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The teacher as a researcher in own classroom

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Abstract

The study is an attempt to clarify and discuss the positioning of the teacher as a researcher and ethnographer in own classroom. The research question is how to be empowered as a researcher in own classroom and at the same time be aware of possibilities and challenges of one's positioning? Based upon theoretical sources, the study illuminates both possibilities and challenges for the teacher as a researcher. The findings show that special attention should be paid to the teacher's theoretical background, preconceptions, presuppositions, role and perspectives as well as the choice of methodology and ethical aspects.

Introduction

There are various attitudes to the question of doing research in one's own classroom. Based upon theoretical sources, this paper will comprise a discussion of some of the essential points a teacher, teacher-as-researcher, has to be aware of when doing research in own classroom. The focus will be upon aspects to be aware of before, during and after the research study is being carried out.

The teacher-as-researcher is not a new phenomenon, and the teacher's positioning and knowledge will to some extent decide the research question. To clarify the positioning it is essential to discuss the teacher's preparation of the research study as well as the concepts of participant as observer and observer participant. In connection with the teacher's access to the setting, the concepts of outsider and insider perspectives are discussed. The choice of methodology leads to a clarification of the challenges the teacher-as-researcher may encounter and to a discussion of research tools originating from ethnography and grounded theory. Finally ethical issues are discussed especially in connection with being positioned in the school system.

Background and research question

The teacher-as-researcher already existed in the USA in the 1950s where Corey (1949) argued that teachers should conduct research to improve their own practice. At that time the concept of the teacher-as-researcher was especially associated with the quantitative methods described by Lewin (1948) and others.

During recent years a form of research practice, action research, has been encouraged in Britain. The title "action research" (Walford, 2001: 108) is now often used to describe activities carried out by teachers and other educational professionals where they examine practices in the classroom, often their own classroom, and where they systematically question their own teaching. The idea has been to make educational research an integral part of the work of teachers in schools rather than an activity carried out on schools by outsiders (Hammersley, 1993). The main aim is to improve teaching and to develop teacher professionalism. There are different approaches to accomplish that aim.

This study aims at clarifying and discussing the positioning of the teacher-as-researcher and ethnographer in own classroom. The background of the study is the discussion and questioning of

value of doing research in own teaching environment. The research question is how to be empowered as a researcher in own classroom and at the same time be aware of possibilities and challenges of one's positioning? The discussion of teacher positioning will include references to among others Charmaz, 2006; Hammersley, 1993; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2002; Hargreaves, 1996; Walford, 2001/1991.

Preparation of research study

Before beginning the study sufficient theoretical knowledge of the field of research must be achieved in order to know the language and the theory of the field in question. Without that knowledge the teacher-as-researcher will end up wearing the wrong glasses and using the wrong language.

The teacher-as-researcher needs a specific research question based on his own curiosity and wish to change aspects of the teaching environment. It is clear that personal aspects are central in the choice of research topic and in the issues that are confronted during the research. According to Walford "All research involves the researcher in decisions about the choice of topic and how the research is to proceed" (Walford, 2001: 98). Therefore it is essential to explain your interests and previous work.

The teacher-a-researcher has to be aware of which research question he asks. It is advisable not to ask a question directly related to the teacher's own subject or personality or a question concerning sensitive issues. The study can for instance relate to the students' previous learning experience, expectations, ambitions, present workload, preparation time or their plans for the future.

When choosing the research question, the teacher-as-researcher has to consider whether the research study will test a theory, i.e. draw upon and develop existing theories, generate a theory or just develop descriptions, explanations and clarifications of the field in question. The challenge for the teacher-as-researcher is to generate sufficiently objective data about his own ongoing activities that can be generalized to other classroom contexts.

Time is another aspect to pay attention to. Collecting data is time-consuming, and the question is whether that will fit into teaching. Before starting the research study the teacher-as-researcher has to set aside sufficient time for the study. It is customary within ethnography to obtain multiple datasets. The benefits of using different ways of gathering and recording data when working with students have been well documented (Prosser 1992; Coffey and Renold 2006). The teacher-as-researcher has to ask himself whether there will be time for obtaining multiple datasets, or whether the research study can be carried out without multiple datasets.

When having decided about the research question, the next step is to define the role as a teacher-as-researcher.

Participant as observer or observer participant

The teacher-as-researcher is not a so-called "novice" in the field of research, which is combined with certain challenges. A teacher researching himself is unable to determine the extent to which the effect is due to the method, his own enthusiasm, his rapport with the students or a number of other potential variables. In addition, it is difficult to disseminate the result to other teachers because the research was carried out at the micro-level.

The teacher-as-researcher is unable to look at the field from a social scientist's point of view. It is difficult to make observations and inferences, asking informants, constructing hypotheses and acting on them in an objective way. It is advisable that the teacher-as-researcher should aim at becoming a participant observer instead of an observer participant (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2002: 104). Participant observer means complete participation or "total immersion" in which case the researcher is already a member of a group. However, the role as a participant observer will normally prove rather limiting, and the range and character of the data that can be collected will often be quite restricted.

Although the teachers' role comes close to total immersion, there are major differences. Besides being a participant observer, the teacher is also a tutor/instructor/coach in relation to the students. He will be in a conflicting position since he covers two roles: as a teacher and as a researcher. Thus it becomes difficult to be neutral.

In this connection it is essential to mention that there has been some criticism of conventional academic educational research not only from teachers but also from academia itself (Hammersley, 1993: 215). Conventional academic research is often largely irrelevant to the practical concerns of teachers and often invalid because it is separated from the objects it claims to understand. Hargreaves criticizes educational research by saying:

"what would come to an end is the frankly second-rate educational research which does not make a serious contribution to fundamental theory or knowledge; which is irrelevant to practice; which is uncoordinated with any preceding or follow-up research; and which clutters up academic journals that virtually nobody reads" (Hargreaves, 1996: 7).

From this point of view, the teacher-as-researcher has an advantage of being close to the research field. However, as mentioned before this positioning might prevent him from looking at the field from different angles or for that matter from a meta-perspective. If the researcher is familiar with the field in question, it is not advisable to use observation since he will be biased and consequently not able to interpret the data in a sufficiently neutral and objective way. To meet these challenges the teacher-as-researcher can take specific steps to maintain a high level of awareness and to try to suspend preconceptions.

Access to the setting and outsider/insider perspectives

Although there are various challenges for the teacher-as-researcher in own teaching environment, there are also some possibilities. In the case of an ethnographic approach, both the selection of sites and the access to these sites are especially demanding. However, the teacher-as-researcher does not experience these challenges since he has special access to data collection.

Other challenges are trust and reliability. Normally there are trust, reliability, confidence, dependence and obligation between the teacher and his students. That means that the students do not mind supplying data. The researcher does not have to gain the students' trust. He may explain to them that it is a privilege to take part in the research study as they are given the opportunity to voice their opinions and hopefully change things to their advantage. However, there are different issues to take into consideration.

The teacher-as-researcher has to deal with the question of reliability of data and his own personal experience. Although he might be used to student evaluations, research might give deeper and more direct information about the teacher's personality, role and skills no matter what kind of data are collected. Before starting a research study in own classroom, the teacher has to ask himself whether he will be able to deal with criticism, and if so, what to do about it. He will probably also be the teacher of the specific class after finishing the research study.

Another issue to be aware of is outsider and insider myths (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2002: 109-110). Outsiders and insiders have immediate access to different sorts of information, and they are exposed to different kinds of methodological dangers. For the outsider, the complete observer, it is the danger of failing to understand the perspectives of participants. For the insider, the participant as observer, the danger is that the task of analysis may be abandoned in favour of the joys of participation. In addition, bias may arise for "over-rapport". The risk of close rapport with one group of students may lead to problems with rapport with another group of students. The possibility of data collection may be limited due to friendly relations. It will be difficult for the insider to maintain a marginal position and to distance himself from the participants' accounts. According to Hammersley and Atkinson (2002: 112) "The ethnographer needs to be intellectually poised between familiarity and strangeness." He has to adopt a variety of roles carrying with them challenges and possibilities. For the teacher as an ethnographer it is essential to pay attention to what the participants say and do but also to the context and to his own background. Consequently, there is a need for openness on the part of the teacher-as-researcher, for suspending preconceptions and for fighting familiarity. The teacher-as-researcher has to live up to the tradition of ethnographic research of "making the strange familiar and of making the familiar strange" (Raggl, 2015). So the teacher-as-researcher should aim to question the taken-for-grantedness of widespread beliefs and practices.

Whether being a teacher-as-researcher or a researcher without specific relation to or knowledge of the research field, the researcher is confronted with the question of preconceptions and taken-for-granted assumptions. Charmaz states that "Our preconceptions may only become apparent when our taken-for-granted standpoints are challenged (2006: 67). It may be argued that preconceived theoretical concepts may provide starting points for looking at your data, but they do not offer automatic codes for analyzing these data. Charmaz gives examples of problems in connection with coding such as coding at too general a level or identifying topics instead of actions and processes (2006: 69). To some extent the teacher-as-researcher can make up for and balance his double role by choosing a suitable methodology.

The choice of methodology

This paper aims at discussing the value of choosing a qualitative methodology. Before doing qualitative research in own classroom, the teacher-as-researcher has to clarify his attitude to the concept of agency versus the concept of structure in qualitative research. Social theory gives primacy either to social structure or agency and action. A large body of work deals with clashes between these perspectives and attempts to bring them together. One of the researchers trying to build a bridge between agency and structure is Giddens (1997). This paper does not account for and discuss the concepts of agency and structure but concentrates on an agency-focused, bottom-up methodology giving voice to students.

Schools can apply a form of action research including collaboration between teachers and external researchers. Action research recognizes that different people have different skills and opportunities to develop and use them. Through cooperation, this division of labour does not lead to exploitation, irrelevance or invalidity but to a gradual building of a greater knowledge of teaching and schools (Walford, 2001: 113).

Both action research and design research offer the possibility of doing research in own teaching environment. In this case researchers and research questions will normally come from researchers outside the school system and not from the teacher himself. Thus the researcher in charge will not be the teacher but somebody from outside the field.

For the teacher-as-researcher a grounded theory approach offers the following advantages. Different tools can be applied to collect data such as focus group interviews and narratives in order to illuminate the question from different angles. The approach comprises the method of constant comparison when interpreting research reports, developing codes and categories. It also offers the possibility of testing reliability and validity, of including deviant answers and of paying attention to what is not said. However, there are aspects to take into consideration when choosing the methodological tools.

Different methodological approaches might give access to more reliable data than data collected by means of an interview. Interviewees may be expected to lie depending on the topic. According to Byram (1996) the interviewer will influence the interviewees' answers. The interviewees will know about and have an attitude to the interviewer's interests. To minimize the impact of the interviewer, attention must be paid to what the interviewees do instead of what they think or feel.

Consequently, researchers need to move beyond the traditional cooperative paradigm and recognize the underlying conflictual nature of society. To avoid misinformation, evasion, lies and fronts, researchers can apply a variety of tools to cross-check the data such as observation recorded in field notes, questionnaires with student statements, narratives, and focus group interviews. Especially observation should focus on behaviour, on what people do more than what they say, and on the interaction between people in its many forms.

The teacher-as-researcher is in a conflicting situation both as to interviewing and observation. As already mentioned observation might give rise to problems since the teacher-as-researcher may be biased due to being entrenched in the environment and having experience from it. Thus it is advisable to apply different instruments to get access to those being researched from different perspectives and to get them to tell the tales to be interpreted by the researcher. The instruments of most value will be semi-open questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, profile confrontations and student questionnaires comprising student statements.

Strauss states that

“this stepping away into conceptualization is especially difficult for even experienced researchers who may, in a particular study, either have gone a bit native through personally participating in the field of study, or who know too much experientially and descriptively about the phenomena they are studying and so are literally flooded with their materials” (1996: 29).

Both Charmaz (2006) and Strauss and Corbin (1990) give example of how to solve the problem of preconceptions and previous experience in the field of study. Some of the techniques for breaking through the blindness due to experience, assumptions and preconceptions are being aware of coding “only what you see” (Strauss and Corbin, 1990: 75) and focusing on what is before you so that data cannot be taken for granted. The researcher also needs “theoretical sensitivity, the ability to “see” with analytic depth what is there” (Strauss and Corbin, 1990: 76). He needs to be able to understand what people are saying and what they can possibly mean.

As mentioned previously the teacher-as-researcher will behave as a participant observer. According to Hammersley the participant observer has to behave as an outsider “Even where he is researching a familiar group or setting, the participant observer is required to treat this as “anthropologically strange”, in an effort to make explicit the presuppositions he takes for granted as a culture member” (2002: 9). This means that culture is turned into an object available for study. In general the idea is to oversimplify or use models. Hammersley argues that (2002: 10) certain theories are believed to be “capable of capturing social complexity (...) most notably the grounded theory of Glaser and Strauss (Glaser and Strauss 1968; Strauss and Corbin, 1990)”. The teacher becomes an ethnographer with the purpose of observing and listening to the agents in order to better understand a specific situation. That is what the application of grounded theory and ethnography can deliver.

Conducting the study: Ethnography and grounded theory

Both ethnography and grounded theory offer the possibility of considering students as social agents in their own right (Qvortrup , Corsaro and Honig, 2009). Ethnography is regarded as an ideal method for engaging with children’s and students’ agency.

For ethnographers it is frequently well into the process of inquiry that they discover what the research is really about. Often it turns out that the issue might be quite different from the initial foreshadowed problems, which may require shift in research focus. Ethnography starts from what is there. It is a question of capturing the multilayered nature of everyday life and reflecting differences and commonalities.

The teacher-as-researcher may have the impression that the problems are ordinary, and maybe, when subject to research, they are far from ordinary. When applying a grounded theory approach, there are general strategies available to uncover the so-called hidden truth behind the apparently ordinary truth. One strategy here is the “constant comparative method” (Glaser and Strauss, 1967/1999), which means that the researcher examines each item of data coded in terms of a particular category and notes its similarities and differences to other data that have been similarly categorized. This may lead to categories being differentiated into more clearly defined ones as well as to specification of sub-categories (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2002: 213). During this process of systematic sifting and comparison, the mutual relationships and internal structures of categories will be more clearly illuminated. The research process may stop with an exploration and explanation of the research question, or it may be developed further into the generation of theory.

The teacher-as-researcher is sufficiently immersed in the field of study. However, the challenge is to retain enough detachment to think theoretically about what he has seen and lived through. Meanwhile his display of understanding sympathy for the students whom he is studying permits sufficient trust in him so that he is not cut off from seeing important events, hearing important conversations, and perhaps seeing important documents. According to Glaser and Strauss

researchers applying a grounded theory approach "differ from researchers who bring such a working baggage of preconceived formal theory into the field that they end not by discovering much substantive theory but by merely writing footnotes to the imported theory" (1967/1999: 227). The teacher-as-researcher has to be able to maneuver between the above two positions. He can check his ability as a researcher by means of the method of comparison and verification "because the provisional character of the linkages – of answers and hypotheses - gets checked out during the succeeding phases of inquiry, with new data and new coding" (Strauss, 1996: 17).

When moving between data and concepts, it is important to note plausible links to those made in the emerging analysis. For instance if students seem to resist against teacher authority, it must be clarified whether it is a specific type of teacher authority and not to generalize that students resist against authority in general. In this connection attention must also be paid to temporal and social contexts.

During the interpretation of interviewing data, the temporal context is essential; what occurred and what follows. What has happened to the interviewee prior to the interview and what is anticipated in the near future will be important. Consequently, it is an advantage to combine interviews with observations since each will provide data about temporal contexts. Observations need to be combined with other research tools because the teacher-as-researcher has a tendency to be biased when observing. He has the possibility to carry out long-term observations of the specific place, and for ethnographers "place" is normally crucial to understand student experiences. The teacher-as-researcher will be able to operate at a micro level and thus to explore the context in depth.

When analyzing data, it is important always to consider alternative interpretations to minimize own background and preconceptions in the analysis. The validity of the analysis can be checked by comparing data relating to the same phenomenon but deriving from different phases of the data collection or from other data sources supplied by different researchers. However, this may be both a burdensome and a complex way of checking the validity.

The teacher-as-researcher has to be able to reconstruct the social world he reports which might be complicated because it is his own world. He might have the authority to carry out the research, but the question is how he uses his authorship (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2002: 253). The teacher has to be familiar with the possibilities of writing ethnography and to be able to deal with that issue in a satisfactory way.

If the teacher-as-researcher chooses to move beyond exploration and explanation, the next step will be to generate theory and to compare the generated theory to other relevant theories. It is during this process that the teacher-as-researcher needs to have specific knowledge of relevant theories to be used as a framework for approaching the findings.

The research process does not follow an ideal, logical approach that can be carried out as a pre-defined set of procedures (Walford 1991). The teacher-as-researcher needs to contend with the unanticipated behaviour and views of participants. He must be able to handle the unpredictable and to manage the emergence of "sensitive issues" as significant themes.

Ethical aspects

Ethical issues are related to the behaviour of the researcher and the consequences for the people studied. In principle, the teacher-as-researcher does not have to ask permission of anyone to conduct

the research. However, in educational research there are layers of consent that need to be negotiated both formally and informally such as through conversation. Educational institutions demand different ethical procedures and forms of participant consent. Sometimes gaining consent needs to be renegotiated during times when new ways of gathering data are found important and introduced.

In the case of the teacher-as-researcher, he does not have to build rapport with the people studied. This aspect might give rise to specific problems such as how much does he have to tell the participants about the research, and does he have to tell all the participants? The teacher-as-researcher should also be aware of the question to what extent it is right to allow others to believe that you agree with them. (Walford, 2001: 136).

Another issue relates to what is public and what is private for the participants when the teacher-as-researcher asks questions. This may lead to the issue of publication, or whether it is advisable to inform the school of the result. There will probably be clashes of interest and conflicting interpretations depending on the reader. It might also give rise to problems if the teacher-as-researcher has the obligation to feed back the findings to the participants. What is advisable is to act in ways that are ethically acceptable, taking due account of the teacher-as-researcher's goals, the situation in which the research is carried out and the values and interests of the students involved. The teacher-as-researcher has to pay attention to the above issues from the very beginning when asking the research question.

Conclusion

The study shows that there are a number of challenges and limitations as well as possibilities to be aware of when being a teacher-as-researcher.

The challenges especially concern the teacher-as-researcher's different conflicting roles and his preconceived, biased attitudes. Careful thought needs to be given to how data are collected, to the layers of consent needed when working in the educational system and to how to manage sensitive information. Sufficient academic theoretical knowledge, specific skills and academic language will also be a challenge for teachers not being familiar with the research field.

To counterbalance the challenges there are steps to be taken such as being aware of and making explicit the researcher's background. When choosing a methodology, the researcher should consider issues such as the concepts of agency/structure, reliability, validity and ethical aspects. Being aware of one's positioning as a researcher and paying attention to the different challenges and possibilities before, during and after the research process may empower the teacher-as-researcher in own classroom.

Doing research in own classroom offers a number of possibilities. The teacher has easy access to collecting data, and a certain level of trust and dependency is expected to exist between the interviewer and the interviewees. In the case of an inductive, agency-focused research approach, the generated theory can be related to already existing theory, and there will be spaces for deviant categories not fitting into the generated theory. The research will give the teacher-as-researcher the possibility to increase his knowledge and to change aspects of the educational environment.

To be empowered as a researcher in one's own classroom demands a great deal of time and energy. In addition, the ability to distance oneself from the struggles of everyday experience of the classroom and from preconceived views about effective practices is far from easy. If the challenges

seem too burdensome, what should be recommended is collaboration between the teacher and an external researcher keeping in mind that different people have different skills and opportunities to develop and to use.

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