

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND FORMULATION OF A RESEARCH PLAN**

#### **3.1 The Study's Conceptual Framework**

In this chapter, I will present a brief history of action research and how this research design has evolved into a widely used educational research model. As the focus of my research is how I go about improving my principal's role to improve students' literacy, I will describe why other research models did not provide me with a framework to conduct an analysis of my daily work in context while I sought answers to the problems our school posed. It was this realization that led me to construct an action research model, in which my professional readings, reflections and critical conversations became meaningful to me as I embarked on creating my own living educational theory about my principalship. I will define "living educational theory" as developed by Whitehead and I will outline why this theoretical framework provides both the necessary conceptual grounding and validation process required for my study.

In reviewing my ethical stance, I will examine how the experiences of other leaders in a practitioner research role assisted me in safeguarding against any perceived misuse of power caused when a principal collects data from her staff. These discussions close with my rationale for choosing to conceptually frame my action research design with living educational theory. It is my contribution to living educational theory that adds knowledge about educational leadership to the field of education. I will conclude this chapter with a discussion on how I incorporated action research methodology into my study's research plan and I will explain my plan's evolution in the field.

### ***3.1.1 Evolution of Action Research***

As professionals in the fields of social sciences and the humanities began to inquire into their own practices, research methodologies designed for the pure sciences began to fit less well and a new research paradigm was sought (Carr & Kemmis, 1986).

### ***3.1.2 The Origins of Action Research***

Among the early explorers was Kurt Lewin, commonly accepted as the ‘father’ of action research, who sought a new methodology for his investigations. The term ‘action research’ first appeared in his early works around 1934, and evolved during his practical social experiments and research, now referred to as the Iowa studies, during World War II. Lewin found that people do change (take action) when they experience the need to change (reflect) and will adopt new behaviours (new action) based on their values. Lewin’s (1951) field theory is based on the proposition that our behaviour is purposeful and influenced not just by the physical constructs surrounding us but also by the psychological ones that occur in our minds as we make sense of situations in which we find ourselves. Given the depth of my new challenges in leading a very difficult school, I related very well to both of these constructs as I tried to make sense of my role in my new surroundings. It is however, the psychological constructs that fuelled my inquiry and my search for an appropriate research model.

### ***3.1.3 Influence of International Action Researchers***

Since its origins in the 1930’s, action research has become a worldwide research methodology with theorists in the United Kingdom (Elliott, Lomax, McNiff, Whitehead), in the U.S. (Argyris, Mills, Stenhouse) and in Australia (Carr, Kemmis) whose work has shaped and refined it. Lewin’s (1951) notion of taking informed action led to Argyris’ (1974) double loop learning theory that also examines the governing variables in situational contexts, which

Schon's (1983) work later refined in his theory of reflection-in-action – think, act and reflect. Out of the foundation works of Lewin, Argyris and Schon, other researchers began conducting action research studies. The rationale for using action research resulted from the participant's desire to learn about one's practice in its natural social context through collective self-reflective inquiry with a view to improving practice and as a means of obtaining new knowledge (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1982, 1985). In linking action and research to generate reflective action to change human behaviour, action researchers create a 'double burden' of both finding new knowledge and creating positive change (Argyris & Schon, 1991).

### ***3.1.4 Action Research in Education***

Given this construct of action research, I believe that this research model is well suited for educators who are continuously asked by society to act in context while afforded little tolerance for error. Action research conditions the researcher to be reflective but always with the view of taking informed action (praxis) to answer the research question – to 'do something about it' (McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead, 1996). Its methodology is not to test ideas by trial and error but to take deliberate action that is pre-determined to minimize error. It is therefore not surprising that many educators have chosen to conduct research through their own action research studies – beginning with Stephen Corey, the first researcher to use action research in education in the 1950s. Lewin's (1951) work provides a practical foundation and framework for educational research, as it defines action research as being a process that gives "credence to the development of powers of reflective thought, discussion, decision and action by ordinary people participating in collective research on 'private troubles' they have in common" (Adelman, 1993). Educators need to make regular informed

decisions about their practice and student outcomes to enhance learning, and this work necessitates collective research in the field to inform practice (Mills, 2003).

### ***3.1.5 Methodological Applications of Action Research***

Action research is very subjective as its methodology is defined by the individual researcher, so it is difficult to provide a philosophical framework to encompass all action research studies. Educators do not conduct action research according to only one design model and presently, there are three main current schools of thought in action research (Mills, 2003): American, with its roots in the progressive education movement as conceptualized by John Dewey (Noffke, 1994); British, with a basis in curriculum reform and increased professionalism in teaching (Elliott, 1991; Stenhouse, 1975); and Australian with a move towards collaborative curriculum planning (Kemmis, 1993). Out of these movements, three methodological applications of action research have evolved:

- ‘critical’ action research, also known as emancipatory action research, which draws from critical theory (Mills, 2003) and from postmodernism (Carr & Kemmis, 1986) and in which there is a shared democratic commitment to seek new knowledge and to break away from traditional bureaucratic traditions for reform and social improvement (Carr & Kemmis, 1986);
- ‘technical’ action research that incorporates a scientific approach to problem solving and is product directed;
- ‘practical’ action research in which the researcher focuses on the “how-to” and “how do I” research questions (Elliott, 1991) and which is not so clearly framed theoretically.

Hammersley (1993) has criticized some research methodologies as being too scientific in nature and not always relevant to research outside of the pure sciences and he offers two reasons for educators to select other research methodologies, namely, that scientific research cannot always answer and solve teacher problems and secondly, that there is no scientific method that guarantees results as the world of education is ever changing and a traditional approach is therefore unlikely to be effective.

### ***3.1.6 Theoretical Framing of Action Research***

Today, for action research in education, the over-arching theoretical frame, or what Creswell (1998) refers to as an ideological perspective, is postmodernism. This frame emphasizes that a truth can be socially constructed by a particular group coming to know and understand natural human experiences in context. Stringer (1996) argues that elements of postmodernism, with its ability to deconstruct knowledge and to create transformative elements, allows action researchers to ‘critically inspect’ and explore social dimensions of their practices and then to reflect on possible transformations to their practice. This viewpoint implies a more universal application to action research than implied by Mills (2003). Quigley and Kuhne (1997) cite the work of Habermas (1970) and his assertion that knowledge can be socially constructed through technical, practical and emancipatory interests. It is the intent of the researcher in context that frames the action research leading directly to practical change. The research outcomes relate directly to the researcher and therefore can be applied immediately thus closing the gap between theory and practice. Through the cycles of planning, acting and reflecting, a change in practice occurs (Quigley & Kuhne, 1997).

Action Research is evolving as new practitioners engage in research (Lincoln & Guba, 2000) and providing a research framework for practitioners to reflect on their own practice

while at the same time working towards improving it. This activity is guided by a series of action-reflection cycles, with proposed ethical solutions tested in the field, critically analyzed for validity and trustworthiness, subject to further action-reflection, and in the final stage, refined or changed as required to effectively answer the research question (Hubbard & Power, 1999; McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead, 2003).

Habermas' (1973) notion of critical endeavours creates a conceptual framework for the social sciences that includes critical theory in the epistemology of human interactions and practice. However, Carr & Kemmis (1986) argue that Habermas has failed to produce "standards of rationality" in which critical social science can justify its own research procedures, and is lacking in examples of successful practical applications. Nonetheless, Habermas' work does provide a theoretical background to the methodologies advocated by action researchers (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988).

Kemmis (1993) also raises the issue of how to best frame action research theoretically for educators: should it be part of a larger field that we know as social theory or should the focus be more narrow and limited to the development of educational theory? He supports an educational approach and explains the steps to be taken, "Our task as educational researchers involves us in taking concrete and explicit steps towards changing the theory, policy and practice of educational research, as well as participating in the work of changing educational theory, educational policy and educational practice..." (Kemmis, 1993,p.15). Educational theory needs to logically unify theory and practice with rigorous standards of practice by which to judge its realizations of practice.

As there is no universally accepted framework, no single educational theory, and certainly not one conceptual framing for action research, for the purpose of my study, I have

adopted a practical approach to explore “How do I improve my practice to enhance the teaching of literacy?” My action research links the development of my practice with new knowledge about how a school principal in performing her functions can purposely impact on literacy instruction.

### **3.2 Living Educational Theory**

During a qualitative research methodology course in 2003, I struggled to find a conceptual framework to support my proposal for an action research project. I came across Whitehead’s (1989a) “living educational theory” and I had a conceptual epiphany as the simplicity and sense of this theory appealed to me. It allowed me to frame my study rationally and to feel comfortable and confident in doing so. As a more informed action researcher, I think how lucky I was to have found this theory so early in my studies, because in all the subsequent readings I have done, no other theory comes close to making sense to me and rationalizes my study on my practice as a principal. From the initial stages of my study, I have used living educational theory to frame my research.

I believe that the different fields of research pull educational researchers in too many directions and prevent us from forging a common professional fellowship that is bounded by a conceptual framework – an educational theory that can guide educational researchers that will yield meaningful, relevant and trustworthy findings. Whitehead’s “living educational theory” provides an approach conceptualized by educators for educators and he is the first educational theorist to do so.

#### ***3.2.1 The Influence of Whitehead***

In Britain in the 1970s, Jack Whitehead, as a young teacher and a master’s student, began to shape his conceptual framework for educational research. As he recounts (Whitehead,

1989a), it was the reading of Polanyi's (1958) *Personal Knowledge* that led him to reflect on his positivist approach to research. In search of an alternative, he came to review the work being done in action research and became interested in its methodology, epistemology and ontology. He began conducting action research on his own teaching practice, and he resisted conceptual frameworks 1) that supported theories as closed systems of thinking; 2) that advocated only the propositional form of research in which external researchers manipulate variables to achieve desired fixed results and 3) that used the over-arching mindset that heralded positivistic research as being the only valid lens to view and judge the professionalism of teachers. In this he was influenced by Hirst (1983), Elliott (1987), Schon (1983), and by others such as Foucault (1980), Freire (1973), and Habermas (1987). In 1985, he loosely defined living educational theory as,

....a theory...generated and tested from a form of self-reflective inquiry undertaken by participants in educational contexts in order to improve the rationality and justice of: their own educational practices, their understanding of these practices, (and) the situations in which the practices are carried out...The educational analysis which follows is focused upon the nature of the validity of an individual action researcher's claim to know his or her own educational development (Whitehead, 1985, p. 97, 2009, p. 176).

Whitehead argued in (1989a,p.1), "...that a living educational theory of professional practice can be constructed from practitioner's inquiries of the kind, 'How do I improve my practice?' The significance of 'I' existing as a living contradiction in such inquiries is considered and other epistemological issues related to values, validity and generalisability are discussed from the living perspective."

This question of involving 'I' in the research is an important distinction as it definitely shifts the focus of the researcher from observer to active participant but more importantly, it places the onus on educational practitioners themselves to conduct research on educational



practice to derive understanding and meaning of their own practice and to add new knowledge to the field. It is these types of inquiries that are at the heart of Whitehead's work and imply quite an important distinction from inquiries that are conducted by researchers who are not participatory researchers. Whitehead proposes that through systematic reflection on their practice, educational practitioners can provide meaningful insights into daily practice and offer valid accounts of how educators develop and conduct their practice. It is through these living situational accounts (praxis) that educational theories evolve – “living educational theories”.

### *3.2.1.1 The Framing of Living Educational Research Questions*

Living educational theory is unique in its framing of the research questions in the format of “How do I...”. “How do I improve my practice?” becomes a question framing the research methodology. But Whitehead goes beyond establishing just a subjective action research frame to study one's own practice. His work (Whitehead, 1985, 1989a, 1989b, 2001; Whitehead & McNiff, 2004) and especially his more recent work (Whitehead, 2005) delves at great length into how to judge and validate claims made by practitioner action researchers. He explores how to produce evidence that will bring the subjective experiences of one researcher to the educational community and provide meaningful findings that can assist others in their practice. From these findings, educational theory evolves and the living component – key and critical to Whitehead's conceptual framework, lives in the accounts produced by practitioners living their values in their practice.

Unlike Popper (1963), whose conceptual theoretical frame excludes all theoretical concepts (theories) in which contradictions exist, Whitehead's acknowledges that there are often contradictions between theory and practice and it is these ‘living’ contradictions that

researchers must research and explore in order to contribute knowledge to the field of education. He asked: How do we learn from the tensions that result between theory and practice? It is the resolving of these contradictions that formulate educational living theories. Whitehead's conceptualization explores the evolution of what people know (tacit knowledge) to how they come to know new knowledge from actively engaging in their practice and what they actually practice (living their values) in everyday context. McNiff (2007) further explains that although practitioners often hold values about their practice, in certain situations these values are denied because of situational constraints. It is when educators reflect on what actions they can take to address these types of contradictions that "living educational theories" begin to form. At this point practitioners begin to act out their values and it is from Stenhouse's (1975) idea of teachers as researchers that Whitehead and McNiff have come to realize educators as theorists (McNiff & Whitehead, 2005). In doing so, Whitehead has re-conceptualized educational theory which no longer has to be propositional but now has a new form with a revised intellectual scope (McNiff & Whitehead, 2005). Dialectic explorations and discoveries can stand alongside propositional theoretical discoveries as valid research results.

### *3.2.1.2 Social Formations in Living Educational Theories*

In moving from living educational theory to living educational 'theories', Whitehead developed a notion of social formations (McNiff & Whitehead, 2005). A social formation is a group of people working together and McNiff's (2007) description of social formations as groups of people working with unsaid rules that are commonly known and accepted is conceptually quite similar to Wenger's (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Synder, 2002) idea of communities of practice. Members of communities of practice steward

knowledge as a 'living process' that is dependent on their voluntary engagement within a climate fostering some degree of informality and autonomy. Leaders must broker relationships so that knowledge can be constructed and shared through the relationships and the exchange of information, and non-hierarchical leadership is critical. Whitehead (McNiff & Whitehead, 2005) encourages knowledge attainment in social formations by having its members critically reviewing their practices with a view to changing and improving.

#### 3.2.1.2.1 Generalizability in Action Research

There are those who criticize action research for its lack of generalizability. Generalizability is important and it does exist in practitioner action research but it depends not only upon the practitioner providing detailed and rich descriptions of one's practice, but also on revealing the social relations that underpin the practice. Whitehead's notion of social formations postulate that these formations are created only when there is a social acceptance of the work being done, when tacit knowledge becomes explicit through the on-going dialogues amongst those who are a part of the educational practice contained in the action research study. It is these professional relationships and the academic review that gives credence to the research and permits the transfer of knowledge from one social formation to another. I believe that living educational theory in a situational context provides a frame for the transfer of knowledge from one educator to another that may be only meaningful to educators in comparable contexts. Sagor (2000) argues that because action research studies in education are usually conducted in "...a unique setting with a comparatively small sample..." (p.157) generalizability may be very limited but nevertheless, these studies "... do offer valid and reliable report(s) of what occurred inside one unique setting..." (p. 158). Educators can extract what is relevant and transferable to their own settings. In this way, case by case,

educators add to their knowledge bank or living educational theory. This one critical element may be the key factor that finally defines for educators an educational theoretical framework.

A research theory must have a validation process and Whitehead forcefully argues that educators must not only conduct research to study their practice and resolve contradictions, but they must also rigorously validate the claims arising from their research. Validation involves “making claims; critically examining the claims against evidence; (and) involving others in making judgments” (McNiff, et al., 2003, p.24) about the claims made. It is a formative process that includes these ascending levels of validation: self validation, peer validation, up-liner validation (management and those in authority), client validation, academic validation (academic community) and general public validation (McNiff, et al., 2003,p.108-109)

Whitehead agrees with Habermas’ (1981) view that in order to strengthen social validation, the researcher must be mindful that the accounts contain sufficient evidence to justify the assertions made and the critical element is that tacit knowledge can only be made explicit through detailed reflection and social validation. Whitehead and McNiff (2007) maintain that action researchers must be accountable and that “accountability is grounded in a process of democratic evaluation” (p. 1). This supports Fay’s (1996) claim that an act only takes on meaning when it is interpreted not just by one interpreter but by other interpreters in context and “meaning arises out of the relationship between an act and those trying to understand it” (p.142).

Guba and Lincoln’s (1989) four trustworthiness constructs of credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability challenge validity if a critical trustworthy element is absent. Living educational theory meets Guba and Lincoln’s accepted standards of validity.

However, Whitehead continues to seek new approaches to strengthen generalizability, or transferability. To this end, Whitehead (2005) more fully explores what he terms as living standards (explanatory principles that are themselves living) that are implied in a living educational theory. As part of the formation of standards for validation methods, Whitehead applies three logics – propositional, dialectical and inclusional (Whitehead, 2005). He (2005) firmly stresses the importance of ontological values in self-study as these values give meaning to human existence and form epistemological standards of judgment.

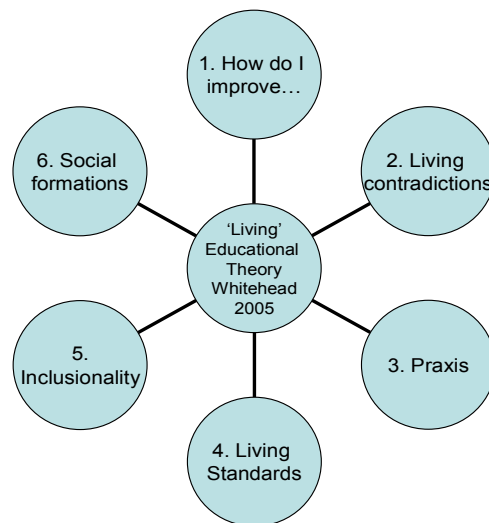
Whitehead's initial conceptualization of educational living theory has undergone a series of transformations. He cautions that action researchers should not to be overly affected by environmental and social influences and that the 'self' (self-identity) must be protected by boundaries (self-boundaries) that are put in place to allow an open exchange of both inner and outer aspects of self that can in turn consciously focus on standards of judgment. These standards then determine the quality of educational research accounts that are based "...on educational influences in the learning and evolution of social formations" (p.21) and action researchers must move toward newly informed practice that merges their values and practice. For these practitioners, social formations then become a key outcome of routine living and of conscious ethical practice.

Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002), in what they call "social movement" (a community-based knowledge initiative), describe within the movement people who are at different stages of readiness but along the way identify key issues "...including core values, identity, relationships, and formal and informal structures" that cannot be obtained from outside the action but emerge and in doing so "...this participant, emergent approach ...opens up a wide range of development options and enables the organization to adapt

methodologies and insights learned from others to fit its own particular (and changing) conditions” (p.195). Social movement leads to social formations that share a knowledge system. Thus, Whitehead’s theoretical arguments about the socialization component of validation of new truths in context are supported by the work of Wenger, et al, (2002).

This section has reviewed living educational theory and its evolution and the following diagram summarizes its critical properties as conceptualized by Whitehead.

## Properties of Living Educational Theory



**Figure 1:**  
**Conceptualization of Whitehead’s Living Educational Theory**

### 3.3 Living Educational Theory Framing of My Action Research Study

After a lengthy review of literature on methodologies, I find myself returning to Whitehead’s theory. I have considered critical theory and although it has elements that are relevant and have potential for my analysis of my claims, this framework’s underpinnings are

propositional and as such do not fully capture the open nature of my inquiry. I agree with Laidlaw (1996) that the standards of judgment are living in my research as I live my practice adhering to my professionally informed ethical standards. I reject the critical action research approach offered by Carr and Kemmis (1986) as being too restrictive and leaving me with a sense of rigid clinical application in a living process. I am drawn to action research because it allows me to construct my research as I live my practice in context. If I restrict my research by placing on it theoretical parameters that will frame it quite differently, then I contradict and negate my action research design.

Argyris's double loop theory (Argyris & Schon, 1974) contributes to my research, but its validation process is also largely propositional and does not fit my participant research. Theories based on propositions have their place in research and add value to forms of social science research as well as to certain forms of action research but in an action research study on one's own practice, this theoretical frame does not allow for personal knowledge to develop and be critically analyzed in an open framework that fosters multiple choices. I strongly support what McNiff and Whitehead (2005) outline for self-study:

In self-study action research, the validity of a personal theory is in the explanations a person offers for their practices (sic). The claim to have explained their educational influence in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of a social formation, constitutes their living educational theory. The validity of the claim can be demonstrated through the evidence that the researcher produces to support the claim. The meaning of the theory is communicated through the way the researcher lives and through the understandings they integrate into their meanings from the ideas of others (sic). (p. 5)

Living educational theory offers me a conceptual framework that gives me a fluid structure, or what Whitehead calls a living form, that allows me to deal with diversity in my leadership role through a multitude of ethically and morally based reflective actions (praxis),

based on my embodied knowledge. At times, my informed actions may be propositional and at other times dialectic in nature. As I detail and record my professional actions, my validation procedures will borrow from those of Habermas's ideas of social validity as explained by McNiff and Whitehead (2005) and previously discussed. Whitehead's standards of judgment provide my research with rigor in the form of meeting ontological, epistemological, methodological and pedagogical standards that are self-reviewed, peer reviewed and then supported as legitimate in the educational community that defines its educational theory.

It is my quest for deep understanding that brings me to living educational theories. I agree that there should be a merging of theory and practice so that the inner self and outer self that Whitehead (2005) discusses are consistent and allow the practitioner to live out personal and professional ethical standards in daily practice without contradictions emerging. Within this theoretical framework, I do not have to force fit my human practice into theory or vice versa. As Hammersley (1993) states, "sound practice cannot amount to the straightforward application of theoretical knowledge, but is an activity that necessarily involves judgment and draws on experience" (p. 430).

### **3.4 Ethical Considerations about My Leadership Role as an Action Researcher**

Since action research is collaborative research being conducted in a social context that necessitates working with others and building relationships to improve practice (Quigley & Kuhne, 1997), action researchers must analyze what biases they bring to the study. Issues of race, gender, class, role, and power must be carefully considered as these elements affect the building of relationships. Questions such as how the researcher's position is different from the others in the study must also be asked (Zeni, 2001).



Mills (2003) argues that the first condition necessary to foster action research and encourage educational change is for teachers and administrators to review and restructure their power and authority relationships. According to Mills, power relationships in schools can either empower or 'under power' professional staff members. He suggests that it is the responsibility of the researcher to harness this power and direct it to empower other members to bring about change. In doing so, difficult questions must be asked and answered and inevitably these questions lead to conversations about roles, responsibilities and decision-making in which the question of leadership arises.

Equally important considerations in practitioner research are the closeness of the researcher to the practice under study and the double burden on the researcher of improving practice while conducting ethical research and constructing new knowledge. These inherent concerns must be addressed to ensure the quality of the data so that it is found to be trustworthy. Wolcott (1994) also warns researchers to be aware of the limitations of being objective when one is involved as a participant in the study and this concern is further compounded for me by my role as an authority figure in the school.

From the literature on the complexities of data collection inherent in action research, I also acknowledge the following considerations that need to be addressed:

1. that there may be a tendency to treat the nature and application of the evidence in too informal a fashion and with less rigor;
2. that ethical dialectic methods can be difficult to establish in one's own practice and with self-reflections;

3. that a more passive relationship between the ‘researcher and the researched’ can evolve especially when the practitioner researcher has a position of power;
4. that the voices of those on the receiving end of the service delivered by the practicing professionals are often silent;
5. that too simple deductive assumptions between theory and practice are made; and
6. that there exists the existence of a narrow focus on how practitioner research can be useful for practice (Wolcott, 1994).

As my action research study is a form of self-study, it is important for me to also acknowledge the steps required for self-study validation and to safeguard against subjective bias. Loughran (2007), Russell (2007), and Whitehead (2007) advocate for a social community validation process in self-study. Research evidence must be examined through the eyes of others to verify claims (McNiff, et al., 2003) which can be done through interviews, questionnaires and video-recordings to determine if the data and research findings resonate with the social community (Whitehead, 2007).

Ironically, depending on one’s viewpoint, it can be argued that practitioner research’s weakest point on one hand – its self-analysis is its greatest strength on the other – its practical usefulness.

#### ***3.4.1 The Action Researcher in a Managerial Position***

Additionally, action researchers also caution that there are trade-offs between generalizability and local responsiveness to the research context. Then, the delicate question of the ownership of the study has to be considered. Does the study belong to the individual practitioner or is there multiple ownership of everyone engaged in making the changes? In changing practices,

actions taken to support curriculum and staff development are often seen as instruments of control if these actions are being prescribed by a person in a managerial position and are seen as offering little to empower or emancipate teachers (Letiche, et al., 1991). To counter this, action research methodology has developed ethical codes of conduct to emphasize the importance of voluntary participation, to ensure confidentiality surrounding teacher efforts and to guarantee that teachers retain a high degree of control over actions taken in these areas (Elliott, 1980; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1982). Particularly difficult for researchers who are in a position of power and authority is that in order to build trusting relationships with others, the leadership role must be downplayed so that an open and honest working relationship can occur. The irony in this is that action research is designed to empower the researcher and thus provide some level of autonomy but as Clay (2001) realized from her research, because her leadership threatened others' autonomy, her own autonomy had to be reduced.

In describing her action research study as a secondary school instructional leader, Clay (2001) refers to her experiencing teachers' opposition to change of any kind, lack of consensus on what needed changing, unwillingness to work for change, numerous references to previously failed change efforts, and incomplete understanding of issues that affect change. Clay says that as she analyzed relationships, two points emerged: 1) the extent to which power and authority exist to make changes; 2) the examination of what the practitioner-researcher has to do to form working relationships with teachers who are resistant to change. She also notes the importance of setting an agenda that mitigates the perception of power and coercion. It is critical that the researcher develops a working relationship with the other colleagues by analyzing the relationship that best brings about desired and effective changes. In establishing best practices, "...the ethics of action research

is really the merger of the ethically defensible actions of the practitioner and the ethically defensible actions of the researcher” (Clay, 2001,p.25). The central ethical concern for school-based practitioner researchers is relationships (Zeni, 2001) and in practitioner research it is the insider to insider relationships that pose the greatest ethical dilemmas (Clay, 2001). But education systems are also hierarchical organizations in which the power and authority of principals are also limited, adding further complexity to my role as a practitioner researcher. I must find both the appropriate time and balance between leading and inviting others to lead in order to build the necessary insider relationships.

To minimize the risk of subjectivity, the researcher must take great care in obtaining data from a variety of sources. But when the researcher is a person in a position of power, the subjectivity increases as it becomes more difficult to ensure that the information collected in the data is honest and not just what the leader wants to hear, or that the solicited data were not coerced. Complex relationships exist between the researcher and the researched and therefore the researcher must develop a ‘critical consciousness’ (Ebest, 2001) to safeguard the quality of data and the relationships. For the action researcher seeking to make changes, tensions also arise from the conflict between coercion and collaboration, imposition and negotiation (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). These distinctions become less clear in what Carr and Kemmis (1986) call the pursuit of just and fair practices. Those who are subjected to the change process often oppose change, ignore or weakly implement changes, and direct resistance toward the change agent (Fullan, 2001).

#### ***3.4.2 My Role as a Practitioner Researcher***

In my role as school principal and that of a change agent, I expected to encounter difficulties and road blocks and therefore I needed to strategize how to deal with these situations. My

research is bounded by two main ethical concerns – my practice and my research quest to find new knowledge to improve my practice. As discussed, my professional values led me to put forward my best efforts to work collaboratively and to establish positive working relationships with teachers to form a viable and self-sustaining learning community to improve student learning. How I fostered relationships with my colleagues was critical in my pursuit of an inclusive, collaborative, team approach to pedagogical and professional development. Through my action research I confirmed that teachers must have trust in my leadership, feel respected as professionals, know that they have a valuable contribution to make, and that I both welcome and value their input.

As a practitioner researcher in a leadership position, I needed to build open and trusting relationships to get honest and useful data from which to analyze and adjust my practice in order to ‘live’ my professional values. My practice and my research goals became closely intertwined in the building of relationships with my colleagues. I was completely accountable for every action that I took and the thrust of my actions in the school was always for the welfare of students and their learning. But I also had to be very sensitive to the professional needs of the teaching staff as long as their needs did not directly oppose my prime leadership mandate.

### **3.5 Summary of the Theoretical Framework**

In this chapter, I have provided an overview of the origins of action research, described its research methodology and offered a description of action research appropriate to my study. It is clear from the literature that educators conducting educational research in the field have not created an educational theoretical framework. Critical theorists call for critical research validation, but this approach limits practitioner inquiry to applying prescribed research

techniques to practice without openly examining the essence of educational theory – educational practices. I have advocated for an educational theory that is critical and reliable on its own terms.

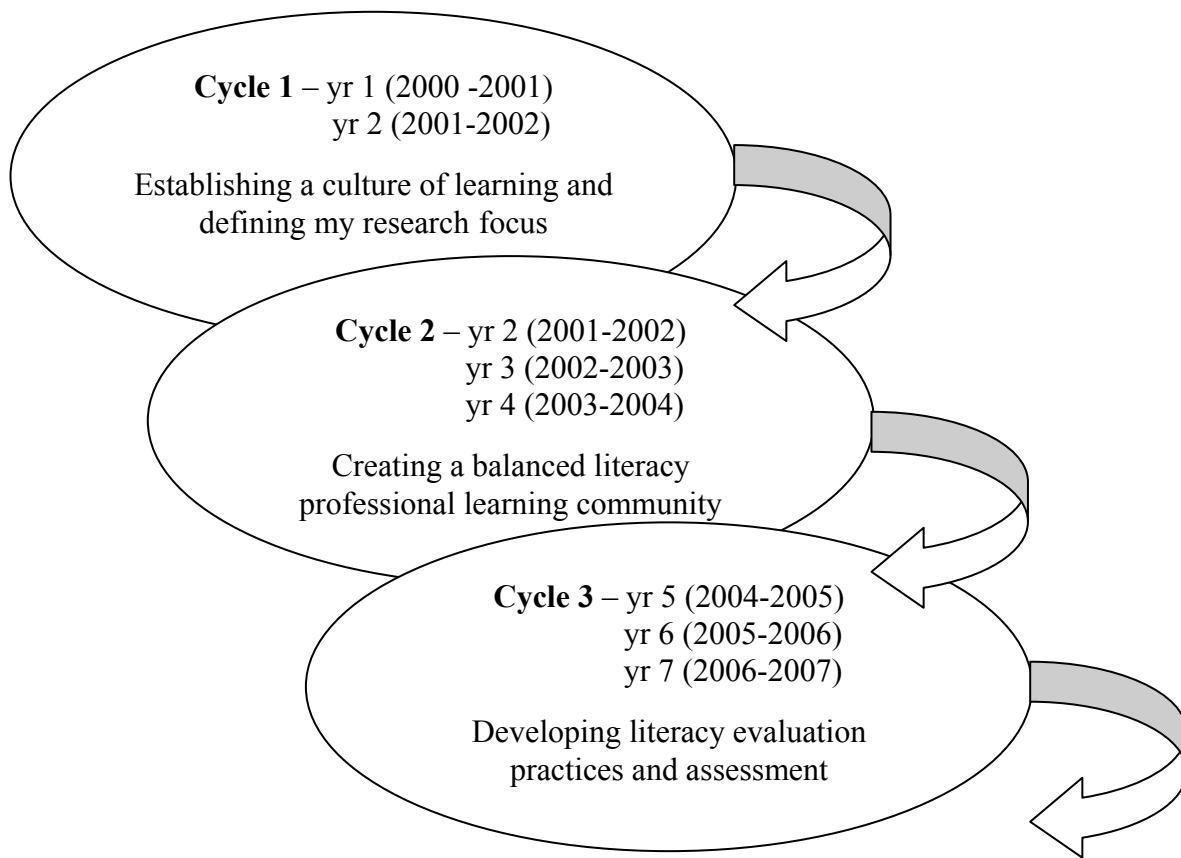
Whitehead has conceptualized an educational theory with standards of judgment devised for educational researchers. The logic offered by Whitehead fits the rigorous validation processes required by Guba's (1981) definition of trustworthiness, Maxwell's (1992) theoretical validity and Anderson, Herr and Nihlen's criteria for validity in action research (1994). Living educational theory (Whitehead, 1989a) has been shown to meet these criteria. It provides a conceptual framework to produce theoretically informed accounts of educators that are grounded in their 'living' professional practices and validated by using a critical approach. I have argued in this chapter that Whitehead's conceptualization of a living educational theory with its standards of judgment, authenticating research from the 'living perspective', best frames my study.

My professional growth arises from the success of my research into my practice and this success was largely dependent on the extent to which I built both positive and collaborative professional working relationships. It was also dependent on the reflective practices I adopted to gauge the effectiveness of my actions and interactions with teachers as my research study proceeded. Building these relationships with my school colleagues was driven by a basic common sense approach that centers on the importance of creating a trusting, caring, open and supportive working environment in which we share a common vision: to be the best educators that we can be. If I have been successful in incorporating these factors into the learning culture of our school and if these values are reflected in our work, then every action I perform as a principal is ethically driven. My action research study will then also

reflect these values as my practice and my research are closely interlinked. My research plan will reflect the realities of the school's environment and respect my dual role as practitioner and researcher.

### **3.6 Research Plan**

Establishing an action research plan is a messy affair and I found it particularly challenging given the complexity of my dual roles in the study as practitioner and researcher, further complicated by my leadership role in the school and how this impacted on my working relationships with teachers. I had a vision of what I hoped to achieve in my practice and I knew that improvements in literacy at the school level were needed but I did not set out to improve literacy with a clear research plan in mind. In fact, my plan evolved over the period of time – seven years – described in this dissertation as I learned more about action research, literacy, and leadership. I struggled with “action planning” to refine my research focus to suit my own “working context” and “personal value position” (McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead, 2001, p. 36). Over the seven years of my principalship of G.E.C. and in the context of the literacy initiatives, I developed a research plan that gave direction to my work as a researcher practitioner, a pedagogical leader, and a change agent. Each of my action research cycles contained a think-act-reflect period that fluidly spiralled from one cycle into the next with each cycle marking a period of time for which very specific goals had been set, and each involved collecting data, analyzing them, considering the next course of action and proceeding to act.



**Figure 2:  
Developing My Research Plan: The Action Research Cycles**

### ***3.6.1 Action Research Cycle 1***

As I have described in Chapter One, my first two years were devoted to making sense of my new work environment (*think*) and initiating first order changes that supported learning about learning (*act*) or “reculturing” (Hulley & Dier, 2009, p. 36). I had begun my new appointment with ideas about how to proceed that I had extrapolated from Bolman and Deal (1991), took action accordingly, and then reflected on the outcomes of my actions (*reflect*) – a cyclical approach described by Mills (2003) as “planning, execution, and reconnaissance” (p.15). During this introductory period, I also gained deeper knowledge about the school



community, the staff and student performance that refined my views about my role in the school. My desire to reflect on and to improve my practice as a novice elementary school principal of a challenging new school led me to consider action research as a strategy which I began using in my second year at the school. In Chapter One I refer to this earliest stage of thinking about my actions and strategizing my next steps as my first reflective action research cycle.

Although my action research did not initially have a plan, one slowly began to evolve during my first year and a half in the school as I started to question how I could become a more effective principal and assist teachers in improving their literacy-teaching practices. Reflection helped me to recognize the need for a school-wide literacy program and with guidance from Fran Halliday, my literacy mentor; it became a balanced literacy approach. My deeper level of understanding enabled me to narrow my research focus and to begin to formulate my research question. Once I had the beginning of a research question first developed during year two I was able to proceed to take “committed” action (McNiff, et al., 2001, p. 18) to improve my practice by becoming better informed about balanced literacy, literacy-teaching practices, and by working more closely with teachers to improve students’ literacy. With “committed” action, my lead research question also changed and evolved as my study progressed over the next five years. I have described the early version of my research question in Chapter One and in Chapter Five I will describe how my research question changed over time, while staying coherent with the changes occurring in my practice.

### ***3.6.2 Action Research Cycle 2***

All of the work undertaken in my first action research cycle shaped the next stage of my study which was to educate myself and the teaching staff about balanced literacy programs and begin implementation. I gained knowledge about balanced literacy from a research trip to visit Edmonton public schools where this literacy model had been successfully implemented. The act of transferring this knowledge to our school formed the basis of my second action research cycle and which again was comprised of thinking, acting and then reflecting before proceeding to the next cycle.

My second cycle began in the later half of year two and extended into years three and four in which data were collected and analyzed and this work will be described in Chapter Four. As staff grew more knowledgeable about literacy practices, a new interest developed that led us to explore the idea of creating a literacy-based professional learning community. Significant progress was made during the second action research cycle due to the coaching and mentoring that had been made possible by a research grant and the nature of my work during this period will be shared through vignettes in Chapter Four. But unfortunately my research focus of establishing a strong balanced literacy professional community became derailed in year five due to mounting tensions caused by provincial labour unrest that resulted in my teachers filing a grievance. This collective action broke the natural flow of my study and prematurely halted the second action research cycle before we reached the goal that the teachers and I had set – to establish a balanced literacy professional learning community. As a researcher I was left to salvage what I could from the second action research cycle and reflect on how I could best re-direct my study. My struggle to determine my next course of action will be documented in Chapters Four and Six. Reflection caused me

to deeply question my actions and those of the staff as well as to review what we had accomplished in enhancing our literacy practices and improving students' literacy. I made a decision that the work that was being developed in the second action research cycle was not to be abandoned but to be put on hold until it could be resumed with full engagement. In the interim, by the middle of year five, I decided to shift my work with the teachers to more neutral ground (assessment) and also to continue improving my practice and the literacy delivery in the school through gaining knowledge about literacy assessment, thereby marking the beginning of my third action research cycle.

### ***3.6.3 Action Research Cycle 3***

The focus of the third action research cycle was improving literacy assessment practices and my rationale for this selection will be explained in the following chapters. To inform myself about assessment practices I sat for three years on our school board's assessment committee, read about assessment, and attended assessment conferences. I became knowledgeable about student-led conferences, students' portfolios, rubrics, exemplars, goal setting and how these critical elements could be factored into both authentic student assessment and assessment of and for learning. Through my research I came to comprehend how assessment practices not only direct individual student learning but also direct teachers' classroom instruction to meet the needs of individual learners (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & William, 2004). I also questioned how this knowledge could improve literacy-teaching practices and sought ways to achieve this goal. Transferring knowledge about assessment became the focal point of my work with teachers after the grievance was filed in year five and it continued until nearly the end of my study in year seven. During this period, I obtained another research grant that enabled me to take two teachers to visit schools in Hawaii to study their authentic student

assessment practices. This research was shared with all staff and grew teachers' literacy practices. Teachers began to see how to involve students in understanding the link between the assessment of students' reading and writing, and the resulting specific actions that were identified to successfully move students to their next stage of reading and writing development.

Although we were making slow but steady progress in our literacy assessment practices, including the use of the *Pearson Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA)* (Beaver, 2006) across all grade levels, I was aware that we still had unresolved issues and so as soon as the grievance was resolved at the beginning of year seven, I revisited the work we had begun in the second action research cycle and I reflected on how to resume this work with the teachers. I will describe the difficulty of restarting this work in Chapters Five and Six, but eventually we did forge ahead with continuing to develop our balanced literacy professional learning community. As this work overlapped with our work on enhancing literacy assessment practices, I decided to put aside further work on developing assessment practices to make time to continue our unfinished work from the second action research cycle. When my study concluded at the end of my seventh year at the school, it was very evident that my third action research cycle was not as cleanly delineated as were the first two cycles and this made my analysis more difficult. This will be elaborated in Chapter Five and discussed in my final reflection in Chapter Six.

### **3.7 Data Collection and Analysis**

Action research methodology has allowed me to critically reflect and improve, whereas empirical research would not have so deeply directed personal changes in my leadership role. The rich understanding I developed about my practice was generated by on-going reflection

that I have documented throughout my study in a professional journal, email correspondence and study notes.

In keeping with action research, my practice was richly documented with thick descriptions of how I conducted my work with teachers in the school but I also collected some quantitative data, namely, the students' reading assessment (DRA) scores recorded over a five year period. I needed to find a way to accommodate both qualitative and quantitative data, and to answer my research question. I also needed to create a way to judge my practice and to determine if it had improved and whether I had enhanced literacy in the school. To resolve these research challenges I talked with critical friends and dug deeper into the literature before deciding to divide my data collection into two parts.

My first action was to review the hundreds of pages of my journal notes and course study notes to seek evidence to help to answer my research question. In conducting this review and analysis I also made the decision to lay open my work with all of its flaws and successes so that others could more fully understand the role of a principal in meeting the demands of the twenty-first century. I focussed in on a specific period from my study that was the most richly documented and that I believed provided the greatest insight into the slow evolution of my practice and that of the teaching staff as we informed ourselves about literacy. How I worked on developing enhanced literacy-teaching practices, determining what interventions I would use to improve literacy in the school and how I proceeded to bring changes to the literacy classroom is the topic of the following chapter. It provides a detailed account of how I went about conducting my work to give insight into my ontological practice. This work also set the foundation for second order changes that would bring about deep professional changes to enhance student learning. These data are presented in Chapter

Four in vignettes to preserve their authenticity and my analysis is in the written text that binds the vignettes together.

The second set of data is quantitative and includes a questionnaire used to acquire other voices as well to triangulate my findings along with my field notes and journals, and the students' reading assessment scores. In Chapter Five I will show how I used a variety of data to help me examine my practice and validate my claims. I will describe my data collection methods, how I created my questionnaire, and a detailed analysis of my data and research findings.