

Doing Community Action Research on Parent Participation with Private Schools: A Case Study on Researcher's Ethical Dilemmas

Hee Yeon Kim
Sejong University, Korea

Abstract

This paper is a case study on the ethical dilemmas of community action research, focusing on the contextual reflections of a group of professional researchers who were working on parental involvement at private schools. Researchers' lived experiences of ethical dilemmas, in doing community action research, are approached based on 'hermeneutic phenomenology' by van Manen (1997). These dilemmas are identified in relation to researcher halo effect, the degree of responsibility in action, a school's investment effectiveness, and the gap between academic ethics and practical ethics. Scientific and educational importance is discussed in terms of the understanding of community action research and the nurturing required for researchers and practitioners to improve educational practices through community action research.

[Key Words] Action Research, Ethical Dilemma, Early Childhood Education

PURPOSE

Action research as an educational inquiry has been widely accepted and expanded upon for the past 20 years. Concerns have mainly been for teachers to transform their

Correspondence and requests for reprints should be sent to Hee Yeon Kim, Department of Early Childhood Education, The Graduate School of Sejong University, 98 Gunja-Dong, Gwangjin-Gu, Seoul 143-747, Korea
E-mail:hykim@sejong.ac.kr

roles as professional practitioners, curriculum developers, and school reformers. Unfolding ethical and political configurations of positivistic science, a participatory world view on which action research stands have been set, has led practitioners to a new epistemology about meaningful knowledge. It seeks the integration of mind and body, thinking and behaviors, and theory and practice (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Educational professionals instantly noted this epistemology for educational reform in a 'real world' and shifted the power of knowledge construction from academia to the school 'ground'.

In this regard, teachers were no more the transmitters of academic knowledge, but the active builders of grounded-theory for better practice.

The 'research as praxis'(Lather, 1986), however, is not just for practitioners but for researchers as well. As Senge and Scharmer (2001) noted, "action research ultimately has to be community action research in which learning occurs through a community of practitioners, consultants and researchers". Educational activity aims to bring about beneficial change and is therefore inevitably value-driven. Educational researchers can no longer stay in the academia world of a value-free island. Recently, they are relating themselves to the real world as educational action researchers. 'Co-operation'becomes not only a key principle but an essential value. Community action research fosters one approach to such co-operation, based on an underlying theory of learning communities that integrate research, capacity building and practice and on a shared understanding of why such integration is both important and difficult.

In this context we, as academic researchers, conducted a community action research about parent participation at private preschools (Kim, Chung & Oh, 2005), in order to improve educational practices and search for developing a learning community in early education settings in Korea. By participating in planning, parent conferences, reflective meetings, and through data recording, as professional researchers, we were confronted by various ethical dilemmas that could be anticipated beforehand or which could hardly ever be expected. Most of those dilemmas were mainly related to the context of private-funded early education settings. Another dilemma was related to the research topic, which dealt with parents, generally recognized as consumers of education. Another source of those dilemmas was the researchers, who are outsiders, that is, us. Such lived experience of the dilemmas not only revealed the difficulties of transformation but also created a context for bringing forth important new theories closely connected to the deepest challenges of change.

Whereas such 'afterwards' experiences would earlier have been seen as purely 'private'ones or at most as a threat to data, constructionist paradigms (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997) have pointed to the challenges of multiple realities and rather welcome the author's