**When does the action start and finish? Making the case for an ethnographic action research in educational research.**

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Abstract

This paper explores how ethnographic and action research methodologies can be justifiably combined to create a new methodological approach in educational research. It draws on existing examples in both educational research and development studies which have discussed the use of ethnography and action research in specific projects. Interpretations of ethnography and action research are developed which aim to minimize the epistemological differences between them. The paper also contextualizes an 'ethnographic action research' approach with reference to an example of the author's research into participation in three 'reception' (first year of schooling) classes in the UK. It is argued that research into the theme of participation in early years education, using participative methods, was particularly suitable for this new methodological approach.

**Keywords:** ethnography; action research; participation; early years; epistemology

**Introduction**

With the constant pressure on early years teachers to attend to outcomes of teaching rather than its processes, it is common for action research projects in early years education to be instigated and led by academic institutions stimulated by government funding opportunities, rather than practitioners themselves. Thus, an action research project team often comprises of a team of university-based researchers working alongside early years practitioners (for example, Anning 2004). However, the potential complexities of this collaboration are rarely fully explored and documented.

Frankham and Howes (2006) have made a useful contribution to the difficulties of researchers doing action research in a primary school, by creating an elision between action research and ethnography in order to tell the story of the 'disturbances' (618) involved in setting up a particular project. They suggest that the setting up period should be 'taken as part of the action in action research' (620). This reflects an issue they identify; that the challenge of collaboration between teachers and researchers is often overlooked in the reporting of the research. This prompts my question about the start and finish of action in action research. If, as Frankham and Howes suggest in their title, talk is part of the action, then the starting and finishing points for the action in an action research project becomes muddied and inevitably tied to the planning and evaluation stages, which also begs a question of the nature of participant involvement during its inception and follow up.

The point of this paper, therefore, is to extend the story told by Frankham and Howes (2006) and suggest that the negotiation, and indeed possible 'disturbances' inherent in setting up a collaborative action project in education make it legitimate not only to slip in an introductory ethnographic period within the action research, but also to characterise the methodology of an entire project as having an 'ethnographic action research' methodology. Indeed, a methodology with this name has already been

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developed in the field of development studies by Tacchi, Slater and Hearn (2003) who suggest that ethnography can 'guide' a study while an action research component can 'link back the research to the project plans and activities' (3).

My own experience of research over the period of a year in three early years 'reception' (first year at school) classes would support this scheme. In this paper, I refer to this project in order to make the case for ethnographic action research as a suitable methodology for empirical research in both early years education and beyond. The project described was methodological in its theme of developing participation at the start of school. Participation was explored as a concept aligned with the work of Iris Young (2000) who prioritises ideas of difference and recognition in the development of participatory democracy. Thus, the project begat participative methods and included research questions which centred on exploring the features in young children's experience of starting school that led to decision making and participation. This was then followed by implementation and evaluation of relevant classroom activities within the frame an of educational action research methodology.

My contention is that the emphasis on methodology evident in this project makes it a particularly useful vehicle for exploring the new approach to educational action research which is advocated in this paper. The project, therefore, aims to contextualise the following three sections tracing interpretations of action research, reflexivity and ethnography which are argued as intrinsic to an 'ethnographic action research' methodology in education.


**Action research as critique**

Lewin (1946) provided the original research for the notion of action research. He suggested that it focused on "two rather different questions … the study of general laws … and the diagnosis of a specific situation" (p36). It is the latter, for the purposes of improving practice, which has led to the interest in action research in educational settings. Networks such as the Collaborative Action Research Network have been in existence since 1976 to support and improve 'the quality of professional practice, through systematic, critical, creative inquiry into the goals, processes and contexts of professional work' (MMU, ESRI website, 2008). However at the same time, according to Lewin (1946), action research can serve an academic desire for generalisable knowledge, thus researchers find it a methodology which enables the development of theory building about practical concerns.

However, it is the emphasis on practices and their outcomes which provides a moral purpose to action research. This underpins a radical view of educational theory grounded in practical reality and forms a critique of the educational theory which is distanced from the classroom. Carr and Kemmis (1986) note that there is a 'double dialectic' at work in their model of action research which enables theory to confront practice and the individual to confront society. The resolution of these opposing forces is to be found in the notion of a self-critical community of action researchers 'committed to the improvement of education' (184). This model suggests a transformation of practice into 'praxis' (190) through the essentially modernist creation of research as a critical educational science. Whereas, in contrast to this, Lather (1991, 12) points out that 'the question of action remains largely under addressed within postmodern discourse'

Carr and Kemmis (1986) emphasise that when a practical activity such as teaching is under the spotlight, then a different view of knowledge is needed than the

'single sphere of "theoria" which in the Greek tradition was reserved for the contemplation of ultimate truths' (99). They also suggest that educational problems occur when there are gaps between a practitioner's theory and practice (112) making it vital that practitioners are able to exercise rational and coherent judgments which lend scientific objectivity to the development of their practices and re-create theory as a more embodied force. Ultimately, Carr and Kemmis (1986) feel that truth and action are interdependent and exist together socially in the midst of constructed meanings within a historical context.

This view gives certainty as well as flexibility and frees up practitioners to challenge a hierarchy of knowledge that excludes the reality of the grass roots. By following a Habermasian approach, Carr and Kemmis's notion of a critical social science aims to clarify, explain and eliminate 'the causes of distorted self-understanding' (1986, 174). In this way, a theoretical understanding may also underpin and illuminate our interpretations. Importantly, a critical social theory 'arises out of the problems of everyday life and is constructed with an eye towards solving them' (175). It focuses on the collective and also aims to be useful. Thus, pragmatism and the ability to critique provide distinctive methodological features of action research, which were also apparent in and appropriate to my project focusing on the political notion of participation at the start of school. The peculiar dilemmas of the project as an example of action research will be discussed following examination of the methodological issue of reflexivity which is considered next.

**Reflexivity as theorising the personal**

In the conception of action research described above, the practitioner-as-researcher occupies a central position as an interpreter-of-practice. However; this interpretation can be viewed as constrained by a theoretical lens which pays little attention to the researcher's biography in terms of their position beyond the practice. I, therefore, suggest that the researcher/ practitioner in action research can and indeed, should, extend the level of reflection on (or indeed, *in*) action by developing practices of reflexivity which include accounts of both autobiography and theory. The next two sections examine a view of reflexivity which, I argue, is nevertheless consistent with the key features, previously outlined, of action research methodology but which also move to a position of greater criticality opening up the complexity of collaborative working to greater scrutiny. This is achieved by attention to poststructural and postcolonial explanations of authorship

A perspective on reflexivity which theorises personal experience concurs with a feminist position on autobiography. Stanley and Wise (1983, 159) reinforce that research is grounded in consciousness but, by providing an analysis of where thoughts originate, they suggest that the personal and theoretical can be combined by the researcher. Importantly, they also say that any attempt to present other people's understandings creates them as deficient and therefore should be avoided (166). This then allows the personal to be viewed as political and suggests that reflexivity has intrinsic relevance to research, a position, arguably, more common to interpretive ethnography than scientific action research.

Okely (1992), for instance, confronts the use of 'I' in research texts by women as subversive and characterises it as 'the voice of individual scepticism from the margins' (12). Importantly she suggests that it expresses not only difference but also 'diffidence in the face of scientism' (12). As an anthropologist, Okely works within an

ethnographic scheme and advocates the use of diaries as a tool to combine the personal with the element of daily immersion in the fieldwork. This can also be interpreted as a political tool to highlight the importance, in a critique of positivism, of daily, domestic and often repetitive events, often perceived as central to a woman's role and certainly, in the context of my study, to classroom life.

Lal (1996) suggests that postcolonialism, as well as feminism, enables us 'to work against inscribing the other' (200). To engage with both of these research perspectives determines that reflexivity intervenes in 'the politics of reality' to become meaningful (207). In this way, reflexivity and textuality can be contextualised and given purpose beyond a specific research project; as Reinharz (1992, 260) says, 'researchers who adopt this view draw on a new "epistemology of insiderness" that sees life and work as intertwined'. Since this 'insider' perspective also overlaps with a position that prioritises participation, I would argue that it can, therefore, provide an epistemology appropriate to educational research in this area, as well as to the position of the researcher.

Stanley and Wise (1983) likewise link a focus on the power within everyday relationships with an understanding that 'politics' is not a concept distanced from ordinary life (64). In this way we can see that reflexivity has implications beyond the purely personal and theoretical, which are based in an interconnectedness of the two. Indeed, in this respect, it reflects the postmodern condition in that it creates 'a symbiotic relationship between ontology and epistemology' (Stanley and Wise 1983, 226) and inserts the notion of uncertainty into practice as well as theory. As Shacklock and Smyth (1998, 3) say, theory becomes a theory-building process and from a feminist and post-colonial viewpoint, the self is integral and has to be negotiated as part of that process.


**Towards reflexivity as meta- theory**

Moving from reflexivity as autobiography, or indeed theory, to reflexivity in terms of meta-theory, it is helpful to identify what Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000) have identified as a 'reflexive methodology'. In this conception of methodology, reflexivity is the main resource for a critical exercise which extends beyond the constraints of any one epistemological realm. As Alvesson and Skoldberg point out, 'it is pragmatically fruitful to assume the existence of a reality beyond the readers' egocentricity and the ethnocentricity of the research community' (3). Thus, they examine and compare theoretical approaches which derive from data-oriented methods, hermeneutics, critical theory and post-structuralism. This enables a deconstruction of epistemology which privileges the idea of reflexivity as 'quadri-hermeneutics', a term which extends Giddens' (1976) idea of double hermeneutics in which the context of research is reciprocally linked to the researcher's self understanding. Quadri-hermeneutics, thus, consists of a further meta-interpretive approach to methodology which allows the researcher to consider the intersections and relative truths of different methodological approaches, using each approach to critique the other.

In the context of my research, quadri-hermeneutic methodology provided a useful framework for characterising the mode of enquiry for my research. The 'data' or findings, as I preferred to conceptualise the evidence, was used to support an argument which was also a construction of theoretical positioning. As such it formed part of a 'never-ending debate' (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000, 276). This

counteracted the idea that data exists without value and theory preceding it and linked both inductive and deductive approaches to the analysis of the data. This position also allowed the empirical material to be a source of inspiration (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000, 3) and helped to create a counter-intuitive outcome. Since, in the research 'field', it is the experience of being there which takes precedence when we connect with and feel illuminated by theory, the hermeneutic domain needed acknowledging in its own right as a powerful dimension in the argument which was constructed with the use of so-called empirical evidence.

Following data-oriented methods and hermeneutics, critical reflection regarding the political and ideological contexts of and issues in, research is identified by Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000) as the third level of argument in qualitative research methodology. This dimension connects well with Carr and Kemmis' (1986) view of action research and was, I would argue, intrinsic to my own examination of participation. It, therefore, informed and penetrated the project methodology. Research can tip all too easily into projects which privilege the researcher as omnipotent, making collaboration with research participants, as an experience of equality, hard to achieve. In my project, it had to be worked on continually and retrospectively in addition to during the actual research 'event'.

The fourth level identified by Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000) is the most difficult to pin down as it covers areas of poststructural and postmodern thought. Postmodern thought and Foucault as a particular social theorist, influenced the construction of education conceptualised in and by my research. This meant that the findings, interpretations and critical theory were subjected to a further critique that interrogated the practices of education and research itself. Thus, for reflexivity to be meaningful it had to recognise that research is also located within a context which is subject to the workings of power. Indeed, from a Foucauldian viewpoint, Usher (1990, 36) reminds us that even the will to truth is a will to power. He also defines research itself as 'a set of activities legitimated by a relevant community' (34), in other words a social practice. This means that the researcher needs to be acutely aware of the politics behind research aspirations and interpretations which must be problematised before justification.

Thus, utilising the argument put forward by Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000), it appears that, to be reflexive, research methodology has to operate on many different levels. My contention is that my research project was well positioned to allow these levels to interact and benefit from a sense of triangulation that went way beyond the literal meaning of triangulation within the positivist paradigm. Laurel Richardson's (1990, 27) image of the crystal, rather than the traditional one of a triangle, is useful here as an encapsulation of the notion of validity which best matches this. This image was also useful in illustrating the process of data analysis. A crystal as representative of the idea of 'multi-methodology' characterises research as a truly intellectual enterprise which then allows scholarship to influence empirical study and vice-versa without reducing either to a sterile exercise in truth production. It then becomes, as Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000, 288) point out, both provisionally rational and provisionally rhetorical.


**Action research as an 'outsider'**

However, even if, as documented here, methodological unity of critique and reflection is pursued, action research often poses many pragmatic challenges with regard to

reflexivity, power relations between researcher and research participants/subjects and the representation of others. My project was no exception and there were potential methodological inconsistencies in its design. It was carried out while I was acting as a support teacher for the local authority and thus working as an early years practitioner, albeit with an advisory emphasis. Nevertheless, the research was designed around my role as visitor rather than class practitioner. This made the implementation of action research difficult. Despite this ambiguity, an action research methodology was claimed as feasible and concomitant with the support teacher's role to facilitate a process of reflection and interpretation by practitioners in order to advocate participation in schools. Nevertheless, at least one of the participant teachers found the process uncomfortable and the presence of an observer in the classroom potentially undermining.

Thus, the main issue which affected the methodology of the project, and the issue which is focused on in this paper, is the problem when action research is claimed by an outsider reflecting on practice which is removed from the front-line of the classroom. An occasional visitor to a class, which is often the children's view of a researcher, cannot be compared with the role of the class teacher in building relationships with children starting school. It is for this reason, it was crucial, in the same way that the talk involved in collaboration with teachers became a focus for Frankham and Howes (2006), to acknowledge and design an ethnographic period to the research which was also able to examine the partnership of the research participants.

**The ethnographic period**

Tacchi, Slater and Hearn (2003, 3) define ethnography as 'a research approach that has traditionally been used to understand different cultures'. This makes it the natural methodology for disciplines such as development studies. However, the strength of action research as an evaluative tool linked to improvements in practice makes it attractive to professionals in many fields linked to the social sciences, including those involved in development work. Thus, we can understand the usefulness of action research to a project with an ethnographic bias where the brief is to immerse and map a culture for the purpose of enacting an appropriate intervention.

However, the same situation is often present in research situations in education when researchers find themselves promoting or enacting interventions in classroom settings with staff and children. The difficulty here, as Frankham and Howes (2006) discovered is to acknowledge the familiarisation time which is required to precede any action as part of the research period. In their case, they characterise this as 'ethnographic-type engagement… leading to another useful example of "community of practice"' (629). In my own research, this period of familiarisation was built into the research design approximating to the first third, translated as four out of a total of 12 visits to each of three classes (see Table 1).

| Table 1 Research Timetable | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Visit** | **Term One** | **Term Two** | **Term Three** |
| 1 | How children choose and share: watching | Making class decisions by voting | Children's reflections on photos |

| 2 | Children's concepts of fairness: listening | 'Who Chooses?' activity | *Playing Together* story |
| 3 | 'Co-operative Faces' game | Children's reflections on 'Who Chooses?' | Teacher projects and support |
| 4 | Co-operative games and voting pilot | Children taking photos | Teacher projects and support |

This first term was clearly marked as a time to immerse myself in the classroom, teaching and children's cultures as well as to develop the research questions and focus. Tacchi, Slater and Hearn (2003) explain that, in this situation, the researcher has 'to make sense of each feature of a place and a project in relation to the bigger picture and not in isolation' (10) and in so doing they have to pay attention to both local and non-local contexts. Thus factors impact on the research both from inside and outside the immediate situation and the researcher takes on the role of shaping a research culture from these influences, thereby becoming a 'social-cultural animator' (Tacchi, Slater and Hearn 2003, 13).

**Interpreting ethnography**

Despite the deceptively simple definition of ethnography as the writing of a culture, the process of representation implied incurs profound questions of validity and reliability. Thus, ethnography as a methodology should be viewed as critical and needing further interpretation. Tacchi, Slater and Hearn (2003) stress the importance of participant involvement in their approach to ethnography which is designated by stages drawn from action research: planning, doing, observing and reflecting. The participative methods which they advocate suggest that research subjects become both 'informants and fellow analysts' as a result of the plurality of roles required in a project which aims to be sensitive to local cultures. My particularly methodological project, focusing on participation, likewise aimed to reflect local cultures, as reflected in reception classrooms. Furthermore, the use of participative methods made a case for ethnographic methodology to influence all aspects of the research beyond the initial period and into the action and evaluation. This meant that the research centred on interactions in the classroom and therefore the process of interpretation itself. To capture this, the accounts of class teachers and children as co-researchers were privileged in a form which attempted to represent the original expression.

Thus, my portrayal of ethnography is that of a broad canvas that has been reworked to accommodate postmodernity and feminist politics. This means that, as Tedlock (2000, 471) points out, 'an ethnographer can allow self and other to appear together within a single narrative that carries a multiplicity of dialoguing voices'. Thereby, I suggest, the emancipatory dimension of a project which prioritises participation as theme and/or method is well accommodated within an ethnographic frame, as well as incurring action. As Denzin (2000) says, the interpretive criteria of qualitative research are now pushing 'the personal to the forefront of the political, where the social text becomes the vehicle for the expression of politics' (915). This allows for the postmodernist flavour of interpretive methodology to gain an edge of activism which incorporates political will.

Perhaps with this in mind, Denzin (1997) suggests that ethnography should move closer to a type of civic journalism that 'makes readers actors and participants, not spectators' (280). Marcus (1994) describes the text of this sort of ethnography as

'messy text'. This is representation which is closer to the research process itself than to a finished product or artefact. Denzin (1997) points out that, by attempting to reflexively map multiple discourses, these texts suggest poststructural readings for which 'no interpretation is privileged' (225). These then 'redirect ethnography towards constructing itself as social criticism, rather than as social science' (232). Thus, the writing and broader representation of research involving participative methods becomes part of the research culture, created by the local researcher as social-cultural animator (Tacchi, Slater and Hearn 2003) and intrinsic to the enterprise of opening up a project to a plurality of perspectives. This is the value of asserting the development of an ethnographic methodology alongside participative tools and its insertion meant that both the teachers and the children in my project were able to influence both the interpretation and representation of the key concept of participation in classroom activities and final thesis. Thus, the research question and use of activities changed in the course of the project to accommodate interpretations of participation from their perspectives. This is returned to in the discussion on participatory action research in the next section.

Willis (2000), however, goes a step further in this debate about ethnography and its representation by defending the reality of the reality that precedes representation. He believes that this is composed of 'the fluid relation between representations, practices, juxtaposition of expressive forms, circumstances and experiences' (116). In this way, he expands the notion of the messy text to confirm that life is not just about a code, messy or otherwise. It is not just signifiers that float, whole cultures do. Where an ethnographic text differs from a literary one is in the actual embodiment of the characters who find their way onto the page as the 'grounded' (117) imaginings of the author. Thus, imagination in ethnographic text inhabits representations of ordinary life and in so doing signals the gap between real and imagined that gives birth to critique. Denzin (1997) hints of this way of 'reading' reality, rather than vice versa, when he talks about texts 'that ideologically mediate the real' (248). Therefore while textuality certainly foregrounds the constructed-ness of research, fieldwork also needs unpicking, particularly because, as Hastrup (1992) says, its condition is 'fundamentally confrontational and only superficially observational' (117). This reflects the centrality of the power relationship between researcher and subject which problematises the truth of the researcher's perspective.

However, in the midst of all this uncertainty, it is as well to point out that a 'politics of location' (Marcus 1994, 570) in ethnography is all the more important to its sense of identity as fieldwork. Thus, in my research, it was important to the overall spirit of the theme that the presentation of its findings to other teachers and researchers allowed for ongoing dissemination and re-interpretation of the fieldwork before the final version was written.


**Ethnography and participatory action research**

Producing ethnography presupposes the essentially active process of getting one's hands dirty in the chosen field of work. Schon (1983) likens this to being in a swamp wherein 'lie the problems of greatest human concern' (3). By allowing further linkage of theme and method, the participatory approach taken in my research promoted an even deeper sinking into the swamp which, I would argue, also strengthened the links between its ethnographic and action research methodologies. This type of research, say Kemmis and McTaggart (2000), has roots in liberation theology, neo-Marxist

approaches to community development and human rights activism (569). The advantage of Kemmis and McTaggart's view of participatory action research is that it provides, not only an opportunity for the researcher to become an insider and thus gain inside knowledge, but also makes possible 'the seed of the critical perspective' (2000, 590) so that other possibilities and views are considered. This means that the participants inevitably embark on a process of self-education and commitment to change.

The strength of the participatory approach to research for my project was the interlinking of both agency and structure which suggested education through reflection as both context and theme. This allowed for a surfacing from the depths of the swamp in order to gain some perspective without losing the power of the fieldwork. Furthermore, and in line with the purpose of the research, Ely (1991, 229) also points out, using Freire's terms (1970), that 'it is the social responsibility of qualitative researchers to avoid seeing and treating participants as passive objects and instead to work with them so that they become increasingly knowledgeable, active, responsible, and, therefore, increasingly liberated'. This is particularly important in an action research project which forms part of a relationship that will continue after the research finished. It meant for my research that its aims were potentially compatible with the stated aims of professional development which, for the support teacher, included providing an increasing amount of in-service training for practitioners and, for the class teacher, included teaching children with an ever increasing variation of abilities and backgrounds.

Participation at every stage was built into the design of this project through the provision of regular meetings between the class teachers and me, which allowed for planning and reviewing of the actions taken collaboratively and away from the pressures of the classroom. The design also involved the teachers in a project which suited their own class planning in the third term (see Table 1). However, it is also important to try and understand the way that reflective practice operates in the immediateness of the classroom context. Schon (1983) uses the term 'reflection-in-action' to define a type of teacher reflection which forms an ongoing almost unconscious part of the teaching process. This is based on what Polanyi (1969) calls 'tacit' or intuitive knowledge which forms part of an automatic way of practising learnt skills.

Shulman's (2002) work separates the process of reflection into the content and form of pedagogical knowledge and identifies that knowledge of *what* to teach is different from knowledge of *how* to teach. This is useful for an understanding of how reflecting on participation in teaching practices focuses reflection on teaching strategy generally which may in turn result in greater innovation in the classroom. It was important for the project teachers themselves to understand and articulate the impact of their reflections and it was anticipated that the group meetings away from the classroom would facilitate this process. This also aimed to help with a sense of teacher agency and centrality in the research.

The position of children as participants became stronger as the project unrolled; the reflexivity of an interpretive paradigm allowing for this aspect to grow and develop as the participatory practices ('actions') were piloted and children's views sought. In this way, the research questions were modified in order to reflect the shift away from observation of teaching practices towards a construction of the meaning of participation for children in the context of a reception class. This meant that the children also became active participants in generating interpretations of their perspective as reception class children which then became trusted 'data' for informing

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adult interpretation and analysis. Indeed, the task of finding a common language between the adults and the children became the focus for participatory practices in the classroom. This then also came to redefine the meaning of teaching and learning.


**Towards 'Ethnographic Action Research' in educational research**

Tacchi, Slater and Hearn (2003) and Frankham and Howes (2006) in their different ways both acknowledge the relationship which ethnography and action research can develop in the life of an empirical research project. This relationship has also been illustrated through my own research carried out in the context of participation in reception class settings. The educational bias has been contextualised further in terms of a reflexive dimension which involved all participants in reflection on their actions and thoughts with regard to the research.

Whereas, a solution to the interrelationship of ethnography and action research might be to designate clear periods for the application of each approach, I have suggested that the connection of these two methodologies goes beyond and is far more complex than this. Indeed, it is, arguably, its own 'messy text' (Marcus 1994). Ethnography, in terms of an epistemological basis is based on a phenomenologically oriented paradigm which accepts a diversity of realities (Fetterman 1998), whereas an epistemological base for action research has been more contested and, indeed, often ignored. Fetterman (1998), furthermore, says that phenomenologically oriented studies are generally inductive' and 'make few explicit assumptions about sets of relationships'.

In contrast to this view of the epistemology of ethnography, Oquist (1978) claims that action research constitutes 'scientific research' within a pragmatic position epistemologically (154). This sounds deductive in its nature and therefore opposed to the inductiveness of ethnography. Nevertheless, within the pragmatic position, action research remains contextually free and outside of the concrete social context that, for instance, a dialectic materialist perspective necessitates. Lather (1986) also manages to circumvent issues of an inductive or deductive epistemology for action research by developing the pragmatic approach as 'praxis'. This places action research outside of both positivist and interpretivist paradigms since theory and practice are seen to shape each other in an emancipatory social science which is respectful of people's everyday experiences. Thus, by focusing on issues of power in the research experience, the researcher can both change and be changed (Lather 1986).

Nevertheless, the possibility still remains that ethnography and action research might be theoretically opposed. However, Willis (2000) helps us to resolve this apparent disparity, by his assertion that text and reality (and thus, I would suggest, 'action') are intrinsically interlinked. `By collapsing the distinction between text and reality, Willis effectively unpicks the main epistemological problem inherent in ethnography: that of 'translating the orality of the subjects into the literacy of the ethnographer' (Marcus 1994, 184). This links with the assertion by Frankham and Howes (2006) that talk can be construed as action, particularly when action research is collaborative or participatory. This means that, when perspectives of both ethnography and action research are present in empirical work, research attends to and revolves around dynamics of communication and the work of creating (provisional) shared understandings.

**Summary**

The links between notions of ethnographic action research and the dynamics of communication, which are suggested in this paper, are particularly pertinent to educational research and were embodied in my own research into children's participation in reception class settings. Action research is not always carried out primarily by an active classroom practitioner and I contend that it would be useful to acknowledge this and enshrine it within the model of 'ethnographic action research' as described, whilst not negating the potential power of the researcher as the instigator of the research. The foregrounding of researcher positionality in this model makes it vital, in my view, to place reflexivity central, with regard to both personal and theoretical levels, in line with a methodology which embraces complexity with regard to the actor(s) and action in action research. Furthermore, the inclusion of an ethnographic period allows and acknowledges the need for researchers from different perspectives to have time to collaborate and understand each other's position before more overt action takes place. It also allows for an ethnographic concern with interpretations and representations to influence the evaluation of actions carried out collaboratively and thus widen the theoretical net of Carr and Kemmis's (1986) concept of a critical educational science.

The heart of this argument is that epistemological differences can, in practice, align. Clearly, debate will continue about distinctions between methodological models and indeed paradigmatic differences too. The argument here is that because response to dynamic situations is intrinsic to action research, it must evolve and accommodate new research situations. Acknowledging the pragmatic purpose of an ethnographic approach to action research in education is one way to accommodate the extent of the collaboration that is essential to its success.

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