A researcher’s agony:

Five moments in the collaborative research journey

Marianne Koo

Department of Educational Policy and Administration

School of Foundations in Education

Hong Kong Institute of Education

Hong Kong

Correspondence

D2-2/F-10

Hong Kong Institute of Education

Lo Ping Road Taipo NT Hong Kong

Tel: 852-29487783

Fax: 852-29487619

Email: mkoo@ied.edu.hk

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Abstract

A teacher educator, because of her doctoral studies, began a collaborative research journey of almost two years with a group of primary school teachers and principals. Action Research as critical, collaborative and recursive transformed the researcher's story into "a non-personal affair". The researcher consistently kept two sets of reflective journals contributing to part of the data collected. She shared these reflective notes in a wider arena so that more people not only understood what the research was about, but also wished to echo the voices elicited from the teachers, the principals and the researcher.

The paper critically examines five moments in the researcher's living encounter within a context of curriculum change. These moments portrayed a reflexive account of the researcher's story that authenticated the meaning of collaborative inquiry to the "real" world of teachers. The paper concludes by delivering a message of HOPE which would exist in people who strive for developing a sense of empowerment and reconstructing teacher curriculum decision-making as both the means and ends of leading to new conceptions and practices of curriculum leadership.

I. Introduction

The focus of my doctoral studies is about teacher curriculum decision-making within a context of curriculum change in Hong Kong by a critical inquiry using narratives from and conversations with a selection of primary school teachers and principals. In the 1990's, reforming school curriculum and management became two main initiatives for transforming basic education in Hong Kong. Two central policies, the Target-Oriented Curriculum (TOC) and the School-Based Management Initiative, were introduced to primary schools, and have impinged upon the life and work of teachers over the decade. However, the conceptual links and contextual relations between these two initiatives lacked clarity in policy formulation, interpretation and implementation. Because of the departure of the colonial government in 1997, these reforms, in terms of both intention and intensity, were also colored by underlying political agendas.

The introduction of the TOC was intended to change the organisation of the subject curriculum (Chinese, English and Mathematics), the teaching and learning pedagogies, and the school assessment and reporting on one hand, while adopting a top-down approach to policy planning and implementation on the other (Morris, 1995; Koo, 1996). The position of teachers, both in their curriculum work and in relation to other major stakeholders (for example, principals, parents and students), was not addressed in the various stages of the planning and implementation of the TOC. Issues about whether teachers were curriculum implementers, adopters, adapters or decision-makers did not receive adequate attention in professional discourse both within and across academic and policy contexts. Accordingly, I was very concerned that the traditional perception of teachers as curriculum implementers was taken for granted by teachers and principals within the context of curriculum change as introduced by the TOC. As "implementers" or "adopters", the teacher's role was to apply
curriculum developed elsewhere and to adopt prescribed textbooks as the ‘blueprint’ for the content of teaching and learning. In the absence of a critical examination followed by a deliberate reconstruction of the changing role of teachers in their curriculum work, I questioned what impact the TOC had on the “real world” of teachers in relation to the act of curriculum decision-making.

This is the setting in which I began to conceptualize my research study and in which I was willing to declare my ontological positions for optimising the research effort (as noted in the purposes of the study). This declaration did not allow me to be presumptuous and complacent about the methodological approach I chose for the study. Rather, I was particularly aware of setting sound and cogent arguments for promoting, justifying and defending my position in this study. I therefore reflected upon my strategies for advocating the purposes of the research, reporting the research processes, analysing the research data and documenting the research outcomes.

Throughout the thesis, I have given myself a place by reporting the reflections that I made along the way as a researcher. Italicised sections, used to indicate my reflections, appear from time to time throughout the thesis. These sections signify either my reactions to my critical reflection or an account of my reflections at a given point in time. The thesis, then, tells the story of both the research investigation in terms of how the research question was addressed, and my journey as a researcher. At times, of course, these two stories merge.

II. Why did I write this paper?

This paper was written with a major purpose of sharing with a wider group of educational researchers my meta analysis of my reflections on the collaborative research journey. I, therefore, decided to use a conversational approach in writing some parts of the paper which highlighted a few questions that I encountered in framing the structure of this paper.

Question (raised many times): "We all know that studying a doctoral program is not at all easy. We always advocate the joy of learning. Therefore, the title of this paper appears to be threatening to those potential students who might wish to begin their studies for a doctoral degree in the nearest future. What is your actual purpose of writing this paper?"

Marianne (the author): "I am sincere about my purpose of writing this paper and presenting it at an international conference. I use a metaphor for this:

Many women hope to have their children of their own. It is not until they have committed themselves to taking the ‘risk’ of expecting a baby, will they know how difficult and complex their involvement will be. In order to reduce the anxiety and uncertainties, hospitals and clinics organise seminars and talks for women to provide them with the required knowledge, skills and support they will need when beginning motherhood.

In this sense, will the medical consultants hide the problems and difficulties behind the scenarios? Do the mothers just share their joy without properly acknowledging the agony they have had in the whole process of bringing up their children? What’s wrong of telling ‘the truth’ and sharing with other people?

In other words, why are some women still willing to have their babies after they hear about other people’s experiences in the processes involved? What is important to
these women? Is there any profound meaning in thinking about and acting upon all this?"

Being a part-time mature student who works in the field of teacher education, I have positioned myself at the intersection of research and practice. I have identified five moments as my agony in this collaborative research study. I am willing to share some of my reflective notes in a wider arena so that more people not only understand what the research is about but also wish to echo the voices elicited from the teachers, the principals and the researcher.

"I attended a Graduate Student Seminar in the U.S. in April 2000. Some of the conversations in a sharing group were noted as below:

**Doctoral Student X:** "Vow! What is this? Is this your name card?"

A recent doctoral graduate (one of the attendants): "...Yes. After you obtain your doctoral degree and become a university professor, you are entitled to have your name cards! Of course, your title will be Dr. and Assistant Professor..."

**Doctoral Student X** (with an admiring voice): "How nice it would be! That's what I study for."

The message outlined above actually links to some serious questions about why I pursued my doctoral studies; whose interests were considered; what implicit meaning was discovered in this collaborative research journey. All this prompts me to continually reflect on an old question (Spencer, 1882), "what knowledge is of most worth?" (p.31).

**III. What is this paper about?**

The doctoral thesis is about my story as the researcher. It documents the research journey of my study. The use of researcher’s narrative (Bruner, 1986, p.11) is evident in the decision of using the first person "I" throughout the thesis. Having said this, the researcher’s reflections attempt to "demonstrate reflexive awareness of the many factors which may have influenced [my] interpretations, judgements and decisions" (Somekh, 1995, p.348). In this sense my reflections (as the researcher) might not only become a part of the data itself but also serve as an analytical conceptual tool for examining own research experiences and outcomes. During the processes of data collection and analysis, I was more concerned how I could make effective use of these reflections as a valuable source in reporting my research story. I constantly kept two sets of reflective journals; one set was about my reflections on my living encounter while the other one specifically focused upon my reflections as the researcher.

I kept my promise to the participants to proceed within the time frame which was mutually agreed upon in the Introductory Seminars of two participating schools nearly three years ago. I do not deny that it was not at all an easy process for me as a researcher, a student, a teacher educator, a wife, a mother, a daughter and so on in terms of contributing time and effort.
The First Moment: "Why am I here? Is it worthwhile?"

Several fundamental questions written in the first week of my doctoral studies on campus provided me with an umbrella framework for ongoing reflections throughout the collaborative research journey. Underlying my questions was a set of values which guided the research study to be organic, authentic, dynamic and interactive. These questions are listed as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions about life</th>
<th>Questions about doctoral studies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What am I here for?</td>
<td>1. What is the meaning of doctoral studies to me?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What should I do?</td>
<td>2. What do I want to find out?</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. What do I value the most in life?</td>
<td>3. What is missing?</td>
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<td>4. What will I give up?</td>
<td>4. What am I scared of?</td>
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<td>5. Is it worth doing?</td>
<td>5. What is my role in the research?</td>
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<td>6. Why is it so important?</td>
<td>6. Am I doing enough?</td>
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<td>7. Should I play the same role as other wives or mothers? How can I maintain my</td>
<td></td>
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<td>family full of love and joy throughout the study period?</td>
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Table 1 Questions written by the Researcher on 6 May 1998 for ongoing reflections

Between May and September 1998, I was concentrating on working out my proposal for confirmation as a candidature at Brisbane. The questions I raised in early May were crucial to understanding why my research study was conceptualised, contextualised and conducted in a particular way; and how likely my research study made sense to and further discovered meaning of my life, participants' lives and other people's lives in a broader community. An Action Research approach as critical, recursive and reconstructive in some sense reflected my responses to these fundamental questions about life, doctoral studies and educational research. The emancipatory and empowering outcomes of the study enabled both the participants and me (as the researcher) to reap the "reward" from our participation.

*Question (raised twice on bus by a Chinese academic in August 1998 at Brisbane): “Do you know that ignorance is a woman's virtue (in Chinese: 女子無才便是德)’?”*

*Marianne: (with a pity smile)*

The questions outlined in Table 1 may give an impression to the readers that the researcher tries to ‘purify’ own doctoral studies apart from obtaining qualifications for securing the job.
However, I would say that all these questions actually reflect some Confucius values embedded in the people of East Asian societies (Tu, 1999). I, therefore, wonder how significant the university academics value the underlying social responsibilities of educational research in terms of transformation and reconstruction. Tu (1999) points out that "the trend of human cultural development is not completely a zero-sum game...Because it is not a zero-sum game, we have many possibilities of a win-win situation. This then depends on whether people are insightful and willing to awaken their hearts'" (p.117).

I am delighted that I am conscious of some Chinese values (which are identified as values of "being" in Table 1) although I have received western education in Australia for my undergraduate and master degree studies. The questions I raised three years ago guided me to search for appropriate ways of conceptualising and contextualising my research study as an Action Research in my doctoral studies.

The Second Moment: "What has happened? Is there a place for my research study?"

Between October and November 1998, I negotiated with the University Human Research Ethics Committee in order to gain approval of my research study in Hong Kong. All the research participants and two Critical Friends signed two copies of Letter of Acceptance.

In the following few months, I offered an Introductory Seminar to each potential primary school. The Seminar was a brief presentation of my research proposal to all teachers at school so that they could have informed choices of their participation. After several contacts, I found that my research study did not meet two local research traditions which were quantitative and time-consuming. Was my research approach not appropriate for primary school teachers and principals in the local context? Or, was it an indication to an absence of independent and critical thinking in our former education in the last few decades? At that time, what could I do about all this? Should I give up and alter my research methodology?

**Notes from the Researcher’s ongoing reflections**

Following my completion of the Master of Education, I decided to pursue the doctoral degree in the area of curriculum studies. It did not take me much time to settle on the research topic. I did, however, encounter great difficulties in communicating the term "teacher curriculum decision-making" with local teachers, principals and teacher educators.

Was it the problem of lacking a conceptual language about how this term would be used? Or, was it a long-neglected or an "undiscovered" area in local educational research about teacher thinking and action upon curriculum matters aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of teaching and learning?

All this required me to revisit the focus of the study several times before thinking about the methodological issues. I reviewed the literature of curriculum studies and beyond, for example, Chinese and Western philosophies, educational reforms, teacher education, educational research and local policy documents. I began to realise that there would be a possibility for me to break new ground in the local research arena by positioning myself (as the researcher) in the "real world" of teachers.

Because of these feelings of doubt and uncertainty, I reflected even more upon the purposes of the study and how it would be significant to participants’ contextual needs and concerns. All this in turn empowered me not to follow an old path in researching curriculum problems in the local contexts.
Having a shared language and a shared intent are important factors to a collaborative research journey (Koo, 2001a). Nevertheless, it appears that sharing ideas is still not common in Chinese adult learning communities. People wonder why one is willing to have "self-exposure" and then query what is the hidden agenda. Of course, it is even more difficult to claim authenticity of the research data by using qualitative research methods, for example narrative and conversation. There are two reasons. First, people wonder why they need to say authentic words in the research study. Who value(s) authentic words merely from a few research participants? Second, is it possible that people benefit from their authentic research participation? If so, in what ways can they recognise its significance?

With reference to authentic participation, it is noteworthy to consider Ba's (1999) words that "only those people who say authentic words can live seriously" (p. 107). Researching with a group of primary school teachers and principals in this collaborative research journey was to take those participants as research partners rather than the subjects of investigation. Tu (1999) said, "the second principle of human living together is to treat all people with humanity. Kant (1724-1804) reminded to take people as the ends rather than the means and to treasure people have intrinsic values rather than instrumental ones. In layman terms, the second principle is to treat people human" (p.116). In this light, what methodology (with a view to epistemological and ontological beliefs) can researchers claim to treat participants as real "humans" when the research study is categorised in universities as Human Research within the educational context?

Given the local educational research traditions and politics, I held tight to the methodological framework in which I conceptualised and constructed the research steps and analysis activities so that the significance and purpose of this study could be fully acknowledged.

**The Third Moment: "Isn't it so difficult? Help!"**

The research study was action-oriented through active participation, communication and reconstruction. It developed meaning-making processes through which the sharing of knowledge occurred, the growth of understanding was facilitated, a direction of change and reconstruction was espoused, and cooperation by teachers as partners was ensured. In this connection, the participants and I embarked on a collaborative journey of reflection and empowerment from the beginning of the data collection period.

I wrote teachers' stories (Koo, 2000a, 2000b) initially on the basis of the teachers' oral autobiographies in three individual interviews of Action Step 2, with an attention to the contextual and conceptual frameworks of the study. The teachers' stories were then reduced into research texts for display in the thesis with reference to the research question. This further reduction of data was to maintain the data in a manageable and sensible format for analysis at a later stage.

Teachers' stories were framed within the school's view and the principal's view because the teachers' comments on their current role and hoped-for role in curriculum decision-making should not go far beyond their immediate school context or the managerial leadership of their principal. This consideration was taken to move teachers' curriculum work closer to a consensual "ideal" and to maintain the context.
Notes from the Researcher's ongoing reflections

Data reduction and data display were very time-consuming since I struggled to finalise the research texts of Action Steps 1 and 2 as teachers’ stories. This sort of struggle was due to the emotions generated when I had to make participants’ stories more precise than the original ones I collected. In the beginning, I wondered whether I (as the researcher) had the right to cut short one’s life story which he or she had told me in the semi-focused interviews. Was it not ethical to report participants’ "full" stories in the thesis? What obligations did I have to teachers, who owned their stories? And what obligations did they have to me? How could I manage all this in my reporting?

I (as the researcher) allowed the body of data to speak for itself. I did not speak for teachers. Teachers were able to speak for themselves.

I decided that I should report the data for display in the thesis with reference to the research question. Deciding what to include and what to leave out was a methodological issue. This decision could then legitimise my act of reducing the life stories to a reasonable length.

I strove to write the teachers’ stories in the balance between restoring the continuity and coherence of life’s unity and keeping the study in its focus and direction. The work is very challenging that probably explains why I am so passionate about the study.

20 August 1999

Unlike traditional educational research in which relationships between participants and researchers are mostly characterised by impersonal or business-like tasks (Muchmore, 2000), my agony was evident in this Action Research approach which involved relationships that were personal and complex.

The Forth Moment: "Is it talk but no action?"

During an occasion, two research participants and a Critical Friend delivered their views on the joy of learning and teaching to the pre-service students. Some of my reflections in relation to curriculum issues were noted as below:

Notes from the Researcher’s ongoing reflections

A group of my students organised two seminars "The Joy of Learning and Teaching" in late March. Charlie (from School 1) and Michael (from School 2), and Critical Friend 2 joined us as guest speakers. My reflections on interpreting and analysing the ideas expressed by these three people are as follows:

- It was not easy for principals to admit that they have their own problems of practice or conflicts of belief about education. It seems that they take up the sole responsibility of 'advertising' their schools whenever or wherever they are. Without thinking and admitting some educational practices are problematic, it appears to be difficult to reconstruct educational work.

- Practitioners need to have their dreams about education and to transform these
dreams into reality of practice.

• Some practitioners lack courage to change and improve because they seldom join together to become a compelling force or work in a collaborative community. They are left abandoned or choose to be alone for a long time and they merely want to settle what matters in front of them.

• The principals make every effort to keep the school as large as possible so they can appear more prestigious. The working goal appears to be not to lose a single student.

• Some practitioners believe in the segregation of theory and practice. They neglect the dynamics of theory and practice for ongoing critique and reconstruction.

• Knowledge and action are separated. A person acts differently from their knowledge. School education must be aware of the intimacy of "knowledge and action together".

• It is tiring to have constructive learning and teaching in terms of maintaining a dynamic classroom.

Hong Kong is at the initial phase of education reform. After the consultation about the review of educational aims between January and February, it is now timely to move onto the stage of the review of curriculum and educational systems. Do people from various education sectors have the conceptions of curriculum, curriculum theorising, curriculum change and curriculum leadership? Unless these ideas have been well conceptualised and enacted, will they hinder transformation and reconstruction of teachers’ curriculum work.

1 April 1999

My reflections on April 1999 linked to the third part of the research question made me more aware of the impact of the study within the contemporary changing policy context.

Action Step 4 as the last collaborative step in the Action Plan took conversations about and reconstructions into action. In this light, the overarching principles identified in Action Step 3 became "navigators" which directed the participants to the pathway of enacting teachers’ curriculum work in Action Step 4. While entering into the last action step, I had the following reflections.

Notes from the Researcher’s ongoing reflections

I endeavored to make the study one that takes seriously a collaborative research approach. Then, how did I not convey a sense of imposition on the participants determining some possible actions? How could the participants become more active in transforming their curriculum work in the best way they could? In what ways could the collaboration among participants be enhanced, taking conversations about and reconstructions into action in Action Step 4? I was, therefore, aware that I had to provide a patient and acceptable research environment in which teachers’ voices were heard and used as the basis for setting the platform for the last two Action Steps.

Apart from this, how could the participants develop ownership of change as the basis for the
ongoing challenge of teachers’ curriculum work?

I think it may be the best way for the principals to demonstrate leadership in leading the change within their own school contexts. By doing so, their fellow colleagues (who are the research participants) may develop a feeling that it is more about ‘their own business’ in ensuing conversations during the meetings of Action Step 4. I’d still keep my role as a Critical Friend as set out and agreed in Action Steps 3 and 4.

10 March 2000

The principals, Charlie and Michael chaired the first meetings of Action Step 4 at their respective schools. The reason for this was to develop a sense of empowerment for all the participants in gaining ownership of talking about and acting on reconstructions of teachers’ curriculum work. In other words, inviting the principals to chair the first meetings of Action Step 4 was to alert all participants that their involvement in Action Step 4 was not only action-oriented but also considered solely on the benefits of their own schools and the students. All this should be considered neither as a detour from the methodology framework nor as an abuse of the power relationships among the participants. Rather, this arrangement in the first meeting of Action Step 4 was to acknowledge my promise as a researcher to reinforce the collaborative intent of the research study so that both the researcher and the participants could enjoy the benefits of their research involvement in a democratic way.

In the research study participants showed a heart-felt need to improve curriculum work with a view to the shared joy of learning and teaching (Koo, 2000b). Teachers should no longer remain at a stage of "talk but no action (in Chinese: 講就天下無敵，做就有心無力)" or "action but no talk". "Act and talk in reflection"! Writing reflections helps to clear our minds, talks to our hearts and acts with an authenticity. In the past, we as teachers could create and innovate; now, we are able and willing to change; and in the future, we can act and talk both critically and constructively.

The Fifth Moment: "What decisions should I make in writing up the thesis?"

The focus of this study was to synthesise all these ideals about curriculum work and teacher curriculum decision-making by mapping a territory of communicative understanding about teachers’ curriculum thinking and actions. In other words, the study attempted to bring all these non-accordant ideals raised in the policy rhetoric, the participants and me (as the researcher) closer to the "real" world by supporting teachers and improving their curriculum work in a sustainable manner.

About the language decisions

At the beginning of my thesis, I had to consider with great care the style of writing and its overall structure. It was necessary for me to make clear my position throughout the thesis – whether active or passive voice should be used in structuring my thesis language. On what grounds, however, should I make these decisions?
Notes from the Researcher’s ongoing reflections

I began my study not coming from nowhere! My previous primary teaching and teacher education experiences provided me with a basic understanding of the contextual problems which front-line teachers frequently confront. I was very careful neither to have a dispassionate involvement in collaborating with the research participants for generating outcomes, nor to be irresponsible to my profession. Maintaining both the passion in thinking and acting upon the focus of the study (as a means of generating momentum for moving the study forward with a view to enhancing the quality of research outcomes), and also the responsibility to the participants and the research contexts (emphasising both "give-and-take" authentic participation and transparency) strengthened me to be committed to ongoing inquiry and to receiving challenge in the process and product of this study – being a "conscientious" social researcher! In this light, the use of "I" in the active voice would enable me to demonstrate this sense of empowerment and ownership.

On the other hand, my reflections (as the researcher) laid out in the thesis are spaces in which I step back from the subjective passion associated with this research effort. These reflections are on the basis of rethinking/discovering the meaning of my thesis story. A quote from Russell (1974, p.547) about Descartes’s assertion "I think therefore I am" explains well why I include these reflections thus avoiding methodological self-indulgence in the study.

My choice of using the first person "I" in writing is therefore not merely a language decision; but it is not as smooth-flowing as I had anticipated. Hsu (1985) stresses that the Chinese self is not independent, but a small self that submits to the benefits of a large self which proceeds consecutively as individuals, families, the nation and the entire world. Perhaps, individualism is often submerged in Chinese cultural contexts. It might be the collectivism deeply rooted in cultural beliefs that causes the revelation of one’s self to take time.

7 July 1998; 11 March 2001

In the end, I was so delighted to select the language in use throughout the thesis as a harmonized synthesis across cultures – this was my study where I should be responsible for focusing my writing to say what I had to say!

About the purposes of the research study

I have a strong conviction that developing a sense of clarity and meaning for the participants and other stakeholders with reference to the purposes of the study is a necessary ethical concern in doing research about humans. This conviction is based on my argument that the participants have the right to be clear about the questions of what the collaborative research journey is, why they are engaged in it, and how their rising emotions, if any, could be ethically dealt with. All this emphasised the need for both transparency (Mitchell, 2000; Muchmore, 2000; Koo, 2000c, 2001a) in conducting this research study with the participants who owned a shared critical intent and for due considerations of confidentiality in managing the data.

My reflections sustaining my argument about the use of purposes in this study were noted as below:
Notes from the Researcher's ongoing reflections

I did not realise any problems in putting forward the purposes of the study until I was asked about the reasons in a seminar. The message to me was whether there should be any purposes for the study and should these purposes be disclosed.

I use a metaphor for this study. A ship is going to sail on the sea. The passengers are welcomed on board. Safety measures are well planned and installed. However, even the captain does not know the destination. The passengers will be told briefly how long this journey will take and what the journey is about. Before embarkation, they are informed that the journey has its purposes and their voluntary participation is significant to themselves, their contexts and the captain. The passengers are expected to use their personal practical knowledge to map the way using the navigational tools provided for the journey. The captain, who works with the passengers during the entire journey, ascertains that they will arrive at a certain place, which is the destination as far as they can go given the circumstances.

So, why are these passengers willing to take part? Curiosity? Fun? Significance? Is it possible that they are on board without having the purposes of the journey made known to them? Is it enough to tell them that it is just an exploratory trip from the "unknown to known"? Is this being ethical and transparent towards the passengers?

The sense of passion and responsibility reminds me to declare my purposes for the study. This declaration, I suppose, could establish a more credible pathway for me to work in trust with the participants towards the outcomes.

12 October 1998

In this study I envisaged teachers developing a sense of empowerment to problematise their curriculum work in context and to take resultant reconstructions leading to ongoing thinking and action. With the four purposes in mind, the contextualisation and conceptualisation of the study provided me with some emerging propositions and observations for developing frameworks within which the research question was further explored. These frameworks contributed to establishing the credibility for advancing an argument for a methodological approach of the study.

IV. What might the readers gain from this paper?

The five moments identified above portrayed a reflexive account of my story that authenticated the meaning of collaborative inquiry to the "real" world of teachers. After critical examination of these five moments, three sets of questions were raised for the readers’ ongoing thinking and action about teachers’ curriculum work within a context of curriculum change. These questions are listed as follows:

About educational change

1. What are the conceptual underpinnings of education reform and educational change? What might be the conceptual and contextual differences between these two notions?
2. Who am "I"?
3. Where do we go from here?
4. Which road should we choose?
5. Where do I position myself?
6. What is the meaning of my participation from a critical, reconstructive and collaborative perspective?

**About change**

1. What is "change"?
2. Why do teachers need to change?
3. Why do schools need to change?
4. What is problematic?
5. In what ways can we change?
   - In whose interests?
   - Who make the decisions?
   - Who are benefits? Who is marginalised?

**About "who am I"**

1. Who was I?
2. Who am I in front of the students and/or parents?
3. Who am I in the classroom?
4. Who am I in the school?
5. Who will I be in the context of curriculum (educational) change?
   - In relation to the principal
   - In relation to other colleagues
   - In relation to the students
   - In relation to the parents

Apart from making sense of the data, I was also discovering meaning with the participants from the collaborative research journey. Any meaning was determined by the effectiveness of the study which was seen as the impact on the teachers' curriculum work in their "real" world. By critical examination I meant that the focus was on critical reflection on both the participants' and researcher's experiences in Action Steps 1 and 2, as well as the reconstructive actions from Action Steps 3 and 4. Since critical reflection is a way to distinguish how and why teachers' educational and societal interpretations have been distorted by ideology (Habermas 1978, 1976, 1974; Apple, 1990; Giroux, 1985), a critical examination outlined above becomes necessary for drawing the conclusion of the study. It is because the critical examination goes beyond relaying subjective self-understandings that are personally biased 'truths'; it is discovering those influences that have distorted the interpretation of what is 'truth' (Allen, 1992). In other words, the data of this study were examined not only for their meaning but also for any distortions through a critical examination.

I, therefore, adopted two criteria in the form of questions to serve as a basis of critical examination in light of the conceptual and methodological frameworks. The first question related directly to the conceptual framework; the second could be seen as a meta analysis of the research methodology. All this led to justify how significant the study finally would be.
Did the analyses of data generate insightful ideas for the four parts of the conceptual framework; and did these ideas incorporate into the emerging propositions?

Was the methodological approach as an Action Research able to effectively promote transformation and reconstructive action by using the Plan of Action with its associated research strategies?

Bearing the purpose and significance of the study, I believe that it is very important to critically examine the data in light of the conceptual and methodological frameworks in order to comment on the effectiveness of the study while making concluding statements in the end.

V. Conclusion

The researcher from the teacher education institute raised the research question and constructed the methodological framework by conceptualising and contextualising the research problem. The school participants provided first-hand contextual experiences and personal practical knowledge about the research focus. It was indeed a collaborative and participatory research journey when both sides had a win-win situation. The teachers (or the participating schools) could see the meaning of their participation while the researcher was able to achieve own goals of conducting the research study.

The collaborative research study, professional development activities and school consultancy projects should have impacts on the effectiveness of teaching and learning. It is in fact very challenging for me as a teacher educator to work with ten teachers and two principals in two primary schools. It is inappropriate for assuming that the research collaboration between the participating schools and the teacher education institute would devalue scholarly work in terms of academic excellence. It is not the case! The collaboration is challenging, empowering and emancipatory.

Above all, the study has brought me to a point where I identify that the place of teachers in curriculum decision-making has to do with the opportunities and challenges that teachers could take reconstruction into action by putting own initiatives into the school agenda within the context of curriculum change. In this connection, teachers and the principal map the territory of their professional work collaboratively with respect to the dynamic mix of personal factors, organizational cultures and institutional infrastructures. It is convincingly to say that teachers developing a sense of empowerment at a personal level, a professional team level and a transformative level in the end change the world of school for better.

The readiness of teachers in curriculum decision-making thus has to do with the freedom to choose alternate pathways for personal growth and professional learning if teachers argue for the place of teachers in curriculum decision-making in many places geographically. By doing so, the processes engaged in transforming teachers’ curriculum work really celebrate the centrality of teachers in developing own agendas of mapping professional work. Teachers are more likely to maintain curriculum decision-making dynamic and evolving.

The potential of teachers in curriculum decision-making is to (re)create the spaces from which the place of teachers in curriculum decision-making has been professionally identifiable and acceptable. After considering the lifeworld perspectives of the research participants about teacher curriculum decision-making, the spaces mentioned above might not be interpreted in terms of time and resources. These spaces exist when people, context and curriculum interact and intertwine with one another in order to
create new social relations and working partnerships. The potential of teachers in curriculum decision-making thus has to do with the possibilities within which these new social relations and working partnerships are being explored at various learning sites.

Conceptually and contextually, the interactions of people, context and curriculum together display a three-dimensional space which opens up new possibilities for people involved in envisioning and enacting teacher curriculum decision-making as both the means and ends of leading to new conceptions and practices of curriculum leadership. People (who are major stakeholders) and context (which includes both micro and macro-social and political contexts) unite in a surface by ongoing critique and transformation of teachers’ curriculum work. People and curriculum together are symbolic to the intimacy of knowledge and action about teacher curriculum decision-making. The interface of curriculum and context becomes a shared phenomenon of curriculum issues and challenges in a highlight. More importantly, hope, trust and support generate momentum to maintain this three-dimensional space dynamic, evolving and sustainable.

References


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