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The Roles of University Researchers in a University-School Collaborative Action Research Project - A Chinese Experience

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The Roles of University Researchers in a University-School Collaborative Action Research Project - A Chinese Experience

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Abstract

Teacher research as an international movement since the 1970s has been advocated worldwide to promote school curriculum reform and the professionalization of school teachers. University-school collaborative action research is a new attempt to support school teachers who learn to do research in their classrooms while providing opportunities for university researcher to develop a better understanding of classroom practice with more effective strategies to support teacher change. Such collaborative research has been promoted in the recent curriculum reform in basic education in China. This paper reports on an action research project conducted by school teachers supported by university researchers in the Chinese context with a focus on examining the roles and gains of university researchers in this project. Data was collected through project meeting observations, questionnaires, interviews and participants' reflective journals. Both quantitative and qualitative analysis methods were used respectively for analyzing the data collected. The purpose of this study is to understand better the nature of such collaborations and the gains as well as challenges on the part of university researchers so that implications can be drawn for establishing a sound university-school collaborative research body that promotes the professional learning of both parties.

Keywords: action research, university-school collaboration, professional learning, China

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Los Roles de los Investigadores Universitarios en un Proyecto Colaborativo de Investigación- Acción - Una Experiencia China

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Resumen

Este artículo presenta los resultados de un proyecto de investigación-acción colaborativo llevado a cabo por profesorado de escuela en colaboración con personal investigador universitario en el contexto chino. El objetivo de este estudio es examinar los roles y beneficios para la investigación universitaria de este proyecto. La investigación del profesorado como movimiento internacional, iniciada en los setenta, ha sido defendida mundialmente con el objetivo de promover reformas del currículum escolar y la profesionalización del profesorado. Dicha investigación fue promovida en la última reforma curricular de la educación básica en China. La investigación acción colaborativa entre universidad y escuela es un nuevo intento en dicho contexto para dar apoyo al profesorado de escuela que aprende a realizar investigación en sus clases mientras aportan nuevas oportunidades a la investigación universitaria a través del desarrollo de una mejor comprensión de la práctica con estrategias más efectivas y de apoyo al cambio educativo. El objetivo de este estudio es comprender mejor la naturaleza de dichas colaboraciones y sus beneficios así como los retos existentes del personal investigador universitario. En definitiva, la implementación de dicha colaboración científica promueve el aprendizaje profesional por ambas partes.

Palabras claves: investigación acción, colaboración universidad-escuela, formación continua del profesorado, China

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The 21st century China's curriculum reform in basic education encourages school teachers (STs) to become teacher researchers. By doing research, teachers can become more reflective about their teaching and students' learning so that they are in a better position to solve problems in the classroom and translate curriculum ideas into classroom practice. Action research (AR) as one kind of classroom research has been promoted by the Chinese policy makers as it is seen to be an effective way for teachers to integrate theory with classroom practice (Wang, Zhang & Lin, 2010).

As one type of social enquiry, AR requires the involvement of the participants within the specific social setting, aiming at gaining mutual-understanding and support among participants as well as relieving the sense of isolation on the part of classroom teachers (Wang, 2002). Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) also claim that educational action research needs to be collaborative. In such collaboration, STs may collaborate with their fellow teachers, their students, sometimes parents, and also educational administrators and educational researchers. The university-school collaborative AR model has been increasingly recognized as a way in recent years to establish closer links between university and schools (Clark, 1988; Kersh & Maszta, 1998). There are recognized mutual benefits for both parties through such collaborations (Wang, Zhang, Lin, 2010) which allow STs to gain access to professional support from university researchers in conducting classroom research; meanwhile, university researchers take the chance to get close to schools and classroom realities so as to deepen their understanding of the work of teachers and develop strategies to support teachers to adapt to the changes demanded by the curriculum reform.

In the traditional researcher-practitioner interrelationship, owing to differences in social status, resources available, and the different nature of their work, university researchers tend to take a superior role. Thus, the collaboration between the two parties bears the characteristics of "expert model", in which researchers function as theory producer, taking the initiative while STs act as passive theory consumers. However, educational AR, in accordance with the underlying principles of

curriculum reform, aims at cultivating STs' autonomy in scrutinizing their own teaching. STs are supposed to take a major role in the university-school collaborative AR with the university researchers playing an enabling or supporting role. Therefore, how to break through the stereotypical researcher-practitioner relationship and build an equal and reciprocal relationship among participants in conducting university-school collaborative AR is the main focus of this paper.

This study is based on a university-school collaborative AR project carried out during Nov, 2009 - Nov, 2011 between 17 university researchers (URs) from a teachers' university and 45 senior high school English teachers in China. The purpose of this study is to probe into how URs collaborate with STs in this project, concentrating on URs' roles and their professional growth through the collaboration with STs. It is hoped that the study will uncover the nature of such collaboration which will lead to some actionable suggestions on how to establish a sound university-school collaborative research body that promotes the professional development of both parties.

Related research

Many scholars have discussed the significance of university school collaboration with regard to its impacts on participants involved. For one thing, such collaboration provides teachers with different perspectives of analyzing teaching practice, contributing to improvement in teaching efficiency as well as clearer understanding of teaching and education (Lisa, 1984). As collaboration is characteristic of equality and mutual responsibility, teachers are empowered in the process so that their self-esteem is enhanced and their status is evaluated (Catelli, Padovano & Costello, 2000). For another, university researchers gain the precious chance to get close to the realities of the classroom, which provides abundant first-hand information that benefit them for collaboratively generating educational theories and developing practical solutions to improve practice.

Several models of relationship between URs and STs in collaboration have been discussed by different scholars. According to Townsend and Day (2007), three types of relationship exist among participants,

namely, the supervisory/mentoring relationship, provider-led relationship and co-research relationship. Besides, based on different goals of collaboration, Day (1998) proposes another way of classification: ideological collaboration, in which researchers try to strengthen teachers' professional identity through collaboration with the hope to give theory-hungry teachers new research-based perspectives on their practice; knowledge-generating collaboration, which attempts to guide teachers in examining their practice and construct their own practical knowledge about teaching and education; and capacity-building, which tries to build up STs' confidence and capacity through the long-term interaction with university researchers. Moreover, Biott and Nias (1992) discuss two models of university-school collaborative research based on the status of participants in collaboration: one is implementation model or researcher-focus model, in which researchers impart theories to teachers through lectures or seminars with STs as merely knowledge consumers. The major interactive strategies used in this model are offering, coaching and demonstration; the other one is development model or interactive model, in which participants acknowledge expertise of both parties. In this model, the central role of STs is emphasized and the main interactive strategies implemented in this model are questioning, consulting and discussion. Researchers work together with teachers during the process of identifying teaching problems and working on finding out solutions and providing necessary interpretations.

Although some research has been conducted regarding university-school collaboration, most of them explore the significance or influencing factors of such collaborations on STs. Very few studies have been conducted from the perspective of university participants in the collaboration. It is thus the main focus of the present study.

Research design

Research questions

Two research questions are proposed for this study:

- (1) What roles did URs play in collaboration with STs in the AR project?
- (2) What gains did URs get by collaborating with STs from the collaborative AR project?

Research method

This study takes a qualitative approach, which allows us to obtain data in a natural setting and gain interpretive understanding of the roles played by the university researchers and their gains during their collaboration with STs.

Setting

This study is based on a project named “Promoting English teachers’ educational innovation for the development of students’ English language competence - a university-school collaborative AR” led by the Centre for Foreign Language Education and Teacher Education (CFLETE) in a leading teachers’ university in China. The aim of the project is to help develop teacher researchers, improve students’ language competence and promote English curriculum reform in basic education.

The project team is made up of three participatory parties: 17 university researchers from CFLTTE of BNU, working as project facilitators; 3 English language teaching and research officers from the Teacher Training School of a local district of Beijing, working as administrative supporters, and a group of 45 senior high school English teachers from 17 schools of a local district. STs are further subdivided into 12 sub-groups based on the principle that teachers from the same school stay as much as possible as one sub-group. However, there are a few cases where the groups are formed with members from a combination of two or more schools. As a result, each of the 12 sub-groups consists of an average of 4 to 9 members, who work together with 1 to 2 university researchers. Due to a number of reasons, such as illness, family pressure, and workload, 11 teachers dropped out and there was a re-grouping of the sub-groups in the middle of the project and 10 groups were kept after the re-grouping.

This project lasts for nearly two years. Throughout the process, the project team organized plenary training sessions including workshops and seminars. Individual URs paid school visits, observed lessons, held discussion with their collaborating STs about their research topics. URs also communicated with STs via e-mails, telephones, and blogs during the time when STs carried out their AR projects in their own classroom

following the steps of identifying research questions; conducting preliminary investigation and restating research questions; making action plans; implementing action plans and collecting data; making adjustments and reflecting on their experiences; and writing up AR reports.

Participants

This study focuses on URs from CFLTTE of BNU. Among the 17 members, 6 are academic faculties from the School of Foreign Languages and Literatures of BNU, and 8 are PhD students and the rest MA students.

14 out of 17 university researchers (URs) participated in for this study. The three that did not participate was because they did not respond to the questionnaires nor did they participate in the interviews when data was collected based a voluntary basis.

Data collection methods

Data collected includes participant observations, questionnaires, interviews, participants' reflective journals after each project meeting and documents from e-mails.

Participant observations: In this study, the authors observed the whole project as participants. Field notes were taken and a recording pen was used to record each project meeting and preparatory meetings held among the 17 URs in advance of each project meeting.

Questionnaires: Two questionnaires consisted of mainly open-ended questions were administered to URs, a pre-project questionnaire and a post-project questionnaire (see Appendix I & II). The former intends to find out before the project the participants' perceptions of AR and their expectations of the collaboration. The latter was conducted half way through the project in order to discover URs' understanding of their roles as well as gains in the process of collaborating with STs.

Interviews: To get a clearer understanding of URs' roles and professional learning through collaboration, one in-depth interview was used towards the end of the project. Altogether, ten participants were interviewed with each from a different sub-group. An interview outline in Chinese was designed with the aim of discovering how researchers

perceived and played their roles in the collaboration (see Appendix III). All the interviews were conducted in Chinese out of the consideration that the interviewees could express their views more at ease. With permission, all the interviews were recorded and the interviewees' non-verbal behaviors were noted down.

Reflective Journal: After each project activity, URs were invited to write a reflective journal with the purpose of keeping record of their thoughts, actions and discoveries while collaborating with STs. No fixed pattern or required content were set for them and they were encouraged to write freely about their collaborative experiences and individual thoughts. As reflective journals were written and shared on a voluntary basis, 9 out of 17 URs managed to keep reflective journals on a regular basis. Altogether 81 pieces were collected. Almost all reflections were written in Chinese which were later translated into English as necessary.

The following table shows the information of the data collected for the study.

Table 1

Information of the data collected

Type of data	Amount of data
Questionnaire I (Pre-project)	12 URs' responses
Questionnaire II (Mid-project)	11 URs' responses
Interview (End of the project)	Interviews with 10 URs (421 minutes in total)
Reflective journals (Throughout the project)	81 pieces of journals
Participant observations (Throughout the project)	Notes of 10 project activities Observation notes of 9

Data analysis methods

Both quantitative and qualitative data in various forms were analysed with appropriate methods. First, the interviews and all the tape-recorded

URs' project meetings were transcribed. Content analysis was used and themes were identified through coding and then codes were identified before core categories were generalized (Chen, 2000). The qualitative data from the open responses to the questionnaires were analyzed in the same manner. Field notes were used to help transcribe the recording and analyze the transcription. Then, the authors read the transcripts carefully to allow themes to emerge to enable the authors to find out what roles URs played in the collaborative project and the impacts of such collaboration on URs.

The reflective journals, 81 pieces in total by 9 URs, were analysed using both inductive and deductive methods.

Data presentation and discussion

In this section, data is presented and analyzed in two parts based on the research questions of this study. The first part reports data regarding the URs' roles in the collaborative AR project with STs. The second part provides a detailed analysis on URs' learning and changes by participating in the project.

URs' roles in the collaborative project

Data collected shows that in the two-year collaborative AR project, URs played a number of roles along with the project and they played certain prominent roles at different stages of the project. These roles included instructor and expert for AR at the introductory stage; facilitator, supporter, and resources provider during the planning stage; observer, listener, and learner during the implementation stage; and pusher and affective carer during the data analysis and evaluation stage, and finally editor and co-writer of AR papers towards the end of the project. At the same time, URs' attitudes towards STs and understanding of STs' work changed as they gained more knowledge about STs and their teaching contexts. The following reports the main findings related to the roles URs played and what they have learned during the process of the collaboration.

Instructors and experts of AR at the initial stage

Although action research has been introduced to China since 1990s, for most STs, it is an unfamiliar term. According to Stenhouse (1979), action research is a systematic enquiry conducted in scientific ways. It therefore involves conducting research by using appropriate methods for collecting and analyzing data. From this perspective, one needs to have some basic knowledge and skills about how to conduct research. For this reason, URs planned three workshops on introducing AR, including the theories of AR and methods for conducting research, including both qualitative and quantitative approaches. During the workshops, teachers were involved in reflecting on their teaching situations and identifying problems with hands-on activities to experience the process of designing questionnaires, conducting small-scale surveys, analyzing data and reporting the results.

As most of the training workshops were led by URS at the beginning stage of the project, URs maintained an authoritative presence. They emphasized the basic knowledge and skills of research and provided instructions on how to conduct AR. As a result, URs played the roles of an instructor or an expert to teachers while STs functioned as learners who relied on URs' instructions and help. These resulted in an unbalanced weight with regard to the knowledge of AR and discourse between URs and STs. Most of the STs found such training useful and expected URs to be their directors, willing to be told what to do.

“I got useful guidance from the researcher.” (ST-reflection, Nov. 7th, 2009)

“...The school teachers had a chat with me. One teacher said: ‘tell us what to do, we will listen and obey’. Another teacher said: ‘what do you want us to do, we will meet your needs’. From the conversation, I can see that school teachers don't know what collaboration means. They regarded themselves as passive actors.” (UR3-reflection, Nov. 7th, 2009)

Facilitator, supporters, and resource provider during the problem identification and planning stage

As the project progressed into problem identification and plan-making for each individual action research project by STs, URs found that many STs were eager to solve the problems they encountered in classroom teaching but tended to jump to immediate judgments about the problems they identified in their classroom teaching. They were not good at asking why questions for the problems they had. At this stage, URs functioned as facilitators who developed strategies to invite STs to explain why they considered the problems as problems and reflect on the possible reasons for those problems.

By engaging in reflections and further inquiries into the problems, STs developed more awareness of the problems they faced and learned to analyse their own assumptions behind the problems. Thus, URs began to adapt their roles from instructors to facilitators and supporters. STs were challenged by URs to explore into their assumptions and beliefs and tried to make sense of what they did and why they did it the way they did so that they were able to make informed decisions for proposing solutions for the problems they had. At this stage, the two parties began to accept each other, and viewed each other from a more equal perspective. URs also found that project meetings became an equal platform for communication not only between URs and STs but also among STs.

I discussed with the teachers on how to restate their questions and this discussion led to some changes in my views on them. Instead of accepting my ideas or keeping silent, they contributed their own thoughts, which I found both logical and coherent. They even mentioned that they sought for the all-round development of students rather than overemphasis on training on language skills. We need to provide them the opportunity to speak out and help explicit their tacit knowledge instead of forcing them to accept our ideas. (UR-6, reflection, March.16th, 2010)

After ST-3 shared how she identified and analysed her problems in teaching, ST-5 and ST-6 found it very clear and

enlightening for them while ST-7 thought that ST-3's research questions could be improved by further narrowing down the topic. I am very pleased that these teachers were learning not only from the researchers but from their fellow teachers. I was eager to join in their discussions (UR-8, reflection, April 20th, 2010).

Another issue came up during this stage was that URs found that teachers, for one reason or another, do not have the habit of reading current theories and related literature on language teaching. Therefore, URs encouraged STs to read research articles related to their specific areas of research questions. To support STs who do not have access to academic journals, URs helped search and download the articles and sent the articles through emails to each sub-project team.

Meanwhile, in each sub-group, URs put in a lot of time and efforts to pay school visits, helping teachers revise their data collection instruments (such as questionnaires, interview schedules), and analyze the data collected. Thus, they changed their roles from instructors to facilitators, supporters, as well as resource providers for teacher research.

Observer, listener and learner during the implementation stage

URs further reduced their intervention into teachers' research as the project moved to the stage of implementation of AR plans. URs took on the roles of an observer, listener, and learner at this stage.

URs observed teachers' actions, listened to teachers' explanations and exchanged ideas with them as equal partners. They began to see themselves not as an expert or a judge to tell STs what is right or not right to do but began to change their views about the teachers and about themselves.

I remembered from an American TV drama a well-cited statement: "Don't be judgmental." I did not really understand it when I first heard about it. ... Now I slowly came to realize that this reflects a kind of a world's view. I am not someone who is up there to tell others what to do and consider myself as an expert who can exert great influence on others. Whether it is in work or in life, we all need to learn to be a

good listener. To be a good listener is the beginning of a true dialogue. Only by doing so, can we offer help to others as well as to ourselves. (UR-8 reflections, April 26th, 2010)

At this point, URs began to regard collaboration with STs as an opportunity to learn, and to deepen their understanding of teaching and learning. They further understood the difficulties teachers came across in balancing lack of time and heavy workload with their research and became increasingly more impressed by STs' penetrating insights into teaching, deep love for education and ardent care for students' growth.

The rigid time structure and heavy workload placed teachers under almost unbearable pressure. I understand more why they seemed to lack commitment to the research project. They really cannot manage it in their available time as they virtually have little time available for themselves. I no longer complain about them any more but try to do what I can to help them. (UR-5, Interview, July. 17th, 2010)

I have a much deeper, and much, much deeper understanding of the nature and reality of STs' work and life. These teachers have deep thinking about teaching and learning. We are in no position to make them think the way we think. We need to respect them and help them with what they can do. (UR-1, Interview, Nov. 27th, 2010)

After hearing the teachers' sharing and reflections at one of the project meetings, UR-5 reflected:

I was moved by ST-8's persistence in exploring into the unknown world of his own teaching, by ST-24's efforts for learning new things, and also by ST-14's honesty in critically reflecting on his deeply held assumptions. I now understand why ST-8 was nervous when he was giving out the questionnaire to his students. I agree that to do AR, we all need the courage to face our weaknesses. I think we, as researchers, should have the courage to stand in these STs' shoes and help them explore the truth of teaching. (UR-5, reflection, April 26th, 2010)

URs changed their perceptions of teachers from knowledge consumers to thoughtful thinkers. They realized that teachers had their own contextualized knowledge and they needed the opportunity and proper ways to make explicit such knowledge to better understand themselves and their teaching contexts.

Through contacts with STs, URs were gradually convinced that teachers were capable in conducting research with their own efforts, persistence and proper facilitation from URs. The conception that teachers were not suitable for undertaking research was a prejudice against teachers.

Pusher for progress and affective carer at the stage of data analysis and evaluation of results

Towards the end of the collaborative project, when STs moved to data analysis and evaluation of their action plans, some of them experienced time pressure and difficulties in data analysis. As a result, they found it hard to keep up with the pace of the project. In order for STs to keep up with the project, a new role that URs had to take on was to ensure that all STs followed the steps in the project. Thus, URs functioned as “pushers” for progress.

Teachers are busy people. Besides teaching, they also have many other responsibilities at school. As AR required extra time and effort especially for data analysis, teachers needed to struggle hard so as to manage time with their busy schedule. Thus, they need to be “pushed” or reminded of the research tasks to be done at this stage.

However, as STs who were over-loaded with school teaching and family responsibilities, this journey of AR seemed to be a strenuous one. Therefore, on the one hand, URs reminded STs of the research plans that they should follow in order to collect and analyse the data for further research; on the other hand, URs took up a humanistic role, offering STs with both mental support and affective care as friends and listeners. In other words, URs did not simply “push” STs without considering the specific situation they were in. In fact, they provided necessary help and support for data analysis if there was a need identified. The various sub-research projects were progressed and monitored based on the constant negotiation between URs and STs.

The following come from URs' reflections, which indicate URs' better understanding of STs and their working conditions and how URs thought they should help:

Teachers are facing the burdens that you and I can hardly imagine, and they are in great need of being encouraged otherwise their fragile motives in research will fade away. Be a friend with them and share your thoughts and understanding together. Provide the chances for them to be heard, to talk about their concerns and strategies are things we need to do. (UR-4, interview, Nov. 14th, 2010)

Teachers are very busy people. They have to sacrifice their spare time to manage the extra work that AR projects have brought to them. The teacher in my group told me that she was struggling to cope with the time pressure. I felt that I should encourage her more and be supportive. So from time to time, I sent text messages to offer help and also to show my support and understanding. (UR-8, interview, Nov.16th, 2010)

URs' care and understanding moved STs and they began to make every effort possible to overcome difficulties and tried to continue carrying on their research projects.

Editor and co-writer of the research report towards the end of the project

As the AR projects moved towards the final stage, all STs were encouraged to write up their research reports. Due to lack of experiences of academic writing, STs found it hard to write such papers. As some of the STs expressed their needs in their reflections below:

ST-1: I hope researchers can give more directions on how to write papers.

ST-2: I hope we are given more guidance on paper writing and on how to publish articles.

For this reason, URs organized project workshops for STs to study

published AR reports written by teachers and provided STs with a report framework. At this stage, URs functioned as editors and co-authors who offered help and guidance for STs to write, check, and polish their research papers. In each sub-research group, URs and STs worked together closely improving the structure of the report and clarifying ways of expressions. After several rounds of re-writing, they eventually produced 17 pieces of action research reports.

The gradual adjustments of URs' roles indicated that as URs left the "ivory tower", they had the chance to develop a better understanding of the true agendas of the teachers, their professional contexts, and their ways of pedagogic thinking. Such understanding is valuable in bridging the gap between the academic discourse of research and the teachers' discourse of teaching.

The role adjustment of URs is also a process in which researchers tried to empower STs. URs withdrew their interventions step by step and created opportunities for teachers to pose problems, conduct investigations, seek solutions, construct theories and pursue publications.

URs' learning and changes from the collaborative project

URs repositioned themselves in the process of collaborating with STs, in which their understanding of STs and AR was renewed and enriched. The following section discusses URs' changes in the process of the project based on their reflective journals and interview data.

Deepened understanding of STs and their teaching contexts

URs and STs are inhabited in different castles (Somekh, 1994), and the long-separation has led to gaps between them. As a result, they know very little about each other with sometimes misunderstandings. During the collaboration with STs, URs experienced a process of adjusting their understanding of STs and the work they do.

Understanding teachers' professional world

As URs walked into these teachers' professional worlds, they learned much about the working conditions of STs, realized the multiple roles teachers had to perform, and the various responsibilities they had to take

up. In the following, URs recorded their understanding of STs' life in their reflections.

I can feel the tension and pressure he bears as a novice teacher. He tried to balance the work from school and the requirement of the project. I can see that his mind and will are with us but his time and energy have to go with the school and students. ...I hope I can do something to help relieve his heavy pressure. (R1, reflection, March. 16th, 2010)

Getting close to STs' life enabled URs to realize the differences in the two living worlds and the difficulties STs encounter in conducting research. Many teachers were trying hard to seek balance between the heavy workload at school and their involvement in AR. Based on this understanding, URs changed their perceptions of teachers as trainees of the project to social beings bearing multitude roles and responsibilities, who needed to be treated in a more humanistic way.

Getting to know the inner landscape of STs

By walking into teachers' professional worlds, URs also walked into the teachers' inner minds and are able to identify with the teachers.

This teacher used the metaphor to describe her feelings about being a teacher. She said that teachers were the loom in her thoughts after reading the book 'The Courage to Teach'. For her, the ideal class was something like to weave a net so that you join the knowledge of the students and herself together, in which she held open, hearty and equal discussions with her students and provided her students the chance to develop a new world belonging to themselves. I thought we had the same dream in education (UR-2, interview, Nov. 15th, 2010)

My eyes became dim while reading the words in one of my collaborating teachers' critical reflections: "I used to put my whole self into teaching. ... However, in recent years, I got lost. I complained more about the low academic performance of my students, struggled with the high pressure in job promotions and the unfairness in the educational system". This indeed was my first time to get close to these teachers'

real thoughts and now I understand the struggle he had for the separation of his heart and body. (UR-7, reflection, June 1st, 2010)

Both UR2 and UR7 were moved by the teachers' deep affection for their students and their hopes for education. URs discovered that STs' inner landscape was colorful and rich, filled with the strong desire to reach out for the students. However, social reality compelled these teachers to go against their will and rendered their teaching lifeless, painful and confused. Facing these controversies, STs needed someone who could listen to them and encourage as well as support them to fight against the complexities.

URs' renewed understanding of AR

As action research is considered as a systematic enquiry conducted in scientific ways (Stenhouse, 1979), it requires adopting rigorous research methods to collect and analyze data. Therefore, at the beginning of the project, much emphasis was given to equipping STs with research methods including both qualitative and quantitative through lectures and workshops led by URs.

However, the workshops and trainings seemed to have had some negative effects on teachers, for such training became quite daunting and intimidating for STs who had little knowledge about those technical terms and procedures. As a result, STs became very much concerned about how to collect and analyse data before they even identified a problem and had a chance to reflect on these problems. One UR wrote in his reflection below:

According to my observation, the emphasis on research technique training estranges teachers from the deep thinking of their teaching concerns. Teachers are supposed to experience the process of examining their practice and their mind through taking action research rather than the fear and awe academic research methods bring to them. Action research is just a means to achieve professional development of STs and we seemed to confuse means and aim at the beginning of the project. (UR4, reflection, Dec.29th, 2009)

Besides UR4, several other researchers also discovered that too much emphasis on the scientific rigor of AR was not sensible. URs' understanding of AR was developed during the process of collaborating with STs. Although most of URs had read literature on AR, few of them had ever conducted it in their own teaching practice before, nor had they the experience of collaborating with STs in AR. Therefore, URs' understanding of AR was only based on their previous readings prior to the project. Several researchers claimed their initial understanding of AR in the pre-project questionnaire in the following way:

Action research is a process in which teachers conduct inquiries into their teaching so as to improve their teaching effectiveness. Teachers need to learn how to find out and solve the problems from the perspective of rigorous and systemic research rather than in a loose way. (R2, response to the pre-project questionnaire, Nov. 10th, 2009)

This understanding of AR adopted a scientific research approach, which emphasized the positivist tradition of research. However, URs experienced the complexity between solving problems and conducting research by being involved in supporting STs to do AR in their practical teaching contexts.

I used to emphasize the scientific rigor in research, believing that only scientific and systematic procedures lead to reliable research findings. Then, what was the difference between action research and the other forms of academic study? The focus of action research is 'action' or 'research'? If the answer is research, does that mean that it requires a scientific approach in it? If the answer is action, does that mean that we only need to focus on the improvement in teaching practice? (R6, reflection, Dec. 29th, 2009)

UR6's concerns reflected her puzzle about the inconsistency that existed between the reality and her previous perception of AR. She used to attach importance to the scientific rigor of research, but the experience of collaborating with STs made her doubt her prior view and sought to discover answers to the question: Is AR aimed at improving

practice using scientific ways or promoting teachers practice and the understanding of practice. The challenge was how URs could make AR workable for STs.

Similar to UR6, a few other URs also bore similar concerns about how AR should be conducted.

Two words intertwine in my heart: technique and mind. However, as I know STs better, I realize AR is not aimed at equipping teachers with techniques and skills in conducting research, but providing a research attitude toward their own practice. (R9, reflection, Dec. 29th, 2010)

R9 realized that AR was not only a scientific inquiry but also professional commitment for teachers to achieve sustainable growth by scrutinizing their own practice and mind (Wang, Zhang & Lin, 2010). By collaborating with STs, researchers' understanding of AR was deepened. Only when STs made explicit their beliefs behind their teaching behaviours, can they develop their autonomy to pursue improved practice and sustained professional development. Just as what McNiff (2002) advocates, AR should move beyond the surface structure of method, and look at the deep underlying structure of our values and intentions in living our lives.

Almost all URs reflected that they developed a much better understanding of AR at the end of the project by collaborating with STs in conducting AR.

Before this project, action research meant merely a research method and I would refer to books to get to know the basic theories and procedures of this method. However, by conducting this collaborative action research with STs, I understood more about it: it was a path heading to teachers' professional growth? It meant the strategies for seeking development in school and innovation in education? It stood for a way to achieve social improvement? Or it led to political emancipation? I believed that, action research was the combination of all of the above. (UR3, reflection, Oct. 26th, 2010)

As we can see, before the project, AR, for UR3, was only an academic term in books, far away from the reality. However, by conducting AR with STs, UR3 acquired multi-faceted understanding of it based on her own experiences. She not only noticed the practical effects of AR as a way to improve practice or achieve school development but also uncovered the significance of AR as a way to achieve social improvement and political liberation. Thus, URs' understanding of AR went beyond the simple technical aspect to a tool for shaping professional autonomy and seeking emancipation.

URs' professional learning from the collaborative project

As URs leave the "ivory tower" and get into the "field", they developed themselves on many fronts from developed strategies for supporting STs, to better interpersonal skills, research skills, and new identification with STs with deep touch in their souls.

Developed strategies for supporting STs in problem identification

Identifying research questions was the starting point for STs to undertake AR. Most people would think that this should not be a problem for STs as they encounter many problems every day in their classroom teaching. However, it was found that URs underestimated the difficulties teachers had in identifying research questions, which lie in the fact that it is hard for STs to pin down specific researchable questions from among so many problems they encounter. They posed their initial research questions as very general ones such as how to raise students' interest in learning English, how to make grammar lessons more effective and how to promote the efficiency of after-class reading. Then they immediately jump to solutions rather than thinking about why these problems existed. Therefore, URs had to strategically guide teachers to explore those deep-rooted assumptions and the basis of their judgment. Some clarifying questions were used, such as 'why does this problem exist?' 'Why does it concern you?' 'What do you expect by conducting research on this issue?' 'Can you explain why it is a problem for you?'. These questions helped STs to comb their thoughts and gradually narrow down their research questions. STs were also encouraged to video-tape their lessons for analysis in order to identify

problems and exploit the beliefs or assumptions behind their teaching behaviours. By doing so, STs were able to identify and describe their research questions. At the same time, URs developed effective strategies to better support STs in identifying the research questions.

Improved in research abilities

URs developed both their research ability and reflection ability in the collaboration with STs. As most of these URs were academic staffs from a university, conducting educational research was their routine work. However, lecturing in the university separated them from the daily work of the teachers, which has resulted in the gap between educational theories and practice. The collaborative AR provided these researchers a precious chance to be involved in the teaching contexts that most teachers worked in to understand what is happening in those contexts and how they would make sense of the contexts and help to solve the problems arise from the contexts.

Only when we are in schools with teachers, can we experience the professional lives and working conditions of STs - the colorfulness as well as complexities of school education. I am more aware of the internal logistics, organizing structures, and functions of school education. (UR9, reflection, April. 20th, 2010)

Similar to UR9, several other URs also claimed the importance of gaining first-hand information of basic education and found it a good way to broaden their educational research visions. Getting into classrooms and sharing with teachers helped to bridge the gap between knowledge production and knowledge consuming. What is also important is that they helped inject the living elements into researchers' research agendas and initiatives.

In addition, several URs recalled their own learning of research techniques through the project. In order to provide necessary support for teachers to conduct AR, URs usually needed to make abundant preparations first. Just as what R8 commented in his reflection:

Before doing the workshop on how to design a questionnaire and how to analyze data using SPSS, I had to read several research method books. By reading these books, I learnt much more about the specific techniques for analyzing data.

The workshops for teachers provided a chance for me to improve myself. (UR8, reflection, Dec, 29th. 2009)

Improved reflective ability was found among many other researchers by an analysis of their reflection. The themes of their reflections stepped out of the superficial level of describing the relationship of participants in collaboration, to discovering the influencing factors of collaboration and AR, and at last to pondering over the nature and significance of collaborative AR as well as the social and political function of collaborative AR.

Deep movement in the soul

The collaboration with STs not only brought changes to URs' improvement in their research and reflective abilities, but also resulted in deep movement in their souls. Researchers experienced the process of facing themselves, discovering themselves and pursuing self integrity.

It is always hard to subject oneself for scrutinizing. It is even harder for URs, being socially acknowledged as experts, to exploit the inner terrain of themselves. However, inspired by STs, several URs began to explore and de-construct their inner selves.

I was moved by STs' sharing after reading the book "The Courage to Teach". Although with rich experiences in teaching, these STs experienced "horror" in their work. But they were brave enough to face the horrors today and tried to transcend these horrors. It was their intrinsic professional spirit that encourages them to explore themselves. As a teacher educator, I also met with difficulties and horrors in my professional life, but I have always tried to hide them. Such cowardness and timidity could only cover the problems rather than solving them. I know now that I need to face myself, explore myself, and seek for self development. (UR-3, reflection, March. 16th, 2010)

UR-3 used to cover herself under the clothes of 'expert' and dared not reveal the flaws in herself. However, inspired by STs who exposed themselves while pursuing professionalism, she obtained the courage to examine herself. Just like what Palmer has ever claimed that the more

familiar we are with our inner terrain, the more surefooted our teaching and living becomes (Palmer, 1998).

The collaboration with STs not only stimulated URs to open their heart for scrutiny, but also aroused their inner belief and philosophy so as to urge them to strive for their ideal.

I used to doubt about whether some of those educational dreams could be realized in real life: life is education and curriculum comes from life. Although I ever believed in those lofty ideals, I gradually doubted their feasibility and believed that they just belonged to “the ivory tower”. However, the words in STs’ reflections told me that these dreams could be achieved in real situations. I could see that this teacher was struggling in integrating himself, his students, his teaching and his life as a whole through open-heart communication with his students. I was moved just because these words touched my heart and I know that I needed to persist in my conviction and be firm to hold on my dreams. (UR-3, reflection, June. 1st, 2010)

UR-3 regained her inner beliefs in education and life. She developed her identity as educators, as an advocator and executor of educational ideals. However, succumbing to the pressure in reality, some researchers stepped back on their previous beliefs. It was these STs who aroused researchers’ inner selves. Researchers regained their desire to seek for the connection between the body and soul (Palmer, 1998).

By exploring the inner mind of two parties, researchers discovered that both teachers and researchers in the collaboration shared the same educational belief, which were the fundamentals for true connections between them. Just like what R7 discovered in her reading of teachers’ reflection:

The voice that ‘education is life’ not only exists in the ‘ivory tower’, but also among teachers working in primary and secondary schools. Teachers prefer to use their mind to communicate with their students and facilitate their development. And this has been what we teacher educators are pursuing for. We are in the same boat. (UR-7, reflection, June. 1st, 2010)

URs and STs shared the same educational beliefs, which integrate them together. This collaboration relieved the isolation participants felt and also provided the power of pursuing for the mutual ideals.

Conclusion

This university-school collaborative AR project has provided a precious opportunity for the two long-separated parties of URs and STs to get connected. Firstly, as URs adjusted and added their roles along with the project, the relationship between URs and STs turned from trainer-trainees to cooperation and ultimately collaboration. URs were no longer the superior “legislators” (Lu & Cao, 2003), while STs also got ride of the traditional role of “executors” or “data providers” (Wagner, 1997). URs and STs became co-decision-makers and practitioners, who seek professional growth through AR. Equity was gradually achieved and mutual interests were met in this process.

Secondly, with this collaborative project, URs not only supported and helped STs to improve their practice by conducting AR, but also gained a great deal of professional learning. They developed a more holistic view about school teachers and their teaching contexts. At the same time, URs developed their inter-personal skills, communication skills, research skills, and writing skills along with the project.

Thirdly, a collaborative learning community was established progressively as a result of this project. With their common educational ideals, URs and STs built up a true link between the two parties. For a long time, due to heavy work-load and other pressures, neither parties had the chance and energy to explore their own inner worlds and reflect on the assumptions and beliefs they held before. However, the equal and sincere relationship established in the collaboration enabled both parties to examine their inner landscape, and explore their tacit beliefs and ideals about life and education. Through the channel of communication created by the collaborative project, each party found in the other the deeply held affections for education, for students, and for their desire to improve education.

Several implications can be drawn from the current study for URs, STs and educational administrators. First, the findings suggests that URs

should be encouraged to initiate such kind of collaborations with schools, so that researchers can keep close contact with schools and offer necessary support. They need to adjust their roles to meet the needs of the teachers and take the opportunity to learn from teachers and their practices. Meanwhile, URs need to control the degree of intervention into teachers' research, for teachers' independence in conducting research should be attached with great importance. Finally, the collaboration with teachers should not be reduced to the technical level. A true collaboration can contribute a great deal to the professional growth of both parties.

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Appendix I Pre-project questionnaire for university researchers

Dear Members,

Thank you for your cooperation in completing this questionnaire, which aims at gaining your understanding of the current collaborative action research project before you step in. Please read all the items below carefully and respond based on your own views. We will treat your personal information with complete confidence.

Thank you again for the time you to spend in giving each issue your thoughts and attention!

1. By what means do you come to know action research?
A: Participating in research project
B: Reading
C: Lecturing
D: Others _____
2. What do you think is the significance of conducting action research?
3. Why do you choose to take part in this project? What are you expectations?
4. What is the significance of conducting collaborative action research among university researchers and teachers from basic education?
5. What role do you expect to play in this collaborative action research with STs?
6. What are the influencing factors for the collaboration between university researchers and STs?

Appendix II Mid-term questionnaire for university researchers

Dear Members,

Thank you for your cooperation in completing this questionnaire, which aims at finding out how you have collaborated with STs in this collaborative action research project so far. Please read all the items below carefully and respond based on your own views. We will treat your personal information in complete confidence.

Thank you again for the time you and for giving each issue your thoughts and attention!

1. By what means have you been communicating with STs in this collaborative action research?

A: School visits

B: Classroom observation

C: Participating in project activities

D: E-mails

E: Phones and text messages

F: Others _____

2. Among the above means, which is the most effective? And why?

3. What roles have you played working together with STs?

4. In the process of conducting collaborative action research, have you perceived any changes in your attitudes, understanding, abilities, etc.?

5. What are the challenges you have met in this collaboration? What are the possible reasons?

6. What are your plans for the next stage of this collaborative research? Do you have any suggestions for other members of the project?

Appendix III Interview Outline

1. Please describe how you have worked with STs in your group? Is it a smooth and nice collaboration?

2. What roles do you think you have played in working with STs?

3. Have you been influenced by the collaboration with STs?

4. Please make comments on your collaboration with STs.

5. What do you think are the factors for an effective collaboration with STs?