Challenges of participation in cross-cultural Action Research

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In this article, the challenges of conducting participatory action research in cross-cultural contexts where different historical, political, social, and cultural backgrounds of the participants mark the interaction are discussed. Empirical data is drawn from a one-year educational development project including participants residing in a country in Sub Saharan Africa and in a country in Northern Europe. As participation is one of the crucial and controversial issues in conducting action research, it is scrutinised through several key incidents that took place during the project period. These will illustrate the complex dynamics of collaboration between the participating actors, such as researchers and teacher educators on one hand, and schoolteachers on the other, who came together to conduct participatory action research. In the concluding discussion, the importance and challenges of exercising participatory practices, and nurturing collaboration beyond differences are further elaborated and some recommendations presented.

Key words: Participatory action research, global North, global South, collaboration, research ethics, ICT for development

Desafíos de la participación en la investigación-acción transcultural

En este artículo son discutidos los desafíos de llevar a cabo la investigación-acción participativa en contextos transculturales, en donde diferentes contextos históricos, políticos, sociales y culturales de los participantes marcan la interacción. Los datos empíricos se extraen de un proyecto de desarrollo educativo de un año, incluyendo participantes que

residen en un país en el África Subsahariana y un país en el Norte de Europa. Como la participación es uno de los temas cruciales y controvertidos en la conducción de la investigación-acción, este es examinado a través de varios incidentes claves que tuvieron lugar durante el periodo del proyecto. Estos ilustrarán la compleja dinámica de la colaboración entre los actores participantes, como investigadores y maestros educadores, por un lado, y maestros de la escuela, por el otro, que se unieron para llevar a cabo la investigación-acción participativa. En la discusión final, se elabora detalladamente la importancia y los desafíos de ejercer prácticas participativas, consolidando la colaboración más allá de las diferencias, y se presentan algunas recomendaciones.

Palabras clave: Investigación-Acción Participativa, Norte Global, Sur Global, Colaboración, Ética de la Investigación, ICT para el Desarrollo

1. Introduction

As internationalisation becomes increasingly characteristic of the work in educational institutions, we increasingly face situations in which collaboration is conducted across cultural and geographical boundaries. It is also increasingly common to apply action research approaches in these contexts, which brings further challenges to such international collaborations. Cross-cultural communication and collaboration always have their challenges, which have been widely examined and reported: see further (Croucher, Sommier, & Rahmani, 2015; Hurn & Tomalin, 2013). With increasing socio-cultural, historical, and economic distance between participants, these challenges become even more complicated. Collaborations across countries in the global South and in the global North may face unexpected challenges, as participants with drastically differing cultural and social backgrounds and traditions come together.

The purpose of this article is to discuss the challenges of conducting Participatory Action Research (PAR) through the empirical example of a research and development project, where participants from a country in Northern Europe and from a Sub Saharan country in Africa joined to examine and develop their own teaching practices in the framework of PAR.

The attempt is to acknowledge the importance of conflicts and differing views within projects, and try to find ways of dealing with these issues. The article is a contribution to the ethical and methodological discussion within participatory action research, highlighting the controversies of collaboration, and also commenting on the North-South imbalance in ICT for development projects, and suggesting methods for collaboration in cross-cultural contexts where action research approach might contribute to an increased balance.

2. North – South context

The project that serves as our empirical case started from a desire to investigate and develop shared platforms for in-service training for teachers, where local challenges and problems were mirrored, challenged, and solved, through international collaboration and communication. The research approach applied was participatory action research, as the idea of equity played a central role in the project ethos. It was also important to initiate development activities that would support teachers in identifying issues in their own daily teaching practices, and in developing tools for handling these issues. The project would aim to apply action research as a way of continuous competence development embedded in the everyday practices of schools.

Six educational institutions, three in a Sub Saharan country in Africa and three in a Northern European country,[1] initiated a collaboration with the aim of facilitating professional development of teachers in compulsory education. Two of the institutions provided professional development courses for teachers, and the other four were engaged in primary and secondary education.

The overall aim of the project was to facilitate teachers' professional development by supporting and stimulating development of solutions to local educational challenges, through the use of digital technology and a collaborative action research approach. Specifically, the following project goals were formulated:

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[1] Anonymisation of the project is done to protect the participants from unnecessary exposure as sensitive information of them is discussed.

– to develop teaching methods adapted to local conditions and needs, applying multimodal and multidisciplinary approaches,

– to develop teaching practices by exploring new working methods i.e. participatory action research and peer mentoring,

– to empower participating teachers in their professional development.

During the initial year, the ten participating teachers were introduced to the central ideas of action research and multimodality in a series of both separate and joint workshops.

Participants planned and carried out a first action research cycle (Lewin, 1947; Tripp, 2005) where they examined new ways of teaching and learning in their classrooms. They visited each other's schools, observing the teaching and learning, and they engaged in collegial networking and support. Teacher educators from the teacher education institutions acted as facilitators through workshops and provided support to the participants throughout the initial year.

The schools in the Northern European country were situated in a small industrial town with approximately 23 000 inhabitants, and in a suburb of the capital city with around one million inhabitants. The schools in the Sub Saharan country were situated in a suburban area of the capital city with almost four million inhabitants.

All of the schools were similar in that they were well functioning schools, in areas with socio-economically diverse population. It was essential to choose schools with a functioning management in this initial phase of the project, in order to secure stable conditions for the testing and development of the PAR project model. It was also essential that the school leadership would show strong support for the project, which they did by providing the participating teachers with the time and other resources they needed for the project, and by opening their schools for the visiting teachers from the other participating schools. Thus, the school leaders participated in the project only indirectly, but they showed great interested in the project during the whole duration of the project.

In addition, the initiators of the project wanted to ensure that the pilot would be sited in schools, which had some degree of ICT infrastructure available, allowing for communication between participants.

The choice of the schools in the Northern European country fell on two particular schools due to their long-term involvement in ICT implementation, school development, and international collaboration. The principals had clear visions for their schools and were systematically engaging their staff in various projects with the purpose of developing education. The schools in the Sub Saharan country were also already involved in ICT development work, through participation in a capacity building project run by the local university.

The choice of the individual teachers was based upon their personal interest and professional competence. For the success of the project, it was important to engage teachers with strong interest in their own professional development and school development, combined with solid experience as teachers. The project initiators and leaders believed that strong inner motivation was required of the participants for carrying out the project. School leaders played an important role in choosing the participants, as they were the persons with knowledge of the potential and interests of their staff, and also with the visions for the development of their school. The project thus chose to apply a strategic sampling with the purpose of securing the best possible conditions for a successful pilot.

At the initial stage, the project engaged ten teachers in total, eight women and two men. Five of the participants worked in a primary school and five in a secondary school.

3. Methodology

The data collected during the one-year project consists of field notes and observations, focus group interviews, project documentation and evaluations, as well as social media and e-mail communication.

The fairly concentrated amount of data has made it possible to conduct a process of scrutinising the data from several perspectives. The individual analysis has then been through collaborative discussion, in an attempt to go

beyond individual prejudices and preconceptions. The findings have also been discussed with external researchers to help to create a necessary distance to the project. Due to ethical considerations, the data has been made anonymous as much as possible without losing the relevance of the context.

Activities during the project were carefully documented through formative evaluation where each participant used methods such as logbook, reflective recordings and blogs. The documentation served as a tool for the participants to create a distance to their own practice, so that they had something to analyse outside themselves. This documentation also functioned as a way of sharing their thoughts with the other participants as critical friends, which enabled peer tutoring over a distance that was vital in this project. Finally, the documentation serves as a rich source of data for the teacher educator/ researcher to investigate the actions and reflections from a researcher perspective.

As this paper poses questions of how to conduct research in practitioner/researcher constellations, and in collaboration that emphasises equality between the participants, the self-reflection of the researcher becomes crucial in the effort to understand what happened and why. Thus, the perspective of the article is introspective. This introspection is inspired by T. M. Kress' (2011) Critical Praxis Research, which aims at surfacing the biases that every researcher holds. Particularly, in a North-South context, it is important to challenge the colonising conceptualisations of research and emphasise the importance of considering the epistemologies and ontologies of the researcher and the researched, both as individuals and as parts of larger collective groups within local, national, and global societies. The emerging discourse on decolonising research (Kovach, 2010; Liamputtong, 2010; Mertens, Cram, & Chilisa, 2013; Smith, 1999) draws attention to the issues of inequality and the prevailing hegemony of the Western traditions of knowledge and knowledge construction. This research calls for the development of transformative research methodologies, that recognise the indigenous knowledge systems and life experiences of those people who have been historically colonised (Chilisa, 2011).

Passing of time from the actual time of the project gives another perspective, that of retrospection. This is intentional: today other issues may emerge

from the data than would have done when the researchers were still emerged in the processes of the project. Researchers might interpret phenomena in different ways as time and new experiences give another perspective. As Freire (1998) insightfully notes: "It is in "distancing ourselves" from the object that we "come closer" (p. 93).

4. Interpretations of PAR in the project

PAR has evolved from the work of Kurt Lewin, using iterative cycles of investigation to improve efficiencies of organisations. In the educational context, the fundamental aim of action research is to improve educational practice. Action research unifies activities often regarded as quite separate: teaching, educational research, curriculum development, and assessment, into one single action-research process. The process is often described as a spiral of cycles (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014; Lewin, 1947). In a traditional view of scientific research, researchers are neutral and should not influence the results of their studies. Action research and specifically participatory action research (PAR) is defined as research where practitioners work together to study, assess, and improve/develop their own practices. There is intentionality in their work, as they aim at making positive changes using the action cycle through their project. PAR applies subjective reflection as a form of data; reflection over own practice, and that of others provides practice-based knowledge that can be combined and strengthened through theory. (Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007)

It was clear from the very start that the research strategy should be one of action research, with particular emphasis on participation. The Northern teacher education institution and the global telecom enterprise, who jointly took the initiative for this project, did not wish to engage in a project that would apply a "top down" approach, where the experts would present solutions and decide how the project should be run. Instead, equal partnerships between key stakeholders were sought, taking in consideration the existing power structures and hierarchies in the participating countries. The core idea of the project was to create opportunities for the development of innovative approaches to teaching and learning, innovative approaches meaning inclu-

sion of ICTs and multimodal teaching and learning styles, as well as reflexivity as a development tool for teachers. The project would also provide a platform for international collaboration on professional development of teachers. These ideas called for ways of working that were based on equality, and a methodology and a strategy that would facilitate structured recognition and definition of which parts of the educational environment that require development, as well as helping to improve the everyday practice of teachers. For these reasons, the choice fell on participatory action research where the active and equal participation of all actors is understood as a core idea in the research strategy. (Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014)

In the project, PAR was understood as a reflective process of progressive problem solving led by individuals working with others in teams, or as part of a community of practice, to improve the way they address issues and solve problems, and thus become involved in educational development and transformation. PAR was implemented in the project as an interactive inquiry process that balances problem solving actions implemented in a collaborative context with data-driven collaborative analysis or research, to understand underlying causes enabling future predictions about personal and organizational change (Reason & Bradbury, 2006).

Figure 1 illustrates the project design as an action research cycle (Lewin, 1947; Tripp, 2005), starting from the initial formulation of a project idea, moving through a number of activities to the final reflection, closing the first cycle and preparing for the next. The three joint workshops formed the central activities when all the participants were gathered. The exception from this was the first workshop that was run twice, first at the Northern site and then at the Southern site, with some joint videoconferencing in order to link the participants together and facilitate first introductions of the whole project group. Intermediate activities were run at each site, with occasional cross-site interactions through e-mails, phone conversations, and social media.

In the heart of the methods and techniques deployed were group work and discussions, as well as dialogue, interviewing, and observations. The workshops during the project were the times for collective learning through discussions and reflections. As the participants were to serve as each other's critical

Figure 1: The Action Research Cycle
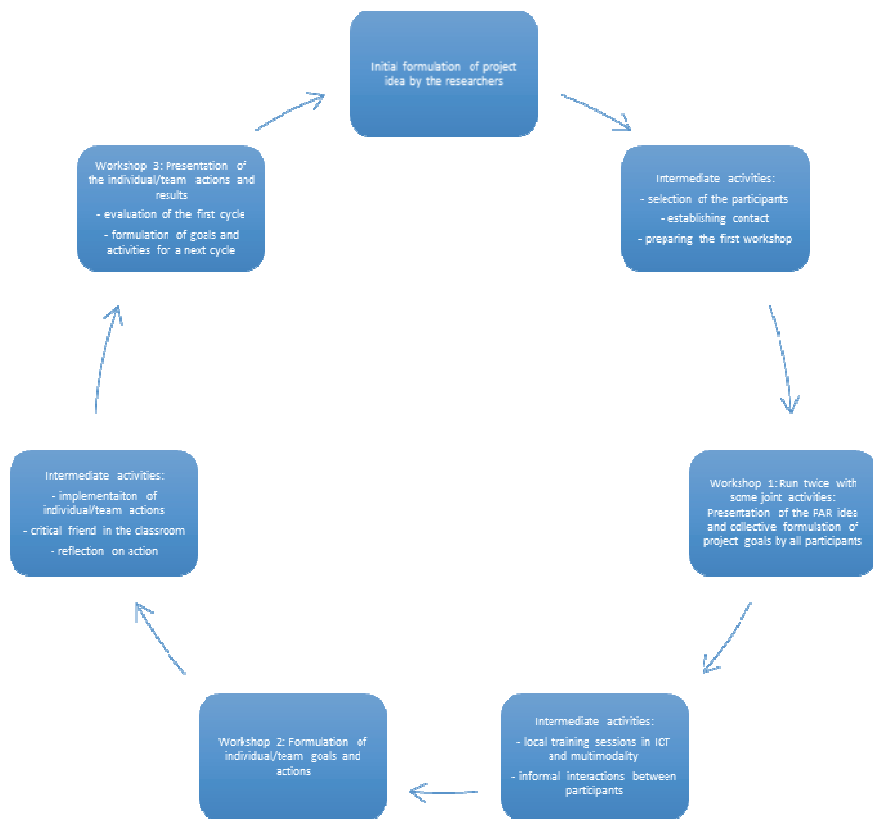
friends, observations of classroom practices, subsequent interviews and dialogues constituted essential working tools in the project. English being the working language of the project and a second language for the participating teachers, might have affected the way participating teachers were able to express themselves. We did not consider this as a major concern, as there were no explicit expressions of unease.

The project took a "bottom up" approach to change and educational improvement, by placing the focus on the teachers and their formulations of important problem areas that needed improvement in their classroom practices. The idea was then to spread these examples to other teachers and other

schools. In a collaborative effort, the participants acted as each other's mirrors in the processes of identifying and understanding possible classroom-based challenges as well as possible solutions. Through active involvement in research processes, the aim was for the participants to understand the need to investigate relevant research in order to gain perspectives on their own process of development. Teacher educators/researchers facilitated the actions of the participants while the participants researched their own practice supported by the action research cycle.

Quite early in the project, the decision was made to visit each other and provide the participants an opportunity to see and experience a glimpse of each other's everyday life at school. These visits proved to be significant experiences that deepened participants' familiarity with the local contexts and contributed to the mutual understanding of the conditions of the teaching profession. They also fostered personal friendships that live long after the project.

The project was set up within the frame of action research as it was understood and interpreted by the Northern teacher educators/researchers in collaboration with the Southern teacher educators.

The initiative arose from the knowledge and awareness of the situation of teachers worldwide: possibilities for professional development are scarce if not non-existent. The pressure of renewal in terms of innovative pedagogies and introduction of technologies is well documented, and present in the educational systems worldwide. Thus, it seemed unproblematic to define overall project goals that would serve all the participants and their needs, even though they came from very different circumstances.

The Northern teacher educators/researchers were convinced that the action research cycle would be an appropriate way of facilitating professional development in collegial collaboration. Participants would be able to define an area they wanted to work with in their own classroom. They would develop and plan their individual project, which would introduce and test innovative pedagogical practices in their classrooms. The individual project work would be subject to continuous collegial feedback and thus benefit from the interactions within the project. The emancipatory ideas of P. Freire (1970) were the lighthouse of the project, and the Northern teacher educators/

researchers felt that through this participatory action research approach they were acting in an inclusive way, ensuring equality in the project.

In retrospect, it is easy to condemn these "best of intentions" as naïve and uninformed of the realities of each context. It turned out that the very idea of action research was quite unfamiliar among the participants; the implementation of ICTs was not as well established as expected, and the geographical and cultural distances between the participants proved more dominant than understood in the beginning.

However, we believe that this is exactly how international collaborations often are embarked upon: with limited information and knowledge of each other and of the conditions defining each other's possibilities to act.

5. Findings

In this section, a retrospective inquiry of the project is conducted with particular focus on the issues of participation. The analysis will deal with the processes and interactions during the action research cycle, in an effort to shed light on the research question of this article: Which are the ethical and methodological challenges for international action research projects? The purpose is to understand what actually happened during the project; what kinds of ethical issues emerged and how the challenges of applying PAR were dealt with.

Participation

The notion of participation is a complicated issue in the context of PAR. At first glance, it may seem a straightforward matter and in PAR literature, it is being described with terms of equality and collaboration (Reason & Bradbury, 2006). The aspect of voluntarism is emphasised. Those who engage in a PAR project should feel that they wish to bring about a change in their practice somehow, which is about involvement and engagement. And yet, this can create issues, as different ideas of the meaning of participation may surface. Participation is closely related to relations of power. Who defines what participation actually means in a certain context? What happens if participation brings about differing understandings of the project goals and

activities? Who regulates participation? Is participation only possible as long as it is done in the frame created by the 'leaders' of the project? What is the quality and quantity of participation that makes it 'participation', in the sense which the PAR ideal describes the meaning of the word?

As we carried out the empirical study described in this article, we truly wanted to be participatory, but did we actually succeed in this effort? There were occasions when our predefined understandings of what "should" be part of the project, collided with other understandings and practices of the participants. We were confused, as we did not understand that there could be another perspective, another way of handling things, another practice. We all thought that we had the "right" answers, which we, of course, did not, as there are no "right" or "wrong", only differing ways of dealing with issues and finding compromises that work for all the participants. In retrospect, it could be said that we could have tried to work on inclusion in the planning of the project more intensely. The power gap between the teacher educators and the school teachers might have been reduced, had we made serious efforts in bringing the school teachers into the planning phase. However, the geographical distance and the lack of functioning ICT worked against us making communication attempts difficult, particularly in the early stages of the project.

Common ground?

Gaya Wicks and Reason (2008) emphasise the importance of commencing a research project in a way that lays a firm ground for the venture. They talk about establishing "communicative space" in the Habermasian fashion. This is not a straightforward process, but filled with paradoxes and challenges that need to be addressed. They draw on Kemmis (2001) who writes about the first central step in action research, which is the formation of a communicative space:

> …The first step in action research turns out to be central: the formation of a communicative space which is embodied in networks of actual persons . . . A communicative space is constituted as issues or problems are opened up for discussion, and when Participants experience their interaction as fostering the democratic expression of diverse views . . . [and as permit-

> ting] people to achieve mutual understanding and consensus about what to
> do . . . (p. 100)

We certainly recognised the need and importance of such a communicative space, but we also came to realise the complexities of establishing one, particularly in a heterogeneous context with a diversity of assumptions, biases and situated perspectives, and not least the geographical distance between the participants. For example, we discovered that as working with e-mails and other ICTs for communication was a well-established routine for university teachers, it was quite another matter for school teachers.

Participation in the project was to be based on voluntarism, but as the school leaders made the selection without any involvement from the project initiators, we cannot really tell whether the participation was based on true voluntarism or rather persuasion exercised by the school leaders in varying degrees. Participation in an international project might have been attractive to the school leaders for prestige reasons, although our understanding is that participation was based on true ambition to develop their schools.

Some of the participants did show disengagement, which can, of course, have its roots in various reasons: they might have been pushed to participate by their superiors; they might have found themselves in a situation where they did not feel comfortable with the project and its aims. As the participants were extremely loyal to their superiors and their institutions, it was hard to distinguish the degree of personal commitment and motivation and the degree of external pressures and expectations.

How are the relations built in a PAR project? In their literature overview Arieli, Friedman, and Agbaria (2009) note that the relation building in PAR projects is scarcely described in the literature and when it is done it lacks the practitioner perspective and voice indicating that the research papers are still written by the researchers and that the role blurring does not reach the dissemination of the research results. Cooke and Kothari (2001) claim in their critique of participation that so-called participatory methods tend to hide local inequalities as they fail to deal with power issues and their manifestations in the local context. Sarah White (1996) distinguishes between four different types of participation: nominal, instrumental, representative, and

transformative. She notes that participation does not necessarily lead to empowerment, as incorporation can often be the best means of control.

In our project, the collaboration took place at local and global levels. At the local level, the teachers within the same school collaborated linking together different classrooms. The project also brought together teachers from different schools within a same region, which was thought as a positive and necessary thing for future support and collaboration. At the global level, participants from the different schools joined in global activities, like workshops and school visits with classroom observations. Participants developed informal connections with each other quite soon through social media, like Facebook. All these activities fed into the local projects that were designed as action research dealing with the local issues identified by the participating teachers. Thus, our ambition was to achieve transformative participation: participation that would make a difference for the participating individuals, their practice in the classroom, and even beyond in the school practices.

Internally, the project relied on structured systems of open communication and documentation, both analogue and digital, face-to-face and at distance. Synchronous technology, such as chat and video conferencing, were used at regular intervals to ensure that the peer tutoring would have sufficient time to succeed. Early on in the project, the official channels of communication were complemented by unofficial ones such as Facebook and private e-mails. These formal and informal ways of communication contributed to the creation of the communicative space in rather an organic manner.

We were aware of the challenges of collaborating at distance, and as experiences from distance education show, face-to-face meetings are crucial in order to ensure personal commitment in others on the Internet (Luppicini, 2007). This is why it was decided that the participants would visit each other in order to learn more about their respective countries, cities and working environments, the schools. These visits turned out to be crucial in two ways: on the one hand, they brought the participants closer to each other through the opportunities of adjacent interaction with each other and the cultures of each other. On the other hand, the visits made the differences and inequalities between the participants even more apparent. A third aspect that became

visible in the physical meeting was that one person would assume the role of a gatekeeper trying to regulate the participation of the Southern group.

About power relations - Gatekeeping

An unexpected aspect of power relations appeared as a so-called 'gatekeeper' role was undertaken by one of the Southern participants. This marked the North-South dichotomy in an unfortunate way and undermined the efforts of equal participation. The representative of the Southern teacher education institution (not originally a Southerner but immigrant for some time back) started to act as an expert on the Southern conditions and to translate the state of affairs to the Northern teacher educators/researchers. The gatekeeper acted protectively towards the Southern participants, to the extent that it looked patronising in the eyes of the Northern colleagues. "They are not ready for this" and "They are not capable of that" was the kind of argumentation that the Northerners were not prepared to hear. The behaviour of the Gatekeeper could be interpreted as a way of cultural brokerage, but because it seemed so overprotective it was likely to be a sign of something else.

Gatekeeping was a symptom of another problem, a problem that was enhanced by the distance between the participants. This was the problem of power: who would be running the show. As the initiative for the project came from the Northern institution and the funding came from a Northern funder, the project faced a difficult imbalance from the very beginning. The project failed to address this issue sufficiently in the initial phase.

Even though regular planning meetings were held, even though videoconference contacts were organised, the imbalance seemed to be accentuated, culminating in a heated exchange of opinions when the whole project group gathered physically for the first time. The biggest frustrations were settled but the fact remained that the Southern researcher continued as an informal (?) leader and representative of the Southern participants. This person was given the authority or exercised the authority: one of the modalities of power Allen (2004) discusses, as the participants seemed to concede an expert status to researchers. At the time, the situation did not seem that worrying, but in retrospect it raises issues of participation and equality, as we also need to

recognise the differing cultural norms that prevail in different contexts. Thus, we certainly recognise the critique of participation by Cooke and Kothari (2001) and admit our shortcomings in addressing issues of participation.

Understanding one another - Visit to the museum

While the participants from the global North were visiting the global South, it was suggested by the Gatekeeper that a visit to the museum exhibiting the local history would be an interesting activity, and inform the far-away visitors of the recent history of the local community, and thus of the participants of the project. The suggestion was welcomed with a lot of enthusiasm by the Northerners, and plans were made to carry out the museum visit during the coming weekend.

Entering the museum, it turned out that only a few of the local participants of the project came to the museum. This seemed somewhat strange to the Northerners who tended to take it for granted that everybody would join in the visit, especially as it was promoted as important for understanding the history of the place and the people.

All kinds of speculations and explanations started to circulate in the group: the seeming disinterest was explained with pragmatism: People have obligations to their families and cannot engage in work-related activities during a weekend when family needs their attention. Another culture related explanation was offered by claiming that it is not part of the culture to visit museums.

Despite the somewhat awkward beginning, the museum visit turned into an important event in bonding the Northerners and Southerners in ways much more powerful than what was possible during the formal, professional contexts. Southerners who chose to come and visit the museum found the exhibition unsettling and yet important: facing their own history, and that of their families and relatives, may have surfaced difficult memories, but also the visit may have provided a (missing) link to the past that helped to complete an image of oneself that might have been fragmentary. For those of the Southerners who came to the museum, for the first time in their lives, this

became an opportunity to show to the Northerners a part, a painful one, of their own family histories, and be recognised as owners of that history.

The experience of this visit shows how important and how powerful the local connections and the local knowledge are. These shared experiences strengthen and expand the communicative space where the participants can operate. This experience also demonstrates how unexpected the situations may be where the kind of 'bonding' can take place, suggesting that interactions, both formal and informal, can work for the benefit of the common goal and the mutual definition of it.

Shared experience - Becoming us?

Another example of a shared experience that strengthened and enlarged the communicative space is the visits made to each other's countries. The Northern participants stayed at a guesthouse when they visited the Sub Saharan country, while in the Northern European country, the Southern visitors stayed with their Northern colleagues. This living arrangement was set up for economic reasons as well as for the teachers to get even more chances to have informal conversations, and thereby strengthen their intercultural, personal and professional understandings.

Visits of this kind may be personally valuable in terms of better understanding different cultures and educational settings but these types of opportunities require financial resources that are not readily available. The possibility for individuals to experience each others' working environment, and to get a glimpse of understanding of each other's everyday lives, is invaluable and gives the collaboration an extra dimension that will enrich the participants and help them understand their colleagues in a better way.

In the beginning, we talked about the importance of creating a communicative space where the participants of an action research project can meet. Our experience confirms that the forming of a communicative space is indeed a basic requirement for moving from positions of 'us' and 'the other' into one unified 'us' where the common endeavour, the common goal of educational development, the common denominator of being a professional teacher, constitute the common ground and makes collaboration possible.

6. Discussion and recommendations

In this section, the challenges of PAR are further formulated and some recommendations are presented based on the lessons learnt in the project.

Tentatively, our study shows that despite the obvious cultural, socio-economic, political and historical differences, participants seek to minimise the differences in the initial stage of the project, and they look for common features, finding that common ground in their role as a teacher. In their interactions and discussions, participants have come to discover the similarities in their professional dilemmas as well as becoming aware of the different conditions that operate in different countries, communities, and schools.

They uncover aspects that are perceived as common, and use these to construct a new project space, a community of teachers/participants, which initially seems to be without tensions. For example, they engaged in long discussions about classroom management and learning styles, issues they are all dealing with on a daily basis as teachers. Additionally, participants seemed to accept the action research discourse without critique, despite the complaints that school development projects tend to have little success. Particularly, the Northern participants, who had been part of several such projects, express disillusioned views. The action research approach was 'sold' to the participants as an alternative approach, which might have contributed to the less critical attitude among the participants.

If we accept the Habermasian communicative pragmatism, urgency of mutual understanding, we could interpret the group dynamics in this action research project as a way of seeking for common ground and understanding. It is a way of forming a communicative space (Habermas, 1984; Kemmis, 2001), the very prerequisite of action research.

From the experiences drawn from the project, we could establish the following considerations that will support the building of equal ground for participation in action research:

1) Making known the understandings and interpretations of action research

Action research approach is not necessarily widely known and applied even though it constitutes a fairly long tradition. In addition, there exist different

traditions, different understandings and interpretations of what it means and how it should be applied. In a(n) (international) project, it becomes crucial to communicate and formulate clearly the different interpretations and as this is done, negotiate together a common ground and common understanding of the concept of action research, which recognise the local conditions and prerequisites.

2) Recognising the different power traditions

Action research has its roots in democratic participation and this counter hierarchical aspect needs to be nurtured in a project where the participants come from different contexts. It is easy to fall into the trap of quasi-democratic collaboration. The power structures are often subtle, particularly in situations where a historical imbalance has prevailed, but also between different professional categories, between schoolteachers and their heads, between schoolteachers and university teachers, between so-called ordinary users of technology and researchers of technology, between genders and so forth. The list can be endless and thus it is so important to recognise the aspect of power relations and make efforts in dealing with them.

3) Nurturing equal participation, making every voice heard

Being subordinate is not only negative. There is a paradox in being un-free. You do not have a right to make decisions, and at the same time you are free of making decisions. You are not responsible for the state of the affairs, as you have not been part of the decision-making. With rights come also responsibilities: responsibility to act; responsibility to see challenges, things that need to be improved. As a teacher, the decision making about school development may be left to the school leadership without further thought of engagement. In action research this position is challenged. As participatory action research requires an effort, and it may be easier to fall back into the old, the familiar and remain passive. It requires courage, and it requires support, to leave the comfort zone of known practices. In action research methodology, the responsibility lay with the participants. They need to do the action. Thus they become responsible for the transformation to take place.

Involving every teacher in competence development and school development requires continuous facilitation, support and encouragement. It requires continuous, open conversations about the happenings within the action research cycle.

4) *Recognising participants' differing backgrounds and turning them into an asset*

Tackling the challenges of action research within an international group of participants brings an additional dimension to the challenges of cultures and traditions. The recognition of local knowledges and bringing them into interaction with more global knowledge structures can be a way to more fruitful and sustainable transformations of the practices that are under scrutiny in an action research project. Gibbs (2001) and Beeman-Cadwallader, Quigley, and Yazzie-Mintz (2012) report on such positive examples of revitalisation of knowledge.

In the project, the participants made use of their local resources and created contextualised examples of new study materials and assignments. On the other hand, they were able to lend pedagogical ideas from each other across countries and adjust them to their local contexts (for example local milieu, local fauna, local florae).

5) *Supporting collaborative work among participants*

The very basic idea of action research is collaboration, doing something together, examining classroom practices together and finding ways of improving that practice through joint endeavour. The collaboration aspect may be particularly challenging in the case of teachers who often are used to working individually, alone in their classrooms. It may feel threatening to expose oneself and one's practices to the scrutiny of others. It is important to create a safe haven in the project with the atmosphere of openness, tolerance, respect and trust. Participants need to feel that they can bring up any issue that is bothering their minds and discuss with the others in confidence.

In our projects, after the initial confusion between conflicting expectations, as the common ground was established, and participants grew into their

role as action-researchers, the interactions became increasingly vivid, and as the project progressed, participants asked for more time for what they called "pedagogical discussions." They had come to appreciate the process of collaborative reflection and sharing of classroom experiences as a tool for their professional development.

6) Creating trust through openness and transparency

Everything needs to be transparent from the very beginning: what is to be done and by whom, and perhaps most importantly, why we are doing this: how do we envision the goal, the transformation and why that is important to us. When the participants can identify themselves with the project ethos, they will be able and willing to work together towards that jointly defined goal.

In practice, this means that from the very first idea the participants should be brought together to negotiate and formulate the visions, the goals and the main activities. The action research methodology gives certain frames through the cyclic setup, which helps the organisation and arrangement of activities. However, especially when working at distance, things tend to become more complicated. Distance creates even bigger demand of openness and transparency. Finding activities and ways of communication, that bring participants closer each other despite the geographical distance, is even more crucial.

Social media may play an important role in providing means for continuous communication, both formal and informal. Organic ways of building communication practices seem favourable, as both flexibility and creativity are important in unstable communication infrastructures where power cuts and weak Internet connections may hinder the use.

7. Final words

The purpose of this article has been to draw attention to the challenges of conducting participatory action research in contexts where participants come from different cultural, historical and economic backgrounds, and particularly where the legacy of the colonial past is further complicating the conditions for collaboration, that being the case in many North-South collaborations.

The action research set-up as such calls for extraordinary measures regarding roles and practices, and the international North-South set-up requires even more careful attention to issues of equal participation, action, and conditions for transformation. This article has drawn on empirical data from a PAR project as an example to illustrate the complexities and unanticipated challenges that may emerge when participants from very differing backgrounds are brought together. Even though several aspects of importance are brought to scrutiny, the most important lesson learnt is that of humbleness in front the human experience. An open mind is our window to new perspectives and to inclusive, participatory actions in research.

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