

Chapter 12

Teacher Responsive Teaching and Learning Initiatives Through Action Research

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Abstract Action research facilitates the participatory adaptation of professional development to the learners' needs in communities of reflective learning in the work environment. Research on professional development through action research (e.g. Reason and Bradbury in Handbook of action research. Sage, London, 2001a) provides strong evidence of teachers' and students' conceptual and actual shifts from distance to collaboration, participation and responsiveness, and a movement from teaching as content covering to teaching as reciprocal action and justified alternative decisions. The RELEASE project is presented as a good practice for teachers' empowerment, responsive teaching and learning initiatives through action research. The project indicated that students and teachers enhanced their learning, which resulted in new skills, strategies and communicative attitudes. Moreover, teachers enhanced their awareness towards the students' needs and students were encouraged to ask questions and reflect on teaching and their own learning.

12.1 Introduction

Results-based educational and curriculum theory does not considerably deal with the different biographies and world views of teachers and students, although it is well documented that curriculum change and reform cannot be realized without changes in teachers', students' and researchers' way of thinking and practices. Another stream of research points out that a very important variable affecting teachers' change is the theory–practice divide in teachers' teaching; teachers know the theories but they do not implement them during their teaching. Thus, educational change and teaching reform cannot be achieved without concomitant changes in teachers' and researchers' thoughts and practices.

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Nevertheless, it is an incontestable fact that teacher development is a powerful precursor in the teaching practice, which can advance students' learning results and teachers' self-confidence and independence. A number of questions arise from the fact that despite the frequent in-service training, school and teaching routines do not change. How can we transform schools into learning communities and theory into praxis? What can empower teachers to understand their own needs and the needs of their students? What can change the school ethos and culture from societies of students and teachers to communities of learning? How can we help teachers gain awareness of their strengths and limitations in respect to pedagogy? And finally, the crucial question concerns the best procedure for teachers' responsive learning and teaching and how we can transform the imposed effective 'methods' to tools of teachers' self-understanding and conceptual and attitudinal change.

To answer the above questions we engaged school teachers and school principals in an action research study in a number of schools in Cyprus. The programme RELEASE (Project ID: EACEA-521386: Towards achieving Self-Regulated Learning as a core in teachers' In-Service training in Cyprus) is presented as including useful and effective processes for developing teacher self-awareness and responsive learning. The project was funded by the European Committee, lasted one school year and was aimed at supporting participatory teacher professional development and changing teaching routines. It is important to note that because of the project, its participatory procedures at schools have been adopted by the Pedagogical Institute of Cyprus for teachers' in-service development.

12.2 Epistemological and Research Foundation

Action research was chosen as the appropriate procedure for teachers' change, development and understanding of their own and students' deficiencies. Action research, as a cyclical, non-linear process, facilitates participatory development, the sharing of responsibility for new action and experience-based knowledge (Reason and Bradbury 2001b). Collaboration, reflection on actions, evaluation and decisions for new actions and practical solutions in the classroom call for understanding theories in the context of their implementation.

The underlying assumption is that responsive teaching, which implies reciprocal responsiveness between the teacher and the student, as well as the exchange of needs and ideas, cannot be realized without teachers' liberation from the textbooks—in other words, from centred teaching. From this point of view, the cyclical incidents of action research allow teachers to decide, try out and re-evaluate their actions in the classroom based on students' responses and the expression of new needs. Thus, during action research, teachers place students' learning and their positive and negative response to teachers' action at its centre.

Research on curriculum suggests that contextual variables in the school and its environment, along with what teachers think and do, are so important that general recommendations sacrifice individual reality for the sake of prescribed routines

(e.g. Doll 1993; Pinar and Reynolds 1992). These routines prevent responsiveness and the learning of both students and teachers.

From that point of view, action research promotes reflective learning and participatory professional development through adaptation of the procedures and content of development to the learners' needs in communities of reflective learning in the work environment. Research on professional development through action research (e.g. Reason and Bradbury 2001a; Koutselini 2010, 2015) indicates a conceptual and actual shift of participants from distance and individuality to collaboration, openness and exchange, and a movement from low trust in their own and colleagues' choices to self-confidence, responsive teaching and learning.

Empowerment of the participants is the result of gaining awareness of all the elements of the context's impediments and the personal constraints that prevent real change and responsiveness. The reflective paradigm of teachers' development (Carr 2004) is founded on the principle that teaching and learning must be constructed in a personal and meaningful way which must be constantly developed and adjusted in order to facilitate justified alternative actions.

The shift from positivistic approaches that promote theories and good practices that have been implemented in different contexts through ready-made procedures to professional development as a heuristic, cyclic and responsive endeavour of all participants in their own school indicates the shift from imposed knowledge to reflective and participatory learning processes. From that point of view, action research at schools aims at the personalization of learning and the work culture in communities of learning, as well as at teachers' empowerment for professional development through cyclic introspection and participatory communication.

A meta-modern perspective of education (Koutselini 1997) moves beyond the borders of the modern and post-modern processes in education and promotes an emancipatory interest which is opposed to all imposed and instrumental knowledge provided by 'experts', who rarely face challenges within the classroom. Whereas modern approaches to education result in teachers' training on theories and decontextualized trials of implementation without a real connection to classrooms, meta-modern approaches advocate engagement, reflectivity and communicative interaction in authentic environments.

From that point of view, action research is a rewarding process in the meta-modern approach, which supports the reflective paradigm of teacher development (Carr 2004; Elliott 1991). It gives meaning to human experiences during learning without fragmenting the experiences to useful or imposed tasks. Thus, it is considered appropriate for changing the school culture and developing teachers' self-regulated skills that respond to students' real needs. Action research gives teachers the opportunity to act and judge their actions whilst teaching and not only *post facto*, as the modern approaches suggest. Its theoretical foundation has its roots in the value of emancipation (Freire 1972; Habermas 1972) and the necessity to understand teaching as a contextual and continually changing endeavour that takes into account individuals' interaction in a social environment (Vygotsky 1978).

From a theoretical point of view, it is useful to point out the importance of reflection for self-understanding. As Gadamer put it (1977: 38): "Reflection on a

given pre-understanding brings before me something that otherwise happens behind my back". Habermas (1972: 208) also elaborated on the concept and process of self-reflection: "Self-reflection is at once intuition and emancipation, comprehension and liberation from dogmatic dependence". Thus, teacher empowerment for professional development cannot succeed without reflective practices that set teachers free from the technical implementation of the curriculum and allow them to test new ideas in their own context (classrooms).

12.2.1 The Study

Twenty-six primary schools voluntarily participated in the RELEASE project, which aimed at promoting teachers' development at schools through action research. The construction of a reflective and responsive situated learning environment was considered as one of the most important presuppositions for teachers' and students' participatory development.

Researchers and teachers shared the challenge of the action research procedure as a means to improve communication between teachers and students in order to empower teachers to respond to the needs of students with 'problems' in mixed ability classrooms. The aim of the study was defined by the teachers who voluntarily participated in the project. Each school decided the specific problem which was to be anticipated. The most popular topics identified were: (a) the implementation of differentiation of teaching and learning; (b) language teaching to meet differentiated needs; (c) conflict resolution at schools; (d) co-operative learning for enhancement of cognitive results; and (e) students' misbehaviour.

Researchers from the University of Cyprus and trainers from the Pedagogical Institute periodically visited schools and discussed various issues with the participants, thus encouraging the continuation of the procedure and providing support for teachers' decision-making and action. From the very beginning it was explained to the principals of the schools that their role was to support teachers' meetings, encourage participation and value their efforts and actions.

Teachers met weekly for three months in order to encourage reflection on action. All participants kept a diary of events and thoughts recording their daily interaction with students, as well as their feelings about group meetings and the procedure of decision-making.

Observations in the classrooms at the beginning of the project indicated that teachers' roles had been reduced to covering the textbook content without any action to respond to real and differentiated students' needs. In these cases, textbooks function as mechanisms of teachers' pedagogical alienation that prevent empathy and responsiveness. Moreover, the practice-theory divide was evidenced in every classroom. Teachers were knowledgeable of theories concerning teaching and learning, and differentiated instruction but they implemented a textbook-centred approach during teaching: teachers and students followed the text and the activities in a linear and ordered way, with students sitting in groups without authentic,

constructive collaboration. Responsiveness among teachers to students and among students was totally absent from all the teaching settings.

Researchers and principals participated in all cycles of the action research, learning from teachers' reactions, thoughts and hesitations. Although they facilitated the processes of action research, their reactions were always reflective and aimed at experience-sharing and reciprocal learning. It was clear to researchers that their role was to facilitate the process, avoiding instructions that would limit teachers' and students' engagement and responsive decisions. Also, the reflective and supporting role of principals provided space and time for teachers to have common meetings at schools. Moreover, principals participated in some of the meetings and encouraged authentic reflection. The initial feeling of mistrust of self and others, the reservations about speaking and proposing ideas, began to fade away.

In the beginning of the project teachers urged for ready-made solutions, indicating a very limited trust in discussions and proposals of alternative actions. Gradually their self-confidence and motivation increased, especially when during group discussions the mentors encouraged them to elaborate on some of their ideas through appropriate readings and action planning.

After identifying obstacles to teacher–student communication, discussions in groups helped teachers to acquire a voice, to speak out and express their feelings and hesitations. During these meetings researchers focused on issues that prevented teachers from 'seeing' the classroom, the students and responding to the different needs of different students.

Moreover, the discourse analysis of their initial written reflections evidenced their attitudes and implicit theories towards learning and teaching. From this point of view, students were to blame for their low achievement. Gradually teachers admitted that their lack of self-confidence for decision-making resulted in routine teaching, which was considered safe and acceptable since it was broadly implemented. The fact that teachers and schools in Cyprus are not accountable for their results due to the absence of any accountability system favours routine teaching which covers the content of the textbooks.

12.3 Responsiveness as a Result of Empowerment

Teachers cannot become responsive unless they are given the power to make responsible decisions based on students' needs and to dare to try out new approaches. To implement an action research project is neither simple nor easy, since reflection must be genuine and the interplay between action and reflection must be based on the pedagogical autonomy of teachers that enhances their awareness. Teaching is seen as 'praxis' and experience that gain meaning from the way participants understand the experience and their attitudes towards it. From this point of view, teachers and students 'live' the experience of teaching and learning

as a unique and ongoing process within which they understand themselves and others and gradually become able to communicate, to share and to care.

Participation of the researchers and mentors in the reflection groups in school contexts encouraged the exchange of ideas, knowledge and positive attitudes towards new approaches. Constructive feedback through reflection in groups cultivated positive attitudes and improved the classroom learning environment, reflective lesson planning and student–teacher communication. Gradually teachers and the principal of each school developed a commitment to their task: the improvement of teacher–student communication that results in learning.

Teachers' motivation and willingness to participate, as well as the results obtained, were greater in schools where the school principals supported and valued teachers' initiatives, participated in the meetings of reflection and new action, acknowledged the project's importance and contributed in the pedagogical discussions. The research suggests that trust building, teamwork and collaboration between teachers and school principals cultivate professional culture and improve quality (e.g. Snoek and Moens 2011). Hargreaves (1998) also underlined the importance of a trusting environment that enables teachers to take responsibility for their actions.

Action research proved to be a rewarding developmental procedure for teachers, principals and mentors; since only in authentic collaboration and reflective meetings can they develop their pedagogical ability and succeed in transforming knowledge into practice. Participation in action research can transform teachers into pedagogues-learners who gradually gain self-confidence and reject ready-made and undifferentiated solutions to classroom 'problems'. It is important to consider that the empowerment of different teachers with different attitudes, experiences and knowledge demands the differentiation of teachers' development.

Action research proved to be a rewarding developmental procedure for students too, as the improvement of their performance in terms of participation and achievement was evidenced in their daily communication and assignments, and in teachers' diaries and reports. The most important thing was for teachers and principals to deliberate on (liberate themselves from) the teaching of textbooks, and for students to express their difficulties, personal constraints and informal evaluation of the classrooms' communication and learning climate.

During group reflections teachers decided what they should change and what activities to try out in order to become responsive to the students' real needs; they were interested in the results of their interventions and they cared about students' attitudes towards their teaching, learning and the classroom environment.

Teachers' responsiveness and discussions inspired colleagues at schools. Whereas at the beginning of the project only one group of three teachers from each school participated, during the action research the majority of teachers in 20 out of the 26 schools joined the initial group and participated in the actions and reflections. Consciousness and the valuing of teachers' pedagogical autonomy are the cornerstones of teachers' empowerment. Teachers discover their power to empower each other and to plan and enact effective teaching in mixed ability classrooms and to deal with the school's and students' problems.

Action and reflection through action research transformed teaching into a decision-making process and empowered teachers to take responsible decisions with the criterion being their students' learning and well-being.

Communication in 'communities of learning and practice' suggests a non-isolated individual development. It is well documented (i.e. Brown and DuGuid 1995; Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1999; Cochran-Smith 2003) that inquiry learning communities facilitate professional development and a re-examination of teachers' and principals' role and actions. The interplay between action and reflection becomes an empowering developmental procedure, which gives teachers the opportunity to evaluate their decisions and re-construct previous meaning.

Eraut (2000) argued that knowledge in education is situated in and grows out of a context. If knowledge and learning are indeed situated, then the most effective in-service education will be contextualized and situated in authentic classroom practice. Today, it is widely accepted that some of the most powerful professional learning occurs when there is the opportunity to be part of a learning community, an inquiry community.

Teachers enter education programmes and schools with explicit and implicit conceptions about their role as teachers and they can be very persistent in holding certain beliefs and misconceptions. Reflection in communities of learning provides teachers with the unique opportunity to negotiate their beliefs and change misconceptions through discussion, decisions and actions, reflections and new actions. In the final analysis they try out their ideas in the classroom and either abandon wrong conceptions and approaches or enhance processes and ideas. Empowerment is the result of teachers' participation in learning communities.

Engaging school teachers in an action research in-service development in communities of learning is a means of pedagogical self-awareness and responsive decision-making. Teachers are more likely to be anxious when they are left alone to change their routines; action research as a collaborative procedure should be regarded as an effective tool for empowering teachers to feel safe to share fears, hesitations and ideas. The cyclical, reflective developmental process proved to be effective for the emancipation of both researchers and teachers, who changed their attitudes towards and their concepts of teaching and learning.

It is also necessary to focus on the role of principals for the construction of the communities of learning and the implementation of action research at schools. Theories that argue for the profiles of effective principals without considering their pedagogical roles for developing their own and teacher leadership seem too simplistic to provide solutions to the complex problems encountered in contemporary schools and teacher education. It can be argued that school principals should receive better training to be able to encourage participation in action research at schools. School principals, if properly informed and developed, can dramatically help towards the upgrade of professional participatory development at the school level, because they can motivate teachers and facilitate discussion, co-teaching, co-planning and peer observation. The role of principals is evidenced in the teachers' discourse at the end of the school year: "without the principal's support it would have been very difficult to become involved in time-consuming activities and

meetings”; “the principal’s involvement facilitated collaboration and reflection”; “principals valued the project and supported the duration of the endeavour”; “the principal ensured that reflection, collaboration for action, and peer classroom observation will not stop”; “it was important that the principal participated as an equal member of the group and participated in the mutual learning and sharing of ideas”.

The RELEASE project had multi-level positive implications. Teachers and students experienced teaching as a lived experience subject to retrospection that provides insights for responsive decisions and action, a process that helps participants actively understand each other and build new knowledge. Also, students and teachers enhanced their learning, which resulted in new skills, strategies and communicative attitudes. As reported in teachers’ diaries, “students’ participation increased significantly”; “before the start of the project, students were asked questions; during the course students gradually increased the number of their questions to teachers”; and, finally, “collaborative learning and discussion in groups encouraged responsive and collaborative reflection”. At the same time, teachers changed their perceptions of teaching and students’ learning from delivery of content into response to different students’ differentiated needs; teachers learned to respond to the readiness of students and students understood that teachers were ready to respect and give feedback to their own queries and needs regarding the fulfillment of gaps in previous learning.

However, teachers faced specific difficulties during the project. They referred to the limited time for coordination and situated learning at schools; the pressure for covering the content and the slow flow of the activities at the beginning of the project; the limited time of the project’s implementation. They commented on the need to liberate themselves from the pressures of time and the achievement of results. In all the cases they stressed that the principal’s and supervisor’s participation in the groups’ reflection and their encouragement to remain concentrated on the project’s cyclical incidents and the responsiveness to students’ needs helped change their attitudes towards teaching as covering content.

12.4 Conclusion

Today’s educational policies are characterized by a deficit of personal introspection, reflection and development at the microlevel of education. Teaching consequently came to be perceived as a set of only measurable and pragmatic skills and techniques. It is strange that policy makers, stake holders and teachers always discuss what students should know and rarely, why students do not learn; it is even stranger that policy makers and academics investigate and document the teachers’ theory–practice divide and rarely, what developmental procedures could change the situation. The results of the RELEASE study advocate the view that the practice–theory divide cannot be overcome unless teachers experience their competencies and

deficiencies in a dynamic school environment in which theory supports practice and practice reinforces theory.

Thus, teachers' empowerment through action research and situated learning at schools contributes to understanding of teaching as a cyclical endeavour through which teachers plan and act during teaching, aiming to respond to students' differentiated needs, evaluate their actions and re-plan new actions based on students' responses, reflection and participation. Pre-defined lesson plans and prescriptions of experts which are imposed on teachers have proved unable to respond to the real students' needs, since responsiveness demands the consideration of students' differentiated and changing reactions.

From this point of view, action research provides new theoretical insights into both teachers' responsive development at schools and teacher–student interaction. Action research promotes a differentiated teachers' development that counteracts the imposed pre- and in-service training systems and supports teachers' initiatives and responsiveness. In this participatory procedure, teachers exchange views, reservations and actions, and become more able to take responsible decisions. Responsiveness cannot be created through technical, closed systems of teaching, nor by teaching and learning prescriptions that ignore teacher–student reciprocal communication. It needs teachers' involvement in authentic contexts, real problems and a thorough understanding of students' needs. As a developmental procedure, action research can promote collegiality and the sharing of ideas and responsibilities with the people with whom teachers work, and thus effect a situation that changes the culture of the workplace. In the final analysis, responsiveness and responsive teaching presuppose cultural changes that value initiatives, self-understanding, collegiality and responsible decisions which meet identified needs. Development through action research revisits the Foucauldian ethic as a system of moral principles and rules of conduct in communities of persons and rejects routine, decontextualized procedures of imposed knowledge.

During the implementation of action research, schools and teachers need to be supported for participation in a cyclical, reflective process. In this context a partnership between schools and universities and/or pedagogical institutes for supporting mentoring and collaboration for changing school cultures and up-down training of teachers is recommended. Schools can be transformed into centres of pedagogy where situated learning could promote collaborative competences and attitudes for anticipating context-bound teaching and learning.

As a concluding remark, the results of this study advocate that action research—although a difficult undertaking—proved to be a transformative experience for all parties involved—participants, teachers, students and researchers. The most important result was teachers' consciousness and their gaining awareness of the fact that “the knowledge is inside us”, as teachers wrote in their diaries in various different ways. Positive results from their actions enhanced their belief in their own narratives and educational practice. As one teacher put it: *“Better communication in my classroom gave me the confidence to share my ideas and practices with other teachers because I now knew that things work”*.

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