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**'It is difficult to work without it'**

**Action research at work in countering  
hegemonic education policies**

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## **Editorial**

Taken together, the six papers that happen to have been submitted to this Bulletin provide us with a surprisingly coherent set of examples from across the world about how action research can be used to counter hegemonic policies by privileging the voices of learners and teachers who are trying to build more equitable contexts for social change. A further surprise is their global spread: they report from Spain, Australia, Sweden and Laos – and yet in each case there is a similar theme: how, in local contexts, to break free from the particular constraints and oppressions of global and regional policy imperatives to create critical spaces for inquiry and action.

The collection arose from the CARN Conference in 2008, organised by Liverpool Hope University and Leeds Metropolitan University. It took place in the centre of Liverpool, the year when the city was designated European City of Culture and many delegates enjoyed the chance to get to know a bit about the city which happens to be the one where I grew up. My own recollections of our weekend in Liverpool are still fresh. We created together a special culture of our own that lit a colourful array of imaginative sparks, and my memories of the event have been further enriched by the opportunity to study these papers.

Three years have passed since that weekend, and I must offer readers, contributors and the conference organisers our apologies for having taken so long to bring this Bulletin to fruition. The personal stories that lie behind the discontinuities that this Bulletin has suffered reflect in many ways the same kind of turmoil and institutional disturbance that is depicted or alluded to in the papers presented here. Suffice it to say that I took over as its 3<sup>rd</sup> editor in 2010 when a major disruption in my own working life created a further hiatus and a further year's delay. The papers in these pages are, however, well worth the wait, and together shed light on the way that action research offers unique opportunities in a turbulent policy environment.

### **CARN 2008: the conference**

To me the participative atmosphere of CARN 2008 was maintained through a particularly bold approach to the way the Conference was structured: instead of spreading the keynote speeches throughout the Conference and programming them as stand-alone events, the organisers chose to group them together at the beginning, with each of the speakers introducing a conference theme that they then facilitated with conference participants in four separate Committees of Inquiry. This immersion of the four speakers into our deliberations was certainly beyond the call of what is normally asked from a keynote speaker, but it brought alive their ideas, and our responses to them to a depth that I felt was successfully sustained with great care by us all throughout the event – to the final plenary when all four drew some issues and questions together arising from the Committee discussions for us to consider and take away.

Marie Brennan opened the four discussion themes with some observations on '**Varying Conceptions of Practice**'. Characterising her home base of

Australia as 'a colony that hasn't made the transition to becoming a serious country' she posed the question 'what are the conditions of practice in our own contexts and how do they relate to everywhere else?' In a deeply philosophical analysis she invited us to think about how '*practice* is always positioned in multiple *fields* and *institutions*', and to consider the challenge of dealing with all three.

Susan Groundwater-Smith introduced the theme of '**Cultural Contexts for the Conduct of Action Research**' through an appreciation of the complex and dynamic nature of 'social political and material conditions for the practice of action research'. She took up the theme of 'place' arguing that in effect, action research is mediated by place and by concomitant questions of 'what can be said and done – by, with and for whom?'

In the third keynote, Susan Noffke spoke to the theme of '**Diversity, Equity and Social Justice**', referring to Raymond Williams's formulation of the 'pessimism of the intellect yet optimism of the will' as a basis for enabling us to recognise hegemonic power without losing the ability to ask ourselves what it means to act ethically and morally in conjunction with knowledge generation. Referring again to the theme of 'place' she introduced the notion of 'transnational urbanism' to illustrate the contested nature of 'place'.

Finally, taking up the theme of '**Ethics**' Brendan McCormack described the tensions between the different ethical paradigms that health practitioners and researchers are subject to, as 'ethics' becomes formulated for institutional practice. This narrow definition of 'ethics' which typically frames research as separate from practice presents action researchers with some special dilemmas. And once again we were presented with a challenge as to how we negotiate our way around a complex territory where the dominant rhetoric and practice undermine our conceptions of how we construe our behaviour as ethical, but because this hegemony is never complete, where we may also find opportunities to re-frame its demands to serve the more egalitarian interests of action research.

By disrupting the conventional separation between keynote speeches and the praxis of the conference space, the organisers had encouraged the posing of questions and challenges from the outset, and gave us, in the Committees of Inquiry, a fertile ground to bring our insights from the parallel presentations we had heard. So the Committees of Inquiry provided a reflective space which positively encouraged us to integrate the themes with the presentations. To me this offered a fascinating contrast to the convention of organising presentations according to Conference themes – an approach which can sometimes result in the substance and richness of the themes becoming lost because they become reduced to titles of parallel sessions.

It was a further lesson about what becomes possible when we situate ourselves in different dynamics, and the conference organisers Anne Campbell, Christine

Bold, Sue Warren and John Nixon - along with the four keynote speakers - are to be congratulated on having taken a risk which proved so fruitful.

### **CARN 2008 through the lens of the Bulletin**

CARN is a forum where we invite, and are invited, to peek or even to peer and to enter into the worlds of others as we share a few glancing facets of the studies we have made of different worlds we have encountered as researchers. In this collection of papers from the Conference we are treated to more discursive versions of presentations that were made in Liverpool in 2008, and the same invitation applies.

All four of the Committees of Inquiry themes can be discerned in the papers in this Bulletin, with an explicit focus on social justice and cultural contexts for the conduct of action research but also with ethics and praxis surfacing as necessary threads within and throughout.

We begin with the very notion of beginning and of entrance in a brief but powerful ethnographic account of how newcomers – in this case, immigrant children – negotiate their ways in to a social space that is new and confusing to them but familiar to those who already occupy it. In **'Learning to live a new life'** Henar Rodríguez Navarro, Alfonso García Monge, Inés Ruiz, Roberto Santos Fernández and Rocío Anguita Martínez examine the social codes and the associated processes of learning them as evidenced by observing 3 children on entry to a new primary school in Spain. This account brings an immediacy of reporting that will resonate widely to readers' own diverse experiences of entering new social spaces and in so doing offers action researchers a fresh problematic in our 'cultural contexts for the conduct of action research' and the experience for us and for others of being a 'newcomer' in such contexts.

Remaining in Spain, we move into higher education and **'Action-Research as a remedy to overcome schizophrenia among university professors'** by Inés Ruiz-Requies, Rocío Anguita Martínez, Iván Jorrín-Abellán and Henar Rodríguez Navarro. Here we see how current Spanish policy imperatives threaten to overwhelm teachers in higher education as they attempt - all at the same time - to meet demands to innovate, to cope with new standards such as those set out by the Bologna Process (Bologna 1999) and to generate research 'products'. Meeting this nexus of apparently conflicting challenges – and varying conceptions of praxis - through action research enabled a university research group spanning a diverse range of disciplines and approaches to evolve into a thriving community of education practice. The authors' account of the process in case-study form demonstrates how uniquely effective the use of action research can be to tackle such a complex set of demands. It also provides us with the title of this Bulletin – *'it is difficult to work without it'* (P.19) – a sentiment that is echoed throughout.

On the other side of the planet in Australia, Greg Elliott and Nicole Mockler worked in an education policy environment where action research is positively encouraged and supported, but primarily as a means 'to implement policy into

practice' rather than to 'grow from local concerns of teachers and schools' (p.23). **'Practitioner Inquiry for whole school change: possibilities and pitfalls'** focuses again on a specific case – an independent high school for girls – to make a critical assessment of attempts to undertake 'inquiry-based professional learning' within the school. By attempting collaboratively to develop 'inquiry as stance' the authors show - in common with their Spanish colleagues - how action research in the form of professional learning for educational change can become embedded within an institutional culture.

Cultural contexts for the conduct of action research are again brought into sharp focus through the work of Britte-Marie Berge, Ann-Louise Backtorp (now Silfver) and Lars Dahlström whose symposium **'The importance of context in neo-liberal times'** presents three layered perspectives: from global to national policy and finally into the classroom, on the productive collaboration that has taken place between educators at Umeå University in Sweden and in the Republic of Laos.

Deeply rooted too in questions of diversity, equity and social justice, the analysis is introduced at the macro policy level by Lars Dahlström with an analysis of **'The global assault on education'**. Setting his analysis within the context of the neoliberal project and its attack on contextually sound education as a social right, he contrasts the mediating role played by the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) league table system as a surveillance mechanism with the way that policy is framed in the global south. There the 'Education for All' framework 'is a composition of a liberal humanist discourse related to the EFA goals and a neoliberal discourse related to the way these goals are going to be managed' (p. 44).

Ann-Louise Silfver takes this analysis of education policy into the national arena in the global south of the Republic of Laos to report her own research **'National education reform in a global neo-liberal context'** on the education reform process there following the waning of the influence of the Eastern Bloc. Once again the themes of the Conference are evident as she deconstructs policy discourses on gender, education and power. And once again we see disjunction, this time at the national level, between goals and the means to implement them – where the values of donors to global south education initiatives become apparent.

The final paper from this symposium, Britte-Marie Berge's **'Stories of resistance – contextual gender choreography analysis in local educational settings'** returns us to settings similar to the ones we encountered in the first paper of this Bulletin, this time in classrooms in Laos and Sweden. Berge's accounts of teachers' attempts to develop gender equity show both 'progress' and 'normalisation' in mixed groups of students, well illustrated through the descriptions of 'in-between' moments and situations made observable through the analytic technique of gender choreography, and further enriched by the action researchers' insights into their own subtle resistances to a fully egalitarian practice of gender equity.

It has been a delight for me to see how CARN 2008 provided an opportunity for us to publish such a compelling and coherent set of 'critical encounters'. The message they all convey celebrates action research as a powerful way to integrate and sustain a critical analysis within educational systems that have become so complex, contradictory and fragmented that it can seem impossible to comprehend them, let alone change things. They show how sustained interruptions to the urgency of implementing policy imperatives have the ability to raise our understanding of these complexities and open up critical spaces where social justice begins to flourish.

My sincere thanks are due to Jean Davidson and Charmian Wilby, CARN secretaries, for all their work and support in helping me to bring this Bulletin to publication.

**Reference**

Bologna 1999 [http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00Main\\_doc/990719BOLOGNA\\_DECLARATION.PDF](http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00Main_doc/990719BOLOGNA_DECLARATION.PDF) (accessed July 12<sup>th</sup> 2011)

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## **Learning to live a new life: the integration process of three immigrant pupils in a school in Spain**

**Henar Rodríguez Navarro, Alfonso García Monge, Inés Ruiz, Roberto Santos Fernández, Rocío Anguita Martínez**

In this research we have followed three immigrant pupils who are newcomers to a primary school in Spain. The aims of study were:

- finding out issues that facilitate and hinder integration
- evidence in order to describe the stages pupils go through when arriving at a new school, and
- social codes that the pupils learn within that context.

With a view to all that, we carried out a school ethnography. The data gathering tools used to collect information were: participant observation, interviews, sociometrics and discussion groups.

The study took place over a school year, from September to June, at a public school in a Spanish city with a population of 300,000 inhabitants. New students from abroad were intensively monitored during the school day, from 9:00 to 14:00.

In the following paper we make use of several narrative accounts as a way to show some of the findings of the study.

### **First moments: "Looking for light in confusion"**

*It is the first school day. Seasoned pupils are playing, joking and greeting each other at the entrance, but a child is standing next to the door, observing motionless what is going on around. He is Josef, a 10-year-old Bulgarian boy who has just come to Spain. He is wearing a cap that he puts in his pocket after a while (no other child is wearing a cap). Not far from him, holding her little brother's hand, is Latifa, a 10-year-old girl who has just arrived from Morocco. She is wearing a scarf on her head. Like Josef, she is observing attentively what is going on around. And soon she takes off her scarf.*

*The bell rings, calling the pupils to go into the building. They all run to line up according to age. The shouting is really deafening and we can notice Josef covering his ears. The teachers stay close to Josef and Latifa. In the lines, children joke, chat and show each other little toys. Some of them come up to Josef to find out his name and ask him if he can play football. He smiles at them. Latifa does not let her little brother out of her sight and sees him off when it is his group's turn to enter the building and go up to their classroom.*

*In the classroom, the newcomers are introduced to his classmates, who are asked to play with them and help them integrate.*

*In the first classes, Josef and Latifa are hanging on the teacher's explanations, even though neither of them speak Spanish. Josef tries to adopt different attitudes according to what he sees around: he laughs when his*

*classmates laugh, he looks serious when they do so... On the other hand, Latifa appears more reserved and, as a rule, only looks at the teachers.*

*Also, during the first days we notice that at the time of entering the school (in the morning and after the break) Josef and Latifa are the first ones to line up, long before their classmates come.*

There are several details in the narrative that are worth mentioning:

First of all, we can imagine that the insecurity derived from getting to an unknown place is compounded by the great deal of information that saturates newcomers. Therefore, this is the moment when they need the adults' help most. To that effect, we have noticed the importance of the teachers showing them spaces, rituals and basic words to interact with their peers, as well as facilitating them to join a group of pupils they can play with during the school breaks.

Secondly, these children choose the clearest codes among all that surround them: those established by the institution and its teachers (rituals concerning times and spaces, adoption of attitudes valued by teachers). Such ritualized times and spaces provide clear and safe places from which they can observe their peers and learn their interaction modes.

Thirdly, we understand that their insecurity gives rise to the need to be accepted. That, in turn, leads them to get rid of anything that may make them look different (the cap or the scarf) in order to show an open attitude.

Finally, Latifa's family is likely to be staying in Spain without legal permission, which probably causes her to appear more reserved and cautious. Obviously, such insecurity will make her integration process slower.

### **When the adult disappears: looking for a place among equals**

*Two weeks have passed since the beginning of the school year. The break starts at 11:30 in the morning. The pupils have half an hour to play.*

*The space is occupied according to age and gender. The older children take possession of the sports areas (football pitches and basketball courts) and the rest must make do with the spare space.*

*Josef's classmates lead him to one of the corners of the playground, where they improvise a football pitch. Once there, they draw lots to form the teams and start playing at once. Willy, a Dominican pupil who is repeating a grade, is not allowed to play, as the children claim he is not good at football.*

*During the game Josef does his best to please his classmates, passing them the ball so that they can score goals.*

*We notice a lot of interactions on the borderline between kidding and aggression. Tomás, a gypsy boy, is fouled and feels abused, so he reacts*

*angrily. The other children respond in the same mood, and as a result he quits the game and goes away to meet other gypsy boys and girls. Latifa has come out into the playground hand in hand with two girls who shadow her everywhere. They decide to play a sort of hide-and-peek, a game in which a person must find and capture the others. Latifa lets one of the girls lead her and runs with her around the playground to find a place to hide. She looks content, and she tries to warn her peers when the girl who chases after them comes near. The bell rings, signalling the end of the break. Before it had rung, some girls and boys (like Willy) had already lined up. Today, Josef and Latifa are among the last children to come. They have made the most of their playtime.*

This description shows several interesting details:

Firstly, the newcomers learn little by little the horizontal codes that regulate interactions among peers, such as separation between boys and girls, age hierarchy in the distribution of space, most appropriate types of physical activities according to gender...

Secondly, one of those codes establishes ways to regulate the status of children within the group. Actions between teasing and aggression constitute a continuous sizing up of the peer's attitudes. If his/her reaction is aggressive, the response will involve the child's exclusion, whereas if his/her reaction is submissive, the child will become the target of future mockery. Therefore, it is not easy for a newcomer to understand this ambivalence of the message and respond in an appropriate way.

Thirdly, the boy's physical activities require a higher degree of skill than those of the girls, and the boys who do not show enough skill will be excluded. This is complicated by the fact that boys do not usually do any other kind of activity. Therefore, the homogenization of physical activities constitutes an obstacle for integration.

Fourthly, newcomers do their best to integrate with their classmates. But when they have to face situations of rejection, those children belonging to groups with a stronger sense of out-of-school identity take refuge in their respective ethnic groups. This is the case for gypsy children.

Finally, in just two weeks the pupils show they are already learning the first things that will contribute to the beginning of their school socialization: physical spaces, basic school norms, teachers' and classmates' names, knowledge of the meaning of basic codes shared among peers (words or gestures to start conversations, to express with whom and where to play, to signal differences in interaction according to gender). These indicators show that the newcomers are reaching the second stage of their integration process. On the other hand, lining up in first place for entry into the school, inactivity during the playtime or

seeking other newcomers to play with constitute clear indicators of problems in the integration process.

### **Limits and opportunities of schooling**

*Three months after the beginning of the school year, Joseph and Latifa start to manage to communicate in a basic way with teachers and classmates. The contribution of the support classes has been fundamental in such process. In those classes, a teacher works with those children who show some kind of learning difficulty, and the atmosphere of confidence and security that reigns there cause Joseph and Latifa to show a relaxed attitude. Such atmosphere contrasts with that of standard classes. There, the number of pupils is bigger (twenty to twenty-five children) and situations tend to be more competitive and individualistic. The teacher sets tasks that are usually worked out very quickly by the most gifted pupils. As for the rest of them, either they are absentminded or they strive once and again without receiving any kind of feedback.*

*During classes we notice that children exchange notes and gestures. There is a whole network of communication behind the teacher's back. Such communication used to go unnoticed by Josef at first, but now we can see him passing notes to other children. He is good at signwriting and his classmates ask him to write their names.*

*Today the teacher proposes doing some group work. The children form groups freely. Willy stays alone. The teacher decides to place him in one of the groups, and immediately its members complain about that.*

*Something similar happens in the Physical Education class. Two teams are formed, but neither of them chooses Willy. The teacher proposes a game in which pairs are created with one member of each team, and the two children that make up each pair must compete with one another to be the first to score a basket. The one who loses is eliminated. Each confrontation is carefully observed by the rest of children. Joseph's and Willy's gestures of tension are apparent. Willy loses and is reproached by the other members of the team.*

From all these situations we can draw the following conclusions:

Firstly, after a while the newcomers reach a new stage in their integration process. At that moment, we can notice a qualitative change in the interactions that take place between new and established pupils. While at previous stages newcomers understood the general dynamics at school and began learning about the basic interaction codes among equals, at this new stage they start to relativize the value of vertical codes (norms emanating from the school and its teachers) and consider them as subordinate to the horizontal ones. Therefore, we can notice at this stage that some games are played according to adults' rules, but such rules are constantly on the verge of being infringed as a way to please their peers.

The most important aspects of this process are social and communicative abilities, self-confidence and self-esteem, personal and family situation, academic performance and social status of the child within the group.

In the second place, the narrative shows us the school culture that newcomers have to cope with, as well as its opportunities and limits regarding the integration process:

- the teachers' work with small groups makes children feel welcomed and helps them to keep up and participate with the rest of their classmates.
- in individual, competitive activities where there is little time to react, the most capable children inhibit the responses of the rest.
- in team work where the teacher has not grouped the children according to educational criteria tends to favour situations of rejection and marginalization.
- tasks children have to perform in front of the group constitute a problem for the most insecure children (as is usually the case for newcomers).

Through all these examples we have tried to show a sample of the complexity of the integration process that newcomers to a school have to undergo. Such a process involves a series of stages and a network of codes that characterize the school culture, as well as showing the different aspects that facilitate or hinder integration.

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# **Action-Research as a remedy to overcome schizophrenia among university professors**

**Inez Ruiz-Requies, Rocio Anguita-Martínez, Iván Jorrín-Abellán, Henar Rodríguez-Navarro.**

## **Abstract**

*In this article we tackle the description and analysis of the process of a university interdisciplinary research group becoming an educational practice community. They state that best practice and teamwork among all members can help them face the changes required by the new educational system of higher education. Case Studies are shown in the field of Information and Communication Technology Applied to Education as an example and a methodological resource of A-R.*

## **1. Introduction**

Spain is currently implementing huge reforms with regard to the so-called quality improvement of higher education institutions. A National Agency, ANECA (Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la calidad y acreditación), was created in 2002 to contribute to the improvement in quality of the Spanish higher education system by evaluating, certifying, and accrediting degrees, teachers and institutions. Universities are encouraged to change the traditional teaching oriented approach to a more research oriented one. At the same time, European higher education is also involved in a major reform to create knowledge.

These research demands coming from ANECA as well as the teaching ones posed by the Bologna convergence process are leading Spanish University teachers into a special kind of schizophrenia. They are expected to innovate in their courses, to cope with the Bologna challenges, and all at the same time they are supposed to generate as many research products as possible in order to achieve the higher education research Standards. For instance, a Spanish associate professor who wants to obtain a tenure track position must teach between 12 and 15 lecture hours per week in both Autumn and Spring semesters, and at the same time they are supposed to publish at least 5-6 articles in international journals. Although ubiquity or even the power of a superhero could be good solutions to overcome this stressful situation, we have come to believe that Action-Research as well as the creation of practice communities could offer more accurate and realistic solutions.

In this paper we show the evolution of an interdisciplinary university research group which developed into an educational practice community after identifying, analyzing and reflecting on the effects of the educational actions of its members. The interdisciplinary research team, formed by Engineers, Computer Scientists, Psychologists and Educators, has been working for the past decade within the Computer Supported Collaborative Learning Field (CSCL)

(Koschman, 1996) (Dillenbourg, 1999), and is especially concerned with evaluation in these kinds of educational settings.

CSCL is a new educational movement that emerged in the mid-nineties among researchers and practitioners in several fields, including cognitive sciences, sociology, and computer engineering. CSCL focuses on how collaborative learning supported by technology can enhance peer interaction and group work, and how collaboration and technology facilitate the sharing and distribution of knowledge and expertise among community members.

## **2. Changes and teaching implications before a new university system: European Higher Education Area**

The establishment of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) requires an improvement in educational quality and substantial changes in the design of the classes using a system of measurement called the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), in the development of competence and formulation of objectives for the training of more autonomous, critical and competitive people and professionals in the workplace, in teaching methodology, in evaluation and in the mentoring system from a practical, participative and student centred focus.

The Bologna process (1999), which has required many changes in European Higher Education from university institutions, already has a deadline of 2010. This is the year in which all European universities must start their new plans of study based on interdisciplinary, integrated and constructive educational models (academic, professional and vital vision (Barnett, 2001)), which seek to train reflective, creative and critical professionals, capable of adapting to the challenges of the new 'knowledge society'. Such a society demands continuous lifelong learning, where the individual must be able to manipulate content, update it, select what is appropriate for a specific context, learn permanently, understand what is learned and all of this in such a way that can be adapted to new, quickly changing situations.

Therefore, the EHEA must see itself as an opportunity to "improve" the University and turn it into a great institution of quality to the service of a better society, beyond formal transformations and bureaucratic adaptations I think this sentence can be deleted We consider that this new vision of teaching consists not only in transforming the subjects to credits and changing the terminology of the official documents, but it also involves a change in the mentality of the way we teach and learn. This is quite a controversial matter because it means changing centuries-old practice.

Our University of Valladolid (UVa) in particular has firmly decided on facilitating opportunities for experimentation and has developed Teaching Innovation Projects within the framework of convergence toward the EHEA. The projects follow objectives related to getting to know what we are doing and how we can adapt the teachings of the EHEA. The role of the teaching staff in the

pedagogical renovation is a key factor. But we must not forget that this requires collaboration and coordination between institutions, departments and participants in the innovation projects.

Because of this, in this article we try to present how a group of people, motivated teachers and researchers, are not only participating in these projects of teaching innovation, but also work, reflect and evaluate their own practice to improve and change it. It deals with the group EMIC-GSIC (Education and Resources, Computers and Culture-Group of Intelligent Systems and Cooperatives), for whom research and teaching have always gone hand in hand, not only because of what one learns researching can be of advantage later to improve classes, but also because, as educational researchers and as committed teaching staff with our own practice, we believe it offers an opportunity we cannot miss to try to improve our teaching practice. On the same note, we consider that if in universities research groups were created with motivation to work and to form "*practice communities*" where communication between members were horizontal, where respect, listening and compromise were the top priority and where language and aspirations were shared, then surely any discomfort, imbalance, and confrontations between staff would be reduced.

Our group is already a stable practice community, interdisciplinary in nature, made up of people in information technology, computer scientists and educators with a horizontal organization and with great diversity, made up of different sensitivities and ways of understanding knowledge, but sharing interests and common lines which revolve around CSCL. We do not claim to provide a solution to such a complex and diverse problem as university reform, but we do believe it is of interest to show how researching our own practice can help solve some of the problems which touch close to the teaching function and stimulating greater involvement. As Lewin (1946) argued -through Action-Research (A-R), theoretical advances and social changes are achieved simultaneously.

### **3. Action-Research as a resource to overcome schizophrenia which the Bologna Process assumes for university staff: an interdisciplinary group**

If the methodology of A-R represents a process where subjects investigated are authentic co-researchers, participating actively in the planning of the problem to be researched (which will be something that strongly affects and interests them), the researcher must become a facilitator of the process, a catalyst for problems and conflicts, and, in general, a technician and an available resource to be consulted. The research experiences and the evolution of the group could be considered research that drives towards action. The practice community we have formed "little by little", "study after study" has helped us unite forces and continue making joint decisions to overcome obstacles and difficulties we have come across along the way.

If we present how we have grown as a practice community and what type of studies we have done, it is because we consider that in these moments of change and adaptation to a new reality, it is of interest to know how people of different disciplines, with very different ways of thinking but with similar motivations (the improvement of quality and university teaching) can work together hand in hand. Because of this, our final intention is to reflect on how we can build an educational practice community among university staff through research for EHEA on educational practice itself.

### **3.1. Toward the change of a common area of higher education: Evolution of the interdisciplinary Group EMIC-GSIC**

Since 1994 the work group has been made up of professors, researchers and education professionals from the Superior Technical School of Telecommunications, the Superior Technical School of Computer Science and the School of Education and Social Work from the University of Valladolid. The group is led by a telecommunications professor concerned with how this field of knowledge could contribute to the field of education, instead of considering such staff as mere consumers of technologies.

Throughout the 1999-2000 academic year, the professor in charge of the Computer Architecture (CA) course was a Telecommunications engineer whose role it was to help students get through the class successfully, and who introduced new educational formulas which required great changes in the educational Project, and involved a lot of effort, work and collaboration among colleagues, because it was a shared subject. Because of this, he opted for a practical learning approach (Gimeno Sacristán y Pérez Gómez, 1992) according to the model of constructive learning (Bruner, 1991, 1997; Coll, 1993, 1997) and developed an educational project in which theoretical and practical procedures were integrated in a collaborative environment based on the CSCL framework. This was a major boost and the beginning of a change for the rest of the professors in the group to change their classes and to research whether this new way of teaching really helped students learn. In this same year, 1999/2000 the Junta de Castilla y León granted the group further support to the Project by enabling professors from education - from the Department of Pedagogy - to join the work team. This innovation marked the interdisciplinary nature of the group, since it tried to implant a methodology based on socio-constructive principles along the lines suggested by the CSCL (Jorrín, 2006), and promoted the evaluation of teaching innovation and of educational practice itself over a period of 4 academic years until 2003.

In 2003, the group grew considerably, both in the number of people involved and the amount of work, due to young researchers joining and receiving grants for new European projects. At this time the evaluation of the innovation spread to include a further class, Information and Communication Technology Applied to Education (ICT from now on) in teacher training for 3 academic years. All the research and work carried out by the group is related with the new demands that the System of Higher Education proposes and how it can continue to promote student centred learning, in a collaborative manner and supported by

technology. In this way, the practice community, interested and motivated by researching their own teaching became directed towards change as teachers.

Further, we show how one of our subjects, the ICT course was burdened with successive research and change projects over the years 2004 - 2006: firstly to follow through with the objectives of the European project TELL (Towards Effective network supported collaborative learning activities) (project "e-Learning TELL", 2005), to generate a conceptual framework of evaluation applicable to the CSCL environment, and secondly to analyze diverse case studies to adapt the subject to the defined approaches in the Informe *Tuning Project* (González, y Wagenaar, 2003).

### **3.2. Case study methodology as action research in the university classroom**

When we talk about Case Study (CS) there is no general agreement about what we are referring to. Sometimes it refers to a research method (Rodríguez et al., 1996), other times, we refer to a methodological strategy (Yin 1993; en Sandín, 2003), while on other occasions it is a qualitative tool whose main objective is to provide a sound description of an event, and finally, it can mean a small group of people or objects (MacNealy, 1997).

Due to these variations in interpretation, and because of the complexity of providing a precise definition of CS, we opted to choose what Stake meant by CS:

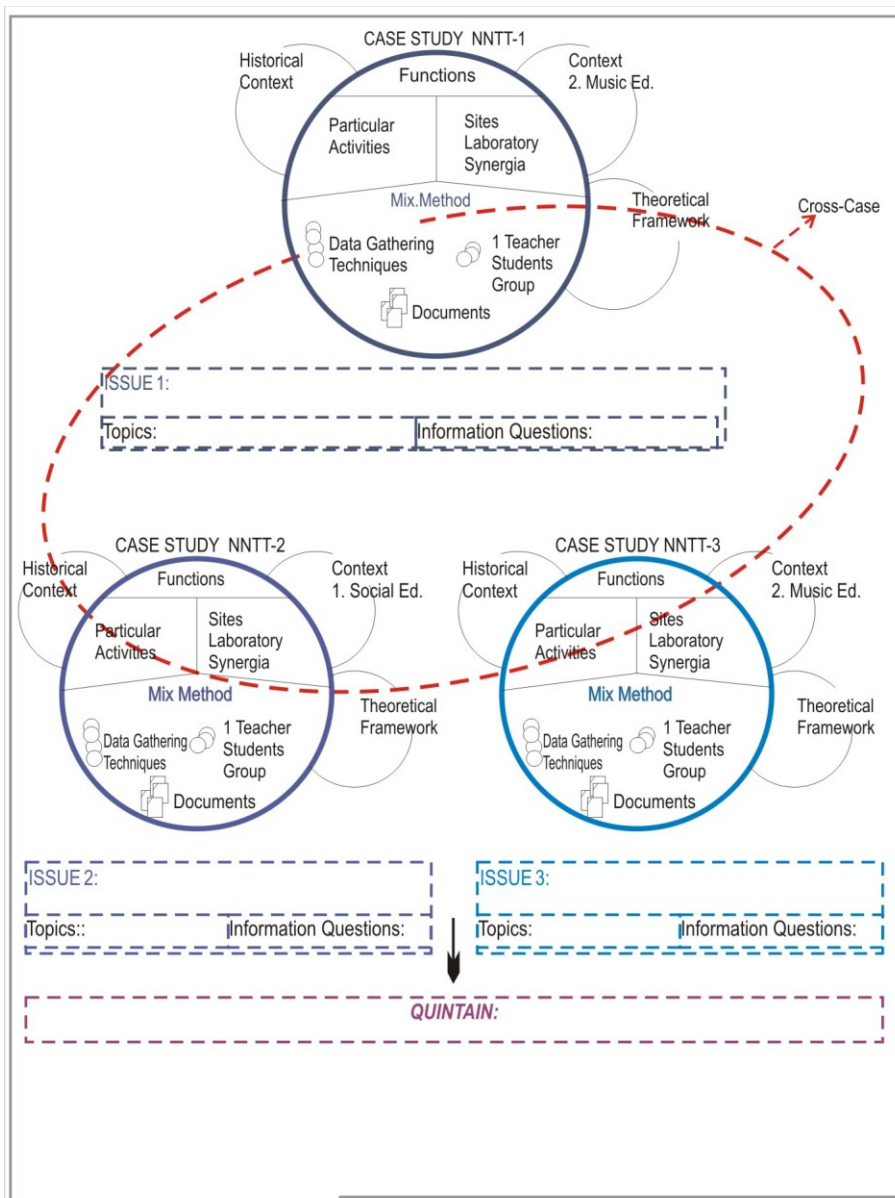
*"...Case study is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied that as a research form is defined by its interest in particular cases, and not by the most used research methods (...). Case Study is both case research process and the research product" (Stake, 1994: 236-237).*

He emphasizes that the purpose of the case study is not to make a representation of the world. The intention is to present the reality of the particular case, to understand it in depth. A case is something specific, complex, and dynamic. An integrated system lots of times, with its "own personality" (Stake, 1998: 16). For this reason, when we want to raise a CS, we need to go into the different situations and particular work settings in order to obtain the most exhaustive knowledge of events as possible. Martínez Bonafé refers to a case study as "exam of an example in action" (Martinez Bonafé, 1990: 59).

In our research, the CS allows us to get thorough knowledge about how the ICT course is developed. The process we follow is to observe the proceedings of the teacher and students, to see the results of those actions, and repeat this process until we find the right strategy that allows us to offer quality education. This process is equivalent to the "action-research-action" cycle that the RA proposes. Therefore, we think that the CS is an optimum tool to describe in

detail an educative situation, always within a context defined by the investigator (Jorrín, 2006).

To better understand how we have used the Case Study (CS) as a methodology of A-R in the classroom, we will describe one of the most recent experiences, carried out between 2004 and 2006 in ICT. For three academic years this field was involved in various processes of "action-reflection-action" that from the start led to changes and led to an understanding of the process as one of continuous change. The research was designed according to Stake's approach (1998, 2005). Both the researchers' interests and the people researched were taken into consideration. The researchers shared the design, results and times yes, I mean scheduling. In the study we can differentiate several roles. For instance, the subject teacher who remained in the role of teacher, the role of researchers who conducted the direct observation in the classroom and the role of students who voluntarily participated in discussion groups and interviews giving their opinions and critiques. Furthermore, other teachers of computer science were also part of the practice community. Their function was to carry out the event log analysis extracted from the collaborative platform currently in use - Synergeia (an educative version of the BSCW, - Basic Supported Collaborative Learning <http://bscl.fit.fraunhofer.de/>). They also displayed the event logs through the sociograms that teachers showed to their students to give them feedback about their participation during the process. Thus, with data obtained from several sources (direct observations, focus groups, interviews and Web questionnaires carried out with the tool Quest (Gómez et al. 2002), event log analysis and daily work performed by students). Three partial reports were written, one report for each case. Later, they were integrated and were crossed, as Stake (2006) calls "Cross-case". This allowed us to obtain the professional and educational competencies developed and acquired by participants during the process as well as to redefine the methodology and technology used. The multiple CS of the ICT course is represented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: Multiple Case Study of ICT course (NNTT) New Technologies**

Quintain is the general and main question in the research. Currently, the ICT course is still settled in the approaches of CSCL to mediate the processes of teaching and learning in an attending teaching environment. It is based on an active methodology that follows IBL (Inquiry Based Learning) (Bruce, 2000) and on a Wiki Technology that we call "Inquiry (cowiki-) based learning" (Jorrín et. al, 2007)

#### 4. Conclusions: Some research experiences which help us change

After working together since 1994, there are lots of lessons learnt from the EMIC-GSIC group that help us to work, understand and overcome the ups and downs that are produced in the change process in which the University system of Higher Education is involved.

- The first and fundamental lesson learnt about the process of research-action-research is that despite being a difficult dynamic, and hard to sustain on time, (because it requires the involvement of the whole collective) it is difficult work without it, because it becomes addictive. This first lesson constitutes the basis for a good job and group learning.

- The second element that adds a fundamental value is that the process of work is systematic. This allows us to make cycles of action – research - reflection in an organized and methodical way and to obtain good data about our reality. We believe that this is the key to the formation of our practice community and to its strong sustainability over successive years. The strong link between teaching and researching is the anchor that allows us to navigate and move forward in the stormy world of Higher Education in general, and the world of teaching in particular. We only have the certainty that research and reflection are the right way to live as teachers.

We also note some of the weaknesses and strengths that have been generated after the process of teaching-learning in the subject ICT , and that are helping us to adapt our courses to the EHEA. Among the strengths, we can point out these:

- Firstly, the design of the subject has promoted collaboration between the students, and they value it in a hugely positive way.

*"I like the dynamic that we are following in class... We work in pairs, we do the tasks, and after all this we discuss it with the rest of our group, and then they give their opinions, I give my opinion. I like it" (Comment from a student of the ITC course subject extracted from the Evaluative Questionnaire)*

- Secondly, the support technologies for the educational process are valued in a positive way by both teachers and students, who refer to its ease of use, and the utility of sharing information between classmates.

*"Yes. I also believe that it has been nice because, for instance, in my case I could find all work and every staff posted on Synergeia. Although maybe I haven't seen everyone" (A).*

*"You also have the advantage that you can access it whenever you want and anything that you don't know you can find it there" (B)*

*(Comments of two students during the Focus Groups)*

Among the weaknesses and points that we have to improve, we take into account:

- Not only do the technological practical aspects of the ICT course subject have to be considered, but also the educational aspects have to be emphasised in a deeper way.
- We have to promote work among the groups, because students don't usually work with members of other groups.

In this paper we have tried to reflect the principal problems detected on the ICT course. Despite the high degree of complexity of the research – action - research process, this practice community continues to be involved in these kinds of studies, and to reflect about their practices and how to transform them. An example of this is reported in Jorrín et al (2007).

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# Practitioner Inquiry for whole school change: possibilities and pitfalls

Greg Elliott & Nicole Mockler

## Abstract

*This paper will report on a year-long practitioner inquiry project conducted within a comprehensive girls' secondary school throughout the course of 2008. A member of an Australian network of teacher inquiry oriented schools known as the Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools, the school has a well established tradition of teacher inquiry and action research. Within the 2008 Learning Project, a team of ten practitioner researchers has worked both collaboratively and individually to conduct inquiry into their practice for the purpose of enhancing student learning, pedagogy and assessment across the School. The project was designed to meet the needs of the school context and funded by the School itself rather than via an external funding source, although a small grant from the Australian Government Quality Teacher Program supported the involvement of the Academic Partner and a number of professional learning activities associated with the project.*

*The paper will report upon the project, contextualised within an understanding of practitioner research as a catalyst for educational change and professional learning, from the perspective of the member of the School Executive responsible for leading the project and the project's external 'Academic Partner' or critical friend. We suggest that while practitioner inquiry is alive with transformative possibilities for teachers and schools, that in this context, a number of enabling factors have contributed to the project's success while a number of inhibiting factors have conversely hindered its success. The paper provides a candid and frank account of both sets of factors and extrapolates from these to suggest some 'pathways for sustainability' of practitioner inquiry working toward whole-school change.*

## Introduction

The past decade has seen a burgeoning of the use of practitioner inquiry or action research as a policy implementation tool. In our own context of Australia, as well as other parts of the industrialised world, we have seen governments pour large amounts of money into programs which engage teachers in 'action learning' or action research initiatives where the research agenda emanates from a primary desire to implement policy into practice. This is not to say that teacher professional learning is not a valued or important part of such projects, however it is true to say that, on the whole, the push from above for evidence-based-practice or action research as policy implementation does not allow for initiatives to 'grow' from the local concerns of teachers and schools, and as such falls short of that which we would claim as the real potential of the work. Of this phenomena, Stephen Kemmis wrote recently:

"I believe that some – perhaps most – action research no longer aspires to having this critical edge, especially in the bigger sense of social or educational critique aimed at transformation of the way things are. Much of the action research that has proliferated in many parts of the world over the past two decades has not been the vehicle for educational critique we hoped it would be. Instead, some may even have become a vehicle for domesticating students and teachers to conventional forms of schooling."  
(Kemmis 2006: 459)

This paper takes up the challenge issued by Kemmis. In an environment dominated by government-funded 'action research as policy implementation' approaches, it reports on an approach designed, funded and implemented by a school in New South Wales, Australia, which was very much focused upon the school, its students and teachers, and the classrooms in which they work.

The case represents an example of what Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2009) refer to as 'inquiry-based professional learning', defined as action research or teacher inquiry which takes teacher professional learning as one of its primary aims. They suggest that at its best, such an approach is:

1. Focused upon transformation, of both self and school;
2. Collaborative, with opportunities for teachers to build authentic collegiality;
3. Ongoing, rather than solely project-based;
4. Capable of engaging teachers in creating knowledge about and for practice; and
5. Encompassing of opportunities for teachers to develop and hone their professional judgement.

As, respectively, the leader within the school responsible for carriage of the project and the academic partner or 'critical friend' to the project, the authors of this paper were concerned not only to ensure that the approach taken reflected each of these directions, but also that it might create a specific 'shift' for the teachers involved toward what Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999, 2007) have named as "inquiry as stance":

"Inquiry as stance is distinct from the more common notion of inquiry as time-bounded project or discrete activity within a teacher education course or professional development workshop. Teachers and student teachers who take an inquiry stance work within inquiry communities to generate local knowledge, envision and theorize their practice, and interpret and interrogate the theory and research of others." (1999: 289)

While we understood at the outset that such an orientation was a longer-term endeavour than the necessarily time-bounded project upon which we had embarked, our concern was also to build in a broader sustainability, such that the fledgling culture of inquiry within the school might begin to move from the

margins of school culture into the mainstream. We shall return to a brief discussion of these issues after our presentation of the case.

### **The Case: Practitioner Inquiry at St Mary Star of the Sea College**

In 2008, St Mary Star of the Sea College undertook and published ten practitioner enquiry projects, gathered under the single banner of The Learning Project.

#### **Context**

St Mary Star of the Sea College is a Catholic, independent high school for girls in Wollongong, Australia. Accredited Australian schools are mandated to deliver a state based curriculum. All schools in Australia are funded to some degree by state and federal governments; however, independent schools do not belong to a central bureaucracy and can be considered autonomous in terms of policies and procedures.

As an independent school, St Mary's has a system of governance that resembles a company, in that there is a Board of Directors, who appoints a Chief Executive Officer (the Principal) and which sets the strategic direction for the organisation. The Board is also responsible for the sound financial management of the College, and has oversight of the annual budget. The operation of the College, its budget and programs is delegated to the CEO – Principal.

St Mary's is a low-fee independent school (by relative measures) and draws students from across the socio-economic spectrum. The 1150 students come from a diverse and broad geographic region south of Sydney. As a comprehensive high school, the student population represents a normal distribution of academic performance. The College enjoys an excellent reputation in the local community and beyond, with most of our graduates receiving first-round offers to University immediately after completing their senior schooling.

As an independent school, recruitment and employment are local matters determined by the Principal and an appointment panel. The criteria for employment always contain a minimum tertiary qualification, determined by legislation, as well as a willingness to support the Catholic ethos and tradition of the school. There are 84 full-time teachers who have been employed for between 1 and 28 years. This mixture of experience is a source of synergy in terms of professional learning and collegial support.

#### **The professional learning culture at St Mary's**

St Mary's has been engaged in practitioner research, and site based professional learning since 2002. The College executive team made a decision in 2004 to move away from spending on out-sourced, one-off professional development courses in favour of professional learning which was either delivered by the professionals on the staff, or projects which grew out of an analysis of local needs. Several solid arguments from academic literature shaped this strategic move, including the work of Wang and Odell (2002) which

sought to trace the impact of models of professional mentoring on outcomes-based reform. Wang and Odell distilled their findings into four factors for learning which lead to sustainable changes in teaching practice and student experience and achievement:

1. active construction and reconstruction of beliefs, content knowledge and pedagogical practices
2. professional learning that is situated in the practice of teaching, relevant to the particular school-based context
3. individual reflection and collaborative inquiry that develops an understanding of what constitutes good teaching practice
4. substantial and sustained time to practise and experiment with a variety of approaches and resources

The first complete implementation of this approach to professional learning was embodied in an ICT training program, called the Big Byte Breakfasts.

The Big Byte Breakfasts are a self-sustaining project-based approach to professional learning that use best practice models of adult learning combined with the allure of a hot breakfast to achieve excellent professional development for teachers integrating technology in their teaching. The professional learning culture in the College has been profoundly changed as a result of the Big Byte Breakfasts, with teachers perceiving peer-led professional learning as valid and valuable.

The second major implementation of the Wang and Odell principles was through the Master Classes – which built on the lesson study approach of practitioner enquiry. The Master Classes structure is another self-sustaining model of professional learning, with observers becoming presenters. The project is two years old and has already borne rich fruit. Many of the positive outcomes relate directly to measuring the gap between teaching and learning. Yet, it is the other unplanned-for outcomes that make this approach to professional learning so valuable. The teachers who have been involved in the master classes as observers are very likely to open their own classrooms to their peers. Beyond the actual lesson studies, our teachers are finding other ways to include their colleagues in their professional reflection, either as visitors to the classroom, or through informal mentoring (Elliott 2007).

At a leadership level, the College had thrown its weight behind an organisational learning model which sees the strengths inherent within a system of collegial reflection and enquiry. Meanwhile, many teachers were coming to appreciate that project-based and enquiry-based learning was a richer source of professional development than other offerings they had experienced.

This phase of the movement towards the broad adoption of sustainable action research may be conceived of as an evolution in thought and strategy. The 2008 Learning Project was a product of this evolution, and of an explicit shift in the strategic intent of the Board of Directors.

## **College Mission and Strategic Plan**

St Mary's mission as a Catholic school is modelled on the values of the Benedictine tradition. In a Benedictine community, love of learning is a value central to our understanding of ourselves as we grow in wisdom and faithfulness. Learning at St Mary Star of the Sea College is led by teachers committed to their own learning and the academic status of their profession.

The College budget has always contained a line item for professional development. Over the past five years, this item has been allocated between \$50 000 and \$70 000 annually. The money has been spent in a wide variety of ways including onsite and offsite professional development, professional development resources and teacher relief for professional development. It has also been used to cover the cost of consultants who have assisted in the delivery of onsite professional development.

The College, through its system of governance, has a plan for the development of educational services over a three year period. Responsibility for the execution of this strategic plan is devolved to the Principal / CEO who in turn develops systems and strategies for implementing this plan. Within this plan, there sit two goal areas which have been the spirit of intent for the learning projects:

In Priority Area 2, the goal and strategy reads:

*2.2 To respond to the increasing accountabilities of the work of teachers with broad and generous professional development opportunities.*

*2.2.1 Make staff professional development a strategic component of the annual College budget.*

(St Mary's 2007)

The plan crystallized the evolution of practitioner enquiry and gave the College leadership the necessary tools to take the next step of embedding research into the life of the students and teachers.

## **The Learning Project 2008**

In 2008, with support from the College Board of Directors, we launched ten action learning projects across every subject area, led by the subject coordinators. The topics of enquiry were proposed by the subject coordinators and negotiated with the project supervisor (Deputy Principal). Each project was required to meet the following criteria:

- The project will be completed by November 2008
- The project will address the Quality Teaching Framework of NSW
- The project will be situated within the Catholic, Benedictine tradition of the College
- The project will focus on improving student learning and student well-being
- Student voice will feature as a prominent source of evidence
- Findings will be based on triangulated evidence

- The researcher will consent to their project being published beyond the College.

The research was materially support by reducing each teacher's face-to-face teaching allocation for what amounted to 70 hours over the school year. The cost of this, built into the College budget, is equivalent to a senior teacher's salary for all ten projects. Specific costs associated with each research project were borne within each department's operational budget. The cost of having the project supervised by an academic partner was covered by an Australian Government Quality Teacher Program grant.

### **Possibilities and Pitfalls**

As with earlier experiments in site-based professional learning, sustainability developed as both a key requirement as well as an indicator of success. In a Benedictine sense, sustainability speaks to the need for balance and a respect for the cycle of work, reflection and improvement. Our development of the Learning Project model was guided by significant questions which helped us clarify how the projects would align with our mission:

- a) Will the Learning Project have a positive impact on student learning?
- b) Will the Learning Project have academic validity and rest on solid research foundations?
- c) Will the teachers involved in the Learning Project receive sufficient support and resources such that the project is not a workload burden?
- d) Will the Learning Project yield a product that will be useful to the broader educational and local community?
- e) Will the celebration of the Learning Project affirm and enhance the status of our profession?
- f) Will the model be robust and economical enough to be repeated?

The final model as described above provided a positive answer to each of these questions and it was with confidence that we proceeded. At the end of the first annual Learning Project, it has become apparent that the sustainability and success of the project was enabled by six key factors. In the obverse, each factor carried its own pitfalls and raised questions which will feed future learning projects.

#### ***1. Strategic intent***

The nebulous language of the strategic planning document (cited above) belies the momentum that led the Board of Directors to such an explicit statement about supporting professional community and professional learning. The academic staff, in preparation for the development of the strategic plan spent time weighing up their dreams for learning, and sent a loud and clear message that facilitating professional learning would be the most direct route to improving student learning. This became enflashed in an action learning model and eventually became the 10 Learning Projects. The intent of the Board was to support the growth of teachers, and the intent of the teachers was to find ways of being enriched in the vocation.

Crowther et al (2008) list the communication of strategic intent as one of the criteria for developing teacher leadership. In the case of the Learning Project, its strategic intent was communicated at board and leadership level, and the researchers themselves became evangelists for the strategy of the project.

**Pitfalls:**

School based strategic planning is not available to all school communities. Oftentimes schools and school leaders are directed by system authorities to pursue particular strategic goals. In our case, the Learning Projects were pursued alongside systemic priorities that ran the risk of fracturing the attention and energy available for our studies.

On evaluation, there exists an opportunity to use locally generated learning projects to proceed towards achieving systemic priorities.

Further, research into the efficacy of strategic planning has emphasised the importance of the leader setting the tone and expressing the vision of the plan (Eg. Vasiliev 2007). It became the concern of this project for the projects to be promoted and celebrated as central to the strategic concerns of the College. In future iterations of the Learning Projects, we will find ways to keep the research at the heart of the educational mission.

## ***2. Leadership***

As described above, the governance model sees strategic action devolved to the school leadership team. In this case, the Dean of Studies, himself an experienced practitioner researcher, was delegated the responsibility for supervising the learning projects. He set the timeframes and milestones, worked with an academic partner to approve and shape the projects, published interim findings to the Board of Directors and published and celebrated the success of finished projects. The management glue in this instance was a fortnightly meeting with the researchers to review their progress and to provide direction, resources and encouragement.

For many of our researchers, this was their first foray into practitioner enquiry, and many struggled with resolving the scope of their research early on. Still others had little depth in their experience of gathering and triangulating evidence. It was necessary, this time, for the supervisor to adopt a hands-on approach to developing the teachers as researchers. On occasions, this meant instructional sessions, where teachers were shown how to structure an interview or focus group. The supervisor also critiqued interim reports, and held the researchers accountable for looming milestones.

Pitfalls:

The type and style of leadership required to guide and sustain the research (and the researchers) falls outside of the usual organisational structure of schools. In an ideal world, where inquiry has been adopted as *stance*, schools might have a senior leader in a position such as 'director of research' or 'dean of practitioner learning'. In the case of our Learning Project, a deputy principal with experience in action research took that role.

In terms of sustainability, then, schools prepared to embed a cycle of practitioner inquiry into the regular work of teachers must also have a plan and a succession plan for leadership of the project. As must often be the case, such projects are stimulated and energised by evangelist leaders. This evangelisation must extend to preparing future 'directors of research'.

### **3. An Academic Partner**

Action research is rooted in the messy daily life of a school. Many of the most pertinent variables being studied are also the most sensitive and can be enmeshed with a teacher's self-concept, or indeed a teacher's competence. An academic partner who could be both dispassionate, as well as providing a broad and valid perspective, allowed for a measure of clinical reassurance to action researchers who may have struggled with the gritty reality of their findings.

In our case, the academic partner came with a background in practitioner enquiry, and as one of the authors of "Learning to Listen – Listening to Learn" (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler 2002) was able to provide a wealth of instruments for gathering and measuring the data on student learning. Considering the diversity of research questions, such expertise was most valuable.

Pitfall:

If research is to be focussed on transformation of teachers and schools, it must be valid, and it must be broadly accepted. In the case of this study, we achieved both by the strategic choice of an academic partner. Schools must work on building alliances with universities or professional associations that may furnish productive, synergistic relationships with academic partners.

### **4. Budget and sustainable structures**

The Board of Directors approved a one-off (now two-off) injection of money to allow for 10 teachers to be given a slightly lighter teaching load (equal to about 70 hours over the year). This was equivalent to about one teacher's salary plus other employment costs. This was built into a teacher's timetable or teaching schedule. Such a structure brought with it a number of benefits:

- a) The researcher had received a 'grant' in advance, which was based on professional trust and respect.
- b) The researcher understood that the grant came with obligations in terms of a result flowing back to the students for their benefit.

- c) The time structure meant that teachers were not required to absent themselves from their regular classes.
- d) The time to attend a research meeting each fortnight was considered fair and reasonable.
- e) In return, the college could demand a high standard of research and reporting.

A decision was taken, for 2008, to grant this research time to all Heads of Departments (10 people). In this way, the researchers were also the leaders of their faculties. This had the effect of enhancing the profile of the Head of Department as a learner and researcher. It also provided a strong voice across the college for the notion of action research as a model for enhancing student learning. The Heads of Departments already had the concomitant authority to delegate tasks and employ resources. Therefore, the research, in many departments engaged not only the researcher but every member of that department. It also allowed a precedent to be set for action learning in future years.

**Pitfalls:**

Year one of the Learning Project engaged middle managers as conscripts. Year two of the plan will engage volunteers. The true test of the project's sustainability will not be evident until sometime hence. As the meta-research continues, it will need to interrogate the changes brought about in professional culture, teacher self-concept, and improvements in pedagogy.

The most obvious pitfall would be the potential loss of funding for the project. In schools which do not have site-based financial management, other sources of funding would need to be found to allow for teacher's loads to be reduced.

***5. Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools***

Developed as an agency of the Centre for Practitioner Research at Sydney University, the Coalition has grown to include schools from across the three sectors of secondary education in Australia: the public, Catholic and independent sectors. The work of the Coalition has been widely documented over the years (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler 2003, 2007). The diversity of this movement is exceptional considering that the schools involved in the Coalition range from economically and culturally challenged city schools to more wealthy, independent, mono-cultural regional schools. The aim of the coalition is to share and cooperate on projects that enhance learning for students and teachers. This collaboration has seen such valuable ventures as a cross-sectoral enquiry into the environmental impediments to learning and a 'Kids' College' wherein students from around New South Wales cooperated with the Australian Museum and architects to redesign the learning spaces in the museum. Two of the central values of our Coalition are the primacy of student voice and the imperative to reflect together.

The Coalition has provided St Mary's with an important forum for testing the research, and the model on which it was based. Teachers from across sectors had input into the project, and provided valuable critique along the way. Teachers leading some of the research projects also had the opportunity to attend the Coalition meetings and learn from other practitioner-researcher. As with any synergistic association, we hope to have fed some ideas and questions back into the Coalition for the benefit of its members.

Possibility:

Networks such as the Coalition have the potential to yield even greater benefit to school-based professional learning by providing the means for cooperative, multi-school projects. By using IT tools to mediate communication, collaboration and the sharing of evidence, they can provide powerful drivers for sustainability through networked inquiries.

### ***6. A pedagogical and research framework***

It became apparent during the planning phase, that ten different projects ran the risk of flying off into ten different directions, and that the core mission of the College may be diluted in such a disparate enquiry into learning. We took the decision to tie the learning projects to the principles of the Quality Teaching framework, developed for the Department of Education and Training in NSW and employed by many schools in NSW, both Government and non-Government. This framework gave the projects a common language and set of reference points and also ensured that the research questions were sufficiently rigorous to warrant investigation.

Building on recent research the NSW Quality Teaching model identifies three dimensions of pedagogy that have been linked to improved student outcomes:

- Pedagogy that is fundamentally based on promoting high levels of intellectual quality.
- Pedagogy that is soundly based on promoting a quality learning environment.
- Pedagogy that develops and makes explicit to students the significance of their work.

(DET 2008)

The framework is further divided into six elements within each dimension, and is used in NSW schools to both structure and interrogate the learning environment.

The curriculum development framework chosen to bring some robustness to the enquiries was the 'Understanding by Design' model of Wiggins and McTighe (2005). Better known as the 'backward mapping' approach, in designing teaching and learning experiences for students at each point of the action research cycle, the teachers worked backwards from the kinds of understandings they wished students to develop to assessment strategies and then to teaching and learning strategies. Each researcher was trained in using both of these frameworks at the beginning of the Learning Project.

Pitfall:

The Learning Project left unresolved the extent to which either of these frameworks become implicit in the thinking and planning of these individual researchers, and further, how will these models might be embedded in the professional learning repertoire of the College.

Crowther et al (2008) stress a school-wide pedagogical framework as a key to improving learning. Unless this is central to pedagogical planning and led from the very top, then there is a risk of tokenism. Part of future meta-research needs to consider the breadth of change brought about by the Quality Teaching framework in the learning lives of students.

## **Conclusion**

The success of the Learning Project is yet to be thoroughly evaluated, as the projects are only now reaching maturity. We have begun to answer the challenge posed by Kemmis (2006). One of our researchers evaluated the experience like this: "I have a strong belief that the project needs to be developed from the researcher and not based on someone else's agenda or interests. Ownership of the project provided a high degree of sustainability in terms of providing the energy to see it to the end." By way of conclusion, we provide our observations on the project thus far in relation to the five dimensions of inquiry-based professional learning discussed at the outset, as well as a brief discussion of the orientation of the school toward 'inquiry as stance'.

### *Focused upon transformation, of both self and school*

As discussed above, the Learning Project was developed out of a strategic concern on the part of the teaching staff for the provision of teacher professional learning which could impact upon the improvement of student learning within the school. The belief of both the Deputy Principal and the Academic Partner, based on their prior experience of inquiry-based professional learning in a range of contexts, was that such work also held the potential to transform teachers themselves. Recent research has shown that powerful teacher professional learning experiences can function as "identity anchors" or catalysts for changing professional identity (Mockler 2008), and it was our hope at the outset that this might be the experience of some teachers involved in the Project. Preliminary evidence indicates that this may well be the case, and we shall further explore this in the formal evaluation of the Project.

### *Collaborative, with opportunities for teachers to build authentic collegiality*

While the 10 projects which formed the broader 'Learning Project' were each shaped around particular concerns 'local' to the Faculty in which they were located, the NSW Quality Teaching model provided a common focus to all. The fortnightly meetings of practitioner researchers provided opportunities for experiences to be shared within the group and for responses to challenges and

difficulties to be collaboratively developed. Furthermore, a number of the practitioner researchers worked with other teachers in their Faculty (or in two cases, across more than one Faculty) to embed the project more broadly. This approach provided additional scope for collaboration and collegiality.

*Ongoing, rather than solely project-based*

While the Learning Project began as a time-bound project, the fact that the project stretched for the entire course of an academic year, and was embedded in the practitioner researcher's teaching load for the year meant that it shared little in common with the short-term funded projects that proliferate. The extension of the Learning Project into 2009, with a new group of self-nominated practitioner researchers, will enable the Project to become further embedded in the culture of the school. In addition, based upon the preliminary evaluation, we believe that at least some of the 2008 practitioner researchers will continue to work in this way into the future.

*Capable of engaging teachers in creating knowledge about and for practice*

In itself, the process of collecting, triangulating, evaluating and acting upon evidence which included a strong student voice component, engaged practitioner researchers in knowledge creation. The publication of their findings and presentation of those findings to the Annual Conference of the Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools in November 2008 is another dimension of this process of creating knowledge for and about practice.

*Encompassing of opportunities for teachers to develop and hone their professional judgement*

In the provision of a framework for the collection and analysis of evidence about their practice, the Learning project has provided a vehicle for teachers to 'take a step back' from their day-to-day work and exercise their professional judgement in new ways. For some this has been a highly collaborative process, engaging colleagues within their own Faculty and across others within the School. Others have 'made sense' of their data in collaboration with the Deputy Principal and other members of the practitioner research team, but the project has provided for all a catalyst for the development of professional judgement. The extent to which this has taken place and its impact will be the subject of further examination during the formal evaluation.

*Developing 'inquiry as stance'*

Implicit in the notion of 'inquiry as stance' is the idea that an inquiry-orientation to teaching practice will be embedded in school culture so that it becomes part of 'the way we do things around here'. With our particular desire in this context to privilege student voice and open the door to students becoming authentic partners in learning, for us this has a deeply ethical dimension. We believe that for some of the 2008 cohort of practitioner researchers, this shift in orientation has begun, but we recognise that such a transition is usually a gradual one rather than a 'lightening bolt' one. We intend to shine the light on this dimension in the formal evaluation, and hope to continue to build toward this within the School in the coming year.

As is the iterative nature of action learning, the Project itself needs to be the subject of a valid enquiry, framed as what John Elliott (2001) has termed "second order practitioner research". What can be said is that the professional community at St Mary's has arrived at a new level of learning which is valid, sustainable and authentically concerned with the reality of how our students learn best.

This is perhaps better put by one of the researchers, to whom we shall give the 'last word':

Overall, now that it is finished, I think the process and the product, for me and my department, turned out to be far more successful than I had imagined. I think it has brought benefits to the department in terms of broadening teacher's ideas and teaching approaches. Sometimes many of us have fairly fixed ideas of how we should be teaching and of how others should be teaching and what students should be learning. We tend to use gut feelings of what will work or not, usually based on our own learning styles and how we were taught. For example, I had two teachers who were very skeptical about performance approaches [the focus of this project] and argued (strongly) their own ideas as to why it wasn't going to work. These ideas were not based on evidence. The project provided very strong evidence that I believe helped convince the non-believers.

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## **The importance of context in neo-liberal times**

A Symposium prepared for the CARN Conference 7-9 November, 2008

**Britt-Marie Berge, Lars Dahlström, Ann-Louise Silfver<sup>1</sup>**

**Rationale for the symposium:** As a group of educators and educational researchers we want to present different but connected perspectives on the issue of context in days of globalised neoliberal influences on education policy and practice. We start from the global assault on contextually sound education as a social right, continue through national influences on educational reform, and close in a discussion of the importance of context in critical classroom action research.

### **Introduction**

To put it simply: Context matters! The recent changes at our workplace triggered us off this time when we realised that the contextual changes that we have observed elsewhere are also about to influence fundamentally our own workplace bringing uncertainty as a result for us and our colleagues. We are talking about the new way of organising public institutions like universities along neoliberal lines and the consequences of this. Neoliberalist ideas and discourses have a hegemonic position today and are changing the way we understand and interpret social and cultural events and processes. This hegemony is found almost everywhere at all social levels and at all social places across institutional and other borders, historically created by hierarchies in and between societies. We need to apply a contextual perspective, following the hegemonic forces wherever they appear, to be able to identify and analyse the threads in this hegemonic network. Therefore, a contextual perspective will integrate what has been with the present to identify the cracks in the patterns from where alternatives for the future can gain a foothold and grow.

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## **1. The global assault on education**

**Lars Dahlström**

The overwhelming influences of neoliberal governance on all kinds of educational and scholastic work have become part of a new common sense. Staf Callewaert (2006:127) recently characterised this neoliberal hegemony as "the tragedy of our time, [which includes amongst other reconfigurations] the radical change from education by educationalists to education by neo-liberal management". These reconfigurations have affected living and working conditions globally for all, including educators, be they teachers at schools or at universities. Neoliberal 'governmentality' operates through acts of surveillance, the establishment of league tables, introduction of different forms of privatisation, intensification of all types of educational work, and the general demand to follow market logic. The present neoliberalisation process in education and other publicly financed fields with historical roots in conceptions about a welfare state follows an enduring penetration and management of our minds, perceptions, beliefs and behaviours through a kind of doublespeak that we often do not detect, as it is heavily supported and engineered by propagandist think-tanks and other public relations entities in the multimillion spin industry (William Dinan & David Miller, 2007).

It is through this process of neoliberal doublespeak that perceptions of human rights, solidarity, and social justice closely attached to the idea of the administrative welfare state are transformed and reduced to individualism, competition, and consumerism within a state managed by expectations and promises. Neoliberal doublespeak has affected (or infected) us in the following ways: the social right to education is transformed into school choice, communal and international actions for collective solidarity are transformed into a chance to win the lottery by giving a penny in the TV show for the poor according to a 'win-win' logic, and social justice is transformed into everyone's individual option to purchase, provided you own the purchasing capital, any consumer item available on the globe, easily accessible on the web or in the supermarket stores around the world and produced by distanced and ill-paid sweatshop workers under killing conditions. Neoliberal doublespeak has now penetrated the welfare state and its social institutions like public schools and universities that are supposed to be the defenders of humanity and the human mind through open and critical debate. We can expect critical voices to be silenced by hegemonic and neoliberal doublespeak and this silencing is carried out implicitly through the moulding of the neoliberal human being.

According to Bronwyn Davies & Peter Bansel (2007:248) it is through the transformation of the administrative welfare state and its responsibility for human well-being and the economy into the neoliberal state that "gives power to global corporations and installs apparatuses and knowledges through which people are reconfigured as productive economic entrepreneurs of their own lives" that schools and universities have become involved as the producers of the neoliberal being.

## **The neoliberal being**

A tentative definition of the neoliberal being, based mainly on Bronwyn Davies' (2005) writings, is a person defined and locked into a notion of consumption. Further, the neoliberal being is a person living in the illusion of their own responsibility and having a flexible mind that lives a life based on a notion of an individual entrepreneurial autonomy. The busyness of the neoliberal being is a sign of 'being someone' within a system that creates intensified working conditions under a culture of surveillance, which confirms the matrix that neoliberal beings are locked into.

Davies (2005) asks whether we can resist the neoliberal conditions for our survival as critical educators by trying to disclose the fractures in neoliberal discourses and replacing these spaces with new discourses and new positions. Further on, she also addresses the dangers of asking critical questions at the same time as being the embodied person through which the neoliberal shifts are played out. Davies claims that we are all subjected to a regime that tells us that our survival depends on acceptance of the terms under which we find ourselves as an act of being conditioned to a social and mental matrix that "has entered our world by stealth, and has eroded our values" (op. cit, p 4).

What, then, is neoliberalism doing to us? Davies refers to a warning by Toni Morrison (1993:2), who said in her Nobel Lecture after winning the Nobel Prize for Literature, that "there will be more of the language of surveillance disguised as research... [and more of] arrogant pseudo-empirical language crafted to lock creative people into cages of inferiority and hopelessness", and concludes that

'It co-opts research to its own agendas, it silences those who ask questions, it whips up a small-minded moralism that rewards the attack of each small powerless person on the other, and it shuts down creativity. It draws on and exacerbates a fear of difference and rewards a rampant, consumerist, competitive individualism. It makes emotion, humour, poetry, song, a passion for a life of the intellect unthinkable.' (Davies, 2005:7)

These descriptions relate to the constraints as well as the possibilities for analysing our own positions, actions, and languages through which we manifest neoliberal discourse. This is a discourse that we at the same time want to disclose and change, still being locked into its surveillance machinery and its economic and utilitarian common sense created by the hegemonic neoliberal preferential right of interpretation. The first possible step is to analyse how we are caught into this hegemonic and matrix-like system as neoliberal beings, remembering both George Orwell's book 1984 and Antonio Gramsci's notion that hegemonies are not for ever, but created by humans and eventually changed by humans.

Under this matrix the neoliberal being is valued according to the consumption criteria of his/her income and power of consumption. As a consequence, the need to earn money overrides any other need and job security has become a

matter of being able to adapt to new situations, rather than through successful labour union negotiations. This type of neoliberal individual responsibility removes the social aspects of life, and the social relations of dependency and belonging are replaced by a disposable being totally dependent on the ups and downs of the economy. This forces us to become competitive beings on our own, a situation that scholars like Richard Sennett (1998) consider to be worse than the 'old' class-based system that was able to create solidarity within and sometimes even between social groups. Educational programmes are adapted to the consumption logics through competition over the consumers (students) and certain strata of their parents, who are attracted by glossy public relation tricks promising all possible side benefits except for critical intellectual and dispositional knowledge. The competitive being fits well into the general neoliberal discourse where competition is the means through which quality is to be improved, while this doublespeak hides the real goal, which according to Callewaert (1997:183) is "the creation of legitimate elite institutions". The competitive message is: being good is not good enough – you need to be excellent – and everyone should strive for it even though being excellent is only for the few!

### **In the global North: the surveillance machinery**

Competition and surveillance are emphasised in the global North by comparative league tables that the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) creates through the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA). More than 60 countries worldwide have bought into the PISA programme, which according to PISA's own brochure (OECD, 2007) cover 90% of the world economy, thus being a truly hegemonic enterprise in line with other global corporate powers. PISA evokes a lot of national concerns and is used as a tool to get support for change agendas along the neoliberal governmentality of surveillance policies, such as more external examinations. It also provokes critical comments as demonstrated in a publication edited by Stefan Thomas Hopmann, Gertrude Brinek and Martin Retzl (2007) that includes analysis from seven countries in Europe. Such critical comments contain concerns about the narrow focus of PISA not being on a par with the broad official reactions to PISA's league tables; the fact that PISA is run by private enterprises that are looking for larger shares of a growing test market; and that PISA pursues through its emphasis and operations the neoliberal restructuring of public schooling and education, which results in demands for national policy changes. Some of these conclusions are further problematised by Jan-Eric Gustafsson (2008) who claims that international comparative studies on student achievement have a deceptive appearance as they create an illusion of reliability through a reality-bound appearance (tasks that imitate everyday schoolwork) while their purpose is to generalize educational outcomes, and that they also create an illusion of research and intellectual reasoning through a multitude of data from different sources and through a large number of instruments. However, the PISA data are not collected to test or develop theories, or to create explanatory and analytical responses to educational constraints.

In this way, international comparative studies have bifurcated in the period following the collapse of the Eastern Bloc. One branch continues to carry out international comparative studies with the aim of creating research-based analyses of globalisations. Another branch has developed into data collecting enterprises to create business and stock market-like league tables of excellence, like PISA, under the guise of research.

The emphasis on education as both the problem and the cure to social illnesses is heightened through international programmes like PISA and national programmes like No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in the US (Linda Darling-Hammond, 2007; David Hursh, 2007). Such programmes will actually draw public attention away from the real issues of social inequalities that are manifested through other social realities related to the distribution of power, economic opportunities, and decent living and working conditions, nationally as well as globally.

Recent neoliberal trends are also transforming universities into business-like enterprises that will lock intellectual work into the neoliberal matrix based on market discourses of competition and surveillance masked as evaluative research with the purpose of finding excellence according to market values. The building up of intellectual institutional narratives will in this new milieu be reduced to vulnerable project identities whose survival will depend on their purchasing and market value measured according to market-related excellence. The new way to organise universities, e.g. as schools of 'excellence', will undermine the intellectual institutional narratives needed for the universities' long-term survival as creative and critical intellectual platforms. These platforms will be replaced by academic shopping supermarkets where each item (institution or individual) would survive on its competitive purchasing value and project employments similar to practices at other and more traditionally commercial marketplaces like the building and construction sector. The human insecurity that is created is not an unwanted side effect, but actually part of the whole enterprise called 'marketisation'. However, alternatives that respond to the need for institutional as well as human narratives for survival have been developed in traditional market-places by the rethinking of the role of labour unions. There are examples of labour unions that have taken over the roles of employment agencies through the creation of community outside the workplace by engaging in retirement and insurance schemes and certain social services like day-care centres, systems for job sharing, and even suggesting more radical alternatives like basic salaries for all citizens (Sennett, 2006). Will there be a need for similar alternatives that are able to reload critical intellectual work in the field of education for the survival of institutional and human narratives in the future?

In addition to the institutional and human need for *narrative space* and *agency* to be able to interpret what is happening, Sennett (2006) suggests two more cultural anchors for consideration as a revolt against neoliberal superficiality. These are *usefulness*, defined as contributing something that matters for other people, and *craftsmanship*, defined as the desire to do something well for its

own sake. Usefulness needs to be seen beyond utilisation value, as work that is publicly good, while craftsmanship is related to closure and commitment over the possibility of doing something real rather than superficial. These notions about narrative, usefulness, and craftsmanship are also found in the field of education and critical intellectual work. We might find them related to pedagogical work that considers the taken-for-granted problematic, poses questions about contextual relations, and develops social strategies for human engagement and tentative closures. These notions are never heard in the present concerns about market excellence because such work takes continuity and passion far away from the rhetoric of superficial league tables. A strategic move similar to the ones reported by Sennett is the so called Norwegian Method that demonstrates new alliances and working methods in the fight against neoliberalism amongst trade unionists. Asbjorn Wahl (2007:2), the national coordinator of the Campaign for the Welfare State in Norway, outlines the four main pillars of a successful strategy as

1. Focus on our own analyses – our comprehension of current developments.
2. The building of new, broad and untraditional alliances.
3. The development of concrete alternatives to privatisation and marketisation.
4. The development of trade unions as independent political actors.

This strategy has managed to stop and to reverse many neoliberal tendencies such as the privatisation of public schools and to revitalise bureaucratised public services without devolving to neoliberal solutions. The Norwegian struggle to restore the welfare state has of course also met with resistance from corporate interests and market forces, right wing populist quarters, ordinary supporters of neoliberal situations such as conservative parties as well as 'conservative' left wing political interests who believe in their own 'third way' version of Thatcher's TINA device for neoliberalism and the present globalisation, i.e. 'there is no alternative'.

National policy changes in education are also envisaged amongst the nations that belong to what can be called the global South and which are not part of the OECD-PISA hegemony. These nations more or less willingly live under a different hegemony which since 1990 has gone under the official slogan 'Education for All' (EFA). However, it does not take much effort to discover that 'education for all' is another means to introduce a neoliberal governmentality amongst the already marginalised in the global South. The image that the human being in the future 'global village' is a neoliberal being is enforced by the EFA agenda and what might remain of critical educational work is another market storeroom based on purchasing value and the destruction of culturally appropriate alternatives (Richard Tabulawa 2005).

### **In the global South: the doublespeak of the EFA agenda**

Global policy trends created by institutions like the United Nations, Unesco, and the World Bank have gone through a similar development as the international

comparative studies reported above. Initially, the liberal humanist discourse of the UN and even more progressive ideas like Paulo Freire's conceptions about education for liberation and conscientization (Freire, 1970) relating to human rights and liberation discourses had strong positions globally in the post-second world war period. These discourses were taken over by the business-like human capital discourse put forward by the World Bank and implemented through structural adjustment programmes in the global South from the 1980s and 1990s.

The introduction of the EFA agenda coincided with the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and was officially received as a new start for education in the global South in the hope that both national and international donor agencies were going to talk the same language of EFA. The EFA agenda adopted the student-centred approach as the overarching pedagogical concept that was going to make the difference for all nations in the global South. However, at the same time a parallel agenda started to show a demand for a different view through so-called logical frameworks, i.e. a technical way to follow the impact on educational systems, and a shift from small-scale project support to national sector support, which brought bigger demands on imperative national policy frameworks. These policy changes created a move away from a situation where educators met in cooperative situations to work out strategies for meeting the constrained realities of education and schooling, for good or ill, depending on the individuals involved and their set ambitions. New situations emerged where the administrators of national policies met their international counterparts in the form of educational managers and co-opted researchers, who created the groundwork for sector analysis and the need for national policy changes according to the western paradigm in the name of research, as an alternative version of structural adjustments. (Samoff, 1999; Tabulawa, 2003)

So-called sector support is also an example of coordinated exercised power and hegemony, as the donors join forces with their funding and through this the governments and administrations of the countries in the global South are put into positions that are close to blackmail. The alternatives for economic support are diminishing, leaving the vulnerable and weak states with no other option than to accept the terms for economic support under official 'partnership' rhetoric. The terms and messages are always the same: become part of our global development by introducing parliamentary democracy of a Western type, and open up your country for foreign investments and foreign markets! The links between education, neoliberal influences, and economy become over-explicit when promises of economic support are only made on certain stipulated conditions related to the EFA agenda, as demonstrated by many international scholars (Samoff 1999, Leon Tickly, 2001) here exemplified by the work of Laurence Tamatea (2005). Tamatea makes an analysis based on the second phase of EFA agenda, the Dakar framework from 2000, which is influencing national educational policies in the global South almost like a mantra. At this point, it needs to be said that at the outset UNESCO was given the role as the official reporter and coordinator of the EFA agenda, even though the main sponsors were the G8, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the

Asia Development Bank, and the World Trade Organisation. It becomes clear at this point that open national resistance to this agenda is almost unheard of, while examples of cunning informal and local ways of resistance are many (Ann-Louise Bäcktorp, 2007; Lars Dahlström & Brook Lemma, 2008). However, national governments in the global South, who are in dire need of international financial support, normally keep an open mind to the EFA agenda, and establish national measures following the neoliberal surveillance turn that are also at times in the interest of authoritarian government powers. Tamatea's analysis of the global neoliberal matrix points to the doublespeak of the EFA agenda through its exploitation of the ambivalence in liberal humanism, which is the basis for the official EFA goals as expressed in the Dakar framework.

The Dakar framework, as with many of the steering documents and annual monitoring reports under the EFA agenda, is a composition of a liberal humanist discourse relating to the EFA goals, and a neoliberal discourse relating to the way these goals are going to be managed, administered, and controlled. The EFA Dakar goals speak the language of human rights through the six general goals, which are

1. Expanding and improving comprehensive *early childhood care and education*, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.
2. Ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete *free and compulsory primary education* of good quality.
3. Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and *life skills* programmes.
4. Achieving a 50% improvement in levels of *adult literacy* by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults.
5. Eliminating *gender disparities* in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving *gender equality* in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality.
6. Improving all aspects of the *quality of education* and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.  
(from UNESCO, 2003 p.27)

The neoliberal turn is discursively related to concepts that are as uncontroversial as the goals above. However, the controversy appears in their operational design indicated under goal 6 above, which according to Tamatea (2005) transforms educational concepts and gives them new meanings through the introduction of corporate managerial content and an objectification of educational social relations through reduction to mathematic symbols. *Quality* is

a powerful concept in the neoliberal discourse of EFA that defines and evaluates quality through measurable learning outcomes mirroring the PISA and NCLB discourses. Another key concept is *transparency* that has entered the field of education from the neoliberal audit culture, building on the notion of visibility. The third concept is *accountability*, which is tightly connected to the punitive measures of receiving and maintaining financial support. The quality-transparency-accountability triad puts forward a different message from the humanistic EFA goals and the question remains: how are these two contradictory messages united in the EFA agenda without evoking their ambivalence? Tamatea (2005) offers some possible answers. First, ambivalence is transformed through the use of doublespeak, a vocabulary of propaganda similar to concepts like 'free trade', as the surveillance power of neoliberalism is given a humane face through the use of quality as the goal to reach. Secondly, the two discourses are actually not so different as they both emanate from the logic of modernity read as control and order over the 'Other' and upholding 'Our' view as universal, thus creating a logical sense to the seemingly contradictory unity of human liberalism and neoliberal surveillance. Thirdly, the EFA agenda can be seen as an extension of the universalism and capitalist production-line worldview of modernity today, characterised as McDonaldisation and in the footsteps of Taylorism with the message that 'one-size-fits-all'. Thus, the agenda's ambivalence can be explained in many ways and turned into something taken-for-granted and accepted as the truth.

### **A reflection on a possibility for the future**

Being a person with one foot in the Western soil and the other in the global South, after close to 30 years of concerns about education for and together with marginalised people, it is rather frustrating to meet the present restructuring of education at both ends. Here in Sweden, we have seen the dismantling of education as a public good through the mushrooming of private schooling financed by taxpayers' money that ends up in the pockets of profit makers, discursively accepted as a result of 'free choice' and with the consequence that even the remaining public schools are today forced to use their tight budgets to finance corporate-like spins. We are also experiencing the flood waves of PISA league tables and its competitiveness that are taken for granted and by that will dehumanise education at an accelerating rate. At university level we experience attempts to introduce the same type of league tables (PO Ågren, 2008), a constant departmental and individual pressure from external surveillance disguised as evaluation research, and talk about excellence that will restructure universities into shopping markets diminishing opportunities for the human narratives, usefulness, and craftsmanship that are necessary for critical educational work. At the other end, in the global South, we have recently experienced the transformation of societies and education according to the neoliberal agenda in Laos, Ethiopia, and Namibia in different ways. The Lao experience is related to the implementation of the EFA agenda coupled with the national version of marketisation called New Economic Mechanism under a centralised communist regime, as reported by Bäcktorp (2007). The EFA agenda in Ethiopia has developed into the most stunning example of a marriage between so called educational quality and efficiency

through the 'plasma teachers' that have replaced teachers with an uncommunicative TV picture in all secondary schools. The promising post-independence teacher education reforms in Namibia since 1990 are remodelled today through World Bank reports into an education that creates flashbacks that resemble pre-independence programmes under apartheid. (Dahlström & Lemma, 2008)

To end on a positive note, what many of us believe are permanent changes due to the massive influences of neoliberal discourses substantiated by the deceptive think-tanks and the spin industry, are actually constructed by humans and are therefore also possible both to deconstruct and reconstruct along more humane lines. This is done at different levels as movements from below reported by Sennett (2006) and Wahl (2007) above. Our own work following a Critical Practitioner Inquiry (CPI) model of conscientization is an example of how the degrees of freedom under neoliberal hegemony can be used for more educative purposes. CPI combines critical contextual analysis with scholastic development to develop situational understanding of the conditions for practice as a basis for practical action and as an alternative to the technical rationality that is enforced by neoliberal surveillance machinery.

## **2. National educational reform in a global neo-liberal context**

**Ann-Louise Silfver**

Laos gained its independence in 1975 after having been under the influence of both French Indochina and America for the previous 100 years.

The Lao People's Revolutionary Party took political control over the country and this marked the beginning of a 15-year period of relative isolation in relation to the Western world, and instead, relationships were formed with Eastern Bloc countries (Evans, 1998).

At this point the state of education was in relative chaos. The new government inherited an educational system that was modelled according to the French system with French as the language of instruction. Furthermore, the colonial system had not been interested in educating the Lao population at large, and education instead aimed to form a group of people which would be 'educated-enough' to handle local tasks for the colonial administration (Cooper, 2001).

The ambition of the new government was to change this and provide education for all its citizens, which not in the least, was a nation-building project with the aim of creating a unified Lao population in an ethnically diverse country (Pholsena, 2006).

The then director of secondary education in Laos, Khamphao Phonekeo, articulated the Lao aspiration of creating a "non-polluted" education system, i.e. one which was not saturated in Western educational ideas and ideals but which represented something contextually sound. He further recognised the dangers associated with accepting aid, stating that:

*Almost invariably, the aid properly so-called, the aid that is potentially useful, is inextricably tied in with an educational model which hardly ever corresponds to the receiving country's needs and situation (Phonekeo, 1975: 93).*

The situation in Laos became such that Phonekeo's ideas of Lao education by and for Lao people, was not realised in the way that he had envisaged. Instead the country became heavily dependent on foreign assistance in order to educate its population.

This became inevitable in the early 1990's after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Eastern Bloc that had up until that point been the community of cooperation for Laos. After 1989, and as a consequence of Vietnam's liberalisation of its economy, Doi Moi, Laos followed suit and introduced the New Economic Mechanism, which also opened up opportunities for Western funding that Phonekeo and others had tried so hard to avoid at independence (e.g. Evans, 1998).

One can of course wonder why this would be a problem. And depending on whom you ask, some will certainly say that cooperation is something to strive for, while others, myself included, feel slightly apprehensive over the effects of development cooperation in the current neo-liberal context.

But let me start at a different end. Laurence Tamatea (2005) published an article in *Globalisation, Societies and Education* in 2005 entitled "The Dakar framework: constructing and deconstructing the global neo-liberal matrix." The Dakar Framework for Action is, to clarify, the follow-up to the UNESCO Education for All policy which was formulated in Jomtien in Thailand in 1990. Here the global aims of meeting the world's basic learning needs were set and as such the Jomtien and Dakar summits have come to represent a global discourse on education that is widely incorporated in development cooperation discussions (Bäcktorp 2007). And who can really oppose the aim of providing good quality education to all members of all societies world wide? As both Laurence Tamatea and I have pointed out, however, the issue is not quite that simple.

Tamatea's argument takes its starting point in the science fiction film trilogy *the Matrix* which explores "the question of truth and reality" as he puts it. Tamatea (2005: 312) describes the Matrix as "a system that constructs a world of virtual 'realities' and managed truths, which are seamlessly realistic to all except the few who manage to escape it." The analogy made is that the fictional Matrix lulls its inhabitants into a sense of security in much the same way as current global educational frameworks do. However, once the surface is scratched, it becomes apparent that these global frameworks with their 'Education for All' and 'Learner-Centred Education' slogans represent managed truths that in 'reality' constitute a discourse/power/knowledge relationship that privileges the 'truths' of some over the 'truths' of others.

Comparing educational reform with a science fiction film might appear a bit radical; however, I think there is good reason for this given that the film does question truth and reality, which has been the task for my own explorations of educational policy. I was not as ingenious as Tamatea, instead I stuck to a post-colonial critique of Western knowledge production and coupled this with Foucault's (e.g. 1972/1982, 1978, 1980) notion of discourse, power, and knowledge as a means for understanding constructions of knowledge and privilege and also to deconstruct taken-for-granted discourses on education and gender within development cooperation in education in Laos.

Education in newly liberated nations is often about creating a sense of national identity and national unity, which was certainly the aim for Lao education after 1975 (Pholsena, 2006). Or in Phonekeo's words, to create a system for the Lao by the Lao which also served as a line of demarcation in relation to Western colonial influence. We know now that this vision was not fulfilled in the way that Phonekeo and the new government in Laos envisaged and that foreign funding became increasingly important in building education in Laos.

What have been the effects of development cooperation on national educational reform work in Laos? My research (Bäcktorp, 2007) focused on discursive constructions of gender and education in policy documents but also among education officials in Laos, i.e. those who were in a position to somehow translate the policy for dissemination to practitioners whose task it was to implement the policies in the classrooms. This paper will however focus on policy discourses, and the policies that I have included into my study were the following.

The Dakar Framework was a key document representing the donors, as was Sida's (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency) policy on Education for All. The Lao policies selected for the analysis were all described as key documents for developing the country and its education system.

The result of my analysis revealed that there are many goals in donor policy that are very humanistic in their formulation, stressing liberatory elements of education and the potential for both national and individual growth and thus prosperity. There were however visible differences between the donor and national policies. The donor policies much more clearly expressed a neo-liberal ideal focusing on the individual and his or her growth through education. Donors also stressed the idea of partnership and local ownership, signalling that the money and know-how was available from donors but that ultimately, it was the recipients' needs that would decide the process. The Lao policies concurred with a focus on the link between education, poverty eradication and growth while at the same time putting much more emphasis on "Lao values" such as reverence for elders, respect for leaders and the revolutionary struggle. However, apart from deviations such as these, what was strikingly clear was that there was a common discourse on quality, relevance and accountability that clearly placed the discourse of the donors at the fore. (Bäcktorp, 2007)

Even though the EFA framework covers countries worldwide, it is clear that the emphasis is on education as a means of poverty reduction, which focuses on the poorer countries of the world. This issue is addressed in the Dakar Framework where the targeted countries were expected to:

*develop or strengthen existing national plans of action by 2002 at the latest. These plans should be integrated into a wider poverty reduction and development framework, and should be developed through more transparent and democratic processes, involving stakeholders, especially peoples' representatives, community leaders, parents, learners, non-governmental organisations (NGO's) and civil society. The plans will address problems associated with the chronic under-financing of basic education by establishing budget priorities that reflect a commitment to achieving EFA goals and targets at the earliest possible date, and no later than 2015. They will also set out strategies for overcoming the special problems facing those currently excluded from educational opportunities, with a clear commitment to girls' education and gender equality (UNESCO, 2000: 9, article 9).*

The international community on the other hand, was expected to "deliver on this collective commitment by launching with immediate effect a global initiative aimed at developing strategies and mobilizing the resources needed to provide effective support to national efforts" (UNESCO, 2000: 9, article 11). Apart from working for increased funding and debt relief, the Dakar Framework also suggested that the international community should undertake "more effective and regular monitoring of progress towards EFA goals and targets, including periodic assessments" (UNESCO, 2000: 9, article 11). The international community was in other words given a dual role of conducting as well as evaluating this initiative. This division of responsibility would from my perspective be very difficult to combine with a partnership discourse. Rather, it is fair to assume that it would consolidate the very patterns that development cooperation claims to want to avoid, namely the unequal distribution of power which I claim is an inheritance from colonialism.

One can then ask what happens locally when these policies are implemented in practice. I will try to give two examples that are currently on the reform agenda in Laos. Firstly, we have the ideas of learner-centred education, which has been an extension of the EFA discourse, and secondly, Action Research.

In Lao educational policy-making since 1990, one of the earliest attempts at crafting a policy in the spirit of EFA was the *Concept Paper for Primary and Lower-Secondary Teacher Education* (Ministry of Education & Teacher Development Centre, 1994). The most concrete outcome of this policy was the 5-point star teaching method, which it was hoped would lead to a more learner-centred teaching and learning environment. The components of the 5-point star were activities, materials, questions, relevance for daily life, and group work. What however has become apparent is that while there are very few teachers that have not heard about the 5-point star, it has become equally apparent that the translation from policy to practice has been very difficult and that the only part of the star that has actually become common practice is the group work component which could be a result of an already existing collectivist discourse in Laos (Ministry of Education, 2004, Bäcktorp, 2007). Learner-centred education has thus been transformed into technical rationality rather than an educational philosophy which could potentially reform classroom practice.

Regarding Action Research, this was not an explicit part of my own research but it was certainly under introduction during my time in Laos between 2003 – 2005 and it is now the research topic of two of my PhD students both of whom are educators in Laos (Bounyasone et al, 2005). What seems to be the case regarding Action Research is that it also has taken the guise of a toolkit rather than as a means to explore, analyse and alter practice. There can of course be many explanations for this but from one perspective, this development, signifies the problems inherent in current development cooperation practices, namely that they are introduced from the outside, moulded within a specific framework but transformed to a general technical rationality that is thought to need no further explanation. And as such, it becomes impossible to implement in

contexts that indeed are framed by specific factors, which do not support change in the way stipulated by the donors.

From this perspective, it becomes clear that the idea of partnerships becomes problematic and that what is revealed instead is a preferential right of interpretation (Dahlström, 2002) with its root system in a global-north logic which in very concrete terms becomes privileged as ideas and the money that goes with them flows from the north to the south rather than vice versa. Thus, colonial patterns are still prevalent within development cooperation, which makes the idea of partnership difficult to come to grips with.

What is needed is a further deconstruction of the truths and realities that are expressed in national reforms driven by development cooperation funding and I argue that this is already done locally even if this is not advertised since this could jeopardise funding.

Development cooperation funded projects and programmes are quite often critiqued for poor outcomes when donors perform the monitoring mandate they have bestowed upon themselves. Standards are not met, accountability is low and transparency is replaced with something more resembling a fog, all according to the monitors. But is this really a sign of local lacks of competence or should it rather be understood as local resistance? I opt for the latter, advocating for long-term sustainable cooperation that actively explores and deconstructs power relations and knowledge production in policy and in practice so that contextually sound educational reforms can be put in place.

### **3. Stories of resistance – contextual gender choreography analysis in local educational settings**

**Britt-Marie Berge**

We have previously stated that market-oriented neoliberal discourses transform goals of equity and solidarity into efficiency and competition when the goals are normalised into normative practice. Thus it might be hoped that strong state regulation might produce more normative equitable outcomes. However, there are considerations that strong state regulation also normalises concepts in favour of some groups of people, and that in these processes aspects of exclusion are made invisible. An extensive discussion of different views on education, state regulation and market forces is to be found in Whitty (2002).

In the final part of our symposium we will focus on action research for gender equity in the context of two local educational settings, in Laos and in Sweden. The examples come from educational situations in teacher education programmes and in trainee schools [comment – please clarify this term]. These situations occur during processes of action research both in Laos and Sweden. There are some similarities between the two countries with regard to state governance of schools and teacher training. In both countries there has, until quite recently, been a long tradition of strong state regulation of education. The turn towards the more hegemonic influence of neoliberal discourse started at the beginning of the 1980s in Sweden when rule-governed curricula were abandoned in favour of the first goal-governed national curriculum (Skolöverstyrelsen, National Board of Education, 1980). In Laos that was to occur a decade later at the beginning of the 1990s at the World conference on Education in Jomtien, Thailand, where delegates from Laos and 154 other countries became a part of a process when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights from 1945 was transformed into the rhetoric of 'education for all' within a neoliberal discourse. (UNESCO 1990)

This means that critical action researchers in both Laos and Sweden are working 'in between' tensions inherited from previous state governance and the growing influences of new liberalism. In both countries gender equity has been and still is promoted in official educational policy documents. In both countries there are tendencies for efforts to reach 'gender equity' are normalized in favour of Lao Loum groups, i.e. members of the majority ethnic group in Laos, and the white middle-class in the Swedish context. Positions of strong social influence and power are still held by men in both countries. (Berge 2001, Weiler et. al., 2000, Bounyasone, K. et. Al., 2005, 2006).

We will reflect on how contextual gender choreography analysis based on poststructural theories can be used as guiding lights and deconstructive processes in classroom contexts. In other words, how taken-for-granted gender power relations are confronted through action research. Examples are taken from projects which were based on the presupposition that gender matters; but that the ways in which teachers and students are "doing gender" are contextually bound. These projects were also based on the presupposition that

gender discourses are very strong, since they have become embodied through repeated routines of gendered relational actions during people's lives. And since they are embodied, they are often experienced as "normal" and are therefore often unconscious.

How is it possible to do action research for gender equity in educational settings, when "doing gender" in relational actions is only partly about conscious actions? One of the first challenges in these action research projects has been to make as visible as possible those contextual routines of "doing gender" in relational actions. We are inspired by Judith Butler (2004), who was in turn inspired mainly by Michel Foucault and his reasoning about the politics of truths and the question of power (ibid p. 40ff, 215f). Butler proposes performative gendered bodies with their main ontological status in contextual performative actions. These performative actions constitute the contextual 'reality' of gender. Gender regimes require performances that are repeated over and over again. Without these repetitions the contextual power of 'doing gender' is broken (ibid 204ff, 216ff).

In action research the concept "gender choreography" has been as a useful metaphor in discussions about performative actions. Gender choreography has been compared with contextual rules, both formal and informal, which open up possibilities but also constraints for what figures and steps that are possible to take in relational actions. What figures and steps are accepted? What figures and steps are not accepted? In what ways are the figures and steps gendered? Are there some positions that open or close depending on aspects other than gender?

Gender choreography is about performances but it is also about how gender is experienced and talked about. How gender is performed is always mediated by one's lifelong experiences of being positioned in relation also to race, class, sexuality, physical ability, and nationality. Besides observing performances, it is also important to document "voices", through interview and observation. The main question during the action research processes has been: How could we make contextual gender choreography visible?

We have tried to do this by actions that aim to break the "normal" repetitive routines in the classroom. Since our presupposition was that those gender discourses that built gender choreography are heavily embodied, moments of resistance were to be expected, when people involved, consciously or unconsciously, would try to normalise the effects of the actions. These moments of normalisation, we hoped, would reveal traces of contextual gender choreography. (Berge with Ve 2000, Maguire & Berge 2009)

The teachers wanted their first actions to be in line with their efforts to fulfil the aims of gender equity stressed in the national curricula. These actions embraced more gender sensitive content during lessons; changes on how to

organise the students in groups; changes in how the teachers approached and related to the students.

Our experiences have been that these actions resulted in 'in between situations'. There were both moments of gender equity – when teachers' efforts to construct gender equity resulted in moments of expected progress. But expected moments of backlash (or normalization) also occurred, when the actions were met with resistance. Our presuppositions were, as previously mentioned, that these latter moments would reveal traces of contextual gender choreography. In the following we present a couple of examples from teacher training in Laos and Sweden. The Lao example is from teacher education at in Laos and the Swedish example is from a trainee school [comment – see previous comment about need for clarification of this term].

Despite the fact that the Lao constitution states that "Laos citizens irrespective of their sex, social status, education, faith and ethnic groups are all equal", there is a large group of women, and men from minority groups who have not had equal opportunities for education, mainly because they were not instructed in their own language. The language that is spoken and written in education is from the dominating Lao Loum group. A complicated quota system of university intake has been constructed to promote intake of students from ethnic minorities yet on a classroom level Lao Loum males are dominant. ((Bäcktorp 2007, p110; Bounyasone, K. et. al., 2005, 2006).

One of the teachers had worked hard to break the oral Lao Loum male dominance in the classroom by supporting all women, and men from ethnic minorities to become more active and talkative in the classroom. There were a lot of moments of equity reported from the teachers; moments when women "stand up" and "report on their findings" and "answer a question in front of all students in the classrooms". There were also examples when usually shy and quiet men from minority groups "stand up and ask a question to the group" However, during the same action the following moment of normalization is reported: Some male students laugh out loud when one of the females breaks with her usually unobtrusive behaviour and voluntarily stands up and expresses herself. The males also demand that she stop talking. Notwithstanding, the teacher managed to keep the action going and construct a moment of equity, when the teacher stopped the harassment and asked the female to continue her speech. (Personal communication and emails from Keophouthong Bounyasone, November 2008).

If this was an example of when 'in between situations' occur during the same action the following example illustrates an 'in between situation' when both progress (gender equity) and resistance (normalisation) occurred in the same argument. The following happened in a trainee pre-school in Sweden.

The teachers used pictures on a flannel-board to challenge what they regarded as traditional gender-patterns among 3-5 years old children. They also used a video camera to document how symbols of femininity and masculinity

permeated the youngest children's gender awareness. When the teachers placed a man into a picture of a kitchen, one of the children agreed and said: "Yes, in our house my daddy is the one who cooks..." This was regarded as a moment of progress / a moment of gender equity by the teachers. However, this very young pre-schooler seemed well aware of the "normal" gender choreography when he immediately continued: "...but that is just because our mother works so late; because in real life it is the mother's duty". His last statement drew support from some of the other children. In this 'in between situation' the latter was regarded as a moment of normalisation, by the teachers. This first action and 'in between' analysis of a gender choreography, gave the teachers a direction about how to continue. The teachers' subsequent actions were to teach both boys and girls how to cook in a kitchen together with grown ups of both sexes. But as expected gender discourses are very strong. After one of these lessons, one boy commented: "Girls cannot do their own pancakes. But I can!" He had transferred gender positions by making pancakes in the kitchen (moments of progress), but not without degrading girls (a moment of normalisation). This became the starting point for new actions. (Forsström, Johansson, Leandersson, 2001, p 50ff)

These examples are traces of 'gender choreography' in an inland region context in the northern part of Sweden, where many young people emigrated out of the area for education and young women in particular did not return. The unemployment rate was higher among women as was the rate of illness compared with men. Rates of reported crimes of violence and sexual harassment within families had increased at the time of the project. The context around this pre-school was fairly homogeneous racially. The preschool-children in this project classroom were all white Swedes as were the teachers. According to the teachers, these patterns supported more traditional gender patterns of gender division and male hierarchy in the majority of the school children's families.

We will end by presenting how we have interpreted the data during the action research processes. Not only are the students' figures and steps included in gender choreography, but the action researchers are also "doing gender". Embodied gender discourses also affected how we as action researchers interpreted the gender choreography from the data. How could we make visible our own unconscious parts of the contextual gender choreography? And who should have the preferential right of interpretation? We take examples from some action research projects in a small white middle-class district, with a growing population and good opportunities for higher education in the neighbouring city. This small district boasted, at the time, two fairly successful and competing male football teams.

These compulsory school teachers had worked hard during different actions to make everyone outspoken and visible. They especially supported children who were quiet, "invisible" and too adaptive to other people's needs and claims. But education in solidarity and empathy were also important issues for every student to learn. The teachers regarded these talents as two sides of the coin.

They often used drama-exercises to make it easier for the students to position themselves and perform in a variety of positions and as a variety of characters.

However, when there were changes in how these students related to each other and to the teachers, there were interesting moments of resistance coming from the action researchers themselves. When we reflected on these moments, a gender choreography became visible. The resistance was directed on the one hand to what was regarded as girls being too demanding and outspoken. There were no such reactions towards unobtrusive boys who had become more visible and outspoken. On the other hand there was resistance to boys who had become too compliant, especially if they were not interested in sport and competition. How did we manage to grasp this embodied gender choreography and make our own resistances visible?

When we interpreted situations from the data, our intention was to challenge and provoke every member's first immediate interpretation. The idea was to look at the data from as many positions as possible. The university teachers brought different gender theories to use as interpreting lenses. The data brought the students' different voices and the teachers gave different opinions based on context knowledge. Before any final interpretation was made every team member should have looked at the situation from as many angles as possible. These opportunities to make perspective shifts, we hoped, would function as deconstructive processes and make the second interpretation more nuanced than the first.

There were, however, situations when high rate of agreement on the first interpretation made it difficult to create deconstructive processes through perspective shifts. Teachers then tried to think of another student in the same position. This experiment had a remarkable impact, and the teachers realized how they would have acted differently depending on which child they related to.

These examples of searching for gender choreography were taken from Laotian and Swedish contexts, in contexts where action researchers have been brave enough to examine their own assumptions, performances and positionalities. However, we argue that such processes will work in any context. We also argue that it is worth trying to create moments of equity through action research in between micro-contexts and the socioeconomic-political global context.

### **A tentative reflection**

In this symposium we have attended to power relations and the way they have been played out at three different levels, all connected to contextual analysis. First, we attended to the global situation where we identified the parallel parameters of neoliberal ideas that seem to have influenced all national education systems in the global north and south with their surveillance machineries that both motivate and strengthen the hegemonic agenda and marginalise alternatives. Secondly, we analysed how education reforms in Laos

after the introduction of the policy of new economic mechanism and the opening up of the Lao society for western capitalist interests further emphasised the influences and doublespeak of international donor organisations. We showed how the official discourse of partnership between donors and receiving countries like Laos has been undermined and reform efforts related to learner-centred and action research policies reduced to technical rationalities. Thirdly, we looked into gender choreography in classrooms within national contextual frameworks characterised by official gender equity discourses and found that the performative actions of mainstream gender repetitions are strongly anchored in the social practices of schooling, even though it is also possible to challenge them through moments of equity in the intersection between micro contexts and socioeconomic-political contexts.

Our tentative reflection is that much will remain the same, even though we might experience individual progress and marginal systemic fluctuations within education systems, until a major assault on the hegemonic neoliberal model of humanity is successfully carried out - with positive consequences for global solidarity, national education systems for humanitarian community development, and education for equity and social justice.

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