Educational practice calls for a multifaceted, holistic approach

In their work on the fundamental theory of education, Van Loggenberg and Jooste (1980:13) identified holism (Greek: *holos*, whole) as one of the vital essentials of education. The concept of education is derived from the Greek word *paidagogia*, which basically entails leading or escorting the child as holistic being from immaturity to maturity – from a condition of dependence to a state of independence. In addition, education also calls for holistic, multifaceted activities, which include: endeavours to guide the child from ignorance to knowledge; from mental immaturity to mental maturity; from physical immaturity to physical maturity; from spiritual immaturity to spiritual maturity; from irresponsibility to responsibility. This again chimes with a Christian perspective. Seen from a Christian perspective, the child has to be handled and trained as a holistic being, created as a body-soul unity (Coetzee, 1940:14). This entails that as holistic creations of God, children need to be developed in terms of their full spiritual, mental and physical faculties in order to reach their full (holistic) God-given potential.

This implies that teachers not only are to teach subject matter to the learners in their classes, but also are to be aware of the learners' feelings, thoughts and values about the subject matter, as possible reasons for their academic performance in those subjects. It is education policy that teachers are obliged to assess and support barriers to learning regarding each learner's "behavioural and social competencies, health, wellness and personal care" (Department of Education, 2008:14).

Research in education, in turn, is holistically contextualised by the nature of the problem being investigated: this entails the particular

subject area, the matter being addressed, the nature, characteristics and needs of the target group or research population, the nature of the audience related to the inquiry, as well as the juridical imperatives connected to the subject of focus.

The holistic nature of educational practice obviously requires a holistic approach in its research endeavours. The mixed method approach is holistic by nature because it combines quantitative and qualitative research instruments and inclinations. It utilises not only the qualitative but also the quantitative approach. Action research as a strategy also meets this requirement since it draws from vastly different world views in order to find appropriate answers to the variety of problems related to educational practice (Mills, 2007:8).

(iv) Educational practice is complex and constantly in progress

Education finds itself in a multi-layered world characterised by multitudes of paradoxes, and tensions in which the teacher is expected to implement constant changes advocated by top-down administrators and politicians from outside the school walls (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009:1).

In essence, the positivistic approach to research is grounded on the notion that all behaviour and events are orderly and that all situations have empirically detectable causes, from which researchers are able to explain and predict (Mills, 2007:2, 3). Education as a social science does not strictly comply with these criteria; it rotates around human behaviour, which is often disorderly and impulsive. That is why education policy advises, as indicated above, that teachers be aware of and assess learners' behaviour in order to effectively support barriers to learning that learners may experience.

The problems addressed by social science research are complex; to use only a quantitative or qualitative approach to address a complex scenario is often inadequate (Creswell, 2009:203). For example, education is normally conducted in the extremely complex environment of a classroom (Mertle, 2009:23). South African classrooms which are populated with learners from diverse backgrounds and with diverse abilities and needs, within the South African inclusive education system, indeed constitute a complex educational environment.

One of the attributes of the classroom is its multidimensionality due to the large number of events taking place – each event with its own set of consequences, constantly evolving around the diversity of individuals, each with its own objectives (Pine, 2009:17).

The 2005 American report conducted by the Committee on Research in Education and National Research Council emphasises the complexities of educational practice (Pine, 2009:11). The Report describes educational practice as multi-layered, and *constantly* shifting – being transformed by its intricate relations with diversities of people as well as the values of political forces. The Report also notes that research in education is multi-layered in the sense that it needs to pay attention to “the physical, social, cultural, economic and historical environment” relating to the particular research.

This multifaceted complexity of educational practice demands a multifaceted research approach not predefined by any boundaries for research (Pine, 2009:25). This scenario calls for a contingency approach which fits in with the attributes of action research which is constantly asking: *which method works* for this particular situation? (Pine, 2009:37). Action research is flexible, fluid, open and responsive by nature and therefore suitable for dealing with the contingent scenarios of the classroom and school environment (Mertle, 2009:23; Creswell, 2009:14; Koshy, 2010:4). Action research ties in well with education policy with regard to the described roles of teachers in the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education, with one of the roles being that of “scholar, researcher and lifelong learner” (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2010:51), which implies that the teacher is continuously busy researching the situation of each learner in assessing and supporting learners’ needs and performance.

The afore-mentioned report issued by the American Committee on Research in Education and National Research Council not only emphasised the complexities of educational practice but also the fact that it is *constantly shifting* and being transformed by factors such as the intricate diversities of people it deals with and the driving forces behind political ideologies (Pine, 2009:11). Since educational progression is an imperative in order to keep up with the latest scientific trends, it also needs to take cognisance of the latest research approaches available. A relatively new research approach is mixed methods, which – as explained above – has only

recently started to receive serious consideration among scholars (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:396). It can be typified as a step forward in the progression of world research, now gaining popularity by utilising the strengths of both the quantitative and qualitative approaches (Creswell, 2009:203).

One of the universal features of a Christian approach is the prerequisite for progression, development and growth. The Greek root for growth is *auxano* which means to grow (up), increase in a literal and metaphoric sense. This word is utilised in a broad variety of contexts. For example, the Christian has a duty to progress and to increase in facets such as faith, knowledge and righteousness (Barclay, 1965:118; Renn, 2005:455). Furthermore, if a man has a talent, he should utilise it and develop it – he should progressively be able to do more with it (Barclay, 1975:324).

As mentioned, the classroom situation is complex. Complex, intricate scenarios, such as the classroom environment often tend to be complex and even disorderly. The Biblical pattern of creation in Genesis 1 is applicable in situations like these: the teacher (education practitioner), including the Christian one, has to advance from disorder to clarity and order, and from clarity and order to progression. One way of bringing this about is through research, among others by applying a mixed methods approach. This approach enables the teacher as researcher to detect the general trends within the class environment by means of a quantitative approach. In addition, s/he can uncover the deeper, more subjective elements lurking in the subjectivity of feelings, emotions and perceptions of, for example learners, by applying a qualitative approach. Once there is clarity on these trends the teacher advances to the next step. The Christian teacher is called upon to assist in aspects of progression such as the development of the learner's God-given talents, the enhancement of the learning environment suitable for optimal learning as well as for the development of his or her own God-given knowledge about procuring the dynamics that would be necessary for effective teaching strategies, skills and techniques.

(v) Educational practice calls for effective change

Progression and change go hand in hand. Change and renewal (Greek root: *anakainoo*), is regarded by some as the “moving motive of the whole Christian life” (Barclay, 1958:232). In the New

Testament it signifies the renewing work of the Holy Spirit of the believer as such and of the believer's mind. In the Old Testament the Hebrew root word *hadash* is linked to concepts such as renew, repair and restoration (Renn, 2005:808, 809).

In view of this, it can be averred that educational practice in South Africa needs to change. Much of the traditional orderly report writing based on empirical findings not always results in effective change of educational practice. These reports often become documents filed in the dusty drawers of academe and politicians. Indeed it is the aim of the inclusive education system that quantitative results in reports (percentage marks) are to be corroborated by qualitative descriptions of how the assessment was performed: "The educator will keep detailed and diagnostic records of assessment. The educator will understand how to interpret and use assessment results to feed into processes for the improvement of learning programmes" (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2010:52).

The ultimate aim of action research is to improve practice. In fact, the first step in the sequential spiral of action research is *planning to change* (Koshy, 2010:1, 4) since its objectives are focused on *effecting positive change* in educational practice (Mills, 2007:3).

(vi) Educational practice calls for immediacy

Immediacy is regarded as one of the essential requirements for solving problems in a typical classroom scenario (Zeichner, 2009:17). The problem with traditional research techniques is that they are often time consuming – they require a relatively formal procedure, which includes describing the problem, collecting and analysing data and writing a report. Action research, on the other hand, is not confined by these time limits – the teacher can immediately enter the sequential cycle typical of action research. For example, the moment an incident takes place in class; the teacher can immediately start reflecting on it, or begin planning on how to solve it or how to adjust to the situation (Zeichner, 2009:24).

The demanding pace of a typical classroom often leaves the teacher little time for reflection in a single period. The fact that the teacher is constantly on the scene of inquiry can obviously speed up the sequential action of the research cycles of planning, acting, observing results, reflecting and adjusting (Department of Education, 2008:23).

Action research is practical since it affords teachers the opportunity of obtaining immediate access to the findings (Mertle, 2009:19).

According to the Bible, God also often acts suddenly – immediacy is therefore part of the Christian life (Renn, 2005:944). Paul on the road to Damascus found himself in a position requiring a quick response “when *suddenly* there shined round about him a light from heaven”. “Christ’s manifestations of himself to poor souls are many times sudden and very surprising and he anticipates them with blessings of his goodness” (Henry, 2010). In addition, the Christian occasionally finds himself in situations where problems have to be cleared up in an instant (Dake, 2007:598). Likewise, the Christian teacher is often confronted with problematic situations in the classroom where problems and challenges have to be solved – sometimes in an instant. In terms of James 1:5, he now has to turn to God for wisdom for the “enlightening of his understanding with the knowledge of Christ” (Henry, 2010) in solving these problems.

(vii) Educational practice needs to be monitored from the engine room

Action research is conducted *by* teachers *for* themselves – it is a *systematic inquiry into one’s own practice* (Mertle, 2009:4). The fact that the teacher is constantly in the class to plan, act, observe, reflect and readjust could assist in steering the ship out of troubled waters.

Teachers are constantly expected to adjust to the complexities, paradoxes and tensions created by politicians, administrators as well as the legal imperatives from outside the school building (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009:1). In the past teachers were not able to contribute to the debate on educational practice, simply due to the fact that they did not have access to it, or the necessary knowledge of traditional research tools (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009:1). Traditionally, research on educational practice was conducted by university professors, scholars and graduate students – with the educational practitioners left out in the cold as mere subjects of inquiry. In other words, much of research was done *on* them and not *for* them (Mills, 2007:6).

Action research, again, is not so much an academically sophisticated instrument for research, as it is an easy-to-apply tool to utilise in the everyday working environment of the educational practitioner.

As far as learners at school are concerned, they are classified by law as minors and regarded as immature by society. Seen from an educational perspective, they lack the necessary skills and specialised knowledge needed for careering and adulthood. They are consequently in need of tutors and leaders such as parents and teachers to lift them to the desired levels of maturity, proficiency and competence. Paul's letters to Timothy show the obligation of Christian leaders to build up one another within the fellowship (*koinonia*) of the church, being consecrated for the task or calling for which they are set apart (Barclay, 1965:117). Teachers are not only called, but also professionally tutored to initiate education from the engine room. Teachers, finding themselves at the heart of the classroom, have to take on a strong leadership role: they have to exert control over all teaching activities and they have to facilitate all aspects related to effective learning processes.

5. Recommendations

The intensity of the problems embedded in South African educational practice necessitates *practical* solutions. The result of a rigid theoretical approach to research is that many of the current critical issues in educational practice remain unanswered. Research conducted by academe and politicians from *outside the school walls* appears to be too far removed from the everyday school practice to solve all the problems. It is therefore suggested that these problems be approached from a pragmatic philosophy of research, linked to the practically orientated strategy of action research. In many of the developed overseas countries, educational practitioners are already conducting research from this hands-on perspective in an attempt to find practical solutions to their problems. As a result of the inherent dynamics of a classroom, educational practitioners in countries such as Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom already seem to favour action research (Koshy, 2010:3). Jack Gillette, the Dean of the Graduate School of Education at Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and previously the Director of Teacher Preparation and Education Studies at Yale University, suggests that "higher education faculty members stand shoulder to shoulder with their candidates inside real classrooms ... Both faculty and candidates would be engaged in a cycle of acting, collecting data, and

reflecting and improving such that concrete evidence of student learning develops” (2012:26), thereby aptly describing action research performed collaboratively by academe and teachers in the classroom.

The afore-mentioned brief survey among South African educational practitioners, however, indicated that almost 62% of the respondents did not conduct action research on educational practice as a form of school-based management in their classrooms. The vital question is: How can the tide be turned? First of all, one will have to bridge teacher indifference towards conducting their research. Resolutions need to be taken by South African teachers to solve everyday practical problems from within their own workplace. The practical experiences of teachers at the rock face may yield crucial information about what can work in educational practice. South African teachers need to turn the tide currently flowing top-down, from academe and politicians to the teachers, to a tide flowing upwards – from the teachers towards the politicians and academe. Instead of waiting on politicians and academics that are often not really familiar with the scenarios and conditions inside the school walls, the results of teacher-based research attempts need to be collected as sources of information made available to politicians, academe and ultimately, policy makers.

Teachers will have to be sensitised to the worth of their own research contributions for the improvement of their particular work environment as well as the service they are rendering towards education in general by sharing their findings within the broad educational community.

Teachers will also have to be informed about the dynamics of hands-on research, which originates from everyday educational practice – and especially about the cyclic approach of action research. Although the essential skills of action research are likely to be taught by academe, these skills need to be applied by the teachers as educational practitioners themselves.

The findings and outcomes of the research done by the teachers are to be shared with the teaching fraternity in consultation with the academe who now becomes a partner in reflection – a partner in the cyclic research process and not the sole agent of the process. Consequently, the traditional cyclic strategy of action research

which basically entails the four-step cycle of planning, acting, observing the results and reflecting, followed by sequences of progressive cycles in pursuit of finding the ultimate solution to a problem, can be altered to include a fifth phase – consultation with a knowledgeable researcher (e.g. an academic partner).

According to the brief survey referred to, it appears that South African educational practitioners are not properly informed about the principles of action research. This condition of ignorance and unawareness needs to be resolved by a well-informed practitioner (e.g. an academic researcher) who now becomes an intermittent mentor of the process – a trainer of the inexperienced educational practitioner regarding the dictates of action research. This does not necessarily imply that such a mentor is to become part of the actual research which is conducted by the practitioner; it merely means that such a mentor is an advisor regarding the dictates of the process itself, distant to the actual research process.

6. Conclusion

South African teachers, finding themselves in the centre of day-to-day educational practice, are the key to the turn-about in South African education; they have to become the key role players in a pragmatic-action research strategy, and start conducting research from a pragmatic stance in order to find practically based answers to the problems currently obstructing effective educational practice.

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