Diary of an Action Research

Creating Space for Dialogue, Reflection and Collaboration in Teacher Training

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The present chapter explores the goals, experiences and outcomes of a teacher training course embedded in action research, which explored how the attitudes of prospective teachers can be revealed and possibly modified through reflective-co-operative practice. Joint planning, team-teaching, and providing collegial reflections throughout the course were applied in order to enhance teachers' self-efficacy, which may result in a greater commitment to changing practice. By reflecting on the intensive, content-rich and sustained collaboration, we aimed to investigate impacts upon teaching and/or learning processes and outcomes. We found an urgency to focus more on the personal development of prospective teachers by using participative methods, assisting the acquisition of specific transversal competences, such as critical thinking, collective knowledge building, problem-solving, and a co-operative spirit. Ideally, teacher training embraces the development of these new teacher attitudes; therefore, we propose a model that is designed to provide collaborative experiences and an atmosphere of inclusiveness to prospective teachers and to promote the understanding and appreciation of diversity.

— **Keywords:**

teacher training

collaborative practice

action research

professional development

Theoretical framework

Action research is a value-oriented, reflective process designed to inform and influence practice with an emphasis on participation and collaboration, focusing on immediate application rather than the development of theory (Noffke & Somekh, 2010). Action research does not begin with a hypothesis, but a problem, an idea, which is systematically investigated, and in this process researchers gain a better understanding of the research situation as well as themselves, their values, attitudes and behaviour. In this way, action research can also be seen as a form of self-evaluation in a professional context (McNiff, 2002). Action research as a way of "professional learning" opens up new spaces for communication, promotes dialogues and the building of common knowledge constructed from the interactions of different views and reflections of participants. New knowledge is most often generated through dialogues between participants and is ideally based on trust, common values, moral commitment (Málovics, 2014), and a democratic and inclusive approach. Action research fosters collaborative relationships and more egalitarian relations between participants by maintaining an extended view of "expertise" that is based on innovative partnership rather than a hierarchy of different types of knowledge. "The idea of co-producing knowledge recognizes that knowledge is plural and that our research participants provide knowledge, which is turned into propositional knowledge – by the researchers – for dissemination to academic and policy audiences" (Pearce, 2008, p. 16). The outcome of common knowledge construction is unpredictable since the research itself is "guided by the process and context" (Pearce, 2008, p. 18), which is a less comfortable and less controlled methodology than traditional research. However, it serves the aim "to value and support any unexpected and emergent new areas of thinking and practice as well as new relationships" (Pearce, 2008, p. 18). Action research emphasizes collaborative relationships in which all participants can benefit from a supportive environment and a reflective learning process. As a systematic, collaborative and participatory process of inquiry, embedded in teacher training, action research facilitates the creation of space for effective professional development in several ways:

1. We gain a deeper understanding of our own role as professionals by reflecting on our experience, which in turn helps us to make judgements about our own effectiveness.
2. We extend our professional knowledge by framing and reframing experiences, thus obtaining alternative perspectives, making it easier to reflect on emotionally challenging situations.
3. Maintaining a research-oriented mindset contributes to the professionalisation process, reinforcing feelings of self-efficacy and competency.

Research into teacher learning supports professional development that is collegial and collaborative, provides an opportunity to reflect on results with colleagues, helps to understand how students learn, and is intensive and sustained over time, since this environment allows teachers "to raise issues, take risks, and address dilemmas in their own practice. [...] Research on effective professional development also highlights the importance of collaborative and collegial learning environments that help develop communities of practice able to promote school change beyond individual classrooms" (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009, p. 3).

Cycles of action research in teacher education

The action research was carried out in the spring semester of 2019 as part of the teacher education programme at the Institute of Education Sciences, Faculty of Humanities, University of Pécs in a course for second-year students ("Education and School"), during which we created the conditions for co-operative learning and collaborative teaching. The ten thematical units of the course material were adjusted to fit the co-operative principles: personally inclusive parallel interactions, constructive and encouraging interdependence, personal responsibility, individual accountability, equal access and participation, and conscious competence development (Arató & Varga, 2015). Co-operative structures were chosen over the traditional teaching method because they "powerfully assist the acquisition of transversal competencies" such as systemic thinking and collective knowledge building, problem-solving, critical thinking, a co-operative spirit and skills in navigating knowledge networks (Arató, 2015). The bilingual model (the use

of both Hungarian and English language as the medium) served three purposes:

1. To keep students outside their comfort zone by creating the need to adjust to new conditions, handle challenging situations, and allow themselves new experiences.
2. To facilitate true co-operation among students who worked in constant micro-groups (four members each) where there were inequalities among the members regarding foreign language proficiency. In order to efficiently deal with authentic English input (articles, videos, instructions), team members had to pool their knowledge and share skills and experiences so that they all benefitted from the contribution of the other team members, thus creating positive interdependence within the team.
3. By constructing a foreign language environment, we intended to urge students to use English **in, through** and **for** learning while developing cognitive as well as interpersonal and social skills.

The collaboration of three teachers/instructors involved joint planning, team-teaching and participant observation, as well as providing collegial reflections and acting as a "critical friend" (Schuck & Russell, 2005). The process was monitored by means of participant observation (colleagues taking turns teaching and observing), taking fieldnotes and collecting artefacts, such as posters and mind-maps produced by prospective teachers. The 23 students registered on the course were assessed by regular knowledge retainment tests, while the Psychological Immune Competence Inventory (Oláh, 2005) was administered to measure positive personality traits and the possible changes in the psychological immune competencies of student teachers. Participants completed the test at the beginning and at the end of the course, and the data was analysed using Jamovi statistical software. Reflections were not only employed to monitor the process of action research but as a potential means to change the participants' perceptions of themselves and encourage them to try new approaches. The reflections of students were documented in the form of structured written feedback (at the end of each 135-minute session) and turned into a corpus of text to be analysed by applying the Grounded Theory coding process. The teaching/learning process was constantly monitored, and modifications and adjustments were made on the basis

of the feedback from students and the reflections and interpretations made by the participants; thus, the research process became a series of interventions, as visually summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Action research cycles

Partnership and dialogue with students

From the very beginning of the research process, we set out to create a space for dialogue with students to form a sense of partnership. Three strategies were applied in our model with the intention of fostering prospective teachers' involvement in the action research: writing and signing a contract, adopting co-operative learning structures, and giving and receiving mutual meta-reflections. The contract served as a common framework for all the activities taking place in the context of the research (the condition of active participation, the number of absences allowed, the obligation to complete written feedback regularly, as well as the psychological immune competence questionnaire) and briefly described the aims and the content of the "Education and School" course. It also listed the course

requirements and teachers' competencies to be developed. Every single student received an original copy of the contract, which was signed by him/herself and the three teachers, by means of which we ultimately created student ownership. It was our aspiration to create an "alliance" with the students, building on shared values and mutual respect, so that they could take individual responsibility for their actions and decisions to the same degree as the three teachers/instructors of the course.

Co-operative learning for engagement

The second strategy, in line with the philosophy of participatory action research, was the consistent application of co-operative learning structures in the classroom. Based on the literature, it was assumed that engaging students in co-operative learning "promotes a more constructive management of conflicts than competitive or individualistic efforts. It promotes self-acceptance as a competent person, higher-level reasoning and critical thinking competences, more frequent generation of new ideas, higher student achievement and deeper retention" (Arató, 2015, p. 35). Therefore, micro-groups of four students were formed that functioned as "the substantive space of personal and social behaviour" (Arató & Varga, 2015, p. 36). The organisation of the course material and the classroom activities were planned at micro-group level in order to "structurally deconstruct the hierarchical, logocentric and teacher-centred education" (Arató & Varga, 2015, p. 35) and efficiently apply the following principles:

1. **Personally inclusive parallel interactions** put an emphasis on personal involvement in learning, and simultaneous interactions multiply the number of dialogues in class, reflecting the attitude that knowledge is the result of collective creation.
2. **Constructive and encouraging interdependence** means that the focus is on the relationship of the group members (learners) while working towards a common goal. On the other hand, the collective effort of the group is essential for individuals to reach their goal.
3. **Personal responsibility and individual accountability** allow for individual development (personal and social competencies) supported by personalised (peer) feedback. There is a focus

on individual attitudes, behaviours and actions and taking responsibility for them, and learners are assessed by their individual learning outcomes.

4. **Equal access and participation** reflect everybody's democratic right to access shared knowledge as well as making their voices heard regardless of the stage they are at in the learning process.
5. **Conscious competence development** means that co-operative learning not only builds on learners' competences but helps to recognise and articulate learners' own different competences and supports their conscious development (Arató & Varga, 2015; Arató, 2013; Herrmann, 2013).

Since the structural approach of co-operative learning carries paradigmatic features, it "could be understood as a deconstructive paradigm that provides some pragmatic answers to the questions of our everyday educational practice from classroom level to educational system level, focusing on the destruction of hierarchical and anti-democratic structures of learning while setting up co-operative ones" (Arató, 2013, p. 58).

Possible impacts of co-operative learning

Although we maintain that co-operative learning is a crucial and relevant component of action research in teacher training, there is a need to investigate students' engagement and participation from a qualitative aspect. In his study, Herrmann notes that the findings of higher education research into co-operative learning are ambiguous, and he highlights that a "number of studies report co-operative learning to elicit more conscientious effort and stronger commitment to preparation. Nevertheless, the same studies also reflect a number of problems related to co-operative learning such as freeriding, resentment towards being dependent on peers, conflicts arising over varying levels of ambition, and distrust towards peers" (Herrmann, 2013, p. 2). He also cites studies which suggest that students' perception of "proper" university teaching may be incompatible with the principles and practice of co-operative learning; in particular, students with a transmission concept of teaching and learning and "who expect correct answers and comprehensive reviews" may oppose co-operative learning groups (Herrmann, 2013, p. 10).

We encountered some of the difficulties and controversies mentioned above, especially in two areas. In the first place, the principle of "constructive and encouraging interdependence" suffered due to the unwillingness of students to learn from each other and the lack of mutual trust when they were confronted with their own misconceptions and those of their peers. Secondly, equal participation was often challenged by the bilingual approach since students with a (perceived) lower foreign language proficiency refused to deal with authentic English input (refusal of personal responsibility) and "translators" were appointed in some of the micro-groups to manage the task.

We reacted by undertaking interventions in both cases as part of the action research cycles. To handle mistrust in the groups, we introduced regular teambuilding exercises that supported individuals to recognize and understand their own feelings and those of their peers. Emotional intelligence activities, such as "Mood checks" using emotion charts, helped to make students aware of how emotional patterns affect their classroom experience and group productivity. Another activity called "Are we progressing?" not only encouraged students to express frustration in a positive way and to question certain team patterns but also revealed how each person is responsible for their own behaviour and for how the team performs, helping them see that they can impact the quality of interactions and progress.

To handle students' frustration with being confronted with the English language as a medium of instruction and feeling inadequate (some of them actually panicked), we introduced skill-based differentiation. Authentic English texts, which served as inputs for group discussions and for the creation of mind-maps about the effects of multitasking, were tailored to reflect the different levels of language proficiency. The texts themselves were not modified, however the ways of processing the information varied enormously, and the four members of each micro-group could make their own individual decision about which text to choose:

1. Task A (for students claiming very little or no English knowledge)
 - translation of 10 keywords from the text into Hungarian using online help (e.g. their smartphone),
2. Task B (for students claiming a basic knowledge of English)
 - match 5 keywords with their definitions (the Hungarian equivalents of some difficult expressions were provided),

3. Task C (for students with an intermediate level of English) – find 5 keywords in the text that are related to the title of the text, or
4. Task D (for students with a higher proficiency of English, e.g. language major) – summarise the text in 4 short sentences.

Students doing the same task formed "expert groups" in order to work on their special assignment with the aim of reaching a common solution. Upon returning to their "home groups", all experts reported the information learnt and were able to act as a source for the other group members, hence fulfilling the principle of equal access and participation. In the context of action research, we understand our roles as facilitators who "should structure and re-structure the learning process" (Arató, 2013, p. 76), so it was our intention to not only provide a practical example to prospective teachers but also create the conditions for them to experience the need to take responsibility and to work on a possible resolution. This approach reflects our belief that knowledge is a social construction to be developed by a learning community, and that in educational practice the focus should be on the learning process itself with the main goal being achieving autonomous learning (Arató, 2013).

Promotion of reflective practice

The third strategy, named "mutual meta-reflections", is closely related to the ongoing iterative cycles of action research (planning, acting, observing and reflecting), which again positioned students as contributors to their own knowledge by offering them the possibility to reflect regularly on the content and the methodology of the course as well as on their experiences and feelings, their perceived roles and how their own learning process evolved. We define reflection as "a deliberate and conscientious process that employs a person's cognitive, emotional and somatic capacities to mindfully contemplate on past, present or future actions" (Harvey et al., 2016, p. 11) and go along with the view that emotions that may arise during the students' experience contribute to the learning process (Harvey et al., 2016). Throughout the cycles of the action research, we encouraged a structured and systematic reflective practice and based the interventions (modification of content and/or methodology) on students' written feedback. We asked them to complete the following 12 sentences at the end of each session anonymously:

1. I liked/did not like this topic because...
2. What I learnt today...
3. My most important experience today...
4. These skills of mine were developed today...
5. Looking back, this is what I would do differently ...
6. This is what I questioned...
7. I need to make progress in...
8. I have made the greatest progress in...
9. The activity/role which made me feel good...
10. The activity/role which made me feel bad/embarrassed...
11. The most important thing I have received from the group/learnt from others...
12. The most important thing I have taught others...

Individual reflections – providing us with an insight of a unique and personal nature – were assessed between sessions and taken into consideration in planning interventions for the next class. By contemplating students' feedback in the light of participant observation and researchers' fieldnotes about the same class, we were able to create new forms of understanding about our practice. At the end of the course, the written feedback of all students was recorded electronically and turned into a corpus of text (12 sentences x 10 occasions x 23 students) to be analysed by applying the Grounded Theory coding process. The data is going to be used to map the thinking patterns of prospective teachers, expectedly revealing levels of reflections and attitudes towards their own professional development.

In contrast to the systematically written reflections, meta-reflections occurred orally during the teaching/learning process as part of a joint and more conscious and deliberate effort to make sense of the process itself. Meta-reflections often happened as a "time-out" in the middle of the teaching-learning process, when students sought to develop an understanding of what was happening to them, framing and reframing their reactions to their experiences and interpreting the reflections of the teachers/researchers. Instances of meta-reflections provide good examples of the "communicative spaces" in which dialogue can flourish (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). It was in these dialogues that student teachers became true, emancipated partners in the action research, shaping the understanding of our professional roles as teacher educators.

Collaboration as an innovative partnership in teacher education

It requires time, effort and the opportunity to develop trust to create and sustain a space for communication within an action research project in which participants collaborate in order to gain a deeper understanding of teaching and learning processes, student attitudes and their own effectiveness. Platteel et al. suggest that two interrelated conditions can be distinguished that are essential to "the forming and sustaining of a collaborative action research partnership: (1) **Contextual conditions** – a supportive context for the research project needs to be created" (e.g. workshops, meetings, inspiring readings), and "(2) **Communicative conditions** (in speech or writing) – at least as important as contextual conditions is the willingness of participants to engage in free and open communication and dialogue" (2010, pp. 432–433).

As to the contextual conditions, we established ourselves as an academic research group focusing on gaining a better understanding and improvement of our own practices in teacher education while using the data for theory/model building. We greatly benefitted from our different professional backgrounds and expertise in three related fields: (1) teacher research/pedagogy, (2) special education needs/learning disabilities, and (3) language learning and teaching/linguistics. We integrated our expertise in the joint planning of the course as well as team-teaching, building on each other's ideas in the teaching-learning process either in a planned way or spontaneously. The ten thematical units (135 minutes each) for the "Education and School" course were planned in a detailed manner, making use of a digital "planning board" with the following headings:

AIM Teaching/ learning	STEPS Realisation/ implementation	TIMING (minutes)	Equipment needs	Teacher activity	LEARNING Structures	Reflections
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For each 135-minute class, three sections of complementary professional content were planned, consciously building on each other's expertise. For instance, the third session of the course started with students discovering parenting styles (creating and presenting mind-maps based on co-operative learning), followed by an English block about relevant aspects of IQ and EQ (making use of authentic

texts and videos as input for the micro-groups), and finally they worked on the concept of "attitude" and learnt to differentiate between naive and scientific approaches. During the whole session, the three teachers kept changing their roles by teaching, assisting and observing alternately.

However, action research is context-bound and strongly rooted in practice, and we argue that a constant dialogue of theory and practice evolves throughout the research process. The practitioners involved in action research work in and reflect on a complex and dynamic environment while the exploration of their personal philosophy, beliefs and attitudes take place. Problems, questions and interventions that occur call for the inclusion of new theoretical components that may help to make sense of our experience and assist in making relevant decisions.

Critical friendship and self-study

The "communicative condition" of a collaborative action research partnership specifies the criteria for a free and open dialogue "through which the truth can be revealed" (Platteel et al., 2010, p. 433) and the readiness of the participants to engage in this "communicative action". One of the most helpful partners in assessing one's own practice in communicative actions is a critical friend who "acts as a sounding board, asks challenging questions, supports reframing of events, and joins in the professional learning experience" (Schuck & Russell, 2005, p. 2). A critical friend not only provides support and challenges throughout the research (by giving critical evaluations that are constructive and professional) but also helps the researcher to adopt a more independent stance towards his/her own action research. The role of critical friends is extremely valuable (in our case, it was my two colleagues/co-teachers/collaborative research partners) in all phases of the action research project. As a teacher/action researcher, I was relying on them to provide honest and impartial feedback during our 60-minute weekly meetings that were held immediately after the classes. Some concerns and difficulties may be alleviated by involving critical friends in the process, such as the lack of distance from the research situation, the difficulty with becoming detached and the conflicting roles of teacher versus researcher (Anagnou & Fragoulis, 2014). Critical friends also play a major role in supporting self-study practice, which is an "inherently critical activity that seeks to challenge one's fundamental assumptions about personal professional practice" (Schuck & Russell, 2005, p. 12). During

the practice of self-study, one needs to get rid of defensive routines and adopt a mode of communication which reflects strength (feeling vulnerable while encouraging inquiry), honesty (encourage yourself and others to say what you fear to say) and integrity (advocate your principles, values and beliefs) (Mandl, 2007). During my meetings with my colleagues/ collaborative research partners, I had the opportunity to immediately articulate my introspection and soul-searching personal thoughts on my role as a teacher, which were either confirmed or questioned by them and, acting as critical friends, they described the behaviour they observed during the teaching process. It is important to see that "those who engage in self-study are critical of themselves and their roles as researchers and teacher educators. We believe that this self-reflexive form of inquiry can lead to fundamental changes in our selves. For example, it could lead to a reframing of one's educational philosophy, or it can lead to a change in one's stance towards practice. It is important to remember that self-study is not a study of the self in isolation, but rather a study of one's self in relation to other people" (Feldman et al., 2007, p. 968).

— **Insights and preliminary conclusions**

A metacognitive approach to action research

Action research does not stand for the ideas of objectivity and value-free researchers – as rooted in the tradition of positivist science – but "emphasizes the need to understand people's subjective experience and the meanings they give it in context" (Pearce, 2008, p. 8). Action research always offers a multiplicity of viewpoints and "seeks differences, contradictions, possibilities and questions as ways of opening up new avenues of action" (Whitehead, 2017, p. 15). Taking Kurt Lewin's influential concept of action research, we maintain that "diagnostic activities such as observations, interviews, and questionnaires are already powerful interventions and the processes of learning about a system and changing that system are, in fact, one and the same" (Mandl, 2007, p. 35). A guiding principle of action research is the conviction that "valid science must engage with human beings as persons" (Pearce, 2008, p. 10) and not as a "subject", and thus a collaborative relationship and the idea of co-producing knowledge is accepted and advocated.

Towards professional development – teacher learning

Most competency-based approaches (integrating knowledge, skills and attitudes) in education are often rooted in the deficit model instead of referring to a teacher's core qualities: trust, care, kindness, sensitivity, courage, commitment, flexibility, honesty, fairness, humour, etc. (Korthagen, 2017, p. 396). Since we might not be able to perceive the quality of teachers in a standardised list, Korthagen proposes an integrative view of the "effective" teacher and illustrates his vision with the onion model. He describes the effective teacher as someone who "impacts her environment on the basis of a certain coherence between her core qualities, ideals, sense of identity, beliefs, competencies, behaviour and the characteristics of the environment, e.g. a classroom or school" (Korthagen, 2017, p. 397). A variety of studies describe the learning processes of teachers that concentrate on reframing limited and negative self-concepts and beliefs about educational situations, which can be an emotional process, while successful coaching leads to "increased feelings of autonomy, more self-efficacy" (Korthagen, 2017, p. 398). He points out that teacher learning is multi-level, multi-dimensional, often unconscious and above all value-based, whereas learning communities are the true facilitators of professional development. Teacher learning as described above parallels the learning process of collaborative action research where shared common experiences help participants frame and reframe incidents, experiences and events to gain alternative perspectives. Professional knowledge is developed through effective reflective practice which "offers a way of interpreting problematic situations that dramatically diminishes the need to rationalise one's behaviour" (Loughran, 2002, p. 13).

The professional development facilitated by our participation in collaborative action research has brought about changes in several dimensions of teacher well-being (as proposed by an upcoming OECD project on "Supporting Teachers' Professional Learning and Well-being for Quality Teaching"), namely:

1. Growing self-efficacy in classroom management, instructions, and student engagement (cognitive well-being).
2. Commitment to change, feelings of trust, and higher job satisfaction (psychological well-being).
3. Improvement in workplace relationships and teacher co-operation (social well-being) (Schleicher, 2018).

Collaborative action research not only offers a strategy for change and professional development but has the potential to improve teachers' self-efficacy (teachers' beliefs in their ability to perform), which is closely linked to teachers' well-being and strongly influences their academic achievement and behaviour. A research-oriented mindset and systematic reflections on experiences, supported by a learning community, can empower individuals, prevent burn out and may positively influence teaching quality and job satisfaction. Thus, we fully agree and support the suggestion that "universities must include action research as a core unit in teacher preparation programmes" as it holds significant value to improving practice (Hine, 2013, p. 161).

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