

ETHICAL DIMENSIONS WHEN INTERVENING IN CLASSROOM RESEARCH

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Abstract

There is an increasing amount of educational research that aims at intervening in classroom teaching and learning practices, partly as a response to “what works” in education. However, few researchers ask the fundamental question of who actually “owns” the interventions, and not the least which ethical dimensions arise from intervening in classrooms. The present research investigates these two questions and relates them to the role of the researcher in formative intervention research, and by relating ethical dimensions to ethics of principles, consequences, relations and virtues. It suggests that interventionist researchers need to develop their reflexive sensitivity, both epistemologically and methodologically when they conduct formative interventions in classrooms, and that the idea of intervening requires different responses depending on the type of ethics that is applied. Interventionist researchers need to be more humble, more open to new ideas and changes in their original plans, and more able to share their contributions with the field of education compared to descriptive research designs. Also, they need to question the very idea of intervening in classrooms, legitimize it and reflect on it with ethical dimensions in mind.

Key words: formative interventions, research ethics, intervention research, professional development.

Introduction

A lot of research results from the field of education are published in scientific journals and books without contributing to a change of teaching and learning practices in schools. However, some educational research, as also evidenced in the present journal, have the aim of intervening and changing classroom practices (Postholm & Madsen, 2006). Even though this type of research is practical, participatory, collaborative and developing, intervention means disrupting already existing practice in some way or other. Educational researchers and interventionists need to reflect on this matter, even more so in the 21st century where the question of “what works” puts a higher demand for and requires more interventions in classrooms. One recent and well-known example is the seminal work by John Hattie (2009), referred to colloquially as “teaching’s holy grail”, where research on meta-analyses reveals which variables of teaching and learning “work better” than others in classrooms. Some researchers and teachers have, arguably uncritically (Sjøberg, 2012), tried to change educational practices according to Hattie’s variables of success listed in the back of his book.

According to Wardekker (2000), researchers cannot be indifferent to changes of practice when they are conducting research. He argues for the fact that “The introduction of research instruments into a practice, including dialogue between the researcher and the practitioners, is itself change-inducing” (p. 270). In this sense, all types of classroom research are exposed to some degree of intervention – either consciously or unconsciously. Postholm and Madsen (2006) go so far as posing the question whether it is ethically correct that researchers should not offer the research field their knowledge and experience when conducting research in schools, taking into consideration that the researcher has read a lot of theory and has often experience from teaching. They argue that if the researcher sees that s/he can contribute, and the practitioners

find the researcher's contributions useful, then it is ethically incorrect *not* to intervene. On the other hand, we find voices like Steinholt's (Steinholt, 2009), which are principally skeptical towards any type of intervention research, due to an understanding of practice and profession as being genuinely unpredictable and inconsistent.

Steen-Olsen (2010) writes about two types of reflexivity in connection with what the researcher has to consider when working in collaboration with practitioners: Epistemological reflexivity, being the researcher's considerations of his/her values and understandings, and methodological reflexivity meaning the researcher's evaluations of his/her impact on the field of practice s/he is conducting research in/on. Whichever ethical perspective, it is fair to say that these two types of reflexivity should be the core of ethical concern when intervening in classrooms. However, in widely used books on research methods (such as Creswell, 2009, 2012), intervention is seldom problematized, but treated as a mechanical experimental-control group issue with the aim of testing the effect of a treatment on a specific sample. The parts that include ethics in books on research methods, often consider general ethical issues related to permission, anonymity, informed consent, confidentiality, reciprocity, trust and respect. At times, researchers are even warned against their influence on the field of practice: "Researchers need to respect research sites *so that they are left undisturbed* after a research study" (Creswell, 2009, p. 90, my emphasis). Obviously, there are grades of disturbance or interventions, but is it at all possible to leave a research site undisturbed? Does Wardekker (2000) have a point when claiming that any introduction of a research instrument will ultimately have an effect on the research site? Possibly, the extent of reflection upon ethical issues increases with the extent of explicit or conscious intervention in a research process. For example, in an action research or a formative intervention research design, there is a high degree of change or intervention involved compared to descriptive research designs.

Despite the importance of ethics in research, less is known about ethical dimensions when interventions are conducted in classrooms to change teaching and learning practices. Thus, the following two interrelated questions are addressed:

- (1) Whose invention is it, i.e. what are the political and educational perspectives of intervention research?
- (2) What ethical implications follow when the researcher becomes an active – or rather a proactive – part in the research?

Doing Intervention Research: What Does It Mean?

The term "intervention" may still have a laboratory flavor to it, being a type of research that has a longer history in for example medical and science research rather than education. In education, the term has been more widely used in purely quantitative randomized controlled trials. One can assert that all classroom research consists of some type of intervention from the time the researcher enters the field of practice (cf. Wardekker, 2000).

Formative interventions address qualitative transformations (Engeström, 2008; Engeström & Sannino, 2010) and are systematic applications of research-based knowledge about certain educational topics on actual classrooms. Formative interventions stand in contrast to educational design research in that it is dialogue-based. The dialogues between the research participants and the researcher shape and drive the interventions (Eri, 2013). In formative interventions, it is not uncommon that the role of the researcher is "the active member role", which means that the researcher is engaged in the central activities and that there is a development of the field of practice through collaboration without the researcher becoming a full member (Postholm, 2010). First, it should be made clear that when conducting research, the researcher has to make sure that such aspects as anonymity, confidentiality and informed

consent are taken care of, i.e. informing the practitioners (the teachers and the pupils that open their classrooms to the researcher) about the research study and ensuring their anonymity, for example through the use of pseudonyms. However, it can sometimes be difficult to inform about all aspects and directions of an intervention study, since new knowledge and experiences can change the plans (Postholm & Madsen, 2006; Eri, 2013). The research questions may take other directions than what the researcher originally thought, but the topic of the research may remain the same. The practitioners should also be given the information that they can, whenever they wish, and without any particular reasons, resign from participating in the research study.

Postholm and Madsen (2006) mention communicative, social, and professional competence as important competences the researcher has to possess when working closely with practitioners. S/he has to be honest and willing to share his/her competence with the practitioners as well (p. 55). They also argue for the fact that the researcher has to have knowledge about the research field. That is why a formative intervention research requires that the researcher spends some time in the field of practice before starting the collection of data. In a way, the researcher's study depends on the practitioners (Postholm & Skrøvset, 2010, p. 19-20). Honesty, sensitivity, mutuality, trust and a willingness to share competence are thus some of the characteristics Postholm and Madsen (2006, p. 58) list which the researcher has to possess. S/he has to be honest towards the practitioners from the very start of and during the research process. Questions that should be addressed are amongst others what the research study is about, how the data will be collected, what the study requires from the practitioners, and how the data will be handled. The researcher's social skills demand, in a metaphorical sense, to *see* the practitioners; not to say that s/he is to act as a therapist, but rather being aware of verbal and non-verbal communication and how these affect the practitioners and the research process.

In contrast to Plato, Aristotle emphasized experience as part of the concept of knowledge (Gustavsson, 2000, p. 163). The researcher can be wise, but not necessarily having practical wisdom. Aristotle distinguishes between these two, the latter being a suitable translation of the term *phronesis*, i.e. making the correct decisions in practical situations. The researcher can in a sense be regarded as a guest in the field of practice. The researcher is typically well-read on the topic of research and its connections with learning, and s/he has some research questions that s/he brings to the field of practice. The entire research study may depend on collaboration with the practitioners. Consequently, it would be fair to make clear what type of a reward there is for the practitioners, when they in fact "let the researcher in" as the guest. Mutuality is a matter of giving and taking. Development of teaching and learning practices and someone to discuss with could be seen as rewards for the practitioners. That requires from the researcher that s/he is willing to share his/her knowledge and experiences with the practitioners. If there is no trust, there will be scarce potentials for learning.

Aristotle (1989) distinguishes between three types of knowledge: *Episteme*, *techne*, and *phronesis*. The first one has to do with scientific knowledge, i.e. "to know", and is partly relevant when discussing *whose intervention* it is when interventions are conducted in classroom research. The person that intervenes, in this case the researcher, can easily be interpreted to be the knowledgeable one. "Scientific knowledge is judgement about things that are universal and necessary" (Aristotle, 1989, p. 144), whereas practical wisdom is concerned with the particular, it is concerned with action, and comes from experience (p. 146ff). The third type of knowledge, *phronesis*, concerns political, societal, and ethical perspectives. In the following, political and educational perspectives relevant for intervening in classrooms will be considered, before discussing ethical and philosophical perspectives.

Political and Educational Perspectives

The researcher has his/her presuppositions and is naturally curious about finding out something about a phenomenon. In classroom research, practitioners (teachers and pupils) provide the data that the researcher needs. Thus, the researcher is dependent on them and has to build a relationship based on trust and mutual understanding. The practitioners may be led to believe that the researcher is interested in his/her own research more than what is actually going on in the classroom, i.e. the researcher exploits the field of practice with the only instrumental aim of doing research (and possibly obtaining a degree). On the other hand, the researcher may be misled to think that the practitioners are merely participants – objects to be studied – not subjects with their own theories, understandings, and solutions. Both extremes are hazardous. Hellesnes (1992) refers to the one-sidedness of understanding practice as scientism if it is done merely from the scientist's perspective, and naivety if it is done solely from the everyday practical point of view. This encourages the type of research where both the researcher's and the practitioners' point of view are given value and respected. However, the very question of intervening, despite its popularity among some educational researchers, can be questioned. To provide an example, Steinsholt (2009) criticizes the Norwegian Educational Act of 2006-2007 (The Norwegian Educational Act, 2006-2007), and compares it to the American *No Child Left behind Act*. His main concern is that these acts specifically state that valid, reliable and updated research results are to be used to make the teachers' practice more effective. According to Steinsholt (2009), this way of decision-making is one-dimensional and instrumental. He questions the usefulness of intervening in teachers' practice with the aim of improving it in accordance with research results that claim to be effective. What kind of truth do the research results represent? What does it mean that something is "effective" in education? Effective for what and for whom? This may be the main critique against intervening in classroom practices. For example, even though there is clear evidence from several research results that portfolio assessment with its formative elements is better for pupils' learning conditions, it does not necessarily imply that this is true for all educational contexts and for all types of pupils. In fact, Steinsholt (2009) argues that it would be morally wrong to intervene in teachers' practice, despite good intentions or results, for matters that will be elaborated on below.

From an educational philosophical point of view, the future cannot be predicted. That is why Steinsholt (2009) stresses the inconsistency of our decisions. All actions contain an element of inconsistency, which in its turn opens up for opportunities (Steinsholt, 2009). That is precisely what characterizes the professional teacher. The practical wisdom, *phronesis*, enacted by the teacher cannot be predicted and directed by research results. If we do that, as the educational acts Steinsholt (2009) criticizes, we are in danger of violating the profession's particularity; or said with reference to the French deconstructionist Jacques Derrida and his philosophy, we are in danger of killing the other. *Episteme* becomes the only relevant type of knowledge, whilst *techne* and *phronesis* are neglected. Judging from this point of view, then, intervention research in general should not be conducted.

Reductionism refers to the reduction that occurs when scientific theories focus on certain aspects and as a consequence overlook other aspects of a phenomenon (Gustavsson, 2000). This could be said to be the opposite of richness in perspectives, i.e. seeing a phenomenon from various, different, and sometimes contradicting angles. It is the researcher's duty to look for alternative ways of interpreting the data. This is true for all types of research, but maybe more true for intervention research, since the researcher in an intervention research has reduced his/her theories to the one that is to be studied. Trying to falsify one's conclusions is important for all researchers, but as argued here even more important for interventionist researchers.

This brings us to the core of ethical issues in intervention research.

The Ethics of Intervening in Educational Research

One perspective is to see the relationship between the researcher and the practitioners as an unequal one, where the researcher is superior in terms of “knowing”. Another perspective would be to consider the two parts as equal, but having different roles depending on the context (Steen-Olsen & Eikseth, 2009). Being able to see and listen to the context is thus important when discussing *ethical implications*. The discussion of ethics will be done from four different traditions: Ethics of principles, ethics of consequences, ethics of relations, and ethics of virtues. Finally, the relevance of these different types of ethics for intervention research and the researcher’s role will be discussed.

Throughout history, various philosophers have written about epistemological and ontological questions: What is knowledge, truth, being, learning, values, right or wrong, good or bad etc. When it comes to values, we can distinguish at least between four traditions:

- Ethics of principles or duties, with its proponents being Kant, Habermas, Rawls, and Kohlberg, which is relevant for research in terms of universal principles securing all participants mutual strength and balanced influence in a rational discourse.
- Ethics of consequences, as formulated by Bentham, Mill, and Hare, has relevance for the research process and the presentation of research.
- Ethics of relations or care, with its main proponents being Løgstrup and Levinas, may be applied to shed light on the vulnerable position of the participants in a research study.
- And finally, Aristotle’s and later MacIntyre’s ethics of virtues can help the researcher consider the implications of his/her research for individual and societal virtues.

The above mentioned traditions are all concerned with ethics or values, but emphasize different aspects. Ethics of principles and consequences take a more distant position towards the matter, whereas ethics of virtues and relations maintain a closer and more personal relation.

Ethics of Principles

Nothing can be a moral principle, according to Kant, if it cannot be a principal for all. Thus, it is a demand that a moral principle is universal, which is famously known as Kant’s Categorical Imperative (Kant, 1993/1785, p. 54). Part of this imperative is also the idea to treat others with respect, which for Kant means treating people as ends, and not merely as a means. In practice, this would imply supporting others’ capacities to act, i.e. others’ ideas and purposes. Kant argues for an obligation to reject a policy of refusing needed help (O’Neill, 1991, p. 179). In his philosophy, humans are agents. In formative interventions, the researcher spends time in the field of practice and together with the practitioners question existing practice (Engeström & Sannino, 2010, p. 7). This would mean spending time in the classroom to question the existing practice, with the help of the teachers. The teachers have to be supported in their analyses, even though they may have other, sometimes deviating, perspectives than the researcher.

All human beings have to be treated as a goal in themselves, not as a means towards a goal (Kant, 1993/1785, p. 63-64). The participants in a research study are thus to be viewed as goals, which implies that the researcher has to show a genuine interest in them. When being regarded as a goal, one has dignity (p. 70). The reason for human dignity, according to Kant, is autonomy (p. 72). Collaboration between the researcher and the field of practice does require autonomous practitioners. It is, after all, they who are the ones doing the practical job of teaching and having the responsibility for the pupils and their learning.

In Kant’s philosophy, an imperative can be hypothetical or categorical (Kant, 1993/1785,

p. 46). The hypothetical one is concerned with the outcome of an action, whereas the categorical imperative is in itself necessary – regardless of the outcome. It is thus to be viewed as a moral law (p. 53). A researcher’s openness towards the practitioners in the classroom may be said to be a categorical imperative. However, intervening in practice with the aim of changing it may be against Kant’s categorical imperative, since intervention in itself cannot be considered a necessity. That is unless the *intention* behind is to improve practice. Then we are indifferent to the consequences that may arise – maybe the consequence of the intervention in fact leads to a worse practice (meaning poorer learning conditions for the pupils) – but Kant would disregard that and merely emphasize the good intention.

Ethics of Consequences

John Stuart Mill was amongst others concerned with the concept of utilitarianism, where actions and activities are assessed according to their effects on human happiness. The morally right action produces the most good, both for oneself and for others. This theory can be called consequentialism, i.e. possible consequences of an action determine whether the action is right or wrong. In contrast to his predecessor, Jeremy Bentham, Mill distinguishes between different types of happiness or pleasures. He claims that intellectual pleasures are qualitatively better than for example sensual pleasures (Brink, 2007). Thus, if the outcome of an intervention research is better learning conditions in terms of for example more reflection or better scores on tests for pupils, the action could be judged morally right. Another consequence that is relevant to mention is the dissemination of research results to teachers and teacher educators. In this sense, the most good for the researcher may be seeing that the research study has achieved some insight worth sharing with others. The most good for others may be to read about and identify a context that can contribute to developing the practice and understanding of pupils’ learning processes, as also evidenced by Brevik’s study on participants’ ethical reasoning for taking part in research studies (Brevik, 2013).

Ethics of Relations

Along with Heidegger and Husserl, Levinas was one of the philosophers concerned with phenomenological aspects of a relationship. Levinas argues for the responsibility we have in relation to another person. This responsibility is non-reciprocal, i.e. it exists without words having to be uttered (Bergo, 2006). Eikseth and Skeie (2010) also write about the innate value between the researcher and the practitioners. The close relationship requires that the researcher encourages the practitioners in their work in order to build necessary trust, in addition to confidentiality and informed consent as described earlier.

Levinas states that existence is firstly human (Bergo, 2006). The face-to-face contact is of primary importance to him. In intervention research, the face-to-face contact is in fact in focus. Face-to-face meetings between the researcher and the practitioners are the main arenas for discussions and decision-making. This is particularly valid for teachers working in a very hectic environment. The researcher may experience not receiving any response to or reactions towards e-mails, but when meeting the teachers, s/he may see immediate interest and involvement.

Ethics of Virtues

Aristotle (1989) claims that good is “that at which all things aim” (p. 1). This may not seem to have immediate relevance for education, but we could ask the question what good is in education? It could be argued “that at which all things aim” in education is pupils’ learning. All intentions and actions on behalf of the teachers seem to point at this end. It should be added that

learning here is not defined narrowly as meaning only epistemic knowledge, but includes all types of knowledge, also *phronesis*. Thus, pupils' learning is considered to be the ultimate goal of intervention in practice, also in research where the interventions are only aimed at teachers. Moreover, Aristotle states that "intellectual virtue in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching (for which reason it requires experience and time)" (p. 28). Experience and time are two frequent concepts in educational contexts. In intervention research, it is thus important to value the practitioners' experience, and at the same time show understanding for their priorities when time is a critical factor.

According to Aristotle, "virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice" (1989, p. 39), cf. informed consent mentioned earlier. Choice, says Aristotle, relates to things that are in our own power (p. 54). Voluntary actions are defined as actions done not under compulsion and with knowledge of the circumstances (p. 48). Based on this definition, it is interesting to ask to what extent the practitioners' involvement in an intervention research can be considered to be voluntary, and what that means for the researcher's role.

Concluding Remarks

In an intervention study, it is important that the researcher spends time in the field of practice before the actual intervention begins. That is not only for the purpose of analyzing the needs, both historical and empirical, but also to understand and become part of the practitioners' culture. Ethical competence (*phronesis*) can be gained through being together with people who are experienced in various situations. Some researchers claim that it is ethically incorrect *not* to intervene in classroom research, given the responsibility and knowledge researchers have when entering the field of practice; and other researchers are inherently skeptical do intervening in classroom practices. From this latter perspective, then, intervention research with the aim of changing practice is in itself morally wrong. In line with Kant's moral theory, we could pose the question whether a classroom researcher, in addition to having a narrow research focus, should intervene in the field of practice with the aim of changing it? Could this be a moral imperative, i.e. a universal law?

In Kant's philosophy, virtues, norms and reason are put in opposition to emotions, feelings, and lust. Whereas others would claim that ethics cannot be reduced to specific domains, but that it rather concerns human being's life in general. This latter interpretation of ethics is more in line with Aristotle's *phronesis* and Levinas' concept of relations. Levinas' philosophy emphasizes the Other, and the responsibility connected with that. Obviously, the Other for a researcher who becomes an active part of the research is the practitioners. Kant's moral philosophy is concerned with a priori, i.e. pure reason. He claims that moral based on principles of experience are rather practical rules, not moral laws.

Ethics of consequences and ethics of virtues view actions as being directed by a goal. However, within ethics of consequences, in contrast to ethics of virtues, the goal is measured according to its maximizing of the individual's happiness. Ethics of virtues is concerned with contextual, specific, situational and concrete actions. To act practically wise, one has to have knowledge of opportunities about ways of acting, which assumes moral judgement (*hexis*). That is why experience is important in ethics of virtues.

These principles can be applied to classroom intervention research, shedding light on the goals of the research and the importance of the researcher's moral judgement. The most important ethical consideration may be the researcher's openness for new ways of seeing through the lens of research. This goes for all types of research, but when intervening in practitioners' everyday life, the researcher's ethical responsibilities are more overt and thus more sensitive. Books on research methods should, in addition to the traditional ethical issues pertaining to data collection, data analysis and the reporting of research, also take care to problematize the ethics of intervention research.

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