Encounters in the Third Space: Constructing the Researcher's Role in Collaborative Action Research

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Abstract
Action research is a methodology that has been increasing in educational studies in recent years. Previous studies have revealed that action research affects practitioners more than traditional methods, since the practitioners are not only participants but also researchers themselves. One branch of action research is collaborative action research (CAR), whereby practitioners and the researcher collaborate through the action research process. This study builds on material from collaborative action research in one Icelandic preschool that lasted over 24 months. The focus of this article is on the role of the researcher in the action research project and how it was constructed through the process. The research material consists of the researcher's self-narratives, practitioners' diaries, interviews, and recordings from meetings. The findings show that the researcher's role was constructed in a so-called third space where the researcher and practitioners collaborated. The researcher went through an emotional landscape while constructing her role and her position was something in between an insider and an outsider. Finally she faced different kinds of tension concerning her role as a researcher in the collaborative action research. The study contributes to the limited number of studies on the researcher's role in CAR and how it is constructed during the process.

Keywords: Researcher's role, Collaborative action research, Third space, Preschool teachers

Introduction

This article focuses on the researcher's role in collaborative action research (CAR). The study is part of a larger Nordic research project (Johansson, Puroila, and Emilson 2016) where action research was conducted in five Nordic countries, based on collaboration between researchers from universities and practitioners in preschools. The aim of the study is to deepen understanding about how the researcher's role was constructed during the CAR process. In the field of education, there is a growing interest in employing CAR methodology, as there is evidence that it promotes practitioners' professional development and their learning from their own perspectives about practice. Moreover, CAR involves the potential to contribute to transforming educational practices (Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon 2014; Koshy 2010; Mills 2007). Like all forms of action research, CAR not only benefits the practitioners' side but it

also offers researchers opportunities to gain insights into educational practices and to co-create new knowledge together with the practitioners (Bruce, Flynn, and Stagg-Peterson 2013; Koshy 2010).

The researcher's role in CAR differs from that in many other qualitative research designs as the researcher is challenged to build an equal relationship with the practitioners (Madsen 2013; Postholm and Skrövse, 2013; Sandberg and Wallo 2013). As Madsen (2013) remarks, this is not an easy task since the practitioners tend to treat the researchers as persons with more expertise than they themselves possess. However, the researcher's role in CAR has not been widely discussed in previous research literature. This study aims to fill in that gap. We employ the concept of the third space to conceptualize the construction of the researcher's role in collaboration with practitioners. Moje and colleagues (2004) state that the third space is created when 'what seems to be oppositional categories can actually work together to generate new knowledge' (42). In our study we attempted to create that kind of space to combine the researcher's and practitioners' expertise.

The study draws on research material from one preschool in Iceland. The first author of this article, Ingibjorg, was the researcher who worked with the practitioners in this preschool. The second author, Anna-Maija, came into the study later, for the analysis and writing processes. Nevertheless, she had conducted a similar action research project in Finnish preschools. Thus, the authors had an opportunity to share experiences, reflect on, and deepen understanding about the researcher's role in an action research project. The research question guiding this study is: *How is the researcher's role constructed in the third space, between the researcher and practitioners in collaborative action research?*

Collaborative Action Research: Creating a Third Space

In accordance with Bruce and colleagues (2013), we understand that the methodology of CAR aims to narrow the traditional gap between research and practice for the benefit of both parties. This means that experts from the outside, for instance, university professors and their graduate students, assist practitioners with each phase of the research (Bruce, Flynn, and Stagg-Peterson 2013; Kosky 2010). Researchers in the field of early childhood education have employed various terms to describe methodologies similar to what is designated as CAR in this article. Formosinho and Formosinho (2012), Araújo (2012) and Pascal and Bertram (2012), for example, used the terms *praxeology* and *praxeological research*. In praxeological research, the emphasis is placed on the integration of three levels: 'the work (practice), the worker (self) and the workplace (context power relations)' (Formosinho and Formosinho 2012, 600). These researchers understand the integration of the three levels as crucial if the research intends to change practice (Formosinho and Formosinho 2012). Similarly, Sandberg and Wallo (2012) employed the term *interactive research* to designate what is both a new form of collaborative research and a continuation and elaboration of the action research approach. Interactive research is concerned not so much with the solving of practical problems, but rather with the creation of opportunities for researchers and practitioners to engage in joint learning processes (see Figure 1).

In this study, CAR is regarded as one potential answer to Curry's (2012) criticism of educational research, where the benefits are often one-way, namely only for the researchers and academic community and not for the practitioners and their community. The aim of CAR is that it will lead to a mutually beneficial relationship even though there are some challenges to overcome along the way. Arhar and colleagues (2013) discuss the importance of establishing a third space, which demands building bridges between researchers' and practitioners' worlds. They argue that when practitioners and researchers have successful partnerships, they manage

to create a third space between their expertise. The teachers in Bruce's, Flynn's and Stagg-Peterson's (2013) study reported that they appreciated the interest the researchers' showed in their work and their support in problematizing and looking at educational practices from a critical viewpoint. Similarly, the university researchers experienced that they were able to gain deeper and more detailed insight into teachers' daily lives and their professional practice.

The Researcher's Role in Collaborative Action Research

In this study, we will explore the researcher's role in CAR. Even though there is evidence of the strengths of CAR, some recent studies address challenges that a researcher might meet when engaging in collaboration with practitioners. For instance, Postholm and Skrövset (2013) and Sandberg and Wallo (2013) note that the researcher is expected to be confident, honest, and possess a high degree of self-respect. In addition, they argue that the researcher needs to have good communicative skills to gain trust in the setting. The crucial point seems to be that the researcher cannot have complete control over the research process, and therefore, should remain patient, open, creative, and responsive. The researcher is challenged to allow the research to be process driven, while also being prepared for unexpected events. Some studies call for acknowledging the emotional challenges the researchers might face in collaborating with different practitioners (e.g., Carroll 2015; Dickson-Swift et al. 2007; Visser 2017). Furthermore, Gillberg's (2011) study draws attention to both individual and collective needs of the practitioners' community; she found it important to balance the collective and individual needs at all stages of the study.

Sandberg and Wallo (2013) employ Ellström's (2007) *model of knowledge creation through interactive research* to visualize the landscape of practitioners' and researchers' collaboration (Figure 1). The model represents the relationship between practitioners and researchers as an interaction of two activity systems, a research system and a practice system. The research system is 'driven by the researcher's problem formulations, theories, data collection and analysis' (198). The practice system, by contrast, is 'driven by the need to find knowledge and methods for solving problems in the organization' (198). Traditionally, these two social contexts are regarded as separated. However, in this study we understand them as two joint learning cycles that together create a changing process, the aim of which is to provide tools for the practitioners to make changes themselves (Ellström 2007; Sandberg and Wallo 2017). Moreover, the changing process that is created by these two cycles, is similar to what Arhar et al. (2013) call the 'third space', a common space in the intersection between the two systems, where there are bridges built between researchers and practitioners. This kind of collaboration can release traditional power relations that often are recognized in educational research, between the practice and research (Bruce et al. 2013; Formosinho and Formosinho 2012). However, Sandberg and Wallo (2013) state that 'the researcher should not involve himself or herself in the goal-oriented actions of the practice system' (200). They argue that it is necessary for the researcher to maintain a some distance from the practice and the balance between objectivity and subjectivity. As Puroila and Johansson (2018) note, looking at the phenomenon under study both from near and far involves potential to promote the generation of knowledge.
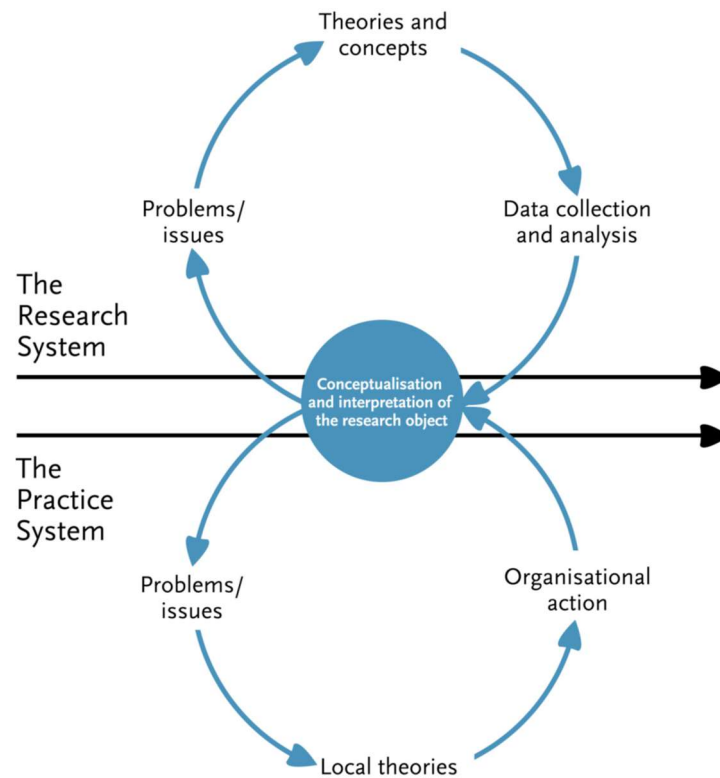
Figure 1. Ellström's model of knowledge creation through interactive research (Ellström, 2007, p. 5).

Platteel and colleagues (2010) provide concrete examples of how collaboration operates in the third space. They argue that it is important to develop trust, free and open communication, and dialogue between researcher and practitioners. Practitioners and researchers in their study contributed to the third space 'by staying open, taking each other's opinions seriously and learning how to be critical without passing judgment' (445). Also Arhar et al. (2013) determined that it is crucial for both practitioners and researchers to be willing to go beyond their traditional roles and engage in new activities. In their study, 'succeeded partnership were those in which partnership persisted, ultimately creating relationship that bridged university and school' (225). These research findings provide a fertile ground to explore the researcher's role in our study.

The Study

The Context of the Study

Research materials for this study were gathered over a period of 24 months. In the beginning of the Nordic project, the researcher, Ingibjorg, was offered an opportunity to participate as a member of the Icelandic research team. Ingibjorg was a beginning researcher with limited experience in educational research or in CAR but she had a previous experience as a preschool teacher. Two Icelandic preschools participated in this project, chosen because of their high rate of qualified preschool teachers, staff stability, and most importantly, their interest in contributing to the project. Ingibjorg was responsible for the collaboration with practitioners in one of the preschools, Hill Park. The preschool was one of the oldest preschools in Reykjavík, the capital of Iceland. At Hill Park 51 children, ranging in age from two to six, were divided

into three units. There were seven practitioners from two units at Hill Park who participated in the project. All of them were educated as preschool teachers.

Ethical Issues

The study was reported to The Data Protection Authority of Iceland and the City of Reykjavík preschool authorities provided permission for the research. All participants signed informed consent forms, where they acknowledged that they knew what was involved in participating and that they had the right to opt out at any time during the process. The confidentiality and anonymity of the participants was also emphasized (EECERA 2015). Parents and other staff members at the preschool were informed about the study.

Since CAR is based on the relationship between practitioners and researchers, the traditional ethical guidelines, although important, are not sufficient (see Hyry-Beihammer, Estola, and Syrjälä 2013). Ethics in CAR require high moral awareness throughout the entire process, given the highly personal nature of such studies (Zeni 2009). In our study ethical criteria introduced by Locke, Alcorn and O´Neill (2013) are of relevance because they address researchers' role and the relationships with the practitioners. When being in the field, Ingibjorg was aware of and attempted to act in accordance with the following principles:

- *Principle of plain speaking:* the researcher should use language that maximizes the practitioners' understanding.
- *Principle of right action:* the researcher and the practitioners should evaluate whether the aim of the study and the understanding it will bring is morally right.
- *Principle of critical self-reflexivity:* the researcher and the practitioners should attempt to become conscious about their taken for granted assumptions.
- *The affective principle:* researcher's and practitioners' feelings and emotions are respected and they count as information in the research.

Moreover, we have regarded ethical sensitivity, respect of the practitioners and self-reflectivity as guiding principles during the analysis and writing phases.

The Research Material

In order to gain insights into the researcher's role in the third space, we used research material that was generated both by practitioners and the researcher. Firstly, the main part of the research material in this article is Ingibjorg's *self-narratives*, consisting of a total of 217 pages. On the one hand, the self-narratives are handwritten notes that the researcher wrote during some of her visits to Hill Park (164 pages), and on the other hand, they are narratives that she wrote on her computer after her visits (53 pages). Kennedy-Lewis (2012) defines that a self-narrative is a text 'written by the researcher about the researcher's own experience in navigating the cultural dimensions of the research process' (109). Self-narratives can assist the researcher in reflecting on her/his role and making visible the decisions that were made during the research process. Finally, self-narratives can be utilized to explain and provide transparency of the research process for the academic and practitioners' communities. After each visit to Hill Park, Ingibjorg wrote in her self-narratives about the progress of the process as well as her thoughts and experiences concerning the communications and relationships with the practitioners. The self-narratives were, therefore, both personal reflections on her work and documentation of the learning or transformation that the practitioners experienced.

Secondly, the research material consists of *audio recordings* from focus group interviews, conducted at the end of the research process, where the practitioners reflected on the process they underwent. These recordings were transcribed by Ingibjorg, 89 pages in total.

Finally, the practitioners were asked to reflect on the research process in their *diaries* at the end of the project. Four practitioners handed in their handwritten reflections, 18 pages in total.

Analysis and Interpretation

The analysis process drew on the ideas of hermeneutic analysis, the aim of which is to interpret and understand the phenomenon under study (Siljander 2011). Gadamer (2004) maintains that we cannot understand another's viewpoints through getting inside the other, reliving his/her experiences, nor conveying information from one to another. For Gadamer (2004), understanding takes place in an ongoing dialogue with one another and oneself. Respectively, understanding meanings in the text is a dialectical process that takes place between the text and the interpreter's prior understanding.

As typical in hermeneutic analysis, there was constant movement between the research material, the researchers' previous understanding and the review of the previous literature in this study. Furthermore, the analysis involved looking closely at some details in the research material and then taking steps backward in order to get a holistic view on the research material. One part of the analysis and interpretation was the collaboration between the two researchers, Ingibjorg and Anna-Maija.

The analysis process consisted of three phases. The first phase occurred during the field work while Ingibjorg collaborated with the practitioners and wrote the self-narratives. At the same time, Ingibjorg familiarized herself with previous research literature on CAR and the researcher's role in action research because she was struggling between two different roles, being a teacher and being a researcher. Ellström's (2007) *model of knowledge creation through interactive research* (Figure 1) (Sandberg and Wallo, 2013) and the concept of the *third space* (Arhar et al. 2013; Moje et al. 2004) were especially helpful in coping with these challenges. In the second phase, Ingibjorg read and re-read through the research material with the aim of identifying aspects that were meaningful for her role in the collaboration. At this phase, Ingibjorg looked at the research material both in relation to her experiences from fieldwork and the research literature. In the third phase, the second author, Anna-Maija joined the analysis and interpretation process. The collaboration between the two researchers enabled combining both insider and outsider views on the research material and Ingibjorg's experiences. This allowed us to sharing our experiences and thus deepening understanding about Ingibjorg's role as a researcher.

Findings

The analysis process led us to identify three perspectives meaningful for the construction of the researcher's role in CAR. First, the third space emerged as a landscape filled with a variety of the researcher's emotions. Second, the researcher's role was something between an insider and an outsider. Finally, being a researcher in CAR involved challenges of coping with different tensions.

The Third Space as an Emotional Landscape

The research material, especially Ingibjorg's self-narratives, offered insights into a variety of emotions Ingibjorg experienced during the collaboration. In the beginning Ingibjorg seemed to be insecure about her role as a researcher and about the processes involved in the action research. This is no surprise for those who know the characteristics of action research and the challenges involved in the researcher's role. The researcher cannot have complete control over the research process, but needs to let the research be process driven and be prepared for unexpected events (Gordon 2008; Koshy 2010; Postholm and Skrövset 2013; Sandberg and Wallo, 2013). Ingibjorg realized that the creation of the researcher's role was not a straight road; it had its ups and downs. This was an emotional process where the ups represented positive emotions, for instance, Ingibjorg experienced herself as confident, the meetings were successful, and there was positive feedback from practitioners. The downs, however, represented negative emotions. For example, Ingibjorg's self-narratives show that she sometimes was insecure about her role, unsure if the action research was going well, and even anxious when trying out new things. In the following excerpt Ingibjorg is at one of her down-points in the process:

> …but I feel a bit worried about whether the research is beneficial enough. Are the practitioners getting enough out of this? Have they developed themselves? Are they ready to finish the research at the end of December? Has this maybe not benefitted anything and just failed? Have I done well enough to motivate and encourage their development????? I feel like everything is a bit floating and I feel a bit insecure. I do not know where I stand or where the research stands right now.

Nevertheless, as Ingibjorg realized at the beginning, it is usual to have setbacks and the only way to deal with them is to aim high again (Koshy 2010; McNiff 2010; 2013; Sandberg and Wallo 2013). She twisted quickly to positive thoughts and in the same narrative she continued and wrote:

> …but on the other hand, I fully believe that this will be fixed soon and I will gain confidence again after a few visits to Hill Park and meetings with the research team. Let's hope so, at least. I guess this is a regular autumn feeling…

The self-narratives show a process of how Ingibjorg's emotions toward her role as a researcher developed, through ups and downs. The research material reveals that the research process was also an emotional one for the practitioners. On the one hand, the practitioners seemed to be uncertain about their capacity to meet the expectations set by the research process. On the other hand, they expressed their joy when Ingibjorg came to the preschool. Some of the practitioners showed even attachment to Ingibjorg and treated her neither as an outsider nor a colleague but as a friend. At the end of the process, when looking back, Anna said:

> I think it was a crucial factor how well we [the practitioners] clicked together with you [Ingibjorg]. You really fitted into our setting. It was just natural that you were there.

Moreover, Helga wrote about her emotions in her diary at the end of the process, by using the metaphor of hiking. The hills represented challenges that Helga faced during the process and when she mention icy hills, the challenges were even harder. The guide she

mention, represented the researcher, Ingibjorg. The following excerpt shows how Ingibjorg's support made the challenges easier, followed by more positive emotions:

> Sometimes there were hills that were hard to climb but then it was good to have a guide. I would say that when it was ice on the hill, Ingibjorg showed us where to go to avoid the ice. So when we were nervous, our guide helped and calmed us down.

There is not much previous research on researchers' emotions in CAR even though researchers have discussed their role (Postholm and Skrövset 2013; Sandberg and Wallo 2013). However, some scholars have emphasized the importance of taking the researchers' emotions into account in qualitative research, especially when the data collection involves close relationships with the participants. They argue for the need to pay attention to researchers' emotions in planning and conducting research, and when reporting the research findings (Carroll 2015; Dickson-Swift et al. 2007; Visser 2017).

Being in Between the Research System and the Practice System as a Researcher in CAR

The researcher's role in this study was connected both to the research system and the practice system (Ellström 2007; Sandberg and Wallo 2013). This meant that when Ingibjorg was in the field, she felt herself neither as an insider nor as an outsider but rather as a little bit of both. Therefore, it was meaningful for her to get support and encouragement from both systems.

Firstly, positive feedback from the practitioners at Hill Park helped Ingibjorg to become more confident as a researcher. Research material shows how the practitioners experienced the researcher's role and what aspects of the role were meaningful for them. For example, the practitioners found it important that Ingibjörg guided and supported them in the research process, and this concurs with some previous studies (Bruce, Flynn, and Stagg-Peterson 2013). When reflecting on the process at the end, some practitioners mentioned that the research would not have been so successful if she had not guided them through the whole process and supporting them in their professional development. In her diary, Elin described how a short talk with Ingibjorg helped her to see how well she was doing in relation to values education, which was the focus in the action research:

> Once during a preparation time Ingibjorg came in and we talked for a while. I told her that I had not been connected to the action research project because I had been preparing for the parents' interviews. Ingibjorg then pointed out that the value of respect was involved in giving parents the opportunity to come to the parents' interview, and also to use good time to prepare the interviews well. I agreed with this. We also discussed the interview content, and Ingibjorg pointed out to me that she could see both the values of respect and care in the fact that I asked each child what they wanted me to tell their parents about the preschool. This talk with Ingibjorg opened my eyes a little bit, even though I thought I was not doing anything in relation to the values, that was not the case, I just did not realize what I was doing and how to relate it to the values.

The practitioners found it important that Ingibjorg was often available to them and very visible in the preschool. This made them more confident about the action research. Anna mentioned this in the final interview at the end of the project when she reflected on why she believed the project was successful:

> It was because you [Ingibjorg] were so visible in the setting and it was good to come to you for support. You were positive about the project yourself, and always ready to answer us. We were so confident, always, from the beginning, very confident that this would be a successful process.

Even though these examples of the practitioners' perspective on Ingibjorg's role were not fully visible to her until the end of the action research, she also received positive feedback during the process which helped her to construct and understand her role. This is obvious in the following excerpt from her self-narratives:

> At least they say that they are happy to have me and that they feel like I am one of them. I guess I am doing something right as a researcher.

Kennedy-Lewis (2012) defines her own role as a *former-teacher-as-researcher*, as does Ingibjorg in this study. This background involved both potentials and challenges in shaping the researcher's role. On the one hand, Ingibjorg's previous experience as a preschool teacher helped her to draw her attention to details of the practice that otherwise might have remained neglected. On the other hand, her background posed a dilemma when it was difficult for her to decide whether to participate as a former preschool teacher, or to observe silently. There is no one correct rule on how to respond to such situations.

In addition to the practice system, Ingibjorg sought support and encouragement to understand her role from the research system—from more experienced researchers, form colleagues in the research team, and from reading literature about CAR. As the following excerpt from her first narrative shows, she was convinced that she would get strong support from the Nordic research team and later she described how discussions within this group helped her to reflect on her role:

> I know I will get good support from these people…
>
> I started a discussion about our [her and researchers in other preschools] roles at the preschools, how much we should participate and so on. The conclusion from this discussion was that there were no certain or universal rules about the researcher's role in collaborative action research. Everyone needs to evaluate on their own how to behave as a researcher in research like this. The key is to be constantly thinking about your own role and how you act. The circumstances each time need to control this.

Reflecting on her experience by writing self-narratives, supported Ingibjorg in understanding and constructing her role as a researcher. These self-narratives were also aspects coming from the research system. One narrative, for example, showed that she was improving in her interview skills with the preschool teacher:

> When writing up the interviews now, I am experiencing how I, myself, have developed as a researcher, i.e., my interview technique is so much better. I am better at waiting and letting people explain, and I am better at asking for further explanations.

Tensions when Constructing the Researcher's Role

During the process of constructing the researcher's role in the third space in the CAR, we identified some tensions. The research material showed two different kinds of tensions that Ingibjorg faced and these affected how her role was constructed. On the one hand, there was a

tension about closeness and distance in her relationship with the practitioners. On the other hand, there was a tension about differences and similarities in the expertise of the two parties.

Closeness and Distance
In Ingibjorg's self-narratives, we saw how she reflected on her relationship with the practitioners. For example:

> Regarding me as a researcher, I am in a good relationship with everyone but I feel like I have not had equal communication with everyone. But people are different; some approach me more than others and everyone in their own way.

As this excerpt shows, Ingibjorg soon realized that each practitioner approached her differently. The practitioners saw her role differently and their need for support or encouragement from her varied. This seems to be one of the biggest challenges Ingibjorg faced concerning her role as a researcher during the process. She wrote several reflections on her relationship with the practitioners where she wondered how close to them she should be; what was relevant for her role. The following narrative shows how thin that line can be:

> The relationship with the practitioners is such a big part of this whole thing. I need to be close to them, but not too close, I think. Because, I do not want to be their best friend either; I am a researcher. They invited me to their Christmas party and I found that too much, but it would also be rude to say 'no'. Luckily, I had other plans that night and, therefore, I could say 'no' without feeling guilty.

Another narrative describes a struggle she had accepting a friend request on Facebook from one of the practitioners at the preschool:

> I got a friend request on Facebook from Sara. I am not sure what to do. I feel like if I accept her request, we are getting too close and our relationship is getting more personal and beyond the research. But, on the other hand, if I do not accept her friend request, I am sending her a certain message that tells her that I do not want to be too close and our relationship is limited and only professional. I believe this could have a negative impact and maybe limit my access to her feelings and thoughts about what we are doing.

After thinking for some days, Ingibjorg accepted the Facebook friend request from Sara, and there was never a problem related to their Facebook friendship and they remain connected through Facebook. Ingibjorg worried that other practitioners at Hill Park would follow Sara, and send her a friend request, and she was unsure if they would behave like Sara in a Facebook relationship. This never happened so she did not have to deal with that.

Difference and Similarity in Expertise
Ingibjorg emphasized building a good relationship with the practitioners at Hill Park as suggested by previous researchers (Platteel et al. 2010). During the first weeks of the process, she visited the preschool mainly to get to know the people and to make them feel it was normal to have her there. Therefore, she focused on sitting in the teacher's lounge where the teachers came for their free-time and this setting provided an opportunity to talk informally.

Ingibjorg often wrote in her self-narratives about how easy she found it to come into the preschool and work in collaboration with the practitioners. She felt welcome from the very beginning and never felt that her presence disturbed or bothered the practitioners. Rather, they seemed happy to have someone at the preschool to discuss their practice and profession. The practitioners also seemed not to feel any pressure from Ingibjorg, because she was frequently in the preschool during the process. The principal Anna said:

…and there was never any shyness, nor did anyone change their practice or say, 'Oh she is coming. I have to be careful how I act.' I never heard that, never.

We are aware that this is not always how practitioners understand the researchers' role in CAR (Madsen 2013). Also, Ingibjorg experienced some tensions about differences and similarities concerning her expertise and the practitioners' expertise. Ingibjorg's intention was to get close to the practitioners by focusing on the expertise she shared with them, namely, the profession of a preschool teacher. She wanted to avoid making a hierarchal relationship with the practitioners where she was higher than they were, based on the fact that she belonged to the research system, while the practitioners were part of the practice system (Ellström 2007; Sandberg and Wallo 2013). Ingibjorg's feeling was that the practitioners understood this relationship similar to how she understood it. She wrote about it after a meeting she had with the research team, where another researcher discussed problems she was experiencing in the preschool where she worked:

> …but this is not a problem in 'my' preschool. They [the practitioners] are not waiting for me to teach them something new. I think, no I feel, that they understand that we are in this together, that this is a collaboration between us.

Nevertheless, Ingibjorg worked in the research system and that seemed to make the practitioners expect her to have greater expertise concerning the research, as previous research has indicated (Madsen 2013). The practitioners were going through processes where they were challenged to develop professionally and create some new knowledge for their practice. Some signs indicated that they understood Ingibjorg's expertise as a researcher that could support them in this process. They saw her as different than those in the practice system. Ingibjorg wrote about this in one of her self-narratives:

> I feel a bit strange that Sara always calls me 'our doctor'. For example, she writes on the whiteboard in the teachers' lounge: *Dr. Ingibjorg is coming today.* And when introducing me to a new staff member the other day, she said, 'This is Ingibjorg, our doctor.' I know that Sara is referring to the fact that I am a doctoral student, but by doing this, she is putting me on another level. At least that is my feeling. Not sure how I feel about it. I think it is a bit inconsistent with them saying that they feel like I am one of them, a part of their group and so on.

There were also other indications that the practitioners considered Ingibjorg as someone who did not fully belong to their own community: For instance, Helga said that collaboration is always a good thing, both with colleagues and someone who comes from the outside. At the end of the project, when reflecting on the whole process, Sara wrote in her diary:

> The collaboration between the institutions [meaning the preschool and the university], and with our doctoral student [Ingibjorg] has been very successful and it has giving us a lot. Without this collaboration, we would be poorer, that much is certain.

As an outsider, Ingibjorg was able to support and encourage the practitioners toward their professional development. This required sensitivity towards the practitioners' needs, which they did not necessarily recognize or verbalize themselves. She explained this in a discussion with colleague and then wrote about it in her self-narrative:

> If I see they are having trouble with the diary, then I come in with some input, and support them to think in a certain way.

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Discussion

The focus of this article has been on the researcher's role in CAR and how it is constructed in the third space, through collaboration between the researcher and practitioners. There is a growing interest in applying this methodology in educational studies. Increasing interest in working collaboratively with practitioners challenges researchers to re-consider their role. The findings from this study contribute to the limited number of studies on the researcher's role in CAR and how it is constructed during the process. The limitation of the study is the fact that it only builds on research material about one researcher in one action research project and, therefore, the findings cannot be generalized (Bogdan and Biklen 2007). Even though each action research process is unique and the findings are not generalizable to other contexts, our findings can inspire and support future researchers to plan the action research process and to reflect on their roles. The findings of this study draw attention to four points meaningful to understanding the construction of a researcher's role in CAR.

Firstly, the *theoretical and conceptual tools* employed in this study involved potential to deepen understanding about a researcher's role in CAR. The model from Ellström (2007) provided a fruitful conceptual tool for exploring researcher's role in between two systems, the practice system and the research system. Moreover, we applied the concept of the third space (Arhar et al. 2013; Moje et al. 2004) to understand where the expertise of the two systems meets, so that we could build a bridge and go beyond researchers' and practitioners' traditional roles to create new knowledge in the field (Sandberg and Wallo 2013). In this study, the researcher's role was created somewhere in between the two systems since the researcher could identify herself in both systems, as an educated preschool teacher who knows the preschool practice and as a researcher familiar with the theoretical and methodological focus. Identifying herself as part of both systems also enabled the researcher to seek support and encouragement from both parties.

Secondly, the findings show that *the researcher's role cannot be fully pre-planned or fixed beforehand*; rather, the researcher's role becomes constructed through collaboration between the researcher and the practitioners in a particular context. The researcher's and practitioners' backgrounds, personalities and professionalism are of high importance for the collaboration and the researcher's role as well. This demands the researcher to have good communication skills and to be sensitive to different people to be able to gain trust in the setting. This also challenges the researcher to cope with uncertainty and let the research be process driven.

Thirdly, the findings show that working as a researcher in CAR is an *emotionally loaded process* where both the researcher and the practitioners are present in a holistic way. The construction of the researcher's role is not a direct road from point A to point B, there are hills and valleys along the way. The researcher travels through an emotional landscape while struggling with her own role in the process. In previous methodological research literature, researchers' emotions have largely been neglected (Gillberg 2011; Postholm and Skrövset 2013; Sandberg and Wallo 2013) and this is something that needs to be highlighted (Carroll 2015; Dickson-Swift et al. 2007; Visser 2017). This study draws attention to the emotional aspect of the researcher's role: the researcher not only works rationally, but also has emotions that affect his/her role. The role, therefore, is rooted in both the researcher's heart and mind.

Finally, our findings show that a researcher in CAR might *face tensions* to understand her role and, moreover, to work as a researcher. In our study, the first tension concerned the nature of the relationship with the practitioners. The second tension involved differences and similarities in expertise. The researcher was required to cope with these tensions to serve in her role. This helped her become aware of her own role and the nature of her relationship with the practitioners, i.e., the nature of the collaboration. In this sense, our findings imply that the

tensions faced during CAR, can promote transformation in the construction of the researcher's role.

Conclusion

CAR differs from other qualitative research approaches, as it is often implemented as a long-lasting process that requires the researcher to engage in a relation with the practitioners. This means that the two parties collaborate for a long time, not only to generate empirical knowledge, but also to influence and transform the practice. The research approach also challenges the traditional researcher's role, as an objective outsider who looks at the research issue from a distance. The research reported here, shows that the concept of the third space provides a potential framework to understand the researcher's role in CAR. Our findings demonstrate that the construction of the researcher's role in CAR involves emotions, falls in between traditional insider and outsider roles, and requires coping with tensions concerning the relationship with the practitioners.

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