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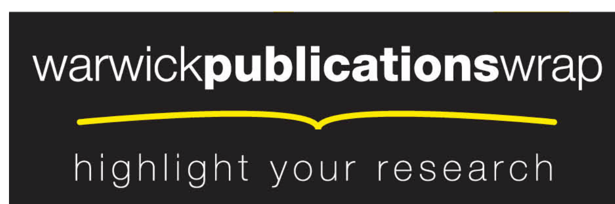

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A look at ethical issues in action research in education

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Abstract

This reflective contribution covers a wide range of ethical issues which are bound to arise when teacher-researchers engage in technical, practical or critical models of action research. Once these three models are briefly explained, the paper proceeds to justify why ethical dilemmas are an intrinsic part of action research, precisely on account of its collaborative nature and of the diverse motivations, perspectives, and institutional roles held by its participants. As a result, questions around power and control are also likely to arise. Hence, we stress the need for action researchers to anticipate these ethical issues and be prepared to handle them through sincere and respectful dialogue among all participants.

Keywords: ethics; action research; collaboration; power; voice.

Resumen

La presente contribución reflexiva cubre un amplio espectro de cuestiones éticas que suelen emerger cuando los docentes-investigadores se involucran en los modelos técnico, práctico, y crítico de la investigación-acción (IA). Luego de describir brevemente estos tres modelos, el artículo examina cuestiones éticas como partes inherentes de la IA en relación a las diferentes motivaciones, perspectivas, y roles institucionales ejercicios por sus participantes. Como resultado, preguntas sobre el poder y el control surgen en la IA. En consecuencia, el artículo resalta la necesidad de los docentes-investigadores de anticiparse a estas cuestiones éticas y de estar preparados para gestionarlas mediante el diálogo sincero y respetuoso entre todos los participantes.

Palabras clave: ética; investigación-acción; colaboración; poder; voz.

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ACTION RESEARCH (AR) HAS evolved in various ways and traditions (Burns, 2010; Crookes, 1993; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Noffke, 1997; Ryan, 2013; Somekh, 2010). Fields such as applied linguistics and education are usually enlarged by AR-framed contributions from a variety of geographical contexts and institutional settings (for recent examples see Bevins & Price, 2014; Calvert & Sheen, 2015; Castro Huertas & Navarro Parra, 2014; Talandis & Stout, 2014).

In an attempt to define AR, Burns (2010, p. 2) relates it to “the ideas of reflective practice' and 'the teacher as researcher'. AR involves taking a self-reflective, critical, and systematic approach to exploring your own teaching contexts,” and adds that AR seeks “to intervene in a deliberate way in the problematic situation in order to bring about changes and, even better, improvements in practice.”

In principle, this definition succeeds in highlighting the agents and reasons behind AR. In Burns' view, AR is in the hands of teachers, and reflexivity, action, and transformation appear embedded in the process of teachers examining their own teaching practices. In this regard, AR is taken as an opportunity for teachers' professional development (see Wyatt, 2011; Yayli, 2012).

Drawing on this introductory definition we summarise three models of AR and discuss some of the ethical issues underlying the implementation of AR in foreign language learning and teaching. Throughout the paper, we pose questions we have asked ourselves in our identities as teacher-researchers. We believe that ethical issues deserve serious attention in AR, and all research in fact, because dilemmas around power, benefits, voice and how all actors involved are represented, among others, may affect the very nature of AR: transformative praxis.

Action Research Models

Cain and Harris (2013) summarise three models of AR: (1) technical, (2) practical, and (3) critical. Technical AR refers to experiences from joint projects between schools and universities where the former bring to the table initial ideas and interests. Practical AR is about the “here and now” and it is usually ignited by teachers themselves or their institution. They seek to maximise performance within the opportunities and constraints of their educational institution. These experiences are generally small in scope and may not be published in peer-reviewed journals. Last, critical AR carries political and emancipatory undertones, the objectification of which is normally dependent on AR allowing for an expansion of the participants' self-awareness as individuals in society (Villacañas de Castro, 2014). While the other two models seem to operate within pre-established environments, critical AR seeks to challenge social order, power, and control, and promote democratic undertakings and horizontality. However, this does not mean that technical or practical action research experiences are innocuous. In a

thorough review of action research, Noffke (1997) convincingly argues that even in the personal and professional dimensions of AR, dimensions we can relate to technical and practical AR, the political angle is manifested through issues of power and control. Put another way, these models are not exclusionary of each other.

Whatever the tradition or model, AR cannot be enacted as an individual's event. There is an inherent element of participation and collaboration as knowledge is viewed as socially constructed in Vygotskian terms. While *collaboration* and *participation* can be used interchangeably, some authors prefer *participatory* to highlight involvement and ownership (e.g. Townsend, 2013). Through any of the models above, collaborative action research (CAR) promises several benefits to those who swim its waters (Banegas et al., 2013; Bleicher, 2013; Wyatt, 2011; Yayli, 2012). However, benefits also come together with challenges. According to Cain and Harris (2013) and Patthey and Thomas-Spiegel (2013), AR can be time-consuming, face-threatening, unpaid, and loaded with ethical issues which may threaten the aims of any AR project. We shall turn to this last challenge.

Ethics in AR

Ethical issues in educational research and AR are extensively examined in the literature (Beach & Eriksson, 2010; Coghlan, 2013; Collins, 2004; Floyd & Arthur, 2012; Jones & Stanley, 2010; Locke, Alcorn & O'Neill, 2013; Lomas Scott & Fonseca, 2010; Mockler, 2014; Nolen & Putten, 2007; Puchner & Smith, 2008; Walford, 2005; White & Fitzgerald, 2010; Zeni 1998, 2009). In the paragraphs which follow we briefly discuss some ethical issues we may find in the process of AR based on recent publications and our experiences.

Discussing Ethical Issues

There are a variety of ethical issues that must be taken into consideration. Many of these involve negotiating the relationships between people involved in a given study. In this section, we will highlight the following issues: collaboration, young learners, power, confidentiality, anonymity, authorship and ownership, representation and voice, benefits, and sustainability.

Collaboration. Both collaboration and participation need to be voluntary and participants must be autonomous and free to withdraw at any time without any consequences. It is important to discuss co-option and coercion so as to avoid or minimise their presence. There may be cases where a school principal or a language coordinator decides to embark on AR at institutional level: Are teachers really free to opt out? Will they appear as uncooperative or unprofessional? Is AR "a democratic undertaking or a web of collusion and compliance?" (Jones & Stanley, 2010, p. 151).

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2007, p. 35) warn us that "in our enthusiasm for the idea of inquiry […], we urge and in some ways impose this perspective."

Collaboration and the genesis of any project must lie in the hands of those who wish to research their own classrooms. In the case of researcher-teacher researchers' collaboration, it may be dangerous for a researcher or more experienced teacher-researcher to impose on colleagues their own innovative, liberating and emancipatory agenda when others involved seem to be content with the professional environment they inhabit. In this regard: Do I have the right to impose political ideas on my colleagues, ideas which more often than not have a bearing on personal educational choices? Will I make them feel as outdated in their language teaching approaches? Do I see myself as their saviour? Why do I feel I need to "mess" with my colleagues' status quo? What will happen if the order of things is altered? Will I become liable for whatever happens?

Young learners. Other cases of collaboration include researching with young and teenage learners. In a recent review of child participation in applied linguistics research, Pinter (2013) includes three constructions: children as objects, children as subjects, and children as co-researchers. Given the sociocultural and qualitative architecture of educational action research, children and teenagers may participate as subjects and co-researchers (Leeson, 2007; Smit, 2013), especially when AR is conducted according to the critical model outlined above. When children are part of AR some questions surface: Can they also opt out? Will that affect their grades? Will the project data be threatened if a learner decides to leave even after signing informed consent? Will parents force their kids to participate? Will a teacher manipulate the learners to obtain "positive" data? Doyle (2007) observes that

> while the research may be part of the teacher's professional development, the children are not there for the teacher's development. The opposite is the case. The teacher is there for the development of the children (p. 77).

Authors agree (Groundwater-Smith, 2007; Smit, 2013; Yonezawa & Jones, 2009) that sustainable educational reform may start from the inside out and this entails the involvement of learners by creating a context which promotes participation. At the same time, teachers need to ensure that broader participation will be sought as opposed to (mis)representation in the hands of student leaders. For different reasons, teacher-researchers may decide to collect data from student leaders thinking that their views are supported by their peers. However, Banegas (2013) carried out class interviews where student leaders spoke out and their peers remained silent or supported leaders' ideas. Nevertheless, divergent opinions emerged among the learners when the author followed up such interviews with a questionnaire.

In addition, we need to understand that vulnerability is at play. Even when we embark on a project which places young and teenage learners as participants in roles such as active informants, co-researchers, and even researchers themselves, we need to be critical about the impact that the project will have on them and the wider community. Thus, learner participation entails a number of ethical issues related to their participation in the following dimensions: level, focus of decision making, content, nature of participation activity, frequency and duration, benefits and impacts.

In our quest for emancipation, critical thinking, and democracy, we may run the risk of arriving at conclusions and implications which will later become impossible to implement at an institutional level. Working with young learners also entails issues around power. Although we as teacher-researchers should be emotionally receptive and open to seek symmetry (e.g. Postholm and Skrøvset 2013), we may also need to consider that teachers and learners have different institutionally and socially assigned roles.

Power. The ethical dilemmas behind collaboration bring about the issue of power. Power is linked to pre-established roles, positions, and relationships, for example, a school principal researching his/her school including teachers. There are other instances of unequal distribution of power such as that between a teacher as an insider and a researcher as an outsider in a school-university project and their different roles and academic backgrounds, or a researcher with an insider's perspective. In these relationships there may be cases of privileged knowledge, sensitive information, and ongoing personal relationships that are in tension with professional relationships. Mockler (2014) remarks that teacher researchers should have the desire to identify and understand the power dynamics at work within the classroom. We may agree that knowledge is power and knowing about something which others do not may confer a researcher or a teacher with special access to the social fabric of their embedded practices. Power is thus linked to maintaining confidentiality.

Confidentiality and anonymity. They are usually addressed together with informed consent (e.g. Doyle 2007; Locke et al., 2013) and respect for participants (see Hedges, 2001; Mockler, 2014). Doyle (2007, p. 81-82) defines confidentiality as:

> not having identifying characteristics such as name or description of physical appearance disclosed so that the participants remain unidentifiable to anyone outside the permitted people promised at the time of informed consent. Anonymity is only one aspect of ensuring confidentiality. It involves using a fictional or no name at all rather than the participant's real name.

We believe that such definitions of confidentiality and anonymity are problematic

because they are depicted as synonymous. Confidentiality means more than that. For example, Campbell and McNamara (2007) conclude that confidentiality means that participants can be open to us and tell us their stories in confidence but refuse to allow us to use their data. In other words, participants may be willing to talk but unwilling to be quoted even if they remain anonymous.

There may be cases where anonymity cannot be achieved because participants could be easily traceable through the context of the research and the researchers and/or authors. Actually, anonymity also raises issues in relation to the very nature of AR. If AR is supposed to be local and context-responsive, is anonymity a delusion? Can we ensure confidentiality and anonymity when the same participants engage both in individual and focus group interviews?

Authorship and ownership. Anonymity is associated to ethical issues of authorship and ownership. It may be the case that participants do wish to appear under their real names as they believe they own the data provided, particularly if the experience places them under a positive light. It may also be the case that participants demand to be co-authors of the project-based reports. Sometimes it is not enough to include them in our acknowledgements. In AR, everybody counts and without participants we cannot go very far. However, this should be discussed every time researchers share their findings at different forums.

Representation and voice. Issues behind ownership are linked to representation and voice. Informed consent forms usually include the participant's right to corroborate data and our interpretation. Participants may ask to have data analysis revisited if they feel they have been misinterpreted or placed under a negative light. Should this happen, we may need to acknowledge this request in our report to follow transparency and honesty, but again we will fail to protect the participant and make him/her feel deceived.

Collection methods may be face-threatening. In a recent CAR project (Banegas, 2013), a participating teacher stopped observing the author's lessons when learners perceived that their teaching styles were in sharp contrast. The author experienced the danger of representing participating teachers as heroes or villains. Such a situation revealed the aspect of voice and authorial stance, which became significant in relation to the same phenomena. Even when we claim to follow principles of respect and negotiation, it is us interpreting other people and writing about them.

While the situations above may be embedded in technical AR or in projects where teachers are not the authors (for example someone writing a dissertation), there may be issues of representation when teachers are the researchers. When teachers investigate their own practices within a culture of performativity, they may ignore data which they feel will "rock the boat" and threaten job stability. Conversely, they may overvalue anecdotal data in such a way that one successful account is portrayed as the common

pattern in the classroom.

Benefits. All AR projects have consequences and benefits. Discussing benefits depend on principles of honesty and transparency. Banegas (2013) led a CAR project through which he obtained a doctorate degree, and his invested interests forced him to be open about unequal benefits. While he sought to help his colleagues and himself develop professionally and produce a positive impact in their learners' experience, he was the only one to become a doctor of applied linguistics. Benefits are to be discussed and outweighed from the start and while the research project unfolds in order to ensure that participants acknowledge their different motivations. They also need to be properly included in reports because they will shed light on the extent to which AR is technical, practical, or emancipatory, and the personal motivations behind it.

Sustainability. When a CAR project aims at improving already good practices or transforming a challenging landscape, care should be taken in relation to whether action will continue after the research is completed, funding stops, and external facilitators return to their universities. Teachers taking part in AR may be interested in sustaining their effects over time, but develop concerns about their inability to pursue AR alone. It is in this scenario that empowerment becomes crucial because AR seeks to turn small-scale, localised initiatives into long-lasting practices which trigger new cycles, new questions, and further topics for inquiry. It is also essential that the project is teacher-generated and teacher-developed so that they feel co-responsible and involved. If a project fails to achieve this, the participating teachers may abandon their explorations, even when they proved successful, and return to previous practices because they never really felt part of it or because they do not have the time and support to continue. Furthermore, school administrators and policy makers may discourage teachers to enact a different curriculum particularly in hierarchical systems and settings.

Conclusion

The growing number of teachers and lecturers engaged in researching their own practices indicates an encouraging landscape because it provides hopes for qualitative and educational research. Research which involves learners and teachers needs to produce a direct impact on learning and teaching practices. Yet, for AR to become memorable, engaging, and meaningful, it must be based on respect, honesty, teachers and learners' interests, and constant awareness of ethical dilemmas around agents' actions and decisions.

While the literature offers several contributions on ethical issues in AR, we believe that this paper has offered further insights into ethical issues derived from power and voice.

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