PHENOMENOGRAPHY: IMPLICATIONS FOR EXPANDING THE EDUCATIONAL ACTION RESEARCH LENS

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ABSTRACT
Action research is a growing tradition for improving teachers’ practice and students’ learning outcomes, and it draws from a variety of methods for collecting and analysing data. In this article, phenomenography is proposed as an innovative approach for enhancing action research. With an emphasis on mapping variations on students’ experience, using their own voices, phenomenography offers an analytic system for revealing how students differ in their perspectives, and results from this approach can potentially lead to action research for tailoring curriculum to fit a diverse student population. Though popular among researchers who are interested in studying variation, especially educators, phenomenography is absent in the action research literature. Qualitative analytic approaches tend to reduce data to a few common themes, yet phenomenography is about purposefully coding the data to explore differences. In diverse communities, phenomenography offers a system for tapping a variety of perspectives/conceptions/experiences, including oppositional ones, and action research offers the means for improving educational conditions. While much of action research is committed to inviting multiple voices to resolve educational problems as participatory action research, phenomenography has not been explicitly indicated as a methodological approach throughout the literature. This article draws attention to the potential union of these two disciplines as phenomenographic action research.

KEYWORDS: Phenomenography, action research, qualitative research, categorizing data, variation theory, diversity.

When we are engaged in pedagogical action research, it must be in the context of a particular practice. We must be aware of open generalizing and we need to
construct knowledge bases on how to realize the values that are embedded in our society (Elliott, 2017).

**INTRODUCTION**

Like other forms of action research, educational action research is informed by methods of inquiry that are applied contextually in cycles of planning and implementing initiatives, assessing outcomes, and using what was learned to improve practice as an ongoing process (Mertler, 2016). In his keynote address at the 2017 Conference for the Action Research Network of the Americas (ARNA), John Elliott (2017), who launched the *Journal of Educational Action Research*, argued that educational action research has largely ignored phenomenography as an analytic method for studying variations in experience and as a process for teachers to realize pedagogical aims and values. First introduced by Marton (1981), phenomenography offers a research framework that is “designed to answer questions about thinking and learning” (Marton, 1986, p. 1) and for “mapping the qualitatively different ways in which people experience, conceptualize, perceive, and understand various aspects of, and phenomena in, the world around them” (p. 31). By expanding the lens on the variety of ways students experience school, educators can gain insight on why some students do well and why others lag behind, and findings can potentially lead to pedagogical strategies for addressing educational disparities. In line with student-centered pedagogy and action research, phenomenology engages students’ as primary stakeholders by drawing from their unique experiences.

All educational research is guided by the researcher’s theoretical framework, goals, purpose and investigative lens, and in qualitative approaches there is considerable debate about epistemologies for collecting and analysing data (Boyatzis, 1998). According to Creswell (2005), analysing qualitative data in educational research is “an inductive process of narrowing data into a few themes” (p. 237). In phenomenography, however, a primary goal of analysis is not narrowing data to just a few categories. Instead, the analytic focus is on variation or spreading data across dimensions of variation (Marton, 1981) to reveal a broad spectrum of categories and expose differences. My goal in this article is to reinforce the notion that students have common experiences, yet each is unique in the way they experience and understand the world. With phenomenography, action research can be purposeful with analytic methods to explore differences in how students understand concepts and experience education, and the findings can be used to serve individual learning needs. Research has shown that students vary in many ways; they have different understandings of the same material (Marton & Säljö, 1976), have different learning approaches (Belenky, Mcviker Clinchy, Goldberyer & Tarule, 1997; Boström & Löfqvist, 2012; Gardner, 2006; Lynn et al., 2016; Reid, 2005), and they have cultural understandings that are incompatible with the dominant culture (Delpit, 2006; Hale, 1982; MacLeod, 2008; Morris, 2016; Philips, 1983; Wax, Wax, & Dumont, 1989). Given that educational disparities in the U.S. continue to be experienced among various populations, widening our scope on how students experience schooling differently might provide insight on how to serve them more equitably.
Exploring diverse perspectives is not new in action research. Action research is about “visiting different perspectives” (Santos, 2012, p. 113), highlighting “the diversity of perspectives” (Gregory et al., 2011, p. 363), responding to a “rich variety of outcomes” (Clarke, Egan, Fletcher & Ryan, 2006, p. 407), and addressing “competing approaches” (Hadfield, 2005, p. 291) or “competing agendas” (Ottmann, Laragy, Allen & Feldman, 2011, p. 413; Ponic, Reid & Frisby, 2010, p. 324). Phenomenography is a research process that purposefully applies thematic analysis to highlight the variety of perspectives. Infused by phenomenography, action research can lead to a deeper understanding of diverse views and inspire solutions for addressing the educational disparities we continue to experience.

In North America, educational disparities persist where First Nation people, American Indians, Hispanics, and African Canadians and African Americans lag behind Caucasians, Asian Canadians and Asian Americans. This pattern is evident in early childhood and persists through K-12, test scores, repeated grades, dropout and graduation rates, disciplinary rates, and enrolment in higher education (American Psychological Association, 2012; Lasser, Himmelstein & Woolhandler, 2006; Musu-Gillette et al., 2016; Statistics Canada, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2017). These patterns are also found in socioeconomic status, health outcomes, and healthcare access (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013; Lebrun & LaVeist, 2011; Statistics Canada, 2016). Research has also shown that educational disparities are associated with teacher macroaggressions (Beaulieu, 2016) miscommunications and cultural misunderstandings (Delpit, 2016; Hale, 1986; Philips, 1983), school bullying (Dupper, 2013), exploitation of students (Morris, 2016), racism (Heitzeg, 2016), sexism (Sadker & Sadker, 1986), and other dynamics associated with the socio-political histories of marginalized people (Attewell & Newman, 2010). As North America continues to grow in diverse ethnic and racial makeup, applying phenomenographic methods would be beneficial for analyzing diverse views (Marton, 1986), and action research methods would be beneficial for making educational practice more inclusive and tailored to the needs of students who are underserved (O’Hanlin, 2003). I propose phenomenographic action research as a promising analytic system for bringing marginalized voices to the center of educational change. It has the potential for making diverse stakeholders’ perspectives and agendas coalesce over an inclusive and equitable educational mission.

**Theoretical Foundation of Phenomenography**

Phenomenographers attempt to characterize how phenomena (e.g., events, relationships, dynamics, etc.) appear to individuals in their particular context. Originally developed and applied by educational researchers at Göteborgs Universitet in Sweden, the method ‘provides descriptions that are relational, experiential, content-oriented, and qualitative’ (Marton, 1986, p. 33). Unlike other qualitative approaches where researchers decide what the categories of observation are prior to launching a study, phenomenographers look for the most distinctive details in the data to identify ‘structurally significant differences’ (p. 34) in how individuals define their experience. A major goal in phenomenographic research is to understand the variety of ways individuals experience their world, delineated along categories of description and dimensions of variation (Marton, 1986;
Phenomenography is sometimes confused with phenomenology. Both are concerned with how phenomena appear; yet phenomenography aims to describe the qualitatively different ways of looking at, or experiencing, the same thing or event (Marton, 1986). Research is focused on the variation in people’s distinct ways humans experience situations (Marton and Booth, 1997; Marton, 2000; Säljö, 1988), and an underlying principle is that we do not experience the same thing or event in exactly the same way (Holmqvist, Gustavsson & Wernberg, 2007; Thorndike, 1914).

Compared to phenomenology, phenomenography begins with a goal of exploring the variety of experiences and perceptions for the purpose of understanding rich dimensions of variation, including individual differences. Empirical studies that combined phenomenology with action research have proven to be helpful, but did not have a primary goal of purposefully looking for dimensions of variation. As an illustrative example, using a phenomenological approach, Goodnough (2011) studied the long-term impact of collaborative action research on teacher identity and practice, but rather than examine the variety of experiences or unique identities, individual experiences were examined to identify commonalities in the teachers’ perceptions’ (p. 77). Her study was indeed valuable for understanding how collaborative action research impacts identity and practice and how learning evolves, yet it reflects a dominant research agenda for seeking commonalities, not intentionally focusing on differences in experience or perception.

Phenomenography and phenomenology emerged from different traditions. Phenomenology originated from philosophy and seeks to answer questions such as the following from Van Manen (2014). What is the phenomenon? How does the phenomenon give or show itself in consciousness? What existential structures of meaning lie at the core of the phenomenon? What makes the phenomenon or lived experience unique and singularly different from other phenomenon? Phenomenography originated from educational research and poses questions to explore a group’s various ways of knowing, understanding and conceiving phenomenon (Marton & Pang, 2008). Apart from studying the phenomenon, phenomenographers primarily investigate how people understand the phenomenon differently.

Richardson (1999) argued that phenomenographic analytic methods are indistinguishable from Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) grounded theory approach. Indeed, both approaches have common characteristics as Marton and Booth (1997) acknowledged, but what makes phenomenography unique is a research agenda that focuses on variation of experiences, and identifying relationships among the analytic categories (Stenfors-Hayes, Hult, & Dahlgren, 2013). In a study that used both methods, grounded theory and phenomenography, Kinnunen and Simon (2013) identified similarities between the two approaches: 1) both are based on a non-positivistic view of knowledge, that subjective accounts of people are valid data for scientific research; 2) both use an inductive approach to data analysis, a means for discovery without restriction of prior theories or models; 3)
analysis is an iterative process to understand the essence of phenomena; and 4) comparison helps define the boundaries between the emerging categories or themes. They are also similar in data analysis by:

- getting to know your data well, looking for emerging categories/codes (possibly using only reduced data set), refining categories/codes (using the whole data set), making connections between the categories/codes, placing the results into an existing pool of knowledge on the topic (p. 213).

The approaches differ, however, along the type of questions that guide the research. Phenomenographers are interested in the variation of perceptions, conceptions and experiences, and grounded theorists aim to construct a theory or model. Moreover, phenomenography allows the researcher discretion on how to conduct the analysis, yet grounded theory has strict step-by-step guidelines on how to conduct the analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Both methods use a qualitative discovery process with carefully defined goals, but phenomenography is purposefully guided with an agenda to explore differences. Like grounded theory, phenomenography shares the similar goal of a qualitative discovery process; however, it is unique in that its analytic approach is rooted in variation theory with an a priori agenda to explore diversity. This nuance might seem insignificant, but in a world where individuals and communities are divided along ideological lines, have different privileges and opportunities, and experience discrimination, phenomenography has a distinct place in action research methodology for examining the different ways phenomena are experienced and interpreted, and for guiding action-oriented solutions. Because students are diverse and have individually unique needs and understandings, supporting action research with phenomenography would be a helpful way to expose the different ways they experience and understand schooling. Compatible with action research, phenomenography is a qualitative research approach that invites students’ own voices to become part of a data-driven process for potentially improving pedagogy and educational outcomes.

As a growing educational research tradition, phenomenography has been applied to study how teachers experience teaching (Stenfors-Hayes et al., 2013; Tighelaar, Vermunt, & Brouwer, 2014), their relationship with students (Beutel, 2010) and diversity (Gordon, Reid & Petocz, 2010), how they perceive their work with parents and student teachers (Niikko, 2004), and how they understand action research as a methodological approach for improving practice (Lam, 2016). There is also a body of phenomenographic research on parents’ conceptions (e.g., Cunha et al., 2015) and students’ conceptions (e.g., Boström & Löfqvist, 2012; Imafuku, Saiki, Kawakami & Syzuki, 2015). Many of these studies address implications for practice, future research, and policy making, but what is surprisingly lacking across them is the explicit connection with how to use phenomenographic findings to inform action research. With the systematic methods of phenomenography for understanding the uniqueness of students, educators would have the means to analyse a variety of perspectives to inform their pedagogy.
Empirical studies that combine action research and phenomenography are rare. One impressive example comes from a collaborative study conducted between a cohort of nursing students and their professors (Smith et al., 2004). A driving goal of the study was to infuse the curriculum with concepts from the humanities (artistic expressions and creative writings) to engage “all the voices in the room” and attend to “the uniqueness of individual experience” (p. 278). A primary feature of the study was to emphasize uniqueness and variety of perspectives. The participants expressed a variety of emotions about the process, from anxiety to joy, and the learning outcomes were described as broad, including how individuals understood teaching and learning strategies, how they experienced group connections and individual differences, and their intrapersonal and interpersonal awareness. Identifying common themes was not a driving goal for this study, however, a common understanding expressed by the group was “we interpret/perceive differently from others” and “learned about human diversity” (p. 282). Discovering and honouring unique differences among group members produced conditions for co-creating individualized curriculum in an overarching pedagogical frame.

In their study of students during the first year of a teacher education program, Boström and Löfqvist (2012) used phenomenographic methodology and descriptive statistics to understand the factors that influence students’ academic performance. They found that learning depends on students’ learning styles and strategies, plus how well the university can meet individual needs. Their study “generated more questions than answers” for continued research, especially around how the university can better serve students who differ by “socio-economic background, values and attitudes, gender, context, age, and awareness” (p. 93). Though not explicitly described as action research, the Boström and Löfqvist study pointed to the urgent need for studying diverse populations and has important implications for serving diverse needs more effectively. If we are to successfully resolve educational disparities, curricular agendas should target the diverse array of student experiences and identities, not just a one-size-fits-all approach.

My search for empirical studies that explicitly combined phenomenography and action research showed only one result by Lam (2016) from the myriad of peer-reviewed journals. The study was about teachers’ understanding of action research and results showed a variety of interpretations. Though impressive in what was found about the results (albeit only a few), the findings were not applied as action research. As I understand the literature, no studies have explicitly linked phenomenography as a method for action research. There are, however, numerous examples of how phenomenographic research can inform teaching practice. For example, in their phenomenographic study of medical training, Imafuku et al. (2015) found that students’ have a variety of perceptions that evolve and that they differ in their comfort with group research projects. They concluded that facilitating each student’s engagement in research is a socially dynamic process and that the role of the educator must be defined according to the student’s prior learning experiences, the quality of research questions that are posed, and a better understanding of cultural, social or experiential factors. They described their work as “a springboard for making more elaborative exploration of students’ learning process” (p. 54) but did not identify it as action research. This is no surprise because many forms of
practitioner research, including teacher research, are indeed action-oriented, but is not necessarily identified as action research (author, 2013).

**Basic Research Methods for Phenomenography**

Numerous sources of data can inform how individuals conceive aspects of the world, but the primary method in phenomenology is interviewing and transcript analysis. The questions that are asked and how they are posed are, of course, important aspects of successful interviewing. Marton (1986) recommends beginning with open-ended questions so interviewees can orient to dimensions they choose to answer first, and these dimensions offer insight on the person’s relevance structure. Follow-up questions can also provide rich data on topics that were invoked by interviewees for further clarification.

In phenomenographic research each interview is audio-recorded and transcribed, and the collection of transcripts becomes the data for analysis. Each researcher might have a preferred transcription method, but a main goal in phenomenographic transcripts is to capture what was communicated as precisely as possible. As discourse analysts have shown, utterances can have multiple meanings in a single context (Jastrzembski, 1981) and the very same utterance can have different meanings in different contexts (Dews & Winner, 1999; Svensson & Therman, 1983). Thus, analysis necessarily requires understanding the contexts being studied, so the process might require repeated listening of interview recordings, rereading transcripts, and follow-up interviews. This is a discovery process with no fixed algorithm, requiring considerable effort to immerse oneself in the data.

A first step for analysing transcription data is to look for utterances that conform to the criteria of relevance based on the research question(s) being investigated. These utterances, preserved as quotes, are interpreted and categorized in the context they were taken, and are eventually added to a “data pool” (Marton, 1986, p. 43) to be analysed along quotes from the other individual transcripts. In this way, one level of analysis involves an individual person’s quotes for meaning and context, and the pooled data involves a second level of analysis in a broader context across the entire group. In the second level of analysis, quotes in the pooled data are examined and are first sorted into categories for their similarities, then each of those categories are re-examined and sorted along their differences. This compare-contrast process exposes the variation of perspectives within and between categories. Marton (1986) described the analytic process like this:

> Quotes are sorted into piles, borderline cases are examined, and eventually the criterion attributes for each group are made explicit. In this way, the groups of quotes are arranged and rearranged, are narrowed into categories, and finally are defined in terms of core meanings, on the one hand, and borderline cases on the other (p. 43).

While Marton used the expression “narrowed into categories” here, the goal is to sort data into “categories of description” (Marton, 1981, 1986) that are logically related to one another (e.g., racial group, gender, grade), usually in a hierarchical or linear and branched
structure. This analytic process is not about revealing dimensions of variation and commonality (Åkerlind, 2012; Marton, 1986; Marton & Booth, 1996). As an example of this categorization process, in their study of a large group of diverse engineering students, Woollacott, Booth and Cameron (2014) sorted their findings along six gradations of learning and practical expertise (superficial, comprehension, consolidation, integration, refinement, know-how) and these were subdivided along three aspects of variation (theory focused practice, problem focused practice, and nature of integration). A similar system of sorting findings could be along categories of race or gender, for example, to provide space for deeper analysis of diverse groups. The Woollacott et al. study revealed rich distinguishing features of each of the 18 categories, but without the goal of studying gender or other distinct student features, and while not described as action research, the findings were used to refine pedagogical practice -- evidence that phenomenographic coding is beneficial for conducting action research in diverse environments.

Unlike traditional content analytic approaches where utterances are sorted into categories that are determined in advance, phenomenographic analysis is dialectic in that the categories are discovered through the process of bringing participants’ statements together to compare and differentiate them. As the categories begin to form, the meanings in each are determined by the data that are included or excluded from each specific category. This analytic process is about identifying the variety of responses, more so than forcing them into narrow categories. In phenomenographic research, this analytic process can potentially reveal how different groups experience phenomena differently.

It is worth noting that phenomenographic interviews with participants are not one-time only events because follow-up interviews might be necessary for reaching a deeper understanding of experiences. Phenomenographic interviewing resembles a back and forth dialogue, sometimes with breaks between sessions, allowing time for reflection, more observations of the context, and consulting with the literature for ideas -- a data collection pattern that is familiar in action research.

A methodological question that is posed in qualitative social research is about the sample size and the required number of interviews for arriving at the research conclusions. Like grounded theory methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), phenomenographic methods follow the concept of saturation. Saturation is about conducting interviews until the input draws repeated and continuous patterns and there is no more to be added by conducting more interviews. In other words, if the sample size of participants is substantial, data collection continues until conceptions of the phenomenon under investigation can no longer be discerned (Dunkin, 2000; Morse, 1994; Sandbergh, 1997; Trigwell, 1994; Yates, Partridge & Bruce, 2012).

Another criticism raised by Richardson (1999) about phenomenography is that it lacks scientific rigor because it is grounded in subjective interpretations. Researchers who laid the methodological groundwork for phenomenographic research acknowledged that the world is both subjective and objective (Marton & Booth, 1996), a challenge in qualitative research that has been actively debated for decades and requires methodological vigilance.
Regardless, qualitative researchers rely on “the participants view of the situation” (Creswell, 2003, p. 8), and in phenomenography, data are analysed as the participants present them. If the merits of phenomenography or other qualitative approaches in action research were tested against the criteria of positivist science, it would not likely meet the critical tests, as Susman and Evered (1978) claimed. One method for increasing the reliability of phenomenographic findings is to have others crosscheck and confirm conceptions that were identified by the original researcher (Marton, 1986; Säljö, 1988), an interjudge reliability approach. Reliability is enhanced if someone else can see the same variations in the data. Another method for dealing with reliability and the problem of subjectivity is to employ Sandbergh’s (1997) notion of interpretive awareness and theory of intentionality:

The researcher must demonstrate how he/she had controlled and checked his/her interpretations throughout the research process: from formulating the research question, selecting individuals to be investigated, obtaining data from those individuals, analysing the data obtained, and reporting the results... ...interpretative awareness means to acknowledge and explicitly deal with our subjectivity throughout the research process instead of overlooking it (p. 209).

To validate the accuracy of findings, Creswell’s (2003) member-checking approach can also be applied by asking participants to review raw data, analytic interpretations and reports, and clarify and expand on the information.

Warnings about subjectivity versus objectivity and pointing to weaknesses in qualitative approaches are indeed valuable while considering the design of studies and interpreting the results. What must be clear by this generation of educational researchers is that no single analytic method can expose the entire view on students’ experience. Phenomenography is a novel strategy to add to the repertoire of action research methods to gain insight on the different ways that students perceive schooling.

**Implications for Practice**

It is generally agreed that all students are capable of learning, yet some continue to lag behind unnecessarily. Findings that are generated from phenomenographic research have direct educational relevance for improving outcomes, especially in classrooms where some students do well with the curriculum while others do not. If we can understand the relationship between an individual student, relative to her or his peers, and in the context of what they are trying to learn, our pedagogical opportunities would be greatly widened. Action research is accomplished through a variety of methodological approaches and could be further informed by phenomenography because it offers a strategy for adding students’ voices to the process, and it provides an analytic lens for understanding how students differ in their understandings. Results from this kind of research can potentially lead to insight on how to tailor the curriculum so it fits our diverse student population.

Phenomenography can also be useful for helping educators understand how students’ thinking changes over time, from novice to expert conceptions. If we think of learning as a
progression of changes in understanding, studying how the depth of understanding varies across time and along the various learning conditions could potentially lead to improving pedagogical practices. Because we do not all learn in precisely the same way, phenomenology could be applied for assessing student outcomes and, in the tradition of action research, that information would be used for updating individualized learning plans and implementing a student-centered curriculum that targets the variety of learning needs. One challenge to overcome for applying phenomenography is the methodological tendency to combine all the student data in a common “data pool” as Marton (1986, p. 43) mentioned. If we did that for all demographic groups, however, how would we compare or differentiate them? Students do not all learn the same way and research has shown this to be true along demographic identities, such as gender (Belenky et al., 1997; Kulturel-Konak, D'Allegro, & Dickinson, 2011; Ro & Knight, 2016), culture and ethnicity (Delpit, 2006; Fong, Zientek, Yetkiner Ozel & Phelps, 2015; Kunjufu, 2011; Philips, 1983), and socioeconomic status (Caldwell & Ginthier, 1996; Jung, 2014; McLeod, 2008), for example. If a central goal in educational action research is to reduce educational disparities, understanding how underserved groups experience education differently is a necessary research agenda. To achieve this goal, applying phenomenographic research within targeted demographic groups and analysing how these individual groups compare across a dimension of variation would lead to a richer understanding of diverse students. In Marton’s (1986) own words:

Encouraging teachers to pay attention to students’ ways of thinking and to facilitate students’ realization that there are different ways of thinking may be the most important pedagogical implications of a phenomenographic view of learning (p. 47).

**Action Research: Growing in Popularity and Variation**

For over the last 15 years, action research has become a growing tradition and this fact can be seen in graduate educational research agendas. In a search on ProQuest, the repository for doctoral dissertations, I found the percentage of action research dissertations has been steadily growing over the years, as shown on Table 1. The phrase “action research” appeared in at least 2% of all the dissertation titles and/or abstracts over the last decade. This increase is indeed encouraging, especially when we consider the potential benefits that result from action-oriented research for improving human conditions. I do not mean to suggest that other kinds of research are not beneficial to society or the development of knowledge; I merely mean that action research offers a powerful approach for improving practice and solving problems.

Considerable literature on action research is associated with educational settings (Anderson, Herr & Nihlen, 1994; Glanz, 2014; McKernan, 1988; McNiff, 2005; Mertler, 2016; Mills, 2017; Sagor, 2010; Stringer, 2008), and it also has a history with industrial settings (Lewin, 1946), environmental disaster (Marsh, 2002), organizational change (Bruce & Wyman, 1998; Coghlan & Brannick, 2014), community action (Stoecker, 2012; Williams, 1999), and personal development (Jensen, Neck & Beaulieu, 2016). There is also growing literature on guidelines for adapting action research to unique settings.
McKernan, 2013; McNiff, 2013; McNiff & Whitehead, 2011; Stringer, 2013) and comprehensive handbooks on the topic (Bradbury-Huang, 2015; Noffke & Somekh, 2009; Reason & Bradbury-Huang, 2013; Rowell, Bruce, Shosh & Riel, 2017; Stringer, 1996). What is missing from the action research literature is how phenomenography can contribute to improving educational outcomes by soliciting students’ input to consider the variety of experiences they have, so curriculum can be tailored to unique needs. What is missing from the phenomenography literature is how it can fortify action research, especially in conditions where stakeholders have a variety of perspectives and change is urgently needed. As Samarasinghe, Aridsson, Abrahamsson and Fridlund (2012) concluded from their phenomenographic research, participants have different views and some can be oppositional. Action would be enhanced with a participatory agenda that includes diverse perspectives -- doing research with people, rather than on people, a guiding characteristic of participatory action research (Hall, 1992; Park, 1992).

If we could incorporate the variety of perspectives that stakeholders have in our action research, including diverse and oppositional ones, we might arrive closer to successfully serving a broader base of needs and address the educational disparities that continue to leave underserved populations behind in social progress. Action research is about improving the quality of life in an equitable way and engaging representative voices, and phenomenology is about tapping the variety of experiences. As educators, are we not obligated to bring the two disciplines together to move toward a social justice agenda?

Phenomenographic studies have already revealed that investigating the variety of students’ perspectives and experiences has implications for improving educational practice, but what
is missing from the history of phenomenographic research is how the findings can be used
to compliment action research to address diverse needs and educational disparities.
Phenomenography offers the means for analysing a variety of perspectives and action
research offers the means for addressing how different agendas can coalesce. In the
tradition of participatory action research, stakeholder voices are integral to the cyclical
planning, implementation and evaluation of initiatives (McTaggart, 1997; Reason, &
Bradbury-Huang, 2013).

Novices to action research and phenomenography might ask how these two disciplines can
be combined in their practice. As a starting point, studying literature on the two disciplines
is essential. There are numerous sources on how educational action research is practiced
and, generally speaking, most models are practiced in cycles of planning, implementation
and evaluation and driven by contextual dynamics (e.g., human and material resources,
scope of issues or problems, and goals). The main goal of action research is to improve the
quality of life as an ongoing process, yet this has not been an articulated goal in
phenomenographic research. Infusing educational action research with analytic methods
from phenomenography can potentially widen our lens on how a variety of students
experience education differently. In this way, students who have historically been
underserved will have more voice in pedagogical practices and educators will develop a
more culturally responsive curriculum.

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