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### Abstract

This article presents a reflexive analysis of a collaborative action research project based on the “Nordic tradition” of action research. In this project I, in the role of researcher, worked with a team of four teachers in a Norwegian primary/lower secondary school to develop teaching practice focused on students’ learning. I have retrospectively analysed data from my research diary, meetings and interviews. The article describes how the collaboration and the relationship between the teacher team and the researcher developed, and how this process contributed to the teachers’ professional development. The results shed light on the complexity of teacher- researcher- relationships, and demonstrate the importance of engaging in reflexivity in collaborative action research.

### Keywords

Collaborative Action Research, Reflexivity, Teacher Professional Development

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## A Reflexive Eye on a Collaborative Action Research Project in School

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*This article presents a reflexive analysis of a collaborative action research project based on the “Nordic tradition” of action research. In this project I, in the role of researcher, worked with a team of four teachers in a Norwegian primary/lower secondary school to develop teaching practice focused on students’ learning. I have retrospectively analysed data from my research diary, meetings and interviews. The article describes how the collaboration and the relationship between the teacher team and the researcher developed, and how this process contributed to the teachers’ professional development. The results shed light on the complexity of teacher- researcher- relationships, and demonstrate the importance of engaging in reflexivity in collaborative action research. Keywords: Collaborative Action Research, Reflexivity, Teacher Professional Development*

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*The process of engaging in reflexivity is full of muddy ambiguity and multiple trails as researchers negotiate the swamp of interminable deconstructions, self analysis and self disclosure. (Finlay, 2002, p. 209)*

This article is grounded in my experience as a researcher in a collaborative action research project. The project involved all the teachers of a Norwegian school and its pupils. The project was funded by the Norwegian National Research Council, and was initiated by researchers and the school management that was eager to promote school and teacher development with the students’ learning as the main focus (Postholm, 2009). Through a reflexive analysis, this article examines the complex and multifaceted processes and relationship between the team of teachers and the researcher in the course of this collaborative action research journey.

### *Action Research for Teacher Learning and Development*

Extensive research evidence suggests that the quality of teaching has a critical effect on student learning and achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Hattie, 2009). Consequently, facilitating teachers’ teaching skills and professional learning is important in order to improve student outcomes. Timperley, Wilson, Barrar and Fung (2007) refer to professional development as processes and activities designed to enhance the professional knowledge, skills and attitudes of educators so that they might, in turn, improve the learning of the students. The fostering of teacher professional learning is nowadays commonly based on the idea that teachers’ practice knowledge and learning is situated in the workplace (Putnam & Borko, 2000). Individuals act and learn by participating in a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Many studies have pointed out that time, opportunity, feedback, and support are important for an effective professional development that has an impact on teaching and learning environment (DuFour, 2004, Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001).

Action research is commonly identified as a means of stimulating teachers’ professional development (Postholm, 2009; Rönnerman, Furu, & Salo, 2008; Zeichner, 2009). This approach is grounded in the assumption of situated knowledge, and takes its point of departure in practical questions and is a cyclical, dynamic, and collaborative process in which the

participants address issues affecting their work practice in order to improve it (McNiff, 2013, Stringer, 2008; Zeichner & Noffke, 2001).

Action research is a generic term for a wide array of related methodology approaches varying when it comes to aims, scope, methods, and intended outcomes. One of these is characterised as a Nordic tradition (Rönnerman & Salo, 2012). A hallmark of the Nordic tradition is its emphasis on collaboration. This collaborative aspect is, according to Rönnerman and Salo (p. 2), manifested in two complementary manners. First, educational action research is characterised by teachers working together in groups, and secondly, researchers are usually connected to the collaborative work in educational locations as facilitators. Consequently, in the Nordic form, action research becomes “[...] a reciprocal challenging of professional knowledge and experiences, rooted in everyday practices in schools, in collaborative arenas populated by researchers and practitioners, and in the interchange of knowledge of different kinds” (Rönnerman, Salo, & Furu 2008, p. 277).

Because action research is so intimately connected to peoples’ lives and work, it does not come fully-fledged in a clear research design. It is, however an emergent process evolving over time as communities of inquiry develop within communities of practice (Reason, 2006). This opens up a wide range of choices when conducting action research. Reason (p. 198) makes the point that the quality of an action research approach rests on the choices made along the way, and the awareness of and transparency about the choices one makes at each stage of the inquiry process. Reflections on quality in action research must therefore include careful exploration of the dialogue and participation along with careful and in-depth exploration of how such dialogue can be established and developed (Reason, 2006, p. 195). Because action research starts with everyday practice experience and is concerned with the development of professional knowledge, the *process* of inquiry is as important as specific *outcomes* (Reason, 2006). Elliott (1991, 2007) has drawn on Gadamer’s philosophy to conceptualize action research as a hermeneutic process of reflection to develop understanding and agency in social situations. He emphasises the importance of doing second-order research. That means that researchers doing action research need to have a reflexive awareness and do meta-reflections over how the researcher influences the research process, the data that are collected, and the practitioners’ actions. Engaging in reflexivity needs to be a continuous endeavour in action research.

### ***Reflexivity***

The etymological root of the word “reflexive” means to bend back upon oneself. In research terms, this can be translated as thoughtful, self-aware analysis of the intersubjective dynamics between researcher and the participants (Lynch, 2000, p. 27). There is, however, a “confusing array of versions of reflexivity – or reflexivities” (ibid), including theoretical understandings, how to apply reflexivity in practice, and the theoretical or methodological traditions embraced. Marcus (1994), for instance, offers four “styles” of reflexivity, three “forms” are described by Wilkinson (1988), and Finlay (2002, 2003) provides a “map” of contemporary variants of reflexivity. Gough (2003, p. 23) asserts that the many attempts to summarize different positions on, and practices of, reflexivity have in fact effectively captured the complexities of the concept. He argues that different forms or levels need to be recognised and practiced.

For the project studied in this article, some forms of reflexivity are of more interest than others. That goes for what is named *reflexivity as introspection* (Finlay, 2002, 2003). Doing this kind of reflexivity requires critical self-reflection about the ways in which the researcher’s background, assumptions, positioning and behaviour affect the research process (Finlay & Gough, 2003). The challenge for researchers using introspection is to not use personal

revelation as an end in itself but as a springboard for interpretations and more general insights. That leads into a variant of reflexivity, which argues against inner subjectivity dislocated from the intersubjective research relations. In this, reflexivity *as intersubjective reflection* (Finlay, 2003, p. 8) the researcher explores the mutual meanings emerging within the research relationship, focusing on the situated and negotiated nature of the research encounter (Finlay, 2002, p. 215). Exploring intersubjective dynamics should be an examination of the co-constituted nature of the research, looking both inward for personal meanings and outward into the realm of shared meanings, interaction and discourse (Finlay, 2003, p. 10). *Reflexivity as mutual collaboration* (Finlay, 2002) involves capturing the participants' experience of/in the research process. According to Finlay (ibid), this approach implies that research participants take part in reflexive dialogues, in which they express their thoughts and interpretations. These might complement and add new insight into the researcher's process of confronting, modifying and honing his or her interpretations. This way of applying reflexivity offers the opportunity to hear, and take into account, multiple voices and conflicting positions.

Reflexivity can be understood in a multitude of ways according to the aims and functions of the research, as well as the theoretical or methodological traditions embraced (Finlay, 2002; Phillips, Kristiansen, Vehviläinen, & Gunnarsson, 2013). Reflexivity can also be applied in a multitude of ways, from being an intellectual exercise to being of direct practical use (ibid). Thus, one can conclude that reflexivity has many definitions and perhaps works best when different forms or versions are recognised and practised. As Gough (2003, p. 22) points out, reflexivity which dwells only on one level may appear impoverished.

The call for reflexivity, in one way or another, is particularly important for action researchers who are so intimately involved with the subject and context of the research, as well as the practitioners that participate in it.

### *The Aim of this Article*

The aim of this article is to provide insights into how a collaborative research relationship between a group of teachers and myself as researcher evolved and brought about professional learning and development. Thus I try to identify aspects that are critical for researchers to consider, if they want to become pro-participatory in their approach to collaborative action research. Developing this kind of joint research in which the aims, research questions, themes and data sources are developed throughout the process, is a demanding and greatly interactive enterprise. There are no roadmaps to guide teachers and researchers through this action research journey. Collaborative relationships can lead to learning and development for both parts. They are not, however, without challenges and conflicts (Goldstein, 2000; Johnsen & Norman, 2004). The outcome of collaborative action research depends on the knowledge construction that takes place in the interaction between the participants and the researcher – and whether they are able to create a “research site” where questioning, analysis and reflection around challenges in work practice are made. In my case, through critical reflection about the interactions with the teachers as well as, my own actions, thoughts, feelings and influence on the research participants and process. I, as a researcher also became the subject of research, both in the research process and its representation (Denzin, 1997). This is a challenging task in which one must examine the research process within context and grapple with one's own subjectivity. By taking a broad perspective on reflexivity as a starting point, especially considering *reflexivity as introspection*, as *intersubjective reflection* and as *mutual collaboration* (Finlay, 2002, 2003), I retrospectively try to examine the following research question:

*How did the relationship and collaboration between the teachers and the researcher develop, and how did the process contribute to the teachers' professional development and teaching practice?*

### **Method**

The school that participated in the collaborative action research project was a combined primary and lower secondary school in one of Norway's largest cities with pupils from the first to the tenth grade. The teachers were organised in teams at each grade. Due to the contract drawn up between the school and the universities, all the teachers were obliged to participate in the project. The different teacher teams were linked to one or two researchers, and each team formulated their own research question within the frame of the project (Steen-Olsen & Postholm, 2009). I worked with a team of four teachers of the sixth grade. The teachers differed in age from about 30 to about 60; three female and one male. To retain the anonymity of the participants, I do not refer to them as "he" or "she" in this article. There were about 50 pupils in this grade. I, the researcher in my fifties, started out as a teacher in secondary school, took a Ph.D. in educational science and have been educating teachers and doing classroom research for more than 20 years. The collaborative relationship between the teachers and the researcher lasted approximately one and a half years.

### **Data Sources**

This article draws upon different data sources. The analyses were evolved and enhanced through both my own regular solitary reflections recorded in a research diary throughout and following the project, and from reflective meetings, discussions and interviews with the teachers. My *research diary* documents my thoughts and experiences and contains my notes concerning why certain choices and decisions were made, how directions changed, the processing of new ideas, problems and challenges, and my own thoughts, feelings, reflections and questions both throughout the project, and upon its completion. Keeping and using this diary enabled me to make my experiences and emotions concrete, and it demonstrates the analysis and interpretations I did throughout the course of the collaboration. The content of this research diary also enables keep focused on the context both, the teachers' responses and contributions, and how these affected and shaped the relationship, the researcher and the research process. The diary functioned as a tool both in the first-order and second-order action research process (Elliott, 2007).

The four teachers and I met for the first time at the beginning of the school year in August. Throughout the year, approximately twenty meetings between the teachers and myself were held. Most of these meetings could be characterised as reflective because we analysed and discussed challenges in the teaching practice, planned courses of action, and analysed and reflected over teaching plans and classroom activities. A few of the meetings were used to present educational theory and research that were relevant for the ongoing work.

Classroom *observations* are also included in the data material. These observations were done at the beginning of the project in order to get acquainted with the teachers, the pupils and the teachers' ways of accomplishing classroom management and teaching, and on later occasions related to the actions that were carried out in the project.

Of great relevance for this article is the *group-interview* with the teachers that was done five months after the completion of the collaborative action research project. This interview was in the form of a conversation with a reflexive angle as the teachers were asked to look back and reflect upon the project, the process and outcome.

### *Data Analysis and Method Considerations*

I continuously conducted data analysis throughout the project, and these analyses were important for the choices that were made and the direction of the work. This article, however, is based on a re-analysis of the data in order to shed a reflexive light upon the collaborative project.

I transcribed all the audio recordings of meetings held throughout the project period, and while working on this article, I listened to these recordings once more. Such close, repeated listening often reveals previously unnoticed features of the conversation (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984). The different types of data were all re-analysed according to procedures outlined in the constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The data analysis moved back and forth, providing opportunities to ask questions and search for appropriate categories through open, axial and selective coding. Through the analysis, four analytical categories emerged. These categories I have called (1) *researcher as a respectful “project manager,”* (2) *insight through observing,* (3) *getting hooked,* and (4) *the importance of a reflective space.* Analytical categories like this are related to each other, and therefore not mutually independent. They are however useful in gaining additional insight into the research relationship and outcome of the project.

In an action research project, the researcher’s aim is to both contribute to developing practice and do research on the process. This double purpose is a source of substantial ethical challenges and dilemmas. Ethical considerations are clearly integral to the entire process (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005; Haverkamp, 2005). Lincoln (1990, p. 279) says: “privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity regulations were written under assumptions that are ill suited to action research where the participants are full, cooperative agents, our co-researchers.” In other words, ethics in research means that the researcher has a moral obligation to protect the participants from harm, unnecessary invasion of their privacy, and the promotion of their well-being. This is obviously a great challenge in action research where the researcher and the other participants interact and connect on many different levels. Haverkamp (2005, p. 146) argues that ethics represent “[...] a thoughtful and sometimes courageous, commitment to creating trustworthy human relationships within our research enterprise.” Adopting a reflexive stance in all phases of the project is also vital to ensure research ethics in action research. Doyle (2007) asserts that researchers should view their research as a negotiated process of meaning making with their participants. As a consequence, she suggests “participative member checking” (p. 908), or the process in which participants are given the opportunity to review their statements for accuracy. This even includes providing choices to participants for how the member checking will proceed. I discussed this with the teachers. Their attitude was that they did not want to spend time on this. Throughout the project, however I presented my analyses and interpretations, and we discussed and reflected on them together. In the group interview after the project was over, the teachers were invited to describe and interpret our collaborative process and the project as a whole. They were also offered the opportunity to read and give feedback on all texts about the project before I sent them in for publication. Two teachers read a few texts, but they usually declined saying they “trusted the researcher.”

Bray, Lee, Smith, and Yorks (2000) argue that validity in action research is determined by the extent to which practice is changed, and therefore traditional validity claims cannot be applied. Although not possible to generalise from the findings of a small-scale action research project, it is possible to relate to similar situations and practices, thus forming a basis for naturalistic generalisation (Stake, 1995). Findings and recommendations from small-scale studies might also be of great relevance for others working with similar projects (Bernhardt, 2015), and much can be learned from rich, holistic accounts of particular cases, especially when they are “anchored in real-life situations” (Merriam, 2009, p. 51).

## Phases in the Collaborative Project

### *The Reluctant Start*

During the first meeting between the teachers and myself, they were polite, serving coffee and engaging in small talk while they clearly waited for me to take the initiative. I started by giving them the opportunity to express their expectations for the project. These expectations varied a lot:

*I am not very enthusiastic when it comes to this project. It is too fluffy.*

*This project comes on the top of all the other things we have to do.*

*We don't really have time for this. Since we have to engage in it, I hope, however, that maybe we can get a common understanding of different things, and maybe we can develop some new ways of doing things out of it.*

*I view the project as a unique opportunity to develop better adaptive teaching and to learn about and develop new methods to use in the class.*

The backdrop of these utterances was that the teachers were directed to participate in action research by their head teacher. They had no choice, and their expectations reflect their varying commitment. Two of them were clearly negative and saw participation in the project as an unwanted duty. One expressed doubt, but was willing to give the project a chance, while the fourth was very positive and saw the potential for professional learning.

The accounts that emerged during the discussions in the subsequent meetings fully demonstrated that all the teachers felt overloaded by tasks and duties that should be carried out; "Time is our Achilles' heel" one of them expressed. They felt a constant bustle and lack of time to attend to the pupils' needs. The teachers expressed a genuine interest in their pupils, and, in a variety of ways formulated their desire to support, facilitate and assist students' learning more than they felt they were able to in their present situation.

During the initial phase, they also indicated that, even if they felt the project "belonged" to the head master and the researchers, out of loyalty they would take part in it. The initiative and progress would however be the responsibility of the researcher. Furthermore, in different ways two of the teachers frequently dismissed researchers as theoreticians living their sheltered lives behind desks, having only superficial insights about "real life in school."

I did not feel completely comfortable with the atmosphere in the start-up phase. Most of the teachers did not want to participate in the project I was representing. In spite of their politeness, I was not welcome, and it felt as if I was an intruder in their busy workday. In my diary I reflected in this first phase over whether the teachers' rejection of researchers' competence, might have something to do with an idea that researchers have a kind of normative knowledge about teaching, and the teachers did not want to be "inspected and exposed." Teachers do not usually have researchers with them in their practice, and a feeling of being evaluated might have been provoked. The teachers did in a way excuse themselves towards what they considered the researchers' norm for good teaching, for example by pointing to lack of time and resources preventing them from making the adaptive teaching they wanted to.

When it came to my thoughts and emotions about pursuing and leading the work onward, I have among other things written these questions and reflections:

*How can I motivate them to collaborate? I feel that three of them want this*



*project to collapse in order to get rid of it! Focus on the positive one who considers the project as a unique opportunity! [...] How can I make them accept me and respect me as a collaborating partner, as a professional and as a nice person?*

*They really have busy days and great responsibilities. How can I offer something meaningful for them in their practice that in turn will benefit their pupils' learning without occupying too much of their time?*

The teachers had not asked for this project, and they obviously considered it a further burden on their workload rather than an opportunity for professional learning and development. I knew I would have to find a balance in a landscape of challenges and tensions. According to Kemmis (2001, p. 100) the first step in action research is the formation of a communicative space in which the participants position themselves. Reason (2003, p. 17) points out that the outside researcher is in danger of “helping” in a way that might not be helpful at all because it could be controlling, patronising, suffocating, or just lacking in understanding: the inside community is always in danger of irrationally rejecting the outsider. When I analysed the teachers’ remarks and opinions, and my own responses and reflections, it became clear that it was important that I acknowledged the teachers’ competence. They were the experts on teaching in a primary school. My challenge as a researcher in this collaborative relationship was therefore to initiate, stimulate and give input regarding analysis, interpretation and reflection over their classroom practice in such a way that would allow the four teachers to construct new knowledge about their professional activity. In trying to create this communicative space, characterised by congruency between the teachers as research participants and myself as a researcher, I also attempted to value and nurture both informal talk about everyday issues as well as school matters; it was important to be sensitive to what they wanted to bring forward. I also realised that I had to be the leader of the project, and eventually the teachers waited for me to organise and take initiative to do what had to be done. The category that grew out of the re-analysis of the data from this phase of the project, I have named *the researcher as a respectful project manager*.

### ***From Fumbling to Motivation***

During the start-up phase that lasted about six weeks and included three meetings between the teachers and myself, we spent a lot of time discussing and describing their practice in order to identify the challenges they faced in their teaching. The teachers willingly expanded on their everyday work, and lack of time and resources were constantly an issue. The conversations were rambling and long lasting. My diary points to the dilemma I felt between acknowledging the teachers’ every day struggle and my frustration that we were constantly “engulfed in dailiness.” I strongly felt we were heading nowhere and that I had to get a grip on the project since the responsibility for it so obviously depended on me. Holding on to my resolution to try to lead the project in a direction that was meaningful for them without wasting their time, I lead the discussion by following up relevant contributions. Over time, we came to a general consensus that discussing given conditions and structures brought no progress to the work. Issues that came up during this phase were that the high noise levels produced by the pupils in the classroom disturbed the teaching, and that the pupils dawdled and were slow to start working with their tasks. These challenges were about classroom management. In our next meeting, I therefore suggested starting with a loop of action research: observing – reflecting – planning – acting (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). This loop consisted of the teachers observing each other’s lessons, and I observing all of them as well.

The teachers sometimes used to be two at a time in the classroom when the pupils worked with special projects or tasks, so they had all seen each other teach. In spite of this, there was a bit of hesitation from two of them when it came to these observations. It might again be the feeling of being evaluated that appeared. Holding on to my role as the “respectful project manager,” I lead us through the observations over a period of a couple of weeks. A meeting was held afterwards to reflect on what they had observed and to plan new steps. A great deal of time was used to present and discuss what they had experienced during the observation period, and being present in the colleagues’ lessons just to observe the activities and the interaction that occurred, created lots of thoughts and reflections:

*You adjust your focus when you observe to “observe.” You see things you never would have seen by just being in the classroom with a colleague.*

*I really had an aha-experience!*

Suddenly there were some positive comments, and attitudes were beginning to change. The observations seemed to have brought about a consciousness about their ways of acting in the classroom, and how this affected the pupils’ learning environment and concentration. As a consequence of this discussion, we agreed that the researcher at the next meeting should give a short lecture on classroom management, emphasising its pro-active dimensions. We also agreed that as the next step all should collaborate and draw up a plan with a few guidelines on how to handle a number of situations in the classroom so that all the teachers responded consistently. Hopefully, this would result in less noise, fewer disturbances in the classroom, and less waste of time.

When I re-analysed this phase, the category *insight through observing* emerged. This category points to the change that arose during the observation period. Teachers work in the hurly burly of their own practice, monitoring closely this practice as they are acting within it. It demands space and time, which, almost by definition, the practice does not give easily. Through this organised system of observation and reflection, these teachers were drawn out of their habitual practice, creating new experiences. The discourse in this phase of the project thus moved slowly and gradually from talking about work burdens and inappropriate structures and organisation to what was going on in their classroom, and what they could do to improve classroom practice based on their knowledge construction from observations, discussions and the theoretical presentation.

### ***The Turning Point***

The recognition that the observations and following reflections were useful, led to a noticeable shift in the teachers’ views about the project. The reluctant teachers had started to change their attitudes. Notes in my diary express relief that this observation cycle had been successful. This gave me courage to continue to motivate and push the project forward. One of my reflections at the time was that in action research it is necessary to tolerate uncertainty and accept that the process might take time.

The teachers continued to work together to harmonise their classroom management for the benefit of pupils’ learning. At the same time, we continued our efforts to find a focus for the further work we would do together within the frame of the overriding aim of the project. I continuously tried to lead the discussion in such a way that they would share the challenges they experienced, as well as which aspects of their teaching they wanted to develop in order to improve pupils’ learning. The challenge to be addressed would have to focus the work, and,

furthermore, it had to motivate and bring about a bit of enthusiasm and ownership from the part of the teachers.

All the teachers pointed out that adaptive teaching was particularly challenging, and as one put it: “Trying to deal with the challenge of adaptive teaching really makes me frustrated.” According to the Norwegian national curriculum, writing literacy shall be integrated into all subjects, and the teachers struggled to fulfil this directive. One teacher constantly claimed that she felt that much of the teaching going on was so boring that the children were not affected by it. This teacher wanted to do something more exciting and fun to motivate the pupils. There were some weeks where we could not reach an agreement on how to proceed. Quite a few pages in my diary are filled with brainstorming ideas and provisional outlines of themes, aims and questions for the project where I have tried to take into account the different viewpoints. When we struggled to find a consensus, I summed up the themes we had discussed previously. Eventually all agreed that adaptive teaching and writing literacy in different subjects were challenging and therefore were the themes they all wanted to address in creative ways that would attract the pupils’ interest and make them feel the joy of writing.

This was a challenge for me, as I had to maintain a positive attitude in order to motivate the teachers and find the right direction to lead them. I got an idea to bring in a colleague of mine to inspire them. She had been working with creative ways of writing for years, and had even written a book about it. The teachers agreed. She came, gave a lecture and planned, observed and reflected together with the teachers about one lesson. Following her visit, the teachers tried out new methods based on her ideas in their subjects. In between our regular meetings, they used and further developed these new ideas and approaches. They became excited about the process, sharing the lesson plans and teaching materials they had used with me.<sup>1</sup> Feedback from their pupils as well as their own evaluations indicated that the children’s learning outcome, motivation, and joy of writing were enhanced. The atmosphere was now completely different from that I had experienced a few months earlier. The teachers were all, to a certain degree, committed to and enthusiastic about the project.

The analytical category I developed through the retrospective analysis of this phase, I have named *getting hooked*. After the experience with the action research circle of observing, reflecting, planning and acting in regards to classroom management, a change of attitude set in. After we combined the areas they found challenging into one theme, and then augmented it with an inspirational contribution from my colleague, the teachers expressed ownership of the project and worked together to develop their teaching practice.

### *The Retrospective Glance*

Five months after the project period was over, or three months into a new school year, the teachers and I had our final meeting. I brought a semi-structured interview guide with themes and open-ended questions. The plan was to carry out the group interview as an informal and flexible conversation where we also reflected together over the process and outcome of the collaboration.

As mentioned earlier, participation in the action research project was not optional for the teachers, and some of them were quite skeptical in the beginning. I started the conversation asking what, if anything, they thought they had gained through the project. The most sceptical of them expressed the experience in this way:

*This project has given me new inspiration. It has raised my consciousness about writing literacy, and how to write in different ways. Now I see that before this I*

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of these teaching plans and materials are described in Lyngsnes, Susegg, and Postholm (2009).

*gave the pupils writing tasks that were boring to the point of tears! [...] I am a slow learner, I think. I had to be awakened to be engaged in the project. Then suddenly the time had run out, and the project was nearly over. For me it should have started now!*

Another said: “The new inputs and thoughts were really an awakening. Both reflecting together and working in new ways with the pupils have raised my consciousness about what I am doing, and prompt me to do things in other ways.”

These quotations reflect several dimensions of the project. Both teachers quoted above credit the affective side of the process for raising his/her inspiration and motivation, and both emphasise their professional development in both teaching itself and how they think about teaching. Their comments demonstrate that developmental processes take time, are complex, and include both the practical actions and reflection of them. All the teachers felt they had broadened their repertoire of methods because of the project, receiving new inspiration and ideas on how to facilitate and support pupils’ learning. They used terms like “awakening, consciousness-raising, educative, motivational” and “getting on new tracks” to describe the project.

My re-analysis of the teachers’ thoughts and views in this phase led to the category *the importance of the reflective space*. This category emerged from a review of numerous statements from the teachers. One thing they drew attention to was the importance of observing each other and then reflecting on these observations. In this way, routine and automatic actions and reactions were brought to light and scrutinised, resulting in a more reflective and substantiated practice. The teachers acknowledged openly that most of them had been very reluctant to participate in the project, but that the collaborative process had contributed to their professional learning and development in various ways. The researcher’s role in the project was strongly emphasised, and here too, the importance of reflection was underlined: “You as a researcher kept us going by organising the meetings, observing, questioning, giving feedback, and most of all participating in the reflective activities.” At the beginning of the project the teachers had an image of the researcher as an expert and distant academic; ‘we thought you came to show us the “right” ways to do things.’ They underlined that the researcher’s competence and personality were significant for the outcome of the project: “Not any researcher would do however. It was very important that you once had been a teacher, that you know about new research and theory about classrooms, and that you are easy-going and speak in a way we understand!” The teachers gave the impression that the collaboration should have been prolonged and commented that they particularly missed the organised reflective meetings:

*Things happen all the time. We get stuck in the daily tasks. We don’t have the time and opportunity to sit down and reflect – or perhaps we don’t give priority to use time for it. [...] Last year we had time to reflect in the meetings with you. This year, however, we don’t have this arena unless we make it ourselves.*

The teacher team clearly had acknowledged the importance of the reflective space for their professional development. On their own, however, they had problems organizing and giving reflective activity priority.

The phases and the categories I developed through the analyses are illustrated in the table below.

| <b>Phases in the collaborative process</b> | <b>Categories developed</b>                           |
|--|---|
| <i>The reluctant start</i>                 | <i>The researcher as a respectful project manager</i> |
| <i>From fumbling to motivation</i>         | <i>Insight through observing</i>                      |
| <i>The turning point</i>                   | <i>Getting hooked</i>                                 |
| <i>The retrospective glance</i>            | <i>The importance of the reflective space</i>         |

## Discussion

In this article, I have tried to take a reflexive stance in order to shed light on how the relationships and collaboration between the teachers and the researcher developed, as well as look at the way the process contributed to the teachers' professional development. This small-scale study has provided me with a number of findings related to both the challenges and dilemmas associated with the process of creating and sustaining such a project, as well as to the outcome of this type of collaborative approach to teacher professional learning. Furthermore, I have recognised the immense importance of exercising reflexivity both during and after an action research project. Through the re-analysis of the data, I have developed categories that give new insight into the emotions, relationships, processes and activities that took place, and I have come to understand that my, more or less deliberate reflections and actions at the time, were actually reflexivity in practice.

Reflexivity in this kind of research relationship is an ongoing endeavour. By bringing my data from the project out in the daylight again and re-analysing them, I have exercised reflexivity on two levels in two different spaces of time. In the first round reflexivity was carried out simultaneously throughout the period of the collaboration and provided insight and alternative actions in the day-to-day progress of the project. In the second round the thorough re-examination of the data, constitutes a retrospective reflexive analysis. It has allowed me to see development, processes, and critical moments in the collaborative relationship, thereby expanding my understanding of the complexity of collaborative action research.

Collaborative action research is a process that develops, grows, and shifts over time, and the relationships between the researcher and the other research participants are a defining factor. These go beyond those found in other forms of qualitative research, which have a more instrumental orientation towards relations, revolving as they do around the use of participants as respondents or informants in the production of data, in order to produce research results (Phillips & Kristiansen, 2013). As the primary purpose of collaborative research is to carry out research with participants, it requires the researcher to cultivate and maintain these relations over time in order to ensure that the project produces results that satisfy the knowledge development of all participants and their – potentially diverse – perceptions about the outcome (ibid).

The relationship between the teachers and me were a theme of concern and reflection throughout the entire collaborative process. The analysis of the first phase of the project, led me to the category "researcher as a respectful project manager." Here, the data from my research diary illustrate how I used *reflexivity as introspection* (Finlay, 2002) to "process" my feelings and come up with a suitable approach in which to frame my role as researcher. My findings demonstrate that when research relationships are formed, an essential aspect of reflexivity requires the researcher to engage in empathetic sensitivity towards the participants and the context. This is a kind of "relational awareness" (Warin, 2011, p. 811) which includes an awareness of how, in the role of researcher, I influenced my research participants, as well

as a simultaneous and interdependent awareness of how they were influencing me. My data show that when most of them affirmed that they did not want a project and stayed quite reluctant over a period of time, unpleasant and ambivalent feelings were brought up in me. I have been a teacher myself and understood they were busy, and I know that teachers' workload has intensified since my days as a schoolteacher<sup>2</sup>. I felt uncomfortable as an outsider imposing extra work on them. Through examining my thoughts and emotions, I realised the great respect I felt for the teachers working in this primary school with more than 50 eleven years olds to attend to. My data also show how I used my position to lead them into and through the project.

Using introspection and being reflexive about one's own personal reactions is one side of reflexivity. Being too preoccupied by one's own emotions and experiences, however, can carry with it the risk of blocking out the participants' voice. The challenge in using introspection is not to use personal revelation as an end in itself, but instead as a springboard for interpretations and more general insight. This process then leads into reflexivity as *intersubjective* reflection (Finlay, 2002) which I applied to my data analysis when exploring the interaction and meanings emerging within the research relationship. An interesting aspect of intersubjective reflexivity is the perceptions research partners have of each other, and how those influence their interaction and participation. My findings show that the teachers initially had an image of me as a distant academic with limited knowledge of school, and they thought I would come in as an expert to tell them how to teach. When this preconception was added to the fact that they *had to* participate, it became understandable that they kept a distance to the researcher and were eager to describe their busy workday. All except one considered the researcher, to be a type of unwanted intruder – and this was also the feeling I had from them. These attitudes naturally had an impact on the interaction and collaboration in the start-up-phase of the project. Through the first loop of action research, however, where the category “insight through observing” emerged, and later in the project when the teachers were “getting hooked,” data demonstrates how they realised that this project could provide them with new tools and knowledge, and that the researcher could contribute to their learning and development.

Attitudes changed over time, and the last meeting captured the teachers' perspectives on the nature and experience of the research, their thoughts about the researcher and how they viewed themselves as a part of it. The teachers clarified and elaborated on the reasons behind their initial attitudes and opinions – and on how their feelings about the project and the researcher changed. This reflexive dialogue was an important data source for both intersubjective *reflexivity* and *reflexivity as mutual collaboration* and provided insight into how the research relationship developed and shaped the outcome of the project. This joint reflexivity that both confirmed and modified my own interpretations of what had happened during this collaborative project, adding depth to my analysis.

One aspect of the teachers' reflections during this final meeting was that they felt the researcher's experience, knowledge and personality were decisive factors in the collaborative process and, in turn, what comes out of a project like this. All the teachers, whether they had positive or negative feelings about the project in the beginning, now declared that they had developed and changed their practice<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, the process had both challenged and convinced them that reflecting over their teaching was important in order to develop professional learning. Although they felt their outlooks had changed because of the project, they also recognised that taking the time to reflect as they had during the project would be challenging with no one there to organise the reflections. Their response surprised me and I

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<sup>2</sup> Intensification of teachers' work is not just a feeling these teachers were expressing, it is today a common feature internationally (Ballet, Kelchtermans, & Loughran, 2006; Hargreaves, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> These statements were verified via interviews with the pupils. These findings are described in Lyngsnes (2009).

needed to think them through. On the one hand, the fact they had recognised the importance of reflecting over practice was a positive outcome of the project. On the other hand, they did not earmark time for it. I could interpret this in a number of ways. Perhaps in my role as project manager I had organised too many activities, and had not given them the opportunity to take responsibility for themselves to developing the habit of reflecting. Perhaps it was just easier for them to not try to squeeze one more thing into their already busy workday, or perhaps the collaborative action research project did not last long enough to implement reflection as a part of the teachers' practice.

### *Final Comments*

Participating in this collaborative action research project was a considerably more complex, multi-layered, situational, and absorbing research process than the qualitative research I usually carry out. Phillips and Kristiansen (2013, p. 257) argue that in research literature there is a tendency to romanticise collaborative research practises and the role of the collaborative researcher, downplaying or neglecting the ambivalences, tensions, problems and fiascos. My study helps elaborate on the complexity of collaborative action research in schools, enforcing that it must be co-constituted and a joint product of the teachers, the researcher and their relationship. In this type of research, the participants' different positions, experiences and professional biographies make it possible or inevitable that assumptions, goals and practices will differ. The direction, the outcome and the meanings are also negotiated in a particular setting and context. As described in this article the researcher's position in collaborative action research is crucial, and the need for reflexivity is comprehensive. It is important to remember, however, that the researcher do not limit the reflexive analysis to his or her own thoughts and actions. Cunliffe (2003) emphasises that the nature of such research makes the researcher's account one of many, and it is essential to remember that research is a narrative constructed by a number of participant stories, and the researcher's is only one of them. Applying intersubjective and mutual collaborative reflexivity allows for different understandings and meanings, illuminating and influencing both the process and the outcome of action research. The aim of this collaborative project was to promote teacher learning and development. It has however led to a substantial learning outcome for the researcher as well, and the next time I carry out an action research project, I will be considerably more conscious of the importance of taking a reflexive stance towards the research process.

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