

# **Recognising participants' professional identities through analysis of narratives in educational Action Research**

Eleni Katsarou, Vassilis Tsafos

The aim of the paper is to demonstrate how deconstructing a narrative in educational action research, under certain conditions, can contribute to recognising the participants' identities and shed more light on their subjectivities, revealing their interpretations and representations, and thus providing them with rich feedback for reflection. To achieve its aim, the paper includes two basic parts: the relevant theoretical framework of combining the two research approaches (action research and narrative inquiry) is presented in the first part. In the second part an action research project undertaken by a group of school headmasters is presented, in order to discuss the proposed procedure, its prospects and limitations. Finally, the contrast between the transformative expectations concerning participants' identities and the less optimistic results on their reflective practice is presented and interpreted in the discussion.

**Key words:** Educational action research, postmodernism, narrative inquiry, action researchers' professional identities, critical friend

## **Reconociendo las identidades profesionales de los participantes a través del análisis de narrativas en la investigación-acción educativa**

El objetivo de este trabajo es demostrar como la deconstrucción de una narrativa en la investigación-acción educativa, bajo ciertas condiciones, puede contribuir al reconocimiento de las identidades de los participantes e iluminar sus subjetividades, revelando sus interpretaciones y

representaciones y, así, proporcionarles una rica devolución para la reflexión. Para lograr su objetivo, el artículo incluye dos partes básicas: en la primera parte se presenta el marco teórico correspondiente de la combinación de dos enfoques de investigación (investigación-acción e indagación narrativa). En la segunda parte, se presenta un proyecto de investigación-acción emprendido por un grupo de directores de escuela, con el fin de discutir el procedimiento propuesto, sus perspectivas y limitaciones. Por último, se presenta e interpreta en la discusión, el contraste entre las expectativas transformadoras, relativas a las identidades de los participantes, y los resultados menos optimistas sobre su práctica reflexiva.

**Palabras clave:** Investigación-Acción Educativa, Postmodernismo, Indagación Narrativa, Identidades Profesionales de los Investigadores Acción, Amigo Crítico

## Introduction

Over the past 10 years, much has been said about utilising postmodern approaches in the context of Action Research (AR). In order to explore the possibility of enriching AR, our research implements such an approach. Of course, this choice determines how we understand concepts such as ‘discourse’, ‘subject’, ‘identity’, ‘research data and their analysis’. In the postmodern framework, knowledge and representations of the world are not reflections of an objective reality, but rather constitute products of discourse. Subjects are fundamentally historical and cultural beings, whose views and knowledge about the world are produced by historically situated interactions. Their identities are socially constructed, in a relational and historical context full of overlapping networks of relations that shift over time and space, characterised by fluidity and contingency and tied in with notions of discourse and power (Edwards & Usher, 1994).

The aim of our paper is to investigate whether and how the process of deconstructing narratives in AR, under certain conditions, can contribute to recognising participants' professional identities, reveal their interpretations and representations, and thus provide them with rich feedback for reflection.

To that end, apart from the relevant theoretical framework, we also present AR undertaken by a group of school headmasters.

We chose narrative inquiry for three reasons:

1. This approach moves away from ‘a position of objectivity defined from the positivistic, realist perspective towards a research perspective focused on interpretation and the understanding of meanings’ (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2006, p. 9). As a study of how professionals (here the headmasters) (re)form their experience, narrative inquiry reflects the postmodern perspective of plural knowledge construction and the legitimization of personal interpretation.
2. In order to reveal identities of AR participants, we need a research method reflecting the same epistemological principles with educational AR. Both narrative inquiry and AR meet two main epistemological criteria: the need to transcend the boundaries between research and practice (Webster & Metrovum, 2007, p.10) and the need for practitioners to participate in producing, expanding, reshaping and disseminating practical knowledge (Heikkinen, Huttunen, Syrjälääm, & Pesonen, 2012, p. 18).
3. A narrative is mainly a way for narrators to perceive experience, to organise their social practices and construct the meaning of their self- and world identities. Thus, narrative, as the making of meaning from personal experience via a process of reflection (Caldinin & Connelly, 1990, p. 245), can reveal both personal meanings and the interpretive framework in which meanings are formed and identities constructed.

### **Narratives, educational action research and participants’ professional identities: Definitions and interrelations**

We approach narratives as texts in which human beings organise their experiences of their world, depending on their past and present, their values, and also on the context of the story being narrated, the people it is narrated to, the narrator’s purpose, etc. Moreover, as social constructions, narratives necessarily depend on their social context (Sikes & Gale, 2006, p. 27) and its

dominant discourses: 'Narratives [...] capture both the individual and the context' (Moen, 2006, p. 57).

Aiming to analyse the action researchers' perceptions, we focus on their narratives as an important parameter of educational AR development. Throughout an AR project, from diagnosing the situation to evaluating their intervention and redesigning it, participants narrate. Through their narratives, they represent and interpret – in a specific way – both the educational context and their intervention in it. These narratives imply participants' specific perspectives, their personal theories and practical knowledge, which in turn denote specific choices; 'the starting-point of narrative thinking is that the research report is a narrative story produced by the researcher, not an image-like replica' (Heikkinen, Huttunen, & Syrjäälää, 2007, p. 11). Educational AR can be considered as a continuous process of co-producing various narratives, constantly reshaping and redefining the AR process. Action researchers can enhance the process if they realise the power of their narratives (the implicit meanings they hide) and analyse them. In the words of Somekh (2006, p. 14): 'The self can be said to be a "research instrument", and action researchers need to be able to take into account their own subjectivity as an important component of meaning making'.

Both AR and narrative inquiry contribute to the construction and recognition of professional identity. It is through narratives that school professionals construct their social identities. They come to be who they are (however ephemeral, multiple and changing) by being located or locating themselves (usually unconsciously) in social narratives, rarely of their own making (Somers, 1994, p. 606). By analysing narratives action researchers realise 'that events that have entered into the speaker's biography are emotionally and socially evaluated and so transformed from raw experience' (Labov, 1997), make their tacit educational theories and practical knowledge explicit and examine changes in their perspectives. In this way, professionals can recognise their identities and enhance their understanding of how they connect to their practices.

In our study, we view school headmasters' identities as fluid, dialogic and socially negotiable constructions (Britzman, 1991), continually informed and (re)formed over time through a complex interplay between personal experi-

ence and social, cultural and institutional context (Sachs, 2005). Assuming that the narrators' discourses construct social realities and identities, our example attempts to show how a discourse analysis of action researchers' narratives can reveal the main features of their professional identities, such as tacit beliefs, needs, ambitions and/or relationships. In this perspective, narrative discourse is understood as verbal exchange, associated with ways of thinking and constituting interrelated ideological frameworks, that is, groups of structured value assumptions, which thus enter in social circulation (Johnstone, 2002). And discourse is viewed as a social practice that contributes to shaping and restricting individuals, while also enabling them to construct specific identities, under certain restrictions.

Yet as action researchers we cannot accept the poststructuralist theorists' claim that the influence and imposition of dominant ideological discourse leaves individuals with a limited margin for choice, intervention or resistance. Opposing this linguistic determinism, we believe that discourse provides individuals with creative possibilities, through which they can construct a critical self, deconstruct the roles prescribed to them, and expand their potential (Usher, 1992, p. 210). This view allows us to perceive both how top down imposed discourse shapes individuals, and how these individuals can, also through discourse, actively intervene, challenge this imposition and contribute to the formation of their self and identity (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Fairclough, 2004).

So, we address the process of recognising participants' identities in a contemporary postmodern landscape as a dynamic process of negotiating meanings based on their views regarding education, and we assign them an active role in this negotiation. Apart from the meanings utilised by participating headmasters to define themselves professionally, we also investigate how headmasters negotiate meanings through interaction with dominant discourse and the discourses of other headmasters during an AR project.

## **Enhancing educational AR through the above post-modern assertions**

### *The project: Aim, duration and participants*

Six primary education headmasters carried out the AR project in a district of Southern Greece during school year 2013-14, focusing on their professional development as a result of their participation in a training programme on educational leadership (detailed programme description in Terezaki & Andreadou, 2012). Some headmasters volunteered as trainers and others as trainees during two school years (2012–2014), participating in this training programme, designed and implemented by a network coordinated by one of the headmasters.

The programme was based on transformational leadership theory and practice (Leithwood, 1992; Bass & Riggio, 2008) predetermining for the participating headmasters a role that stresses building a shared vision at school, improving communication and developing collaborative decision-making processes. Transformational leadership aims at altering existing power relationships in schools, assuming that 'when a process makes people feel that they have a voice in matters that affect them, they will have greater commitment to the overall enterprise and will take greater responsibility for what happens to the enterprise' (Sarason, 1990, p. 61). This aim emphasises the emancipatory character of transformational leadership. It generates collective action that empowers those who participate in the process, by redefining their mission and vision, renewing their commitment and restructuring their systems for goal accomplishment (Roberts, 1985). The training programme was developed around three axes, empowerment, emancipation and transformational leadership, and aimed at encouraging participant headmasters to apply relevant principles and practices at school. The programme's ultimate goal was to create a community of practice (Wenger, 1998; Kimble, Hildreth, & Bourdon, 2008) where the headmasters' interactions and experience exchange would help them develop a common code and improve their learning, in terms of transformational leadership. To sum up, this training programme promoted and nurtured the professional identity of headmasters, who were constantly empowered through collective processes, and emanci-

pated from educational and social constraints, imposed as natural and inevitable by the educational system, and who also tried to create relevant empowerment and emancipation opportunities for teachers, so that together they could change the circumstances that alienated their work and nullified their role.

Through AR, the headmasters aimed to qualitatively evaluate and enhance the training programme, concerning its impact on their views and practices. To meet this objective, these six headmasters cooperated with external researchers: facilitator E.K. (faculty member at the neighbouring University) and two of her postgraduate students who helped with data collection and analysis. So the headmasters conducted AR, studying their beliefs about their role, and their school practices, utilising criteria derived from the programme, related to empowerment and emancipation (for themselves and the school staff) and their ability and willingness for transformation. They engaged in self-reflection on the headmaster role, familiarised themselves with research processes, tried to create practical knowledge collectively, and reached conclusions on the quality of the training programme and their own school practices.

The project was organised in the following manner: The headmasters participated in three-hour experiential training seminars organised once in a month. After each seminar meeting, they planned interventions in their schools in a reflective way. These interventions concerned the ways they could motivate teachers so as to act in the school as members of a professional learning community. In their next training meeting, the participants evaluated these interventions. The facilitator attended these reflection and evaluation meetings adopting consciously a more supportive and reflective and less leading role.

All six headmasters had exercised headmaster duties in elementary schools for over 4 years and were 40-50 years old. Specifically:

Tonia: Head of a downtown school, holds a doctorate degree. She designed and coordinated the training programme, created relevant training material, and participated as a trainer.

John: Head of a downtown school, presently getting a doctorate degree in educational psychology, using strict quantitative methods. He was also a programme trainer.

Popi: Head of a downtown school, holds an MSc. A technocratic, effective school head. She has no research experience.

Chris: Head of a special school, without postgraduate studies. He was very conscious about his work, particularly in the special school context.

Veta: Head of a suburban school, holds a MSc. Rational and low-profile. She has research experience.

Kate: Head of a suburban school, without postgraduate studies, but with great desire to develop professionally.

E.K.: One of the co-authors of this paper and the facilitator of the AR project, invited by Tonia, as an expert in AR. From the beginning, E.K. understood how easy it would be to manipulate the headmasters' thinking and guide their AR. Believing that what the headmasters needed concerning their AR project was to view their school role as problematic and challenge what they had taken for granted for years, she adopted an attitude of posing critical questions, summarising the results of their discussions and thus facilitating inference and inductive thinking on the headmasters' behalf (Cox, 2005).

V.T.: The other co-author and the critical friend in the project, also experienced in AR, invited by E.K. to critically approach the action researchers' narratives as well as E.K.'s meta-narrative and discuss the data analysis results in a reflective intersubjective framework. Being external to the study<sup>1</sup>, he could help action researchers distance themselves from the data, allowing many views to emerge and be identified.

### *Participants' narratives: conditions of their production and analysis*

After taking a relevant decision with the critical friend, the facilitator invited the participants to submit a written open narrative of their participation in AR, after the first AR cycle was completed. We chose the open form, as we aimed to detect the parameters the participants focused on, so as to determine

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<sup>1</sup> For the 'outsider' role of the critical friend, see indicatively Rallis & Rossman, 2000; Foulger, 2010.



their representations. We believed we could thus identify their linguistic choices in the content and structure of their narratives, and connect these choices to the identities they choose to construct, in order to reveal their tacit beliefs, needs, ambitions or latent relationships.

To reveal and crosscheck different points of view, we chose to approach the participants' narratives in two ways. Both co-authors approached the participants' narratives individually, without predetermined axes, aiming to work on two levels:

First, the facilitator approached the narratives within the research context, complementing the data from the research process she participated in with the interpretations of her postgraduate students and creating a meta-narrative. The Oxford English Dictionary (Simpson & Weiner, 2001) defines meta-narrative as 'concerned with the idea of storytelling, specifically one which alludes to other narratives, or refers to itself...'. It has nothing to do with generalisations (ordering facts or events into general ideas), theory, or 'grand narratives'. It relates to the narrator's (in this case the facilitator's) effort to connect the participants' narratives with the context that produced them; their attitudes and values, their aspirations and relationships, implicit or explicit. 'Whereas narrative represents the story as it is manipulated by the discourse, metanarrative speaks about narrative and exists as a function of the discourse' (Simpson & Weiner, 2001).

Secondly, the critical friend approached the participants' narratives almost out of context, making and enriching their meaning. He also approached the facilitator's meta-narrative, produced during first level analysis, to create a new meta-narrative. Then a reflective dialogue between the two meta-narratives ensured intersubjective scrutiny and generated the analytic text presented here, where interpretive stories are interrelated and approached critically in order to complete narrative gaps.

We thus aimed, on the one hand, to interweave both meta-narratives in the perspective of enlarging the interpretive framework, and on the other hand, to approach critically:

- The headmasters' final narratives, as well as the ones produced during the AR process, as represented in the facilitator's diaries or the post-graduate students' reports, and

- The facilitator's and critical friend's meta-narratives, viewing them as interpretive stories produced by the researchers, on different levels.

In this context, we conducted discourse analysis, considering that how people talk doesn't just reflect their world, identities and social relations, but plays an active role in creating and changing them. We could thus correlate the participants' narratives with their role in the AR project, the discourses revealed in the research community, dominant or not, their personal theories on education, on their role as headmasters and on educational research, their needs and aspirations and their relationships with each other. We tried to take into account both the institutional, social and cultural contexts and the headmasters' ones, in a perspective of ongoing meaning-making (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 45). We believed that our two-level work through discourse analysis could meet the demands of recognising and understanding such a dynamic and multi-faceted construction as participants' identity. We could thus perceive it as an on-going interaction between the headmasters' personal world and the collective discourses of the community they live in; we could view and understand it as both a product and a process, in a circular dynamic way (Olsen, 2008, p. 139).

### *Analysis results*

We present the indicative results of our analysis around two basic axes:

- The headmasters' perceptions of the research they participated in and its impact on them.
- Their perceptions of the community they created through their participation in this research process.

We chose these two axes, viewing them as fundamental parameters of headmasters' professional identity as promoted by the training programme. The active intervention at school, the participative role, the collaboration and the transformational orientation of the AR processes are special features that contribute to the negotiation and reformation of participants' identity. By forming a research community and participating in the AR project, the head-

masters strove for empowerment and emancipation, transforming their professional identity.

We investigate to what extent they support the choice to negotiate the meanings they attribute to their role in a community, focusing on and interpreting their differentiations, reservations and retreats. Apart from the characteristics of the identity they construct through their participation in an AR process, we also explore the reaction and resistance created by their participation and the ways they addressed this.

### ***Headmasters' perceptions of their research and its impact on them***

All participant headmasters present their participation in educational AR as particularly beneficial for them. But they use very general terms. Specifically, in order to describe and characterise the process they got engaged in, they use terms that:

- Characterise the process: *solidly building a professional relationship, enchanting process, immensely interesting and learning process, a field with many issues for study and further research, implementing the transformative practices of a participatory leadership.*
- Express their attitudes and emotions towards AR: *enthusiasm, amalgamation of ideas, great joy, leaving with a light and happy heart.*
- Focus on its main features: *critical democratic dialogue, challenging, debate, reflection, free expression, inquiring, enriching participation.*

They obviously appear enchanted by the active and participatory role the AR process assigned to them. The first level of analysis reveals them adopting the role of the action researcher who approaches educational reality in an investigative way and with an interventional and transformative perspective, and also feeling that this approach benefits them notably, amplifying their point of view and improving the way in which they investigate the educational situation and their intervention in it as headmasters. Besides, they focus on the qualitative nature of AR, referring to it either with particularly positive terms (*I came to realise even more that the area of qualitative research is for me... This unique, lonely journey from the abysmal to the innermost, this*

*great bet and most difficult achievement... And therefore the most exciting...!* Tonia) or noting their gradual familiarisation with this approach that allows them to recognise a different research perspective (*I found myself really participating in last year's action research, even though my research past clearly assigns me to 'quantitative' research.* John).

At a first level, they seem to attribute importance to the investigative orientation that enables them to constantly redefine their professional self and school practice, negotiating their role over constant transformations that construct and reconstruct their identity as headmasters.

However, the critical analysis of their discourse shows that their positive statements about AR and its investigative perspective are challenged and undermined by the headmasters' narratives themselves, to some extent. For example, the requirements for investigating what they call 'objective conditions' in the discourse of two headmasters, and the search for a final consensus, throughout all headmasters' discourse, show their significant resistance to basic principles not only of qualitative research but also of the alternative orientation of constant redefining of their professional self. Their discourse reveals their serious reservations regarding notions such as *personal perspective* and *subjectivity*, which they implicitly but clearly identify with an arbitrary creation that has nothing to do with research (*Each of us was viewing things in a different way ... Great subjectivity... Everyone creates a totally subjective version.* Popi). This is why they feel the need to validate their views through theory (*We didn't interpret properly, because we lacked the theory, the theoretical tools for our interpretations.* Kate) and their discourse recurs to the necessity of a representative sample (*Our big problem was methodological limitations. We tried to analyse a part of school life that was too small: few observation days, few diary entries, few questionnaires. Our sample was too small.* Chris; *I agree about the methodological limitations: the observer sees whatever we want to show him, the questionnaires we collected were few and we don't even know what was meant by those who completed them.* John).

For almost all participants, the excitement created by the participative, reflective, interactive and dialogic nature of the AR process, through which

they are enabled to construct their role and action, apparently failed to crack their dominant perceptions about:

- The theory and practice relationship, and
- The need for a single, stable and homogeneous headmaster identity.

Although the participants accept the double role of headmasters and qualitative researchers explicitly, almost enthusiastically, their narratives prove that they actually seek a normative headmaster identity. Essentially, they deny subjective meaning-making and express their reservations about reflective dialogue, while seeking the legitimacy of authority arising from specific perceptions of their social and administrative position, as well as valid theory.

### ***Participant headmasters' perceptions of their community***

As mentioned above, the participants had already formed a professional community of practice and learning before their participation in the AR project, in the context of the training programme. The way they approach the operation of this community is very interesting.

Two out of six headmasters (Tonia and Chris) seem to realise that reflection, which nurtures awareness and the reshaping of practical knowledge, does not occur individually but through the participants' interactions throughout the AR process. In a context of inter-subjective control, various narratives are produced and constantly reshaped by combining different perspectives and voices in dialogue: *The satisfaction that arises from overcoming the group's silence, taking initiative, boldly exposing oneself to a great extent – of course, within the safe environment of our group – that's my main memory!* Tonia. *The meetings of the research group were characterised by responsible research and productive work, in an excellent atmosphere, which was professional, democratic, humane and reflected pedagogical concern.* Chris.

In Tonia's and Chris' narratives, the research group develops a reflective investigative climate in a context of equity, so that they, as action researchers, could recognise that their narrative is no more true than the narrative of any other participant; it was simply viewed as an instigation for discussion, the

personal contribution to the development of collective reflection on their role as headmasters. They seem to have given 'space to different voices and interpretations of the same events' (Heikkinen et al., 2012, p. 9), highlighting the stratification of social reality:

*Through each other's eyes we can see better, both ourselves and the world... we can review established beliefs and practices, build new structures where there are none... Initially in our minds and then 'in action'... For a different school community with a different culture, different relationships and certainly a different educational policy clearly...Tonia.*

Tonia and Chris claim the headmasters created a professional community of learning and practice, supporting that its members are connected through:

- Joint activities and discussions, and shared learning arising from their commitment to collective action (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006, p. 3),
- Knowledge produced by the systematic inquiry on their collective action (Stoll & Louis, 2007, p. 7), and
- The relations between them and 'the ways through which they develop professional identities within this community' (Altrichter, 2005, p. 17).

In such a context of reflection and dialogue, they believe they could discuss and negotiate the meaning of the transformational leadership they support as headmasters and how perceive their role in this context.

However, the other four participants seem to perceive the function of their community differently, focusing mostly on problems. They refer mainly to their inexperience regarding AR, mostly stressing as problematic the need for *a democratic decision-making process and established equal participation for all* (John) and the requirement of the pluralistic approach and inter-subjective scrutiny (*The large number of participants would sometimes endow the process with ideas, but usually it just blocked and therefore delayed the completion of certain phases of the research.* Popi).

Two major obstacles to their effective engagement in the research community appear, implicitly or explicitly, in their discourse:

- Professional burnout, as the community dialogue requires much time and effort (*The fact that most members were school headmasters was nega-*

*tive, in my opinion, because, although they were interested in the content of the research, they were so pressed for time and mentally exhausted, that they couldn't really "invest" everything they could have, if they had had more time and could think more "clearly". Popi).*

- The difficulty in exposing themselves, as the community dialogue reveals the participants' implicit theory (*In my opinion, an important point was the difficulty to expose oneself through research, something also evident in the distribution of the research material to be processed. John*). It is indicative that each headmaster was willing to analyse only the data concerning his/her school, resisting the idea of exchanging data and refusing interpersonal scrutiny.

The resulting picture of headmasters' perceptions of their community is contradictory. Despite latent contradictions, the first group represents their community in professional terms, as a framework urging headmasters towards joint research and reflective activities and discussions and supporting them in building relationships that enable them to learn from each other through interactive procedures (Wenger, 1998). The second and larger group represents their community as a not always functional group of different individuals. Although they realise their common objective, they don't understand the benefits of participation, reflection and conversation in terms of constructing their headmaster identity.

### ***Interpreting the results: emerging discourses and participants' identities***

Essentially, the headmasters' narratives demonstrate two conflicting discourses, developed in the context of this specific interaction, yet obviously relating to dominant discourses in a wider socio-ideological context.

The first one is the dominant discourse of effectiveness that relates to quantitative data, neutrality and objectivity in research, focusing on academic theory and representative samples. It uses theory to interpret practice independently from it, thus underlining the authority of theory. Such a discourse does not host a plurality of voices and various experiences as an enriching factor, but rather presents them as an obstacle to the participants' efforts to gain objective control of the educational situation. Obviously, AR militates

against this discourse. In the framework of this normative discourse, the professional community evaluates the process based on predetermined principles and criteria, validated by the academic community, outside the research process. This is a discourse that has been dominant for years in social research, particularly research on identity (Nias, 1993; Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004), strictly separating theory and practice and viewing practice as an area of implementing theory. It is the well-known positivistic-behavioural discourse, which grounds stable and predetermined identity elements, based on core beliefs, values and practices (Frydaki, 2015, p. 95-96).

The second discourse is more alternative, validating pluralism, the plurality of voices and inter-subjective scrutiny as factors that enrich the research process in a perspective of understanding all aspects of the educational act through the dialogue of diverse voices and views. In such a perspective, the community defines the framework for acting and evaluating the process, which is reshaped through investigation and reflection. This discourse is the result of a significant change that has been taking place in the last 20-30 years in social sciences: the emergence and dominance of a (quite postmodern) discourse, focusing on difference and the importance of the participants' reflection and experience. In this context, research on identity entails open processes of constant redefining, based on personal and social factors in constant interaction (Olsen, 2008, p. 139).

The analysis of participants' narratives illustrates that almost all headmasters have internalised the dominant positivistic discourse and respective identity. Even those who greatly value pluralism and the reflective and investigative orientation in their work, expect at the end a common final conception, a common way of action. They don't seek a common code through which they could also perceive their disagreements, accepting difference and the plurality of voices, but rather a consensus, a final agreement leading to the rejection of difference. Indicatively, Tonia states:

*Several times I felt that I had to bridge, whether in person or electronically, different points of departure, different speeds and different intentions between the group and the facilitator, in terms of the need to create 'common*



*knowledge' for both parties, and aiming at the completion of the research project...*

Their discourse entails a latent need for a single valid final voice. They struggle to form a coherent link between different perspectives. Yet, though the contribution of pluralism is considered important, cooperation is not positively valued as much as one would expect in such a collectively reflective framework, nor are the results of this cooperation mentioned.

Interestingly, this controversial discourse seems consistent with the corresponding state discourse, as it appears in educational institutional literature. It often permeates even the official educational policy texts, at least at the level of rhetoric. Indicatively, recent official texts prescribe, almost explicitly, a role for the headmaster that exceeds purely administrative responsibilities and relates to features of transformational and distributed leadership (Draft Law, 2011). Specifically, they review the traditional headmaster role, transforming it into a role of 'co-ordinator/leader/motivator', responsible for investigating the school teachers' educational needs, interests and prior experiences, and determining and implementing an 'emerging strategic plan' for the particular school. However, since the Greek educational system centrally determines any visions, goals and school operation rules, restricting any attempt for autonomy in a highly regulated context (Leontari, Kyridis, & Gialamas, 2000), the above institutional text remained virtually inactive. Nevertheless, the theoretical and institutional legitimacy of this discourse reinforces its dominance, allowing it to be expressed and to inspire some members of the group of headmasters participating in the AR.

Through our analysis we reached the conclusion that, although they chose an alternative practice to investigate their work and reflect on their actions, almost all participant headmasters to a greater or lesser extent seem to remain at the level of rhetoric, reverting to dominant practice. Thus, they construct a controversial identity.

There are two possible interpretations, apparently inter-related:

- The very epistemological paradigm theoretically grounding this alternative discourse can interpret this contradiction. Obviously, the alternative discourse is not as clear and coherent as the positivistic-behavioural discourse; rather, it is characterised by confusion reflected on internal con-

traditions. To a certain extent such a confusion is expected, as the discourse is relatively new and therefore not as clearly based on specific social (or educational) practices. Besides, it is an alternative discourse fighting a traditional and socially powerful discourse, and as it responds to the thesis of the positivistic-behavioural discourse, it is affected by it.

- Addicted to a stable and fully-controlled positivistic educational framework, headmasters have difficulty in living and working in an uncertain and ambiguous context created by pluralism, a variety of accepted views and an ongoing process of negotiating their identity. So they usually fold back in every opportunity, activating defence mechanisms that can account for the internal contradictions of this discourse.

This interpretation is reinforced by the facilitator's approach of how the group functioned, in context. The headmasters did not manage to bridge the gap created by the absence of a fixed reference point. In her meta-narrative, she states characteristically:

*My choice to adopt the reflective mentor model (Athanasse et al., 2008), that is simply posing critical questions and summarising their answers, initially created embarrassment. The resulting vacuum was immediately filled by the group co-ordinator, Tonia, who assumed a leading role (with the authority of an experienced researcher, as she alone held a doctorate degree); she would supervise the subgroups' analyses, in order to help the members. This development initially allowed the group neither to develop collective reflection, which would emerge at times, nor to discuss different perspectives in order to highlight both their potential complementarity and the various contradictions latent in every perspective. In this way, the participants did not engage in a meaningful reflective dialogue that would reveal the importance of the qualitative approach. They noted the difficulties of their task, but were unable to realise the potential and alternative perspectives it offers. In such a context, the expression of one's problems and weaknesses is viewed as exposure, explaining why all headmasters only presented the positive evaluation of their work in their final reports. They all wrote their own final evaluation. And, surprise, surprise: all reports presented perfect situations, without any problems... Such perfect headmasters!*

This intervention by the group co-ordinator (Tonia), stated explicitly and clearly<sup>2</sup>, obviously creates conflicting reactions, because, although she fills a gap, she constrains the initiatives of professionals who have decided to engage in transformative intervention and alternative action in their work. This finding may explain why Tonia's efforts to present and perhaps construct (through discourse) a united and flawlessly working community, where members trust each other and dare to expose themselves, is not shared by the others, except perhaps by one participant (Chris).

As revealed by their choices to adopt the leading transformational leadership model and to negotiate it through AR, the headmasters consciously try to construct identities of professionals who are empowered by the training programme and make an effort to emancipate themselves from system constraints, aware of how difficult this is, in order to introduce innovations in their schools and transform them. For this reason, they collectively explore joint decision-making and participatory dialogue, which turns the different perspectives into an advantage, utilising their practice as headmasters, based on criteria derived from transformational leadership, in the context of their community. These processes can help them form a common vision for their schools.

Yet their narratives are not consistently articulated based on this reflective and emancipatory perspective. On the contrary, serious contradictions emerge from the analysis. Alternative discourses (of qualitative research, participatory and transformative leadership, emergence of diverse and different views) are substantially undermined by more traditional discourses (of quantitative research, dominance of theory, alignment on common values, choices and decisions), which emerge in the headmasters' narratives. Through these conflicts and contradictions, strong convictions and absolute certainties emerge, hiding the identities of competitive headmasters trying to show that their schools work better than others. Despite their initial assertions to the

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<sup>2</sup> She writes in her narrative characteristically: *Due to my role in this group (I was the coordinator of both the training programme and the research project), I felt strongly responsible for bringing the quality of the group and of the research process to prominence. For this reason, I often had to take initiatives and crucial decisions for the cohesion of the group and the continuity of the project.*

contrary, most participant headmasters simply worked in parallel to each other, without achieving co-operation, throughout the AR project.

They do not actually show a sincere willingness to interpret their differences so as to approach each other and cooperate, essentially choosing solitary paths, though within a community. They do not seem to realise that, through the reflective process, which is fundamental in AR, their intervention in the educational practice is redefined for each member of this community in a continually reformed educational and social context. Nor do they seem to understand that in this way common knowledge is produced, and a common ground for communication is created, even defining the points of teacher differentiation, the issues on which they disagree, and the educational values latent in these disagreements.

The attitude adopted by the facilitator, simply to challenge them and nurture a critical attitude towards their perceptions, so as not to guide them in their AR, was a rather good choice, but it should have been complemented by other actions to be more effective. She could have joined the headmasters in the procedure of recognising their identity, but she did not negotiate with them, not even their identity portraits. She could have shared the findings of the narratives and metanarratives analysis with them and discussed the contradictions in their discourse and in their emerging identities. She could have invited them to interpret how these contradictions are created, also discussing their different interpretations. Had she done so, and had she helped them better understand how they view themselves as professionals, perhaps the headmasters could have defeated their fear of exposure to members of their community and made substantial changes to their identity. Or perhaps if the critical friend had not kept his distance throughout the project, he could have contributed with another perspective on the participants' interaction, in light of revealing and negotiating contradictions.

## **Conclusions – discussion**

Our analysis of the participants' narratives demonstrated that their identities are contradictory. As a process, the action research project in which they participated did not succeed in helping them realise these contradictions,

much less negotiate them. Ultimately, action research seems was treated a technical means, which participants perceived as beneficial, since they cooperated with the university and became acquainted with qualitative research methodology, reinforcing their status as headmasters who utilise contemporary research approaches.

The facilitator and her critical friend (the authors of this paper) were not able to reverse this orientation and endow the approach with an interpretive and critical perspective for two reasons: On the one hand, they were focused on their research interest in this project and the scientific dialogue between them; they were very concerned about the role of the critical friend, his perceptions and subjectivity, the different perspective he offered, since he was not directly involved in the situation under study. On the other hand, the project co-ordinator (Tonia) operated normatively, undertaking a leading role, in an attempt to maintain a safe framework, and avoided self-examination, fearing that such a perspective could be disruptive for the group. Thus a perfect picture was formed, hiding the problems faced by the members, while the researchers simply ascertained and monitored it.

It would be really fruitful if the headmasters engaged in the analysis of their own narratives, thus broadening the reflective framework of their own AR project. Narratives produced during this educational intervention, particularly evaluation narratives, both reveal new educational data and could allow the narrators to realise and redefine their hermeneutical constructs. The narrative analysis could have helped them to realise these contradictions and become more reflective in their way to approach their role as headmaster as well as in their interventions in their schools. In that way, the participants could be benefited by this methodological combination of the two research approaches (action research and narrative inquiry). So the transformative potential of this combination (whether it can alter the way the subjects reflect on their identities and practices or not) still remains an open question.

Still, we found that utilising postmodern approaches in AR offers new perspectives. The final narrative presented in this article, established on the basis of two meta-narratives, revealed that the latter can be complementary even when they conflict with the wider texts they draw on, either theoretically or practically. Postmodern thinking raises issues of constructing identities

through AR narratives (both non conscious identities betrayed by the participants, and the conscious and desired identities that participants want to project). It also offers the perspective of utilising intertextuality (Bakhtin, 1981), i.e. the correlations that narrators attempt with other narratives, whether grand (relating to the views and attitudes promoted by dominant educational discourses) or small (that is, belonging to other members of their group or relevant groups). This is a very interesting perspective, as it can shift the focus of AR from the local interaction level to a wider social ideological framework and to correlating specific narrative events with dominant values and widespread, stereotypical views.

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#### *About the authors*

Eleni Katsarou is an Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Social Studies of the University of Crete. Her area of research is Education, Curricula, development and assessment of educational programmes and materials, and teachers' professional development through action research.

Vassilis Tsafos is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Early Childhood Education of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. His area of research is Pedagogy and Curricula: theory and Practice, Teacher education and development, qualitative research in education and especially educational action research.

#### *Authors' addresses*

Vassilis Tsafos, Herodotou 3, 17456 Athens, Greece  
Email: vtsafos@ecd.uoa.gr

Eleni Katsarou, Department of Philosophy and Social Studies,  
Panepistimioupoli Gallou, Retymno 74100, Crete, Greece.  
E-mail: katsarou@uoc.gr