The teacher as a researcher in own classroom: An agency-focused, ethnographic perspective

Methodological and ethical dilemmas of insider/outsider perspectives

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

Keywords: Teacher-as-researcher; Insider/outsider perspectives; Agency perspectives

Introduction

The teacher-as-researcher (TR) is not a new phenomenon, and there are various attitudes to the question of doing research in one's own classroom. Based upon theoretical sources, this paper reflects upon the process of insider research and discusses some of the essential points a TR has to be aware of when doing research in own classroom. The focus will be upon aspects to be aware of before, during and after the research study is carried out.

To clarify the teacher positioning it is essential to discuss the teacher's preparation of the research study as well as the concepts of participant as observer and observer participant. In connection with the teacher's access to the setting, the concepts of insider and outsider perspectives are discussed. The choice of methodology leads to a clarification of the challenges the TR may encounter and to a discussion of research instruments originating from ethnography and grounded theory. Finally ethical aspects are discussed especially in connection with the positioning in the school system.

Background and research question

The TR already existed in the USA in the 1950s where Corey (1949) argued that teachers should conduct research to improve their own practice. Corey defines action research as research undertaken by teachers, administrators and others to improve their own practice (Corey, 1949).

At that time the concept of the TR was especially associated with the scientific, quantitative methods described by Lewin (1948) and others.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) define teacher research as:

> All forms of practitioner inquiry that involve systematic, intentional, and self-critical inquiry about one's work in K-12, high education, or continuing education classrooms, schools, programs, and other formal educational settings (p. 15).

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) use the term teacher research to refer to research carried out by teachers to seek practical solutions to issues and problems in their professional and community lives. The terms teacher research and action research are used interchangeably (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1999). Although teacher research has the goal of some type of action to improve practice, as noted by Meier and Henderson (2007), not all teacher research is action research.

During recent years a form of action research, has been encouraged in Britain. The term "action research" (Walford, 2001, p. 108) is now often used to describe activities carried out by teachers and other educational professionals in cooperation. They examine practices in the classroom, often their own classroom, and they systematically question their own teaching.

Normally action research originates from the teacher asking a researcher to assist in solving a problem. Action research recognizes that different people have different skills and opportunities to develop and to use. Through cooperation, this division of labour does not lead to exploitation, irrelevance or invalidity but to a gradual building of a greater knowledge of teaching and schools (Walford, 2001, p. 113).

The idea has been to make educational research an integral part of the work of teachers in schools rather than an activity carried out on schools by outsiders (Hammersley, 1993). The main aim of action research is to improve teaching and to develop teacher professionalism. There are different approaches to accomplish that aim.

Schools may apply a form of action research, design research, including collaboration between teachers and external researchers. Design research is part of an intervention in the classroom carried out by a researcher. The researcher is aware of a problem existing in the classroom and is familiar with the existing theory in the field in question. In cooperation with the teacher, the researcher designs a research study with the purpose of changing and/or improving the classroom teaching. Often design research is combined with a pre-test and a post-test in the classroom.

There has been an increase in the amount of small-scale practitioner research in education. One of the reasons is the emergence of the Doctorate in Education, Ed.D. A corresponding growth in the literature on methodology of insider research in educational settings could be expected. However, this does not seem to be the case (Mercer, 2007). According to Mercer (2007) relatively little has been published about methodological issues of insider research in educational settings. It is an under-researched field of research, so considerably more research is needed.

A small-scale research study has been carried out on student teachers in order to investigate the quality of teachers-as-researchers (Cakmakci, 2009). Apart from that there are very little empirical data available on the evaluation of teacher research (Cakmakci, 2009). According to Blakemore (2012) it should be beneficial, liberating and rewarding for emergent teachers to participate in educational research.

This study aims at clarifying and discussing the positioning of the TR and ethnographer in own classroom. The background of the study is the discussion and questioning of the value of doing research in own teaching environment.

In some countries, e.g. in the UK "most educational researchers are ex-schoolteachers whose research relates to schools of the same general type to that in which they previously taught" (Hammersley, 1997, p. 150). This is not the case in Denmark. Here it is a widespread attitude among some researchers within education that you cannot carry out valuable, good quality research if you have worked as a teacher in educational settings similar to your own field of research.

The research question is how to be empowered as a researcher in own classroom and at the same time be aware of possibilities and challenges of one's positioning? The discussion of teacher positioning will include references to among others Charmaz, 2006; Hammersley, 1993, 1997; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2002; Hargreaves, 1996; Mercer, 2007; Walford, 1991, 2001. The discussion also includes specific examples from the situation I faced and the choices I made during my three-year PhD study when doing research in settings similar to my own teaching experience.

Preparation of research study

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

The TR needs a specific research question based on his own curiosity and wish to change aspects of the teaching environment. The main purpose must be to reflect on and improve one's own classroom practice. It is clear that personal aspects are central in the choice of research question and in the issues being raised and confronted during the research. According to Walford "All research involves the researcher in decisions about the choice of topic and how the research is

to proceed" (Walford, 2001, p. 98). Therefore, it is essential to explain your interests and previous work.

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

When choosing the research question, the TR has to consider whether the research study will test a theory, i.e. draw upon and develop existing theories, generate a theory or just develop descriptions, explanations and clarifications of the field in question. The challenge for the TR is to generate sufficiently objective data about his own ongoing activities that can be generalized to other classroom contexts. The TR has to be aware of not overemphasizing outcome and effectiveness. Instead he has to realize that within teaching there are multiple goals which may be difficult to operationalize but important to illuminate and discuss during the research process.

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

Participant as observer or observer participant

The TR is not a so-called "novice" in the field of research, which is combined with certain challenges. A teacher researching himself is unable to determine the extent to which the effect is

due to the method, his own enthusiasm, power relations, his rapport with the students or a number of other potential variables. In this respect it is essential to be aware that the TR's relationship with the researched is not static, but fluctuates constantly. In addition, it is difficult to disseminate the result to other teachers because the research was carried out at the micro-level.

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

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

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

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

From this point of view, the TR has an advantage of being close to the research field. However, as

mentioned before this positioning might prevent him from looking at the field from different angles or for that matter from a meta-perspective. If the researcher is familiar with the field in question, it is not advisable to base the study exclusively on observation since he may be biased and consequently not able to interpret the data in a sufficiently neutral and objective way. To meet these challenges the TR can take specific steps to maintain a high level of awareness and to try to suspend presuppositions and preconceptions.

Access to the setting and insider/outsider perspectives

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

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

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

In this respect it is important to be aware that "all research is researching yourself" (Walford, 2001, p. 98). All research has a subjective element, especially within qualitative research where the researcher is the main research instrument. In all research, the researcher makes decisions, which may relate to for instance the choice of topic, research instruments and the research process. Often these decisions will evolve from previous personal experiences.

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

There are conflicting opinions concerning the insider and outsider perspectives. Simmel (1950) argues that only the outsider can achieve an objective account of human interaction because

only he or she possesses the appropriate degree of distance and detachment from the subjects of the research. Merton asserts the opposite that the outsider:

> has a structurally imposed incapacity to comprehend alien groups, statuses, cultures and societies … (because he or she) … has neither been socialized in the group nor has engaged in the run of experience that makes up its life, and therefore cannot have the direct, intuitive sensitivity that alone makes empathic understanding possible (1972, p. 15).

Insiders enjoy easier access and greater rapport, but they have to be able to make the familiar strange and to handle the fact that the participants have had time to form preconceptions about them and their research.

There are no overwhelming advantages of being an insider or an outsider. Each position has its advantages and disadvantages. It all depends on the particular circumstances such as the research purpose, scale and methodology. Both positions offer a continuum of possibilities.

My own PhD study falls somewhere between the two extremes of outsider and insider research. First of all it is important to remember that all knowledge is a construction. My relationships with the students being researched placed some constraint on the inquiry. The challenge was to see a phenomenon in its wider context and to keep some intellectual distance from the activities I observed. For these reasons it was important to counterbalance these challenges. Doing research in both my own classes and classes at other schools made it possible to constantly compare the results. With this in mind, I applied different approaches. The data I collected from the different institutions and the analysis of these data were remarkably alike. This proved that both validity and reliability of data were of high standard. In this respect the choice of methodology was of great importance.

Whether being a TR or a researcher without specific relation to or knowledge of the research field, the researcher is confronted with the question of preconceptions and taken-for-granted assumptions. Charmaz states that "Our preconceptions may only become apparent when our taken-

for-granted standpoints are challenged" (2006, p. 67). It may be argued that preconceived theoretical concepts may provide starting points for looking at your data, but they do not offer automatic codes for analyzing these data. Charmaz gives examples of problems in connection with coding such as coding at too general a level or identifying topics instead of actions and processes (2006, p. 69). To some extent the TR can make up for and balance his double role by choosing a suitable methodology.

The choice of methodology and agency/structure perspectives

Research within education gives rise to a number of challenges and disputes as to measurement, the operationalizing of concepts (e.g. learning), validity and reliability. In this respect it is important to bear in mind that education both learning and teaching are very complex phenomena depending on the teacher's experience, wisdom, local knowledge and judgement. Since it is difficult to measure and to generalize about these phenomena, there will easily be a gap between theory and practice. During the years there have been disputes concerning the value of quantitative positivist research within social science and education.

This paper aims at discussing the value of choosing a qualitative methodology. Before choosing a methodology, the TR has to clarify his attitude to the perspectives of agency and structure in qualitative research. Social theory gives primacy either to social structure or agency.

To understand the agency/structure discussion, I will try briefly to account for the roots and development of the two concepts and mention some of the researchers particularly contributing to the development. The emphasis on structure is anchored in Durkheim's and Marx's theories in Europe and further developed by Parsons at Harvard University, the USA. More recent contributions are Habermas and Luhmann. The focus on structure is based on the belief that there are natural laws also in the social world, that there is a metaphysical structure above nature, and that structure produces human behaviour. Agents are seen as "vessels swept along" (Ritzer, 1996).

10

The opposite attitude was especially predominant in the USA. In the 1920s and 1930s the Chicago school and symbolic interactionism dominated American sociology. One of the dominant figures behind symbolic interactionism was the German sociologist Simmel, who focused on small-scale issues whereas Marx and Weber were preoccupied with large-scale issues. Simmel especially focused on individual action and different forms of interaction and saw understanding interaction among people as one of the major tasks of sociology. He helped shape the development of American sociology at the University of Chicago as one of the early centres of American sociology and its major theory, symbolic interactionism. Mead, Blumer and Goffman further developed the theories (Tarp, 2006, 2011).

A large body of work deals with clashes between the structure/agency perspectives and attempts to bring them together. One of the researchers trying to build a bridge between agency and structure is Giddens (1997). His structuration theory accounts for the duality between agency and structure, between the students and the system. Duality means that agent actions at the same time structure and are structured by society/structure/system. Duality is a mutual influence or "recursiveness in social life" (Giddens, 1979, pp. 4-5). In educational settings duality appears in connection with student agendas and the school's programme/curriculum. The school influences students through the programme/curriculum, through the causal conditions, while students influence the programme/curriculum through their own agenda. They deal with the causal and intervening conditions in different ways depending on their own agenda. This results in what Giddens calls the dialectic of control, which is created in the interaction between a superior and an inferior in a power relationship, e.g. teacher/student. An inferior can influence the activities of a superior by applying various resources in terms of an agenda not being directly expressed – but only existing implicitly. The dialectic of control is a condition of agency: "An agent who does not participate in the dialectic of control, in a minimal fashion eases to be an agent" (Giddens, 1979, p. 149).

This paper concentrates on an agency-focused, inductive, bottom-up methodology giving voice to students. In this respect there are different approaches.

The ethnographic approach and the grounded theory approach are often seen as interrelated although ethnography grew out of a structure-focused tradition and grounded theory of an agency-focused tradition. Both ethnography and grounded theory offer the possibility of considering students as social agents in their own right (Qvortrup , Corsaro and Honig, 2009). Ethnography is regarded as an ideal method for engaging with children's and students' agency.

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

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

The question is whether the research situation will allow total detachments or the TR has to reveal some of his own thoughts. Revealing own views might contribute to developing trust and opening up conversation. It might be part of the reciprocal nature of the research process.

The TR is sufficiently immersed in the field of study. However, the challenge is to retain enough detachment to think theoretically about what he has seen and lived through. Meanwhile his display of understanding sympathy for the students whom he is studying permits sufficient trust in

him, so that he is not cut off from seeing important events, hearing important conversations, and perhaps seeing important documents. According to Glaser and Strauss researchers applying a grounded theory approach:

> differ from researchers who bring such a working baggage of preconceived formal theory into the field that they end not by discovering much substantive theory but by merely writing footnotes to the imported theory (1967/1999, p. 227).

The TR has to be able to maneuver between the above two positions. He can check his ability as a researcher by means of the method of comparison and verification:

> because the provisional character of the linkages – of answers and hypotheses - gets checked out during the succeeding phases of inquiry, with new data and new coding (Strauss, 1996, p. 17).

Strauss states that:

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

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

As mentioned previously the TR will behave as a participant observer. According to Hammersley the participant observer has to behave as an outsider:

> Even where he is researching a familiar group or setting, the participant observer is required to treat this as "anthropologically strange", in an effort to make explicit the presuppositions he takes for granted as a culture member (2002, p. 9).

This means that culture is turned into an object available for study. Hammersley argues that some forms of theory are believed to be "capable of capturing social complexity (…) most notably the grounded theory of Glaser and Strauss" (Glaser and Strauss 1968; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) (2002, p. 10).

The teacher becomes an ethnographer with the purpose of observing and listening to agents in order to better understand a specific situation. That is what the application of grounded theory and ethnography can deliver.

Conducting the study: Methodological instruments and pitfalls

The TR needs to move beyond the traditional cooperative paradigm and recognize the underlying conflictual nature of society. To achieve valuable data and to avoid misinformation, evasion, lies and fronts, the TR can apply a variety of instruments to cross-check the data such as observation recorded in field notes, semi-open, semi-structured questionnaires, questionnaires with student statements, profile confrontations, narratives, and individual and focus group interviews. Especially observation should focus on behaviour, on what people do more than what they say, and on the interaction between people in its many forms. However, the TR is in a conflicting situation both as to interviewing and observation.

Different methodological approaches might give access to more reliable data than data collected by means of an interview. Interviewees may be expected to lie depending on the topic.

According to Byram (1996) the interviewer will influence the interviewees' answers. The interviewees will know about and have an attitude to the interviewer's interests. To minimize the impact of the interviewer, attention should be paid to what the interviewees do instead of what they think or feel. Distortion of the truth and tailoring of responses may depend on the role and status of the interviewer in relation to the interviewees, whether they are on equal terms or have a student/teacher relationship.

Attention should also be paid to temporal and social contexts. During the interpretation of interviewing data, the temporal context is essential; what occurred and what follows. What has happened to the interviewee prior to the interview and what is anticipated in the near future will be important. Consequently, it is an advantage to combine interviews with observations since each will provide data about temporal contexts.

As already mentioned observation might give rise to challenges since the TR may be biased due to him being entrenched in the environment and having experience from it. Thus it is advisable to combine observations with other research instruments to get access to those being researched from different perspectives and to get them to tell the tales to be interpreted by the TR. The advantage is that the TR has the possibility to carry out long-term observations of the specific place, and for an ethnographer "place" is normally crucial to understand student experiences. The TR will be able to operate at a micro level and thus to explore the context in depth.

The TR may have the impression that the problems are ordinary, and maybe, when subject to research, they are far from ordinary. When applying a grounded theory approach, there are general strategies available to uncover the so-called hidden truth behind the apparently ordinary truth. One strategy here is the "constant comparative method" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967/1999), which means that the researcher examines each item of data coded in terms of a particular category and notes its similarities and differences to other data that have been similarly categorized. This

may lead to categories being differentiated into more clearly defined ones as well as to the specification of sub-categories (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2002, p. 213). During this process of systematic sifting and comparison, the mutual relationships and internal structures of categories will be more clearly illuminated. The research process may stop with an exploration and explanation of the research question, or it may be developed further into the generation of theory.

The specific categories constructed on the basis of the data can be evaluated by the participants, which contributes to a double check of the findings. The evaluation can take place in focus groups or by individual participants. This will give a more comprehensive picture of the situation than being limited to interviewing since the participants have to react to specific categories instead of answering questions or telling tales.

When moving between data and concepts, it is important to note plausible links to those made in the emerging analysis. For instance if students seem to resist against teacher authority, it must be clarified whether it is a specific type of teacher authority or authority in general.

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

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

If the TR chooses to move beyond exploration and explanation, the next step will be to generate theory and to compare the generated theory to other relevant theories. It is especially

during this process that the TR needs to have specific knowledge of relevant theories to be used as a framework for approaching the findings. It is important to bear in mind that not until this stage in the process does the TR apply relevant theories.

The research process does not follow an ideal, logical approach that can be carried out as a pre-defined set of procedures (Walford 1991). The TR needs to contend with the unanticipated behaviour and views of participants. He must be able to handle the unpredictable and to manage the emergence of "sensitive issues" as significant themes. However, the TR may fail to note significant social events. As Thomas agues:

> As a practitioner-researcher, you may know the "stage" and recognize yourself as an "actor" on it, but you will have to take extra measures as a researcher to ensure that you see the research setting and your role within it in a "fresh light (2009, p. 120).

In particular, theoretical aspects of the research and writing tasks will be challenging and demanding for the TR. To make it possible for teachers to carry out research in their own classrooms this should be seen not as an extra activity added to their teaching but rather as a transformation of their teaching.

Ethical aspects

All researchers face a variety of ethical dilemmas. Ethical issues are related to the behaviour of the researcher and the consequences for the people studied. In principle, the TR does not have to ask permission of anyone to conduct the research study. However, in educational research there are layers of consent which need to be negotiated both formally and informally such as through conversation. Educational institutions demand different ethical procedures and forms of participant consent. Sometimes gaining consent needs to be renegotiated during times when new ways of gathering data are found important and introduced.

The TR does not have to build rapport with the people studied. This aspect might give rise to specific problems such as how much does he have to tell the participants about the research, and does he have to tell all the participants? Does he have to present his findings to anyone at his place of work? The TR should also be aware of the question to what extent it is right to allow others to believe that you agree with them. (Walford, 2001, 136). Silverman argues that researchers studying human subjects ponder the dilemma of wanting to give full information to subjects but not "contaminating" their study "by informing subjects too specifically about the research questions to be studied" (Silverman, 2000, p. 20).

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

Conclusion and recommendations

The study shows that there are a number of challenges and limitations as well as possibilities to be aware of when carrying out a research study in one's own classroom as a teacher-as-researcher (TR).

The challenges especially concern the TR's different conflicting roles and his preconceived, biased attitudes. The TR has to define his role as a participant observer and pay attention to insider perspectives in terms of limited and biased access to data collection. Careful thought needs to be given to the type of research question, to how data are collected, to the layers of consent needed

when doing research in educational settings and to how to manage sensitive information. Sufficient academic theoretical knowledge, specific skills and academic language will also be a challenge for the TR not being familiar with the research field. The TR has to engage in reflection. He has to adopt a critical attitude towards established educational beliefs and principles and towards his dependence on habit and tradition. To be empowered as a TR in own classroom demands a great deal of time and energy. Time constraints may have a negative impact on the fulfilment of the research study. In addition, the ability to distance oneself from the struggles of everyday classroom experience and from preconceived views about effective practices is far from an easy aspect.

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

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

If the challenges seem too burdensome, what should be recommended is collaboration between the TR and an external researcher keeping in mind that different people have different skills and opportunities to develop and to use. The purpose of such a collaboration can be to fill the gap between research and practice. An alternative proposal is to prepare teachers as researchers

during their teacher education, which may be useful to any subject. Research within educational settings may have the capacity to illuminate aspects of the teachers' practices which are below the normal level of their consciousness. Teacher research can be useful, but it does not substitute for educational research of a more conventional kind.

References

Blakemore, H. (2012). Emergent teacher-researchers: A reflection on the challenges faced when conducting research in the English classroom. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique, Volume 11*, Number 2, 59-69.

Byram, M. (1996). Framing the experience of residence abroad: The pedagogical function of the informal interview. *Language, Culture and Curriculum 9* (1), 84-98.

Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing Grounded Theory. A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*. London: Sage publications.

Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. (1999). The teacher research movement: A decade later. *Educational Researcher, 28*, 15-25.

Coffey, A. & Renold, E. (2006). Hypermedia ethnography in educational settings: Possibilities and challenges. *Ethnography and Education 1* (1): 15-30. doi: 10.1080/17457820500512721.

Corey, S.M. (1949). Action research, fundamental research and educational practitioners. *Teachers College Record, 50*, 509-514.

Giddens, A. (1979). *Central Problems in Social Theory*. London: Macmillan.

Giddens, A. (1997). *The Constitution of Society*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Glaser, B.G. & Strauss, A.L. (1967/1999). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

Hammersley, M. (1993). On the teacher as researcher In Hammersley, M. (Ed.) *Educational Research.: Current Issues* (pp. 425-445). London: Paul Chapman Publishing.

Hammersley, M. (1997). Educational research and teaching: A response to David Hargreaves' TTA lecture. *British Educational Journal, Vol. 23*, No. 2, 141-161.

Hammersley, M. & Atkinson, P. (2002). *Ethnography. Principles in Practice*. London: Routledge.

Hargreaves, D.H. (1996). *Teaching as a Research-based Profession: Possibilities and Prospects*. Cambridge: Teacher Training Agency Lecture.

Lewin, K. (1948). *Resolving Social Conflicts*. New York: Harper and Row.

Meier, D. R., & Henderson, B. (2007). *Learning from Young Children in the Classroom: The Art and Science of Teacher Research*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Mercer, J. (2007). The challenges of insider research in educational institutions: Wielding a double-edged sword and resolving delicate dilemmas. *Oxford Review of Education, Vol. 33*, No. 1, 1-17.

Merton, R. (1972). Insiders and outsiders: A chapter in the sociology of knowledge. *American Journal of Sociology, 78* (July), 9-47.

Prosser, J. (1992). Personal reflections on the use of photography in an ethnographic case study. *British Educational Research Journal 18* (4), 397-411. doi: 10.1080/0141192920180406.

Qvortrup, J., Corsaro, W. & Honig, M.S. (2009). *The Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Raggl, A. (2015). The international researcher has to "Make the familiar strange and the strange familiar In Fritzche, B. & Huf, C. (Eds.) *The Benefits, Problems and Issues of Comparative and Cross-cultural Research* (pp. 35-52). Gloucestershire, UK: E & E Publishing.

Ritzer, G. (1996). *Modern Sociological Theory*. New York: The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc.

Silverman, G. (2000). *Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook*. London: Sage.

Simmel, G. (1950). *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. New York: Free Press.

Strauss, A.L. (1996). *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of Qualitative Research*. London: Sage Publications.

Tarp, G. (2006). Student perspectives in short-term study programmes abroad: A grounded theory study In Byram, M. & Feng, A. (Eds.) *Living and Studying Abroad. Research and Practice* (pp. 157-185). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters Ltd.

Tarp, G. (2011). *Agent Agendas in Student Exchanges. A Grounded Theory Study*. Saarbrücken, Germany: Lambert Academic Publishing.

Thomas, G. (2009). *How to Do Your Research Project: A Guide for Students in Education and Applied Social Sciences*. London: Sage.

Walford, G. (1991). Reflexive accounts of doing educational research. In Waldford, G. (Ed.) *Doing Educational Research* (pp. 1-17). London: Routledge.

Walford, G. (2001). *Doing Qualitative Educational Research. A Personal Guide to the Research Process*. London: Continuum.