

## **The dialogic practices of educational action research participants as a means of supporting or undermining its critical orientation**

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### ***Abstract***

This paper focuses on the dialogic practices of a group of educational action research participants. It discusses the requirements necessary for dialogue to enhance the critical orientation of action research. Drawing on two areas of scholarship, dialogue studies and post-structural discourse analysis, we made a critical discourse analysis on the dialogic practices of a group of teachers and post-graduate students who conducted action research. By investigating the extent to which the participants in an action research challenge and problematise their personal tacit knowledge, we formulate a proposal for analysing their dialogic practices, as a process that could really empower them.

**Key words:** dialogic practices; teacher-researchers; critical action research.

### **1. Introduction**

It has been 25 years since Carr and Kemmis (1986) introduced the typology of action research (technical, practical and emancipatory), which is now well known. This typology instigated a very interesting theoretical debate on the social and political dimension of Action Research (AR). By introducing critical (emancipatory) action research, Carr and Kemmis actually express their demand for social change. Critical (emancipatory) action research aims at intervening in the cultural, social and historical processes of everyday life to reconstruct not only practice and practitioner but also the practice setting. This change can be brought about by the commitment of participant teachers to assume responsibility (and engage in the corresponding action) for their emancipation from felt dissatisfactions, alienation, ideological distortion and the injustices of oppression and domination deriving from various aspects of the existing educational framework (Kemmis, 2001: 92). Within communities of critical thinking and reflection, participants engage in a fight for more rational, equitable and democratic forms of education, realising and addressing, to a certain extent, the limitations imposed on their action (Carr & Kemmis, 1986: 201-207).

Surprisingly, although critical action research has been widely discussed over these 25 years, little attention has been paid to important issues regarding the critical orientation of AR, as data

analysis in a social perspective (Jennings & Graham, 1996: 167). International literature pays little attention to important methodological issues (see indicatively Feldman, 1999; Treleaven, 2001) such as: how does a group of participants arrive at a common decision or consensus regarding the theoretical framework for discussing their data, or which dialogic practices reinforce the practitioners' reflection and therefore their critical understanding of their practice, themselves and the educational settings, so as to reform them? In a critical AR, teachers-researchers have to be empowered to develop a critical and self-critical understanding of their situation, an understanding of the way both particular people and particular settings are shaped and reshaped culturally, socially and historically (Kemmis, 2001: 92). But how this empowerment could be achieved?

The debate on redefining educational AR in a contemporary context could start from reviewing *Becoming Critical* (1986). In 2005, Carr and Kemmis themselves attempted to do this, by answering the question "how can action research remain critical in postmodern times?" Their answer derives from a rich and reflective line of thought, utilising postmodern tools to make up for deficiencies of the postmodern framework: Action research should on the one hand preserve the vision of empowering practitioners to reveal the tensions and contradictions between emancipatory educational values and dominant educational policies and practices and on the other hand embrace the postmodern perspective of viewing taken-for-granted assumptions as problematic. In the context of conducting AR, this could mean that not even emancipatory educational values can be legitimised through criteria of normative validity, that is, they cannot be considered a priori accepted by participants. In contrast, emancipatory educational values must emanate from common beliefs and orientations, constructed and/or interpreted through dialogue (Carr & Kemmis, 2005: 355).

Both this latter assumption and the methodological deficiencies of AR mentioned above guide our research interest to the *moments of dialogue* in AR. Since every AR project is nothing more than a series of *moments of dialogue*, during design and reflection, and *moments of action*, during the intervention and data collection, it seems natural that any deficiencies of the *moments of dialogue* will have a relevant impact on the *moments of action*, impeding the efforts to construct collective knowledge (Grundy, 1987: 145-147). Despite the validity of this argument, neither literature nor the body of research has sufficiently illuminated how the participants' dialogue deficiencies, when constructing their common orientation, can lead AR to failure, particularly in our postmodern times, when every participant may represent a different group of voices and ways of understanding and referring to the social world, and engage in various forms of struggle for the leadership of any group (Foucault, 1980: 1969). Therefore, in the AR literature, there is no discussion on the characteristics that each participant's discourse should have or on the criteria that the participants' dialogue should meet in order to support AR's critical orientation. Besides, the procedures through which the participants could be empowered to conduct dialogue that

promotes AR's critical orientation remain vague. For such a purpose, an investigation on how the dialogic practices of a group of action research participants can support or undermine its critical orientation could have much to offer.

## **2. Background**

The underlying assumptions of our approach come from two areas of scholarship that have evolved in parallel: dialogic studies and the post-structural discourse analysis approach. Dialogic studies offer a variety of theoretical and practical approaches on fostering collaborative communication on the field. Dialogue combines philosophy, linguistics, political science, communicative theory, psychology, sociology, organisational development and education. The most influential thinkers of the field include Buber (1958, 1965), Freire (1970), Gadamer (1976, 1979), Bohm (1987) and Habermas (1984, 1987). Critical discourse analysis is at the same time a theory (a linguistic, sociological and political theory) and a research methodology, an interdisciplinary field displaying a variety of different approaches (Luke, 1997). As a term, it was first used by Fairclough (one of the founders of critical discourse analysis, especially as applied to sociolinguistics) in his book *Language and Power* (1989), while as an approach it began to appear in international literature in the late '70s and early '80s (Fowler, Hodge, Kress & Trew, 1979; Hodge & Kress, 1979 [1993]). An important contribution to this debate was that of sociolinguist M.A.K. Halliday (1978), who focused on studying the language in a critical way.

Dialogic studies are articulated through dialogue, which occurs when people realise that they are involved in a mutual quest for understanding and insight. The crucial issue is what sort of dialogue can lead to critical and transformative understanding and insight (Frydaki, 2011). Despite substantial differences in approach, dialogic studies always embrace a set of core ideas, which in some cases meet the requirements of the present research. Firstly, the notion that truth is “emergent”, suggested by Gadamer, Buber and Habermas, as it is constructed through communicative interaction, highlights the dialectic structure of understanding (Pearce & Pearce, 2001; Kim & Kim, 2008: 57). Consequently, there is a need for “approaching difference and disagreement as places for further exploration, rather than obstacles” (Pearce & Pearce, 2001: 11). Secondly, there are some common elements in the suggested ways for exploring differences through dialogue for emancipatory purposes. In his *Theory of Communicative Action* (1984, 1987), Habermas argues for the need for ‘ideal speech situations’ to foster both understanding and a humane collective life. This normative ideal describes a situation where dialogue is neither constrained nor distorted by power relations; where each speaker enjoys equal opportunities to participate in dialogue; where intentions are transparent; where the requirements of communication are met through arguments and counter-arguments, questions and answers. The idea of an ideal speech situation provides us with a way to identify and explore existing distortions. In the critical context provided by Habermas, dialogue generates transformative and

emancipatory knowledge rather than a consensus, as participants in communicative dialogue interactions uphold reason over power and bring their preconceived ideas to the dialogue without reflection, so as to reach their transformation (Habermas, 1984). This is dialogue as a social deliberation.

Gadamer (1976, 1979) and Bohm (1987) address the issue of exploring differences through dialogue, reframing it into a hermeneutic framework, in which communicative obstacles such as difference and disagreement are defined as prejudices. Prejudices are transmitted by tradition and are considered valuable starting-points in any attempt to understand; understanding prejudices is a process similar to understanding a person in a conversation. We open ourselves, not only to receive the message of the other, but also to dialectically transform our consciousness after coming into contact with the fellow speaker. Gadamer (1976, 1979, 2001, and 2003) introduces interpretation as an open-ended inquiry, and also the dialectic sense of hermeneutics. In the context of Gadamer's interpretive approach, hermeneutic dialogue changes power relations by undermining self-certainty and revealing to participants their possibility to realise the ambiguity and complexity of the matter under discussion and take into account their own prejudices, the prejudices of the others and the difference of the points of view (cultural, religious, or value-related). Hence, they really participate in a meaning making process, transforming existing meanings and creating common ones, and therefore transforming their own consciousness to a certain extent. It is the notion of dialogue as social reflection.

From a different point of view, Fairclough's post-structural language approach (critical discourse analysis) adheres to the common postmodern perspective of viewing taken-for-granted assumptions as problematic. Fairclough (1995, 2001) argues that language and society are in a close relationship of constant dialogue. Discourse, dialogue practices and text rhetoric are shaped by relationships of power and sealed by social interests. In this way, they reflect, reproduce and transform general social beliefs, leading to ideological, political and social consequences. Since not all discourse types enjoy the same status, the different positions of speakers in dominant discourse types can be naturalised, that is, they can be perceived as natural. This naturalisation poses limitations to the speakers, affects the long-term socialisation of individuals and contributes to the limitation of social identities in a society. When a dominant discourse type is naturalised, it loses its obvious link to a specific ideology or interests, becoming common practice for a specific institution or society. In this way, ideology is transformed into common sense, common practice. No longer appearing as ideology, it becomes more effective, thanks to its disguise (Fairclough, 2001: 64-90). This naturalisation is a remarkable means of imposing dominant ideology. As far as this study is concerned, Fairclough provides the right tools to seek any naturalised dominant discourses which are latent in the shortcomings of the dialogic practices, and which may interpret these deficiencies.

In the postmodern context, rationality no longer aims at finding valid solutions to existing problems, but at viewing answers and taken-for-granted underlying assumptions as problematic (Carr & Kemmis, 2005: 355). Communication through dialogue is not challenged, as it constitutes a means of communicating and challenging answers. Stewart (1991: 360-372) provided a postmodern commentary on several “traditional communication postulates”. Postmodern views of communication stress language as a social process through which people co-constitute their worlds, abandon the construct of encoding, see human identity as emergent from interaction, and separate concerns for quality in communication from a simple check of validity. In a postmodernist view, a critical (emancipatory) action research community is intersubjective in nature when all parties relate to one another, having a sense of agency and a unique perspective. In such a co-created community, power is shared and all participants relate in an interpretive communication with a critical orientation.

This line of arguing reveals the intersection between our two areas of concern, dialogic studies and the post-structural discourse analysis approach: the adoption of and persistence in dominant or naturalised discourses could indicate and possibly interpret the shortcomings of the dialogic processes. Conversely, the qualities of interpretive dialogue reflected in the participants’ dialogic practices could indicate and possibly interpret the de-naturalisation and the diminution of dominant or naturalised discourses.

The quality of *moments of dialogue* is crucial for AR participants to reconstruct both practice and practitioners, and also the practice setting, as well as to develop a critical and self-critical understanding. In order to explore this, the dialogic practices of AR participants should be examined in relation to the following questions:

- Are difference and disagreement viewed as opportunities for further exploration?
- Is the dialogue constrained or distorted by power relations?
- Do dialogic practices reflect an ‘ideal speech situation’?
- Do dialogic practices challenge / problematize the answers?
- Do dialogic practices display the quality of interpretive dialogue (quality of listening, openness to new understandings, rethinking the existing value frameworks and prejudices, profound respect for difference and otherness)?

### **3. Research**

#### **3.1. Purpose and questions**

Based on underlying assumptions mentioned above, this article aims to explore whether and how the dialogic practices of four post-graduate students (three of which are professional teachers) involved in an AR project, in the context of a post-graduate teacher education course, support or undermine the critical orientation of the research.

In particular we are interested in investigating:

I) a) How do the AR participants pursue dialogic consensus? Do they comply with the conditions of “an ideal speech situation”? Do they problematize their answers? b) Do their dialogic practices display the quality of interpretive dialogue?

II) a) What kinds of discourse and which educational (or social) beliefs do the participants express? b) Do participants engage in discourse having the characteristics of “an ideal speech situation” or rather express dominant discourses?

### **3.2. Research method**

We chose to use critical discourse analysis (CDA) to analyse our data because of its relevance to the entire conceptual framework of our research. CDA is consistent with the critical orientation of action research, as both pursue social change. CDA focuses not only on understanding and revealing the social inequalities that are reflected and reproduced through discourse, but also on changing the conditions that cause these inequalities (Rogers et al. 2005: 369). Both methodologies address issues such as revealing hidden power relations. To quote Rogers (2004: 3), “the term critical in CDA is often associated with studying power relations [...] and is rooted in the Frankfurt school of critical theory”. Uncovering possible power relations, discrimination, bias or inequalities latent in the AR participants’ dialogic practices is congruent with our research purpose. We believe that exploring the discourse patterns of an AR context and uncovering possible power relations latent in the participants’ dialogic practices may help us focus on the weaknesses of educational action research programmes and make suggestions for their improvement.

Among the various available CDA approaches we chose the methodological paradigm of Fairclough, which is the most widespread choice of CDA researchers in various areas and the most popular in educational research (Rogers et al. 2005: 371, 375). We find this model methodologically solid, because it offers an explicit framework of textual analysis, utilises Halliday’s linguistic theory, particularly his Systemic Functional Grammar (Halliday, 1994), and maintains that textual choices (vocabulary, grammar, syntax) are interconnected with textual content and reflect its ideology. The way in which this model is used in the present research is presented in “Data collection and analysis” section.

### **3.3. Research context and participants**

Our research was carried out during the academic year 2009-2010, in the framework of an action research project conducted by four post-graduate students enrolled in the postgraduate teacher education program entitled “Educational Theory, History and Policy” of a University of Greece. The 12 students attending the course “Teaching and Researching” divided in 3 heterogeneous groups, each conducting an action research project in the classroom of one

member of the group. The supervising professor (one of the authors) monitored the course of each group's research at weekly meetings with all three groups. In these plenary meetings students were taught ways of conducting AR, its epistemological variations, as well as the main orientations of dialogue studies, in particular as regards the dialogue's potential of leading to critical and transformative understanding and insight. Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, focusing on tools to seek whichever naturalised dominant discourses probably undermining the transformative potential of dialogic practices, was also included in the session.

The members of each group also held their own meetings, discussing without the presence of the supervisor, evaluating their course so far, and deciding on their future course. The participants themselves recorded and transcribed their discussions, to facilitate their AR. Initially, participants did not know that their discussions would be the object of our research. We did not inform them from the start, fearing that they would be influenced and that their discussions would no longer be authentic. When they delivered the material (the CD with their recorded discussions and their action research reports containing the transcripts of their discussions), we asked for and received their explicit permission.

From the three groups of postgraduate students who attended the course and conducted action research, we chose to analyse the discussions of one group only, for purposes of research economy, as a qualitative study, like CDA, must be constrained to a limited number of texts (Miles & Huberman, 1994: 27). The group we chose had consistently and thoroughly recorded and transcribed all discussions they had conducted for their AR. This gave us the opportunity to shape a complete picture of the group discussions, facilitating our research. Another reason for choosing this specific group was the problematic situation they had chosen for their action research: nurturing a spirit of cooperation and group work in the classroom. The group aimed at creating a less teacher-centred and more student-centred environment through student cooperation in group work. The aim of this group's action research project was to find and study ways in which students could cooperate and learn through their cooperation. It was very interesting to study how the members of a group aiming at teaching cooperation actually discussed and cooperated. It becomes even more interesting when taking into account that Greece is dominated by the belief that teaching is a lonely activity, it is individually designed and implemented, nurturing an individualistic professional culture for teachers (Mavroyiorgos, 1999).

The participants of the group, whose discussions we analysed, display great heterogeneity. The group includes practitioners and non-practitioners, teachers of primary and secondary education, students who are just beginning or about to complete their postgraduate studies. The members of the group are:

- George: The teacher of the classroom where action research was conducted. He is an elementary school teacher, 41 years old, with 18 years of experience in elementary

schools throughout the country. In his career, he had few training opportunities before attending this post-graduate course.

- Ann: Member of the AR group. She is an elementary school teacher, 37 years old, with 14 years of experience in elementary schools throughout Greece.
- Betty: Member of the AR group. She is a secondary school teacher, a Greek language teacher, 42 years old, with 9 years of experience in secondary schools throughout the country. She has attended a post-graduate course and holds a PhD in Greek literature. This post-graduate course is the first time she addresses issues regarding education.
- Gloria: Member of the AR group, 25 years old. She is a Sociology graduate without educational or any other professional experience.

For this paper, all participants' names are pseudonyms.

### **3.4. Data collection and analysis**

During our research, we collected the following data: a) reports written by the participants, on the problems they experienced with *moments of dialogue*, and b) the group's recorded discussions during the design and reflection phases, a total of 4 discussions, with an average duration of 45'. From these data, we analysed the second category (b), since our interest focused on the *moments of dialogue*, while the first category (a) provided necessary feedback for interpreting the findings.

We approached the data both as written (the transcribed discussions of the chosen AR group) and as oral discourse. We listened to the audio files of these discussions several times, focusing on the participants' voice volume, interruptions, silences, hesitations, etc.

We analysed the data using critical discourse analysis (CDA), following the methodological paradigm of Fairclough (1995, 2001). Contrary to linguistic analysis, which only analyses texts at the *micro* level, and to social analysis, which mainly focuses at the *macro* level, CDA combines the two approaches by analysing at an intermediate level, that of the social practices and structures of the discourse under study. Hence, it includes both *linguistic analysis* and *interdiscursive analysis* (Fairclough, 2003: 3). We started by linguistically analysing the texts, based on Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (1994) and the three metafunctions of language (ideational, interpersonal and textual). We attempted to *describe* the AR participants' dialogic practices (linguistic choices of vocabulary, grammar and syntax) in the texts under study and the relationships established by these practices (descriptive linguistic analysis). We searched for generating categories based on the emerging patterns deriving from the data, thinking of the initial conceptual framework of our study (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993), especially in relation to the intersection between our two areas of concern, dialogic studies and the post-structural discourse analysis approach. We then moved on to *interpret* the structure of the participants' dialogic practices based on the context. We studied the participants' discourses, seeking influences from other texts (institutional texts, official teaching theory, action research theory, implicit personal theory, etc.) (interdiscursive



analysis). Finally, we barely reached the *explanation stage*, attempting to explain how the educational and broad social framework influences and shapes the participants' dialogic practices, as such a thing could lead us wander from our subject, to reveal dialogic practices which support or undermine AR' critical orientation. We tried to control our expectations and potential biases by presenting the findings and conclusions to the participants to determine whether the analysis reflected their experiences. The results seemed to them to be realistic, accurate and enlightening.

#### **4. Research findings**

##### **4.1. Descriptive linguistic analysis**

We classified the AR participants' linguistic choices in terms of vocabulary, grammar and syntax in two categories derived from the data and pertaining to both the conditions of the habermasian "ideal speech situation" and Fairclough's suggestion for questioning the taken-for-granted truths and revealing power relations through discourse.

*A. The dominance (exercising power through discourse) – liberation from dominance (research attitude) continuum.*

The continuum of personal certainty – exploratory doubt is linguistically expressed with the following choices of vocabulary, grammar and syntax:

Examples of lexicalization of personal certainty: we must, we can't, certainly, expressions of absolute acceptance/rejection, references to the authority of literature.
Examples of lexicalization of exploratory doubt: perhaps, maybe we could think that..., it seems, I don't know, I think, I wonder, why did this happen?, how did this happen?
Examples of grammatical choices expressing certainty: indicative and imperative mood, use of personal and intensive pronouns for emphasis, use of plural to reinforce an argument, superlative adjectives.
Examples of grammatical choices expressing research doubt: subjunctive mood, use of indefinite pronouns.
Examples of syntactic choices expressing certainty: affirmative or negative sentences, conditionals expressing reality, unreality, or impossibility, emphasis on the acting agent, impersonal syntax.
Examples of syntactic choices expressing research doubt: direct and indirect questions, conditionals expressing expectations "if we did that... we would probably..."

An initial coding led to the selection of excerpts for micro- analysis on the basis of their apparent relevance to the research goals. Table I lists excerpts selected because of their relevance in terms of linguistic choices reflecting the continuum from personal certainty to exploratory doubt. In our analysis, linguistic elements were never taken out of context, but were always

analysed in the context that provides them with meaning. This table is not intended to include an exhaustive description, but rather contains indicative linguistic choices, focusing aspects relevant to the issue of access.

Table I contains excerpts from the participants' words in italics and our own comments in regular font. Words in brackets were added by us, based on the context, to enhance reader understanding. Next to some excerpts there is a number in parenthesis, declaring how many times we found linguistic indications of similar meaning in the material we analysed.

*Table I: Excerpts from the discussions of a group of teachers who conduct action research so as to reinforce student cooperation in the classroom.*

George	<p><i>"A regular lesson <b>cannot lack</b> guidance"</i> (two negative elements, so as to stress the affirmative meaning and validate the argument).</p> <p><i>"<b>Let us not forget</b> that..."</i> (imperative mood).</p> <p><i>"We <b>must</b> make a plan, so that they [the students] <b>will be forced</b> to attend while another group is making a presentation"</i> (modal verb expressing obligation, use of the word <i>forced</i> for the students, meaning they will have no alternative) (2).</p> <p><i>"The children <b>have</b> the booklet <b>we I have marked</b> some articles <b>myself</b>"</i> (the phrase about the children is neutral, while the phrase about the teacher is very active dynamic, with extra emphasis on the personal pronoun).</p> <p><i>"So this is <b>what the book wants</b>. The other one is a Project. They should call the Citizens' Advocate to find out how this institution works, etc. <b>There is no infrastructure</b> to actually do this at school"</i> (indicative mood, presenting the authority of the book as the acting agent + negative sentence) (3).</p> <p><i>"There was <b>neither</b> qualitative dialogue <b>nor</b> any significant interaction. The groups <b>continued to ignore</b> each other's presentations"</i> (Negative conjunctions + progressive continuous action) (2).</p> <p><i>"Group cooperative teaching entails <b>the longest</b> delays [...] The children need a lot of guidance to work in groups, at least 15 minutes. And the class only lasts 45 minutes. <b>If I did this... it would take</b> me a month and a half to cover four or five pages of the schoolbook"</i> (indicative mood, superlative form, conditional expressing an unreal/impossible situation).</p> <p><i>"To implement group cooperative teaching at all subjects on a daily basis, <b>one must be working all day long</b>, to design and collect the material. <b>It is just impossible</b>. Also, I don't know if group cooperative teaching on a daily basis can cover the curriculum and advance the class"</i> (impersonal syntax, as if presenting a natural phenomenon – latent negative sentence).</p>
Ann	<p><i>"What we <b>must do</b> is stop the children in the groups from working individually. <b>We've seen it all!</b>"</i> (modal expressing obligation + ironic rejection).</p> <p><i>"This time <b>should be</b> for familiarisation exercises"</i> (modal expressing a normative orientation) (4).</p>

	<p><i>“Look, the lack of attention <b>cancel</b>s out the interaction”</i> (imperative – indicative mood).</p> <p><i>“We [teachers] <b>let</b> the children work and develop their critical thinking”</i> (indicative mood, stressing that educators are the acting agents, plural to reinforce the argument and present it as common practice) (6).</p> <p><i>“Children have the potential, they have the imagination, <b>if</b> we provide them with stimuli and initiative”</i> (first conditional expressing a real, a certain situation).</p> <p><i>“We <b>want</b> to see interaction, initiative”</i> (indicative mood + verb in plural, as if speaking on behalf of others) (2).</p> <p><i>“This is <b>why</b> <b>the literature</b> refers us to projects”</i> (reference to the authority of the literature) (3).</p> <p>[When proposing a teaching design] <i>“This is the time for the playacting part [...] one group could present a subject, become the Citizens’ Advocate office. The other two groups could playact the conflict. <b>This</b> is initiative, <b>this</b> is cooperation”</i> (repetition of the pronoun to provide the sentence with emphasis).</p> <p><i>“That is, we should set some rules on <b>how</b> the groups should operate? That is, <b>what is the meaning</b> of a group? <b>How</b> do its members function?”</i> (interrogative sentences indicate research doubts) (2).</p> <p><i>“I still see the teacher-centred model. <b>I can’t help but wonder why</b> this is happening. We should find out <b>why</b>. If we want to overcome this model and move on to another, <b>why</b> can’t we do it?”</i> (explicit wondering, repetition of interrogation on the causes, using the word <i>why</i> as an indication of research doubt).</p>
Betty	<p><i>“This comes from the literature... We sought ways, methods we could implement in group cooperative teaching”</i> (reference to the authority of the literature, verb in plural, so as to reinforce the argument)</p> <p><i>“There is interaction, but <b>we want</b> more cooperation”</i> (indicative mood + active voice)</p> <p><i>“That is, we take, say, three basic rights and we ask each group to elaborate one right. What is the purpose? <b>We want specific conclusions</b>”</i> (indicative mood – the educator appears as the acting agent, in an absolute determinant role) (3).</p> <p><i>“<b>In other words</b>, our goal <b>is not</b> cognitive but rather to nurture cooperation and the relationships developed within the group”</i> (reaching a conclusion, indicative mood).</p> <p><i>“Do you think as a group that by implementing the teacher-centred model most of the time and choosing the cooperative method some times, these two can help, enrich and support each other?”</i> (interrogative sentence).</p> <p><i>“Ann, we would like you to tell us <b>why you posed these challenging questions</b>”</i> (indirect question).</p>
Gloria	<p><i>“<b>I didn’t think</b> the guidance took too long”</i> (expressing a modest subjective perspective) (2)</p> <p><i>“I <b>understood something else</b> from the interviews, they [the students] support both methods but say the trust their teacher more than their peers”</i> (expressing a personal opinion) (2)</p>

The participants’ discourse choices of vocabulary, grammar and syntax in the moments of dialogue of the action research clearly show that the speakers display a tendency not to conduct research but to dominate the group and impose their view as the right one. In the case of George, his linguistic choices reveal a discourse that is regulative, normative and full of certainty. Ann’s discourse is also characterised by certainty, except certain expressions of doubt, when she sees that her certainties are not implemented in practice. Betty’s discourse reflects her search for

certainty. Her exploratory efforts focus on understanding the arguments of others, not on rethinking her own existing value frameworks and prejudices. Regarding Gloria, her participation in the dialogue is limited and her discourse displays neither certainty nor a spirit of research but rather a general sense of wonder.

*B. Equality – inequality in terms of participating in the dialogue.*

From the four members of the group, two (George and Ann) appear to share equal participation opportunities, which means they dominate in the dialogue. They often give the impression of talking to each other, in a climate of altercation, expressed by the tone of their voice, often rising higher when they defend their opinion or interrupt the other speakers. Betty tries to participate, but her interventions are short and usually complementary or explanatory. She almost always keeps her voice down and tries to calm down the other speakers. The contribution of Gloria to the dialogue is minimal; she abstains completely from speaking when the dialogue revolves around teaching design and evaluation, and barely participates when talking about the research data collected by the group. She speaks in a low tone, in a dull voice with hints of hesitation and incertitude.

Table II refers to an indicative 46-minute discussion of the AR group, the content of which was analysed.

*Table II: An indicative discussion of the AR group*

Participant	Time s/he speaks (total duration)	Times s/he speaks (frequency)	Times s/he interrupts	Times s/he gets interrupted
George	about 19 minutes	58	23	13
Ann	about 14 minutes	85	15	17
Betty	about 11.5 minutes	40	3	6
Gloria	about 1.5 minutes	21	2	7
Total duration of pauses: 15 seconds				

It should be noted that the participants do not offer participation opportunities to each other. They do not address research questions to each other, with a single exception, while they are often interrupted when they attempt to speak. George systematically interrupts his fellow speakers, while Gloria is often interrupted the few times she tries to speak.

An important element of Table II is the limited duration of pauses, lasting only a few seconds. This shows that each participant starts speaking very fast, without taking the time to think, reflect and judge.

In conclusion, there was no openness to new understandings, or profound respect for difference and otherness, a fact which reveals the lack of interpretive quality in their dialogic practices.

#### **4.2. Interdiscursive analysis - Discussion**

The analysis of the findings reveals some interesting points. When pursuing a consensus during the *moments of dialogue*, the participants do not appear to comply with the requirements of an “ideal speech situation”, since the dominant dialogic practices limit the participants’ opportunities for equal participation. Every participant represents a different group of voices and ways of understanding and referring to the educational world, expressing a specific and differentiated discourse. By studying the discourses of the four participants in order to reveal the latent meanings and underlying educational theories, we found that:

George expresses an educational discourse characterised by certainty and resistance to experimentation and innovation, a determinative and normative discourse. At the core of this “dominant” discourse, we can see an implicit personal theory, impregnated with the following naturalisations: a) Teaching is a normative process, pre-determined by curriculum and text books, and controlled by the teachers’ decisions. Even the bounds within which students can be activated are delimited and controlled by these decisions (Boulton-Lewis et al., 2001; Frydaki & Mamoura, 2011), b) Teachers’ participation in alternative pedagogies and innovative activities may endanger their main mission, which is content coverage and maintaining control (Aggelakos, 2007).

These “naturalisations” initially reflect the traditionally centralised character and the resulting certainties of the institutional discourses of the Greek educational system (Katsarou, 2009). The Greek school curriculum is national and compulsory, and includes: fixed teaching hours, content to be taught and textbooks dictated by the Ministry of Education. Textbooks and teaching guidelines usually have a normative orientation which can be neither negotiated nor challenged. In an educational system with such characteristics, the school programme has no room for exploratory and productive processes for the teachers, such as involvement in professional development activities, research, experimentation on new teaching strategies, programme reform, etc. Teachers create frameworks of taken-for-granted assumptions, which provide their work with consistency and order, allowing them to meet pressing everyday demands and therefore to survive (Mavroyiorgos, 1999). In this way, George’s educational discourse seems to have naturalised the dominant discourse of pedagogical routines. As Eisner (1992) argues, educational changes which require a redefinition of methods and practices are often met by the passive resistance of experienced teachers, who already use, possibly successfully, a series of practices / routines they have discovered or adopted, which they have naturalised and which offer a sense of security.

Ann also expresses an educational discourse characterised by solid certainty, a discourse which is as normative as George's, but supports contrasting views. The discourse articulated by Ann reproduces the innovative didactic theory which dominates educational literature, and permeates the curricula to a certain extent (at least at the level of rhetoric), but in a normative way. It places increased emphasis on students (student-centred teaching), collaborative activities (group learning), the facilitation of students' understanding, the connection of learning processes to the students' needs and experience, the adoption of alternative pedagogies and practices. The theoretical and institutional legitimacy of this discourse reinforces its dominance, allowing it to be explicitly expressed and to influence the other members of the group. However, Ann seems to attempt to promote the principles of innovative didactic theory, without recognising the complexity of the matter under discussion or questioning her own presuppositions, but just transmitting its rhetoric. This is indicated by her repeated references to the authority of contemporary educational literature. Thus, the influence of her discourse on the other participants is limited to the superficial adoption of certain elements and fails to instigate research processes of viewing taken-for-granted beliefs as problematic. Even George's resistance is exacerbated by the fact that Ann demands change in the form of a simple instrumental implementation of her suggestions at the AR design, instead of pursuing profound dialogue or conflict with his implicit theory in the perspective of conceptual change.

Betty's discourse is more oriented towards searching than towards expressing her personal educational theory. It does display exploratory character, aiming at reaching conclusions which could constitute the basis for the creation of personal educational theory. Although her discourse expresses no solid certainties, it cannot be viewed as a purely exploratory discourse, since it seeks quick and easy definite answers that close educational issues instead of opening new ones. Moreover, her discourse cannot be considered polarised, because in her quest for answers she investigates the possibility of combining elements of contrasting discourses.

Regarding Gloria's discourse, no definite conclusions can be reached, because of her limited participation to the dialogue. Judging from the few times she did contribute, we can see that her discourse focuses on issues regarding the research data and on subjective comments. The lack of educational experience and her sociological academic background account for the lack of educational theory and her failure to articulate educational discourse. However, her failure to begin constructing her educational discourse through her interaction with the group may be attributed to the type of power relationships established by the discourses and dialogic practices of George and Ann.

George and Ann do not promote the answer challenging process, nor do they enrich the communication with questions and answers that would endorse the research process and the creation of collective knowledge. Ann reproduces the theory and George the practice, both ignoring the dialectical relationship between theory and practice, though which knowledge is

constructed in any AR project (McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead, 1996). Not having embraced a specific educational theory, Betty and Gloria could be more open to constructing a shared truth through communicative interaction. But George and Ann, with their certainties and naturalisations, create a system of relationships of power which impedes Betty and Gloria from expressing their own voices, instead of facilitating them to construct their educational identities via interaction and develop a critical and self-critical understanding.

In conclusion, the participants in our research developed dialogic practices that undermined AR's critical orientation. Instead of constructing common knowledge, they reproduced dominant discourses and relationships of inequality. The power relationships created reproduced the original unequal form of the group. George, as the experienced teacher of the class, defended his dominant role and his teaching routines. His power stems from the status of experience. Ann, a teacher familiar with contemporary educational theory and literature, uses this knowledge to legalise the dominance of her discourse. The "certainties" and compact personal theories of both these teachers appear to act as an obstacle in the process of challenging answers and undermine potential of Betty and Gloria to contribute in enriching the *moments of dialogue*. The result of these impeding factors in terms of challenging answers is reflected in the image of an artificial consensus, deriving mostly from relationships of power in the group's dominant relationships, discourses and dialogic practices (Foucault, 1979). This consensus originates from the participants' submission to the dominant discourses of other members of the group, and serves no purpose but the completion of the research.

Seeking possible explanations for the teachers' failure to serve the principles of critical dialogue, we focus on the constraining role of the educational framework. The educational system is fully centralised, it expresses a regulative discourse through the official educational policy texts (curricula, textbooks, teaching guidelines) and it nurtures a culture of educator individuality, which undermines any effort of reflection, cooperation and research doubt. Teachers gradually naturalise the characteristics of the system, and unconsciously reproduce them.

## **5. Conclusions**

Our research showed that the discourse and the dialogic practices of the participants in an AR project can undermine its critical orientation very easily. Even though the participants were post-graduate students, were taught how to engage in discourse reflecting the characteristics of Habermas's ideal speech situations, and how to reveal naturalised dominant discourses probably undermining the transformative potential of dialogic practices, as well as they were monitored and assisted in their AR project by a professor experienced in AR, they didn't manage to understand how power works, through which practices, techniques and processes, and therefore through which discourses, and how these discourses are constructed.

It seems obvious that they needed empowerment through a more systematic familiarization with discourse and dialogic practices that reveal the power relations among the participants and reflect an “ideal speech situation”. Such a familiarization could include some enlightening presentations of what usually happens during their own discussions, that is how the *moments of dialogue* can undermine the AR’ critical orientation. Also, it is not enough to situate the learning experience of the learners (here the participating action researchers) but rather a dialectic relationship between the participants and the researcher is required (Koutselini, 2008: 46). As our research revealed, the presentation of the results to the participants and the following suggestion for interpreting them was more helpful than the given instruction about CDA and dialogic practices. The participants then began to wonder somewhat what is taken for granted, particularly in terms of relationships of power, silences, and “given” truths. If they could incorporate this awareness in a following AR project, they probably would reach this kind of collective transformative and emancipatory knowledge which is produced through communicative *critical/ interpretive* dialogue interactions upholding reason over power, undermining self-certainty, and creating common meanings. By overcoming polarisations like *interpretive/ critical action research* and *individual/ society*, which represent aspects of a complex and integrated action research process as separate and rather fragmented (Zeichner, 1994: 67-68), teacher researchers can pursue their personal change by developing the dialectic structure of understanding (Pearce & Pearce, 2001; Kim & Kim, 2008: 57), and be oriented to social reform via their personal change.

But the use of CDA by teachers-researchers is not an easy task. It presupposes “critical language awareness” (Fairclough, 1992) on behalf of action researchers, focusing on the political, historical and social nature of language, as a necessary condition for emancipation. This need highlights the potentially crucial role of the University in nurturing skills of *critical/ interpretive* dialogue, during the student teachers’ initial education and in practitioners’ in-service training programmes. AR educators have in their turn to learn to de-naturalise what they are used to viewing as natural and unchangeable, creating the right conditions for their action towards a more equitable and democratic education.

Finally, our research mainly revealed the need to methodologically enrich AR in our postmodern times. Dialogic studies and post-structural tools, like critical discourse analysis, can illuminate aspects of AR which often remain hidden, and analyse the variety of voices possibly expressed in an AR, as well as the ideology they express or the social group they represent. Without losing its commitment to emancipatory principles and values, AR needs to focus on how these are constructed and interpreted through exploratory processes of dialogue and to seek the naturalised discourses which undermine this process.



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