Chapter 18

Constitution of Objects in DWR Activity

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ABSTRACT

A shared research object between teachers and researchers in Developmental Work Research (DWR) aims at development of teaching practices and forming of subject-specific knowledge. Currently, design experiments, action research, and formative interventions are used in educational research. A multitude of approaches show an overarching interest in developing teaching and learning practices. Action research and formative interventions include and empower teachers. However, in many DWR projects, teachers and researchers have different objects. In a tradition where teachers are regarded as learners, a shared research object is of interest. This chapter problematizes the relationship between teachers and researchers with the help of three DWR projects. It is challenging to establish a DWR project in which teachers and researchers aim at realizing the same object. However, when this is the case, such projects may contribute to new knowledge that enhances student learning and educational, clinical, and subject-matter research.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is based upon a keynote speech at the Sixth Nordic Conference on Cultural and Activity Research, Nordic ISCAR 2013 (Knutagård, Krantz & Jedemark, 2013) discussing the significance of a shared research object between teachers and researchers in developmental work research (DWR) projects. The purpose is to develop teaching and learning practices as well as subject-specific knowledge (Carlgren, 2012). There is a considerable body of literature discussing the teachers’ role in educational research that focuses on development of teaching and/or teachers’ professional development (Carlgren, 2012; Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Chaiklin, 2010; Elliot, 1991; Somehk & Zeichner, 2009). There are also research approaches that address the means for developing teaching and learning, both in general terms and in relation to subject-specific research. Many of these contributions address issues of teacher participation. Action research may be regarded as an umbrella term for a variety of approaches, such as teacher research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle,
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1999; Stenhouse, 1981) or lesson study (Lewis, 2002). Teachers possess the power of formulating a problem and research questions themselves, or in collaboration with researchers. In other approaches to development of teaching and learning e.g. design experiment, design-based research (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Brown, 1992; Cobb, Confrey, diSessa, Lehrer & Schabue, 2003), or developmental research (van der Acker, 1998) the research issue is commonly formulated as a theoretical basis and defined by the researchers.

My interest in collaborative practice DWR relates to the need for a subject-specific knowledge base that can be used as a source of expansion of teaching and students’ learning (Carlgren, 2012). Most of the mentioned research approaches aim at improving teaching and developing new knowledge. Many of them take the teachers’ everyday problems related to student learning as a source of formulation of research questions (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Zeichner & Noffke, 2001). However, another discourse focuses on necessary changes in terms of teachers’ learning, collegial learning, cooperative learning, teachers’ professional development (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Carlgren, 2012). Within this discourse focus is primarily on teachers, their learning and development – not on the development of a professional, subject-specific knowledge base. Learning as an outcome of a research project is not a problem per se and it does not imply that there is no knowledge production of importance for the development of the core activity. However, focusing on teacher learning may blur our vision: if teacher learning is in focus, does research or the teachers perceive teachers as the problem or the solution? If teacher learning is in focus, do researchers and teachers perceive teachers’ professionalism, or lack of it, as the problem? If teacher learning is in focus, do researchers or teachers perceive of teachers’ collegial collaboration, or lack of it, as the problem? In any collaborative research project the participants have to challenge what appears to be a culturally-developed perception of teacher learning as the object and not students learning as the teachers’ object. If we were to expand student learning, teachers would need to be part of, and in the long run be responsible for, systematic knowledge production where student learning of specific knowings (Dewey & Bentley, 1960) is the object. Researchers as well as teachers would have to envision teachers as knowledge producers. With reference to medical clinical research, Bulterman-Bos (2008) argues for development of educational research where teachers have a dual role as clinical teachers-researcher and produce practice-relevant research that helps improve education. Carlgren (2012, p. 2) argues in a similar manner, for clinical research in general and especially for “clinical subject matter-didactic research”, suggesting application of research approaches like e.g. learning study where teachers, in collaboration with researchers create knowledge of importance for student learning. What is to be known? What can enhance the development of such knowing? What creates difficulties in learning a specific knowing? (Carlgren, et al, in press).

By taking an activity theoretical perspective to such developmental research, the relationship between teachers and researchers cannot be restricted to issues concerning relations between the involved individuals, or to issues concerning power, authority and status. There is a third party involved, namely the object of the activity that the participants direct their actions towards (Engeström, 2011; Engeström & Sannino, 2010). If the aim were to develop a joint research activity, the research object needs to be shared between the teachers and the researchers. In many cases however, both in relation to action research and to design experiments, there are different objects involved. If the project is meant to be a collaborative project with a common research object there are many demands, constraints and contradictions that may cause problems in establishing and maintaining a common object of research.
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