

"We give you a song and you give us a song"- Reciprocity in Action Research in the field of Music Education

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Abstract. Action research is a cyclical process, alternating action with critical reflection, leading to a better understanding of a phenomenon. It examines the influence of an intervention and includes an investigation conducted by the person who initiated the action. A free dialogue between the researcher and the participants is essential in action research, since the research seeks the points of view of the people who are involved in it. Good relations and free information flow between the researcher and the participants are the heart of action research and are necessary for validating the research. This article reflects on a study in the area of music education, where action research was used as a methodology. It focuses on the aspect of the relations between the researcher and the research participants. The author also discusses the conflict of wearing the two different 'hats', as the course teacher and the study researcher, which often causes tension since they require two different perspectives.

Keywords: Action research; Dialogue; Music education; Reciprocity; Researcher-teacher Conflict

Introduction

Action research is a cyclical process, alternating action with critical reflection, leading to a better understanding of a phenomenon. It examines the influence of an intervention and includes an investigation done by the person who initiated the action. Action research is also a practitioner's research that is performed in order to improve one's own performance and it involves a group of people collecting evidence and making decisions regarding their performance, attitudes, and beliefs, in order to understand them better and to improve them. Action research constantly undergoes modifications and variations (Katsarou, 2016) and its development over the years is tied to the social movements of the 20th century (Glassman and Erdem, 2014).

Action research strives to find out the point of view of the people who are involved in it. Therefore, there must be good relations and a free information flow between the researcher and the participants (Elliott in Kemmis & McTaggart, 1990). Additionally, this free dialogue between the researcher and the participants is necessary for validating the research. The issue of the relations between the researcher and the research participants was discussed widely in the literature on action research, mostly under the category of ethical considerations (Campbell & Groundwater-Smith, 2007). Coghlan and Brannick (2014) highlighted the complex nature of an insider research project within an organization, where the researcher has to maintain an explicit action research role while continuing to function within the organization. The significance of having good relations and communication between the researcher and the participants in action research is well recognized.

This article is based on a study in the field of music education, and focuses on the relationship between the researcher and the research participants. The study focused on the musical development of early childhood educators and its objective was to examine the development of the participating preschool teachers' musical competencies, confidence, and ability to integrate music into the preschool setting. The process involved much reflection by all participants along the way. Both types of reflections described by Schon (1983, 1987) took place: 'reflection in action' and 'reflection on action'.

Reciprocity in Action Research

Reciprocity can be defined as an ongoing process of exchange with the purpose of creating and maintaining equality between parties (Maiter et al., 2008). Being aware of reciprocity in action research and the importance of involvement and trust between the researcher and the research participants, the researcher made sure that she would nurture close relations with the participants. She ascertained that the atmosphere in the lessons would be pleasant, safe, and respectful and tried to make sure there was reciprocity in the relationships. Nevertheless, on some occasions some individuals expressed statements that showed the relations in a different light and led the researcher to understand how these individuals perceived their relations. The following are three examples of such situations, as were documented in the researcher's diary:

Episode No. 1: *During one of the lesson's break I spoke with L (a preschool teacher who participates in the study) and wondered out loud where we had met before, since she looked familiar to me. It transpired that we had studied at the same college years ago. I was quite excited and happy to discover this; I felt as though I had met an old friend. Suddenly she said: 'Well now, look where you are today and where I am!'*

While I was still feeling that the revelation could bring us closer, it seemed that for her this revelation formed a gap between us, since I was the course teacher and a researcher studying for my PhD and she was one of the course and research participants. It suddenly became clear to me that despite my aspiration to construct a system of equal relations, the preschool teachers, or at least some of them, might see me as a person who occupied an exalted position.

Episode No. 2: *As I visited the preschools in order to observe the preschool teachers leading musical experiences with the children, I tried to contribute to the musical life of the group whether by teaching musical activities to the children, with advice, or by sharing an appropriate musical material. I felt that mutual enrichment and reciprocity was indeed created. I was therefore surprised by O's reaction when I turned to her one day during the course in order to coordinate a visit to her preschool. She was a co-operative and open teacher, and I knew that her preschool door was always open for me. On this occasion when I asked her if it would be OK with her that I would come and observe her preschool, she answered: 'Fine, then maybe you can also teach the children something... so that we'll also get something from your visit, that we can 'exploit' you a bit'. Her words were accompanied by a chuckle indicating embarrassment, but the message was clear. While I had felt that there are reciprocal relations between us, her statement led me to realize that maybe from her point of view this was not the situation.*

Episode No. 3: *One morning I visited R's preschool. During morning assembly after she welcomed everybody with a good morning, she stated to the class: 'Children, I have agreed with our guest - we will give you a song and you will give us a song!' Again, she made it clear to me that she expected to get something from our meeting.*

The above examples sharpened the researcher's awareness regarding the complicated dynamics of the relations between her and the research subjects through the research, relations of 'give and take', alternating closeness and distance.

Ownership of the research

In a qualitative study, the relations between the researcher and the research subjects are not optimal, and throughout the research process there are dynamics relating to power that are not simple (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009). At the start of the path, the researcher arrives from a position of power as the initiator, the one who is aware of what to expect from it and its implications. Later during the process, the research participants become those with the power since they hold the control in their hands and they own the knowledge. At this stage, the researcher attempts to construct trust relations with the participants, to gain their consent to take part in the research, and to create accessibility and an entrance into the researched world. The researcher's desire is to weave a system of positive relations, which will enable openness, authenticity, and discovery. During data collection, the researcher is entirely dependent on participants; on their willingness to participate, cooperate, and share their knowledge with the researcher. At this stage, the control and ownership of the data is exclusively in the hands of the participants. The quantity and quality of the data shared with the researcher will depend upon the relationship that develops with him or her. The researcher becomes an observer, a client, a student of the research participants (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2007). With the termination of the data collection process, the power returns to the researcher.

All the above-mentioned was clearly experienced in this present research. The dynamics of the relations described above place in doubt the possibility of 'symmetrical and equal' relations attributed to the researcher and the research subjects in an action research. In this study, the participants discovered issues

that worried and concerned them, and were the ones who created the change and participated in its assessment. However, the research subject itself did not emerge from a problem that the preschool teachers identified and for which they tried to find solution together with the researcher. The preschool teachers did not lead the initiative for change and they did not identify the need for improvement.

In this case, the researcher was the one who initiated the study. She arrived as an external factor with an instructive program of her own that had been developed in light of an underlying difficulty that she had identified in the preschool teachers' ability to integrate music within their educational work. The problem that constituted the incentive for the research worried the researcher and not the preschool teachers; for their part, they consented to participate in the process. Thus, throughout the research, the researcher found herself wondering whether the preschool teachers were really full partners in the process or whether they took an active part in a procedure that only worried and concerned her. Was the position of the preschool teachers in the general layout of the research sufficiently significant?

Although the researcher believes that the answers to these questions are positive, this is only so to a certain extent and it is neither absolute nor decisive, again because the problem that constituted the incentive for the action research did not originate from the preschool teachers' concerns. In general, the role of researchers who carry out action research is often defined as doing research *'with them and for them'*, and the researcher asked herself whether the research was conducted with the preschool teachers and for them. Obviously, the research conclusions, which were implemented in the field work during the process and will continue to be implemented in the future, lead to more successful and effective musical activity for both the preschool teachers and the researcher as their mentor. However, more than once during the process the researcher felt that for the group that participated in this action research, the study was actually performed with them and for *her*. This issue became more pertinent, because the goal of the research was to examine a change process. It is clear and acknowledged that a change process is complex and in fact it is difficult to engender and assimilate a significant change. The difficulty is even more evident when the initiative for change comes from an external source and not from internal motivation.

The problematic nature of this issue, which can be summed up in the question *'whose research is this and for whose advantage?'*, is also connected with the ethical aspect of the research. At the beginning of the course, the researcher informed the preschool teachers regarding the procedure of the research and what their participation would involve. The preschool teachers all expressed their consent to take part in the research and signed a declaration form. The preschool teachers chose to take the course out of an interest in the field of music and a desire to improve their knowledge, musical ability, and their professionalism. However, in practice their participation in the research required them to perform additional tasks beyond the course work, such as writing in journals, answering questionnaires, and allowing the researcher to

observe them in their preschool work. In addition, participating in the research involved a certain degree of exposure and openness. During the process, there was an intrusion into the teachers' privacy and they could even feel exposed to criticism and judgment that could probably cause a sense of discomfort and perhaps even a threat.

The Conflict in the Dual Role of Teacher and Researcher

The two 'hats' that the researcher wore during the process, as the course teacher and the study researcher, often caused tension and conflict since they required two completely different perspectives. While the actions as a teacher focused on the practical, applicable aspect, as a researcher the researcher came from the academic context and aspired to form a conceptualization of the studied phenomenon. As a teacher, she aimed to move forwards, to stimulate, to create interest, to bring about change, while as a researcher she was required to pause, to observe, and to stand at a certain distance from the events. While the teaching was motivated by a profound desire to share knowledge, skills, and experience with the preschool teachers and to 'give' them as much as possible in the field of music education, here the researcher was constantly occupied with an inverse issue of what she could 'obtain' from them--i.e., what she could learn from them about the process.

In the setting of this course that the teacher-researcher examined and studied, she was not totally occupied with teaching. Sometimes it seemed to the researcher that this dual role harmed her teaching, and the need to deal simultaneously with teaching and the examination of its implications was more than once to the course's disadvantage. The researcher could not devote her entire being to her role as a teacher, guiding the action with complete attention to the needs and dynamics that arose in the lesson, since she was also committed to research demands such as recording, data collection, and reflection. More than once, the researcher was forced to interrupt the musical activity because of time restrictions and the desire to be able to document the activities as well. This commitment to the research process also harmed the spontaneity of the course's development.

This was expressed in the researcher's diary as follows:

Keeping in mind that at the end of the course I intend to request the participants to answer the same questionnaire that they answered at the beginning of the course makes me very focused. Usually in my teaching I include interesting reading passages from the education field, which I have collected over the years. Although these reading passages are prepared in my file, I find out that in this specific course I avoid including them in practice because it seems like a waste of time. I am focused on my goal to contribute to them in the following defined fields: recognition of the strength of music and the importance of musical education for early childhood, demonstrating and exposing them to the potential of work with percussion instruments, and teaching methods, techniques, ideas and materials for the incorporation of percussion instruments. Is it possible that because of my desire to be effective, the course loses some of its inherent beauty?

The conflict involved in being a teacher-researcher is described extensively in the literature (Atkinson, 1994; James, 1999). Robertson (2000) stated that this

tension can be resolved by maximum reciprocity within the research design. Lather (1986) defines reciprocity as follows: "Reciprocity implies give-and-take, a mutual negotiation of meaning and power. It operates at two primary points in an emancipatory empirical research: the junctures between researchers and researched, and between data and theory" (p. 263). This concept of mutual benefits and responsibilities, commitment to each other, and negotiation of meaning and power is integral to action research. Robertson (2000) emphasised that the process of theory building should be mutually beneficial to researcher and research participants.

Concluding Remarks

In action research, the practitioner is at the center of the inquiry, and a symmetrical communication between the researcher and participant is necessary. This symmetrical communication gives the basis for reflection and inquiry (Whitehead, 1987). Action research is founded on the reflections of its participants. The researcher, who also serves as a participant in the process of data collection, is legitimized in the research to investigate his or her own activities and to alter them throughout the research on the basis of the findings (Elliott 1995). Both the researcher and the informants are used as sources of information, and throughout the research analytical reporting is performed based on occurrences that take place during the research. In the field of education, the goal of action research is to achieve a deeper understanding of the educational practice of the teachers themselves and the institutions in which they act (Bresler, 1996). According to Kirk and Miller (1986), in action research the issue of validity is not a question of objectivity, but rather a question of whether the researchers see what they think that they see. McNiff (2002) argues that the validity of action research depends on whether the study does what it set out to do, whether there is sufficient evidence to back up the claims, and whether it is presented in a clear form.

Action research can help teachers to develop their reflective practice (Sowa, 2009) and overcome barriers in their pedagogic context (Pleschova and McAlpine, 2016). Vaughan and Burnaford (2016) found three goals for action research in the graduate teacher education literature: action research as reflection; action research as participatory, critical inquiry; and action research as preparation for teacher leadership. Based on the above, the methodology chosen for this current research was action research, a methodology that the researcher found suitable for the study goals. Action research allowed the researcher to collaborate with the preschool teachers over time, to recognize their viewpoint, and to learn about their work in the music context. The research work and data collection were conducted over a period of two academic years and followed two different groups of preschool teachers.

In conclusion, the researcher believes that due to the close relationship and ongoing long-term interaction with the research participants, the conclusions reached are authentic and reflect the participants' perspective. These relationships enable profound levels of understanding and interpretation of the issue under investigation.

As stated by Kirk and Miller (1986), no technique can be used to examine the validity of a research other than continuous personal interaction. We can never be completely convinced that we understand all the cultural meanings of the studied phenomenon, but the best possible investigative tool is a sensitive and wise field researcher equipped with a good theoretical orientation and close relationships of trust with the informants over a period.

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