

# **Supporting the development of Early Years students' professional identities through an Action Research programme**

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## **Abstract**

This paper discusses the aims, rationale and aspects of a new Action Research (AR) module developed for level 6, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) students. The aims of the module are three-fold: First, to support learners in developing the research and academic skills needed to investigate their own practices, generate knowledge and engage in critical reflection. Second, to assist students to be active agents in questioning and designing changes to improve their practice. Third, to support them in disseminating their work in the public sphere and thus take an active part in discussions about their field of practice. Drawing on the processes of ongoing reflection and collaborative enquiry, our vision is to emancipate our students; support them in repositioning themselves as powerful agents with significant insights and the power to make a difference to their practice. However, facilitating emancipatory AR can pose several challenges, on individual, institutional and political levels. The aim of this paper is to reaffirm the rationale for AR as an epistemological, methodological and political tool that can support the professional identities of our learners; also, to dress some of the anticipated complexities and tensions of employing emancipatory AR in an academic environment.

**Keywords:** Action Research, Early Years, professional identity, emancipation, knowledge generation, practitioner research.

## **Introduction**

### *Our context*

Our university offers undergraduate, postgraduate and doctorate programmes in Early Childhood Studies (ECS) and Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). In response to the

growing need for a highly qualified Early Years work force, the Early Childhood Directorate has developed bachelor's, foundation and top-up degrees for Early Years practitioners that are already in employment but seek to gain a higher qualification in their field of practice.

These student cohorts (our student practitioners) are often heterogeneous in terms of age, demographics, previous academic qualifications and experience. Indeed, Early Years practitioners have a conglomeration of qualifications and experience (Lloyd and Hallet 2010; Dyer 2018). They also differ in their self-perceived ability to cope with the academic requirements of university study; their academic self-efficacy beliefs.

Some of our mature students have significant work experience but lack formal academic qualifications. Being in a university for the first time can feel daunting and threatening for this group in particular. In addition to this, the Early Years' workforce has historically suffered a low status, lack of social recognition and marginalisation (Burgess–Macey and Rose 1997; Moss 2007; Brock 2012). This may have had a negative impact on their sense of self –worth and professional identity, as will be discussed later.

Despite the complexities that teaching such heterogeneous groups can pose, our student practitioners have a significant advantage; their work experience. They have all worked in Early Years settings in various roles and capacities and they know the demands, expectations, challenges and 'issues' in their work environments. They have substantial knowledge and 'practical wisdom' about what works in their field of practice; knowledge that has been gained through living and experiencing everyday life in Early Years settings (Schön 1983). When it comes to knowing how to function on the 'shop-floor', their self-efficacy beliefs can be high; sometimes much higher than their academic self-efficacy beliefs. This substantial body of tacit (Polanyi 1962) and practical (Schön 1983) knowledge they have is an asset that we can draw upon to facilitate their academic and professional development.

### ***Our vision***

One of the central themes that runs through our ECEC programme is fostering in our students a strong sense of professional identity and empowering them to develop and even redefine their practice. In line with this political agenda we are now in the process of developing a new Action Research (AR) module for our level 6 student-practitioners. The aims of this are three-fold: first, to support learners in developing the research and academic skills they need in order to investigate their own practice, generate knowledge and engage in critical reflection, both independently and collaboratively. Second, to assist them in becoming activists, to be agents in questioning and designing changes to improve their practice (a political stance explored later); third, to support them in disseminating their work in the public sphere and thus take an active part in discussions about their field of practice. Our vision is to not only teach concrete knowledge and skills, but emancipate our students, support them in repositioning themselves as powerful agents that have significant insights about their profession and the agency to make a difference.

### ***Our stance***

In developing this module, we have attempted to transcend the binaries of theory versus practice, objectivity versus subjectivity and of knowing versus doing. Our position is that AR overcomes such simplistic notions of either/or as it involves generation of knowledge that emerges from action and informs action; it requires the researcher to be an actor, a thinker, a theorist, but also a practitioner; it assumes that action, knowledge and reflection are inseparable aspects of knowledge generation, the latter seen as an ongoing process of professional development.

The purpose of this paper is first to offer a rationale for the development of this AR module as a tool that can empower our students and emancipate them in bringing about change. Also, to address some of the complexities of developing an emancipatory AR module in an academic environment. It considers the political dimension of AR in particular and discusses the complexities of empowering a traditionally disempowered and disenfranchised professional group; early years practitioners. Our goal here is to explore some of the anticipated challenges but also possibilities for development that this module can offer.

### ***Structure of this paper***

Our argument begins with a description of the basic aspects of our AR programme. It first looks at the processes of reflection, collaborative enquiry and activism in the literature before considering how these are employed in our programme. Following this, the paper offers a rationale for our AR module, by examining its epistemological, political and emancipatory dimensions. Then it focuses on the field of Early Years practice and the professional identities of the Early Years workforce; we argue that AR can empower practitioners to position themselves as active agents that can have intellectual and moral control over their own practice (Kemmis 2009). Achieving the ambitious aims of our AR module in an academic environment can pose several challenges and these are addressed and reflected upon in the last section.

## **Action Research**

### ***The roles of reflection, collaboration and activism in Action Research***

The AR process is particularly complex as it involves a constant shift of roles and perspectives on behalf of the researcher. The latter is a practitioner, engaged in everyday practice, but also

an observer, who needs to step back and observe himself/herself acting and interacting. S/he is also a researcher, who needs to be constantly mindful of the research question, maintain focus and assume a systematic approach to data collection; s/he is an activist too, with an eye on taking social action to improve practice (McNiff 2017; Whitehead and McNiff 2006).

The action researcher needs to demonstrate highly sophisticated skills in thinking and acting simultaneously. The step from thought to action may be a highly complicated process (Dadds 1998). Similarly, shifting one's attention from living and doing to thinking about living and doing may not be straightforward. A second challenge involves moving from felt 'troubles' to reflecting on them and to putting these in a statement (Adelman 1993). The research problem is part of the everyday, often pre-reflective, lived experience of the practitioner. It may be too complex to capture; as it is often 'felt' but not articulated (Hampton 1993). This difficulty in articulating what is 'felt' and 'lived', may also be compound by the practitioners' subjective experiences and attitudes.

Practitioners hold their personal and subjective views about their field of practice and these influence their understanding and practice. When experiencing dissonance, practitioners may choose to modify their perceptions and new knowledge to fit with their existing beliefs and expectations (Fisher and Wood 2012). Subjective experience and practical wisdom may be significant sources of knowledge and practice; if unrealised and un-reflected upon, however, they may become problematic and compromise the validity of data. Thus, researchers may need to 'dig out' and uncover their subjectivities, bring them to the fore and put them to the test, in order to re-define the foundations of their knowledge. This may be achieved through the process of reflection.

Reflection is an integral part of the AR process as it enables the researcher/practitioner to 'step in' and 'step out' of the flow of events, to problematize the taken-for-granted and to critically

assess his/her past experiences, expectations and stance and the impact these have on practice and on the research activity. Reflection enables the individual to focus on and explore the 'I/Me' relationship: 'I' as the inner self, the individual and subjective traits, past experiences and dispositions that shape one's identity and behaviour. 'Me' as the outer, the professional self (Hampton 1993).

The 'I/Me' also exists as part of a network of others, which brings us to the notion of collaboration, since AR is far from solipsistic. It begins by creating a learning community (Bleach 2013) that works together to generate knowledge and share views of practice. Working in groups enables learners to develop a sense of belongingness to a community of practice (Wenger 1998). What binds the group together is the value that its members find in learning together; they support and understand each other. Over time, the groups start developing a unique perspective; a body of knowledge, ideas of good practice and ways of thinking and dealing with everyday situations (Wenger et al. 2002). This community of practice, then, becomes a significant aspect of group-professional identity.

Communities of action are characterised by three features: firstly, the members of the community are in regular interaction and share the commitment of valuing and sustaining the community through active engagement. Secondly, the community gradually acquires a domain defined by common interests, knowledge and aims. Finally, the members of the community share their practice (Wenger et al. 2002). To this, we may also add the ongoing commitment of the members to improve their practice, in other words, to be active agents in re-shaping their practice. Hence the notion of activism.

One of the main purposes of AR is, not only to identify, but also to attempt to solve problems in the field of practice (Fisher and Wood 2012). The theory it generates aims at improving a particular area of practice. The researcher becomes an activist as s/he takes action to achieve

an outcome. The steps from thought to action (Dadds 1998) and from action to thought (Adelman 1993), however, may be quite complex to achieve, unless one engages in critical reflection, both individually and collaboratively. This suggests that the three defining characteristics of AR, reflection, collaboration and social change (activism) are inseparable.

These three dimensions are central in our AR programme. Reflection on the practitioners' lived experiences, both individually and collaboratively, enables them to create a communal space for discussion, negotiation of ideas and generation of a particular kind of knowledge. This is discussed below.

### ***Our Action Research Programme***

AR involves two types of activity: action, taking action to improve one's practice; and research, investigating, offering explanations, developing an argument and exploring theory, to explain what we do in action (McNiff 2017). It requires practitioners to engage in an ongoing process of generating their own theories, examining them against others' theories (Whitehead and McNiff 2006) and applying these in their field of practice in order to assess their effectiveness. It thus appears that AR successfully 'marries' the academic and practical domains and unifies 'theory' and 'practice' as the two, interrelated aspects of professional life.

This interconnectedness between theory and practice is at the core of our AR programme. Drawing on the rich reservoir of personal (tacit) knowledge (Polanyi 1962) and practical wisdom, our student practitioners are supported in developing a critical stance towards their personal theories and the ways these impact on their practice. Further, public theories and research are explored and reflected upon, in order to examine whether and how these relate to the students' personal theories (Papadopoulou 2011).

One of the aims of this research module is to support students in developing research skills in order to carry out research. Practitioners are in the unique position of generating 'insider'



knowledge about their field of practice (Fisher and Wood 2012). It is our ambition, thus, to offer students the methodological ‘tools’ they need in order to discover their own knowledge. Challenging the academic-expert and student-novice relationship commonly found in academic institutions, our programme positions practitioner students as the ‘experts’ of their practice and the educators as the facilitators of the research process. This shift in power relationships can pose its own challenges, however; this will be discussed later.

Another significant aim of the new module is to foster a strong sense of group identity, a ‘community of practice’ (Wenger 1998). Group discussions and dialogues with peers enable our student practitioners to share their knowledge, experience, concerns and develop knowledge; concurrently developing a sense of belonging to a group of similar-minded others, a professional community.

Professional groups share, among other characteristics, a common knowledge base, common values and code of practice. It is thus significant to create this space of group discussions and reflections, both in class and in the wider Early Years community. Our ultimate aim, thus, is in supporting our students to reach the public sphere by disseminating their work to wider audiences. We can achieve this by facilitating our students’ publications in professional and academic fora.

### ***Why Action Research?***

#### ***The epistemological argument***

Dominant research approaches in the social sciences have adopted the detached model of researcher (McNiff 2017) and separatist epistemologies. The researcher is seen as a detached observer, as the expert in generating theory about others’ experiences (and often practices). Practitioners, on the other hand, are the ‘technicians’, who translate the theory generated by

the 'experts' into practice (Dadds 1998). Knowledge is seen as a fixed, detached and portable entity (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler 2016) that, once discovered, can be transported and applied in several contexts and for different purposes. The knowledge generator is equally detached from the setting and assumes neutrality and objectivity.

Such research cultures have often under-valued the relevance, validity and significance of AR; the latter producing knowledge that is neither objective nor generalisable. Thus, AR is seen as inferior to other research paradigms, as the 'orphan' in social science (Adelman 1993). At best, AR has been considered as serving developmental purposes and as a series of steps to improve a particular situation (Dadds 1998), rather than as a distinctive approach to knowledge generation.

AR, however, does offer a distinctive type of knowledge about the concerns and issues in the everyday lives of practitioners and organisations (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler 2016). It emerges from everyday experience, from real life; and attempts to reach an understanding and find solutions to resolve problems situated in the life of participants. Knowledge emerges through living and participating in our world (Heron and Reason 1997).

There are four interdependent types of knowledge, according to Heron and Reason (1997): the first, experiential knowledge, is the basis of all the other forms. It is grounded in experience, as immediately given to us through everyday living and participating in the world. The second, presentational knowledge, is our symbolic presentation of knowledge, using different media (such as writing). The third, propositional knowledge, is the most indirect and de-contextualised form, the one favoured by dominant research paradigms. This type of knowledge is stripped off its context, it is expressed in abstract statements and generalised laws. Finally, practical knowing involves knowing what to do and this is demonstrated in

skilful actions. Practical knowing is primary, as it translates the other forms into action that serves a purpose.

Similarly, McNiff (2017) distinguishes between three types of knowledge: the first is the propositional knowledge, the know-that way of knowing, generated by detached researchers and producing generalizable data. The second, know-how type, is the procedural knowledge that enables us to successfully carry out tasks in everyday life. Finally, personal knowledge is the result of our worldly experiences. This type is necessarily subjective and often tacit (Polanyi 1962). It enables us to function in the world and deal with its challenges effectively. We may not remember how we got this knowledge, or where it came from; nevertheless, it enables us to have a sense of what it is to be, the knowledge of the insiders (Cain 2011).

The forms of experiential, practical and tacit knowing become the focus of AR, where knowing is primarily derived from and feeds back into our everyday life and experience. Knowledge is generated in action and by reflecting on action in order to address particular problems and find solutions (Hammond 2013). It is purposive and consequential and it serves a pragmatic function; it enables us to deal with environmental challenges and to adapt to changing environments. Knowledge is never fixed, but rather evolving; it emerges from a continuously changing environment.

Dewey's (in Hammond 2013) ecological approach sees knowledge as the result of the constant transaction between an organism and its environment. This position challenges the orthodoxies of dominant paradigms in the following ways: Firstly, the context is of utmost importance. Knowledge is always in context, it emerges in a particular environment and under certain conditions. Knowledge that is stripped of its context and turned into a generalised law may lose its meaning and relevance. Secondly, the knowledge generator is the living organism, the experiencing person that deals with everyday living and attempts to resolve problems and meet

environmental challenges. This may challenge the spectator model of research, favoured by some research paradigms (McNiff 2017) and the view that complete objectivity is ever attainable. Thirdly, the validity of knowledge should be judged by its effectiveness to resolve issues and achieve desirable outcomes; assist us in meeting environmental challenges.

AR and the knowledge it generates appear to serve the ecological criteria that Dewey argues about (in Hammond, 2013). Indeed, practitioners are situated in a particular context, with its demands, challenges and ways of doing. Their field of practice poses everyday challenges and they are ideally positioned to generate knowledge in attempting to meet these challenges.

The knowledge produced in AR does not make generalizable claims; but nor should anybody else (Hammond 2013). It is neither objective nor completely subjective; it is intersubjective. Reflection and collaborative enquiry enable participants to raise common concerns, to engage in dialogue, to exchange experiences and thus to negotiate a space of common, intersubjective agreement. This open forum of discussion and debate enables participants to reach a consensus, 'leading to warranted assertions about the world' (Hammond 2013, 609).

Through collaborative and reflective enquiry, the local knowledge that practitioners generate can become public knowledge that can be relevant in other settings and used by others to improve their practice (McNiff 2017). The knowledge that AR produces is thus epistemologically valuable and complementary to the aims of academic modules.

The knowledge generated by AR can thus fulfil different purposes: it can improve practice, generate knowledge about practice, but also help reposition practitioners and become their 'voice' in public debates about their profession. Indeed, AR is deeply political. This will be explored next.

### *The political argument*

AR involves taking action with the purpose of achieving a change in the world. It involves speaking for oneself, as a practitioner, and offering explanations for the action one has taken (McNiff 2017). This action takes place in a social context that involves, and possibly has an impact on, others.

There are different types of AR, each with its own purposes and teleoaffective structure (Kemmis 2009). Technical AR aims at improving practitioners' practice based on predetermined, externally defined and measurable outcomes. It is seen as a means to an end, where the end is known; there is a given, uncontested definition of 'good practice', that the practitioner aspires to achieving. The purpose of research activity is seen as the means to achieving this end. The practitioner's agency is limited to following a predetermined 'route', in order to reach a given 'destination'. This typology is frequently employed in HE institutions, where the standards and outcomes are already set and conforming to these leads to accreditation. Research of this kind, focuses on 'teaching' practitioners to implement policy and improve teaching techniques (Kinsler 2010), and may result in the 'domestication' of practitioners (Kemmis 2006).

The second type, practical AR, is more open ended, according to Kemmis (2009). The aim is to improve a particular area of practice, but the ends are not predefined and given. The ends, as well as the means, are in question. The overarching aim of the practitioner is to gain an understanding of the practice and act more wisely. Practitioners explore the effectiveness and long term consequences of certain decisions and in this way they set the criteria for assessing their practice. Compared to the first type, Practical AR allows the practitioner more agency in making decisions about his/her practice and recognises his/her authority in making changes and setting the standards of practice.

The third type, emancipatory, or critical, AR, is the most transitive of all. It involves a critical stance to knowledge generation, policy making, issues of power and control and the positioning of the researcher/practitioner. It problematizes power structures and locates practice within the context of the wider socio-political frame (Kemmis and McTaggart 1986). This type of research requires collective activity; it is undertaken by practitioners that see themselves as 'we', as a professional group with a distinct identity, agency and contribution to make. This type of research opens up a forum for discussion, democratic exchange of views about issues of common concerns; a communicative space where practitioners can engage in group reflections and collectively explore issues related to their everyday practices (Kemmis 2009; Kinsler 2010).

Critical AR does not limit itself to changing a specific area of practice to achieve narrowly and often externally defined short term outcomes. Its influence lies in empowering practitioners to make their voices, individually, but perhaps even more importantly collectively, heard; and taken seriously in making decisions about their practice. This type of emancipatory research appears to be in short supply; the voices of practitioners are, more often than not, marginalised. Indeed, as Whitehead and McNiff (2006) and McNiff (2017) state, practitioners tend to not participate in theory generation and policy formation. They are often seen as the technicians, whose role is to translate others' theories and knowledge into practice.

In his topography of professional landscapes, Schön (1983) speaks about the historic exclusion of practitioners from generating knowledge, informing policy and making decisions about their practice. He speaks of two grounds: professional, intellectual elites, who produce theory and set the standards of quality, occupy the first, higher ground. They create the orthodoxies of knowledge generation and have the authority to produce generalised 'laws'. The theory they produce is abstract, decontextualized and seen as legitimate. Practitioners, on the other hand, are engaged with everyday practice. They occupy the 'swampy lowlands', the 'shop-floor'.

They create a kind of practical knowledge that enables them to deal with issues in their practices, but this is not ‘proper’ theory. Practitioner knowledge is not seen as legitimate, ‘proper’ knowledge and practitioners themselves are not accepted as researchers and knowledge generators.

This power imbalance between the high ground elite and the swampy lowlands can be particularly acute in academic contexts, where AR is undertaken as part of a study that will lead to accreditation. Emancipatory research necessitates agency, decision making, collaboration and self-determination, on behalf of the practitioners; dimensions that may conflict with the externally determined assessment criteria of academic study. Fostering in students a sense of professional identity and giving them freedom and control over their research, whilst at the same time judging their work in terms defined by academic boards, may thus prove to be challenging; this is further discussed in the last section of this paper.

Staying faithful to one of our overarching aims, the purpose of the new module is to engage our Early Years practitioner students in emancipatory AR. Early Years practitioners are arguably even more disempowered and disenfranchised than other professional groups (Burgess–Macey and Rose 1997; Lloyd and Hallet 2010). They may have more barriers to overcome in search for their professional identity and space. This is explored next.

## **The Early Years workforce**

### ***A paradox***

The significance of early experience for lifespan development is unquestionable (Kelser 2011; Sims-Schouten and Stittrich-Lyons 2014). . Evidence from neuroscience (Kolb and Gibb 2011) shows that brain plasticity, especially in the early years, enables us to adapt to environmental demands. Significant advances in neuroscience, genomics, the behavioural and

social sciences have enabled us to appreciate the significance in investing in early childhood education (Shonkoff 201). Early experience is therefore seen as having a critical role in shaping future developmental processes and life outcomes (Gomez 2016). This would suggest that offering stimulating, rich, enabling environments and ‘expert’ care in the early years is an important investment for the children themselves, but also for society. Investment in the early years was one of the suggestions also made by Sylva et al (2004) and has been the drive behind more recent policies (DfE 2017). The latter may be misguided, though, as we will explain shortly.

Despite the significance placed in the early years of life, and the political initiatives that acknowledge this (DfE 2017), there remains a paradox: the Early Years workforce still remains disempowered, disenfranchised and undervalued. Working in the Early Years sector is often seen as nothing more than ‘wiping noses’ and ‘playing with kids’ (Nutbrown 2012, 4). It is a low paid job and not regarded as a profession that requires expertise. Society has historically seen caring for children as not ‘real work’ (Burgess-Macey and Rose 1997) but as a lower level, female specific, ‘natural’ activity (Barron 2016). This may be due to the low position that children (Cohen et al. 2004) and women (Burgess-Macey and Rose 1997) occupy in society.

In an attempt to upskill and raise the standards of the Early Years workforce, ‘New Labour’ introduced the Foundation Degree, which leads to Early Years Professional Status. However, this is not a requirement for all practitioners, only for leadership teams (Lloyd and Hallet 2010; Dyer 2018). This may further accentuate the divide within the Early Years workforce, with some practitioners enjoying a higher professional status and better working conditions than the rest; a threat to their sense of professional cohesiveness.



Also, it is important to examine what is meant by ‘raising’ standards and by ‘high quality’ provision. The Early Years Professional Status is assessed against 39 discrete and measurable competences (Lightfoot and Frost 2015). The EYFS documentation is seen as a highly prescriptive document, with over 1500 pieces of specific advice (Brock 2012). Effective provision is therefore seen as constituting a number of discrete goals and measurable standards (Sims-Schouten and Stittrich-Lyons 2014) and practitioners, graduate or not, are the technicians (Lloyd and Hallet 2010) who deliver these.

This emphasis on ‘professionalism’ and ‘professionalisation’ of the work force (Dyer 2018), through highly prescriptive targets and the ‘skilling up’ of practitioners in order to meet these targets, may arguably achieve the opposite outcome. It may de-professionalise and further disempower Early Years practitioners, depriving them of their autonomy, decision making and sense of agency.

### ***Professional identities and the role of agency***

Being a professional involves enjoying a highly valued social role (Burgess–Macey and Rose 1997) and having the agency to contribute to this role (Barron 2016). Professional identities are fluid and the result of continuous negotiations, tensions, agreements, conflicts and power struggles between social forces and agents. Our professional identities are shaped by conditions of power (Foucault 2002); but we also have the agency to reconfigure them.

Holland et al. (1998) explore the contribution of individuals as agents that actively engage and help change their socio cultural worlds. They use the phrase ‘figured worlds’ to describe the socio-cultural spaces where identity is constructed. These spaces exist before we enter them and they already have a history, belief systems and values, ways of doing, practices and

performances. The Early Years sector could be seen as a figured world with its beliefs, values and practices, its artefacts and language discourses.

As we, active agents, come into contact with our figured worlds, we, not only participate in them, but also bring about change; and we re-construct and re-define ourselves in the process. This is called 'authoring'. Our 'figurative identities' are thus created, and continuously negotiated, as we enter the figured worlds and interact with others in these worlds; as we assign meaning, and respond, to the tools, practices and values created by others; but also by the way others respond to our contributions. When the self complies to the demands and expectations of the figured world, it reproduces it; when it challenges, it can bring about change.

Professional identity is not a fixed entity, a label one adopts for instrumental reasons in a particular professional context. Rather, it involves a sense of self, of personal identity and the attributes, beliefs, values and meanings individuals draw upon to make sense of and function in a given context. Professional identity is more about who we are, not what we do; it is inextricably linked to personal identity (Lightfoot and Frost 2015). The process of identification is ongoing and involves interpreting and re-interpreting life experiences. Identity (both individual and professional) is thus malleable and affected by experiences. A crucial variable is agency (Lightfoot and Frost 2015).

The Early Years workforce has historically struggled to negotiate a socially valued status with employers, governments and the public (Brock 2012). The lack of a clearly defined role, inconsistency in qualifications, pay and employment conditions and the increased pressure to meet governmental standards, without any consultation, have contributed to a disenfranchised sense of professional identity and low morale (Lloyd and Hallet 2010; Brock 2012; Nutbrown 2012; Dyer 2018). Early Years practitioners lack a sense of agency, individually and collectively, to question and bring about change to their 'figurative worlds'. Their ability to

‘author’ their professional worlds may be threatened by the lack of professional status they experience (Lloyd and Hallet 2010; Dyer 2018).

What emerges from the above is a pressing need to empower practitioners in re-defining their identities, individually and professionally; in re-negotiating their role, agency and contribution to the future of their profession. In order to achieve these aims, we need to facilitate their critical engagement with knowledge construction, with issues of power and control and with an awareness of their role and contribution. Emancipatory AR can support them to, not only understand but assume the authority to challenge and re-shape, or to author, their practice.

Facilitating emancipatory AR in an academic environment may pose several challenges, however. These can be on institutional, personal, interpersonal and political levels.

### **Developing an ‘emancipatory consciousness’: challenges and possibilities**

Emancipatory AR, requires a bottom-up approach where practitioners participate in negotiating the standards of quality of their work, their practice, as well as the learning experiences they gain through this module. This would appear to conflict with university study, where meeting predetermined academic standards is a requirement for accreditation. However, perhaps the two need not be as contradictory. The needs for criticality, clarity and research rigour are in line with both academic and practitioner standards and could thus be the broad guidelines we use as we embark on this study. In addition to these, we would need to set more explicit, pragmatic standards about ‘good’ practice, privileging ‘what works’ and reflecting on its conditions (and what makes it work). Most importantly, practitioners and facilitators need to have the communicative space to engage in dialogue and in co-constructing the standards of their practice and research on this practice. We anticipate that this is going to be an ongoing process that will keep resurfacing and be reflected upon in the lifetime of the course.

The second level of challenges involves the process of experiencing the AR process (for the learners and for the facilitators). AR is about change; change in ways of doing, in ways of seeing and evaluating practice and in ways of seeing the self (Dadds 1998). This type of research can be particularly 'messy', as it involves 'stepping back' and questioning the taken-for-granted. This may cause uncertainty, ambiguity and compel the individual to resort to what is known and 'safe' and refuse to engage in critically reflecting on and challenging the familiar (Cook 2009).

At the same time, AR can be challenging for the facilitators too, who have to assume a new role that perhaps transcends what is known and familiar. AR is messy for all participants as it involves assuming different roles but also shifting from one role to another, as the conditions of the interaction change. Learners have to assume simultaneously the roles of novices, of learners, of experts, of colleagues, of individuals (when the focus shifts to the self); tutors may be the facilitators, the novices and outsiders (when the focus is on Early Years practice), the experts, and so on.

Further, students may encounter different challenges and have different needs at different times. Therefore, it may sometimes be complex for the facilitator to offer an effective type of support that meets the needs of all: what is empowering for one student may feel like lack of sufficient guidance for another. This balance between support and empowerment may thus be particularly delicate and will need to be continuously negotiated and re-assessed by all participants.

The third challenge, the political dimension, may be the most complex of all. AR is about change: for the individual, for the field of everyday practice, but also for the wider structures of society. Emancipatory AR can disclose injustices, power imbalances and oppression and compel the researcher to raise these issues and attempt to bring about change on a different

level. Kemmis (2006) would claim that this is the ultimate aim of AR; to foster in practitioners the power and authority to challenge structures. We agree with this. However, it is important to accept that we, as an academic institution, have limited powers to support this political activism. The course cannot exceed its spatio-temporal context. It has limited duration and it cannot enter the living and working spaces of our student practitioners to facilitate 'change'.

Our students may experience difficulties, frustration, disappointment and disillusionment if their political activity does not bring about desirable outcomes. So, it seems that we facilitate a particular way of critical thinking and foster in our students the confidence and self-efficacy beliefs that they have the power to make a difference. However, we do not offer them the support when action is taken. Taking action to improve their practice, involves risks that our students have to take on their own. May this be the ultimate duty of professionals? To challenge, negotiate and co-construct their practice?

## **Conclusion**

This paper is about Action Research. Although it does not include empirical research and it does not involve specific action, its aim is to establish the rationale and place of AR in academia. As we have argued, AR can serve several purposes: it can contribute to knowledge generation, dissemination of good practice; it can foster strong professional identities and a community of practice; and it can empower practitioners to 'author' their own practice. Some of these purposes are more direct and immediate than others. Similar to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) nested structures, our AR design can thus be conceptualised as consisting of layers of impact, moving from the more to the less direct structures.

The first, and most immediate level of impact is the personal. Engagement in AR may impact on the self; it can enable practitioners to reflect on, question, reconsider and perhaps transform

their self-perceptions, their professional and personal attributes. The next layer involves their everyday practices. The knowledge, experience and reflective activity achieved through our programme may enable practitioners to reconceptualise their knowledge about and actual practices. The intermediate, exosystem, that our AR aims to reach is the public sphere. One of the aims of our programme is to enable our students' voices to be heard in the public domain; to participate in dialogues and debates about their practice and to make their knowledge available for public scrutiny. Engagement in knowledge generation, in dissemination and in public dialogue can, in turn, help practitioners reposition themselves as active and powerful practitioners that can and should have a voice in decisions about their practice; as co-authors of their practice. The latter is the widest zone of political influence.

Our AR module has not run yet, so we can only anticipate its potential and its challenges and reflect on these. We are not in a position to discuss 'real' challenges or outcomes yet. This will be the focus of future publications.

In order to engage with and reflect on the effectiveness of the proposed programme, we have added a new layer of complexity to our structure: this is the facilitators' AR. As the module runs, and alongside the facilitation of the students' AR projects, we (the facilitators) will also be reflecting on and researching our practice (the facilitation of the module), questioning and continuously improving its different aspects, processes and challenges. Through this layered and ongoing AR activity, by the students and by the facilitators, we are planning to establish an AR departmental culture of reflection, action knowledge generation and dialogue; an ongoing process of change and improvement for all participants.

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