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Deconstructing the myth of Collaborative Action Research - a democratic undertaking or a web of collusion and compliance?

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Background

Raising standards in education has been the mantra for educational stakeholders in England for the past two decades and has informed national, regional and local agendas for school improvement. In the pursuit of finding solutions to pedagogical problems action research has been promoted as an effective strategy. Informed by an emancipatory agenda it provides a framework for the generation of knowledge through different perspectives. However, the relentless drive for school effectiveness and the commodification of research imposes external and internal pressures on those conducting the research.

Research Questions

The paper provides a reflective account of the perilous journey undertaken by two university researchers leading a collaborative action research project involving education practitioners. It specifically focuses on the conflicts and dilemmas experienced in the negotiation of a multitude of obligations and the balancing act they had to perform in trying to fulfil the expectations of the various stakeholders: the funding body, the research participants and the University Ethics Committee. It is a story about the researchers' collaboration, collusion and compliance with a dominant culture that promotes a model of technical rationality and gives preeminence to auditing and measuring of educational effectiveness. As such it challenges values and beliefs about the purpose of educational research and how it should be conducted and reported. The key issues under investigation is the extent to which the researchers were able to resist the internal and external pressures generated through the 'commodification of research' (Bridges, 1998) in their endeavour to preserve their personal and professional identity. The discussion is concerned with the complex social, moral and ethical issues confronting them, and as such it attempts to make explicit the mechanisms involved in the mediation of their actions in response to external imperatives.

Methods

As this paper is concerned with the researcher's positioning in the matrix of collaboration, collusion and compliance, it seeks to make explicit the conceptualisation of action research as a democratic undertaking (Greenwood & Levin, 2000) and a hallmark of an 'extended teacher professionalism (Strickland, 1988), including the collaboration between researchers and stakeholders. The view presented in the literature promotes the aims of action research to facilitate understanding, improvement and reforming of professional practice (Ebutt, 1985; Zuber-Skerritt, 1996) with a strong emphasis on the aspect of collectivity and collaboration (Kemmis & Taggart, 1988), both of which are associated with critical dialogue and discourses reflecting different perspectives. However, as concluded by Posch (1994) action research tends to be externally motivated or led, forming an element of teachers' career development or as part of a project conducted by higher education researchers, which raises serious issues of ownership and professional integrity. To allow all voices to be heard and thus facilitate the generation of knowledge from all perspectives Stringer (2004) stresses the importance of establishing a communicative space, in which 'a meaning making dialogue between stakeholders' can be facilitated and 'emergent agreements and disagreements, understandings and decisions can be problematised and explored openly' (Kemmis, 2006: 472). He advocates a form of action research that represents a range of perspectives and unites participants and researchers in performing different roles.

Frame

This paper seeks to critically examine the tensions and dilemmas confronting the leaders of this particular collaborative action research projects. In doing so the discussion is developed around the four markers of action research as identified by Zuber-Skerritt (1996: 85), who defines action research as 'critical and (self-critical) collaborative inquiry, by reflective practitioners being accountable and making the results of their inquiry public, self-evaluating their practice and engaged in participatory problem solving and continuing professional development'. The discussion is structured around the following concepts:

- The element of accountability within an arena of competing internal and external agendas
- The concept of 'epistemic drift' (Bridges, 1998; Norris, 1992), which manifests itself in research undertaken primarily to satisfy expectations of their sponsors and funding agents, but which is no longer subject to the critical scrutiny of academic peer review.
- The spectre of litigation reflected in high priority given to a legal rather than caring ethics
- The commodification of education and educational research, reflecting in dubious practices such as filtering, under-reporting and censureship

Research findings

Through this critically reflective account of our navigation process through the micro-conflictual spaces of our collaborative action research context in which we operated as researchers of a collaborative action research process we identified a range of tensions and the tensions generated within. We found that the practitioners were deeply embedded within a national agenda of raising standards through school improvement and thus their mission was one of marketing the educational enterprise rather than critically evaluating it. Equally, we had to concede that we, the researchers, had also become entangled in the performativity and audit culture that had made educational research and educational evaluation in particular an instrument of an 'effectiveness regime that fuels capitalistic futures' (Stronach, et al, 2002: 17). In view of the arguments presented this paper concludes that action research involving university researchers and public stakeholders seriously challenges the democratic principles commonly associated with this genre of critical enquiry. Although as educational researchers we subscribe to this ideal in an endeavour to bring about improvements for the common good, at the same time we feel the need to caution against too simplistic and idealistic a view that fails to take into account the micro and macro political pressures incumbent on university researchers, participating practitioners and other stakeholders

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