

Does successful Action Research Merely Require a Culture of Reflective Practice or is There More to it?

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Abstract

This article explores the issue of whether a reflective culture is a necessary condition for sustaining action research in the Maldives. Drawing on data gathered for a study conducted in the Maldives and supplemented by a discussion of literature on the appropriateness of AR in developing countries, I consider why AR might be useful for professional development in the Maldives. As in many developing country contexts, there are many practical difficulties, such as time constraints that can prevent teachers from engaging in AR. However, the main focus of this article is to reflect whether it is simply a case of the absence of a reflective culture or AR itself that may be acting as a barrier to teacher engagement in it. Based on these findings, I argue that familiarity with reflective practices in teaching may be a prerequisite to the development of AR in the Maldives, and therefore, it may be that introducing the notion of reflective practice into initial teacher training is the first step. I also argue that it is important to carefully and critically consider the assumptions and practices within AR and adapt it for use as a professional development tool.

Identifiers /Key words: Action research (AR), developing countries, reflective practice, Maldives

1. Introduction

After being exposed to AR for the first time here in UK, I felt that it might be a useful tool for the professional development of teachers in the Maldives where I was working as a teacher educator. One of the advantages of using AR in the Maldives as well as other similar small developing countries is related to the contextually-grounded nature of AR (Pryor 1998). Teachers can become responsible for their own professional development rather than expecting other external organizations to organize specific events for this purpose. The other merit is that it is a continuous process. These two factors are important in countries like the Maldives where teachers get very little opportunity for professional development and feel others are responsible for organization of this. As a language teacher educator, I hoped AR would encourage language teachers in secondary schools to be more innovative in their choice of teaching methods, based on their own contexts.

It was for these reasons that I decided to facilitate AR in the Maldives for my PhD. My intention was first to understand the English language teaching context in the Maldives so I designed my study to have an overall AR design, involving doing AR myself (defined as first order AR) and also facilitating AR (i.e. second order AR). I mainly draw on data collected for this study to raise and discuss the issue of using AR in a small developing country context like the Maldives. This same issue has already been discussed in the literature conducted in similar contexts and some of the conclusions they have reached are also relevant to the Maldivian context (Pryor, 1998; Stuart and Kunje, 1998; Walker, 1993, 1994; O'Sullivan, 2002). As in many developing countries, there are obvious contextual difficulties that teachers face which affect their willingness to engage in AR. One of these is the constraints on time and, related to that, the pressure of external exams. However, the less obvious constraint, the lack of a reflective culture related to the teaching and the teacher training culture in the Maldives, as well as the assumptions and practices within AR itself, seemed to be equally powerful in determining the suitability and sustainability of AR. Considering that it is the process of reflection in AR that drives it and enhances learning possibilities (Leitch & Day, 2000), in this article, I consider the question: will the development of a 'reflective culture'¹ *alone* be sufficient for AR to thrive in the Maldives?

2. Geographical, historical and educational overview of the Maldives

The Maldives is a group of approximately 1,190 small low lying coral islands scattered over a distance of 100,000 square kilometres in the Indian Ocean (Bray & Adam, 2001) south-west of Sri Lanka, on the equator. Even though the area of the sea is vast, the land area consists of only 300 square kilometres (Bray & Adam 2001). There are 27 natural atolls², but for administrative

purposes, they are grouped into 21 divisions: Male' city and 20 administrative atolls. The population of the Maldives (estimated as of mid-2008) was 309,575 (Statistical year book of the Maldives, 2009) and more than a third of this population lives in the capital city, Male' (Shareef & Kinshuk, n.d.).

Dramatic changes were made to the traditional education system (where the medium of instruction was the local language – Dhivehi) that existed before 1960 with the introduction of English medium education, at first in Male' and gradually across the country (Gupta & Latheef, 2007). The introduction of English was seen as a necessary step towards the development of the Maldives. Currently, the medium of instruction in schools across the country is English. As a result, English is very important as it will determine the overall success in end-of-school examinations.

As in many developing nations, the education system in the Maldives is very centralized and top-down, with the Ministry of Education (MOE) generally overlooking all matters related to schools across the country. While the national curriculum exists for the primary level, the curriculum at the secondary level is still determined by examination bodies outside the country. Secondary school students, therefore, sit external examinations provided by these external bodies, namely the Cambridge IGCSE Ordinary level examination by UCLES (which is also the secondary school culmination exam) and London GCE Advanced level examination (which is the higher secondary school culmination exam) by the EDEXCEL in Britain respectively. These examinations are deemed by the Maldivian public to be prestigious, thereby placing huge emphasis on the qualification gained in these exams, which are generally regarded as a passport for gaining access to further education abroad as well as within the country.

2.1 Action research in developing countries

It is argued that transfer of western paradigms to developing countries often fails to take into consideration local realities (Crossley & Vulliamy, 1996; O'Sullivan, 2002). Some who have developed this argument with specific reference to educational research highlight action research, because of its contextually-grounded nature, as a potentially appropriate methodology for educational research in developing countries. For instance, with reference to education in West Africa, Pryor (1998) states that action research does appear to be a useful methodology because it is sensitive to context and intended for change and general improvement of practice (referring to Oja & Smulyan, 1989). Its appeal in this context also lies in the fact that the practitioner is a participant in the research, generating knowledge about

¹ Defined as an environment where teachers examine their practice reflectively and reflexively (Bolton 2010) so as to engage in a process of continuous learning (Schon 1983).

² A coral island or islands, consisting a belt of coral reef, partly submerged, surrounding a central lagoon or depression (Shareef & Kinshuk n.d.).

his or her own practice, making it particularly relevant to the “lives, experiences and practice of African teachers” (Pryor, 1998, p. 221). He further points out that involvement of teachers in generating locally relevant knowledge is not only likely to provide a better understanding of the “nature and quality of teaching and learning in the south which is not well documented but it could also be effective in speaking to teachers in similar situations in a way that relates more closely with their own experience” (Crossley & Vulliamy, 1996 cited in Pryor, 1998, p. 221).

While acceding that action research in developing countries is useful as a way of producing knowledge and initiating change and improvement at the grassroots level, its promotion in developing countries, especially by international aid agencies, as highlighted by Diniz-Pereira (2002), also merits some caution. She points out that promotion of teacher research in developing countries by some conservative international organizations may be underpinned by their hegemonic agendas to “keep their control over teacher education programmes” (p. 391) which intensifies teachers’ work further (Diniz-Pereira, 2002). Another important point she highlights is that working conditions and qualifications of teachers in developed and developing countries are markedly different and this influences teachers’ ability and willingness to engage in action research in these contexts.

The experiences of those who have conducted action research in developing contexts (it has to be noted that much of this work is located in African countries) report similar as well as additional constraints unique to their specific situations. For instance, Walker (1993, 1994), drawing on her work as a university-based facilitator in the primary education project (PREP) for African primary schools in Cape Town, highlighted that the conditions for facilitating action research were not present there: there were time constraints and no way to reward the teachers’ efforts. She also identified the teachers’ educational background and experiences as inhibiting factors. Many teachers who participated in her study did not have adequate training. In addition, their experiences of state repression and repression from authorities in the centralized education system prevented teachers from relating to action research. Walker also mentioned that teachers’ unfamiliarity with the notion of themselves as change agents capable of shaping curriculum – “teachers did not envisage a role for themselves as producers of educational knowledge” (Walker, 1993, p. 98) – was also a significant barrier to promoting action research among South African primary school teachers. Owing to these constraints, her intention of implementing emancipatory action research was not fulfilled in the way she had imagined. However, she remained positive, answering her question of whether action research was appropriate for teacher development in South Africa by suggesting that “action research underpinned by a view of teachers as reflective practitioners (Schon, 1987) is one appropriate model for INSET in South Africa” (Walker, 1993, p. 106) provided some contextual issues such as working conditions are resolved (Walker, 1993, 1994).

Pryor (1998), basing his views on his experience in Ghana, also referred to practical conditions like untrained teachers, low income for teachers forcing them to look for employment after school hours and lack of resources as inhibiting teachers from engaging in action research (see also Stuart & Kunje, 1998). He also noted that the problem of talking about action research with Ghanaian teachers was related to their unfamiliarity with the concept of reflective teaching: “the practice of reflection seemed far from their experience...(consequently) the attraction of action research, that it resembles the process of reflective teaching so closely, was not apparent to them” (Pryor, 1998, p. 223). Many other researchers with experience of conducting or facilitating action research in African countries refer to the lack of a critical approach as a factor hindering teachers from relating to the process of action research. For instance, Stuart and Kunje (1998), reporting an experiment with action research in Malawi (resulting from an institutional link between a University of Malawi and University of Sussex), aimed at finding out what happened to untrained temporary teachers (UTTs), the extent of the support provided by schools and its effects on classrooms, identified several difficulties in facilitating action research- “basic resources, background training and a critical approach are lacking” (p. 377) in Malawi. As in the case of some developing African nations (e.g.: Ghana, South Africa, Lesotho), it can be challenging to develop a critical community because of the socio-cultural traditions and colonial history (Stuart & Kunje, 1998; Walker, 1994). Despite this, the authors suggested that action research is appropriate for Malawi provided some minimum requirements were taken care of first (Stuart & Kunje, 1998).

I started this section with some literature that suggested action research is potentially relevant for developing country contexts. The action research experiences from South Africa discussed here do not entirely disregard the potential it has for development of teachers in the South but it also highlights that “at issue is the point that lessons and experience of action research as it has evolved in the developed North cannot simply be transposed to the Southern context, without considering what conditions made action research feasible, and how it might need to be adapted in diverse locations” (Walker, 1993, p. 95). The above discussion in this section highlights the problems of transferring ideas like action research from developed countries to developing country contexts. One of the main problems is that

the notion of critical reflection is generally unfamiliar to teachers in developing nations such as South Africa where teachers are unwilling to engage in critical thought due to factors such as “an impoverished educational background, experience of power of a centralized education authority and state repression” (Walker, 1993, p. 67). As Pryor (1998) and O’Sullivan (2002) note, teachers in western countries find it easier to identify with action research because it resembles the reflective practice promoted through pre-service and in-service training in these contexts. The effectiveness of these approaches in the professional development of teachers in the west is not supported by much empirical literature (O’Sullivan, 2002). Thus, it is only

appropriate that careful consideration should be given before transferring action research (or any new idea for that matter) to developing countries.

2.2 Action research in the Maldives: what's the appeal?

Action research is a relatively novel concept in the Maldives. Before coming to study in UK, I was unaware of action research myself. Therefore, adoption of action research as the design for my own research study initially was accidental. When I came to study at the University of East Anglia (UEA), I knew I wanted to do something that would help me to understand English language teachers so that I may use this to inform my own practice as a teacher trainer. My orientation to research metamorphosed several times over the period of my studies. First it was just a qualitative study, then a case study and at one time I regarded it as an ethnographic study. As I went through these stages, I recalled my experience as an English language teacher and the head of English language department in one of the island schools in the Maldives some years previously. I had to constantly come up with ideas to share with my department and also to engage my own students. These had to be revised or replaced frequently. I came upon the idea of using action research by chance as I talked this over with my supervisor. As I read more and more about action research, I was able to relate the processes to my own experience. My fascination with action research grew from seeing in this approach a resemblance to what I used to do to improve my own teaching.

I felt that action research could be a useful vehicle for my own learning, but my decision to facilitate action research with secondary school English language teachers in the Maldives was to see how feasible it might be as a professional development tool and how it might be adapted to suit the conditions under which the teachers worked. The appeal of AR to me as a potential tool for professional development of language teachers lay in the fact that it was a more 'inside out' approach to professional development (Nunan, 2001, p. 199). This meant that it necessitated more active participation of the teachers in their own professional development (PD), involving them in a long term continuous process of learning, thereby curtailing their current dependence on external organizations. Teachers in the Maldives do not see PD as their own responsibility, often waiting for the school management to arrange a workshop for this purpose. This attitude is fostered by the 'outside in' approach (Nunan, 2001, p. 199) to professional development currently prevailing in the Maldives. In the Maldives, PD takes the form of occasional workshops (mostly once or twice a year) organized by the National Institute of Education (NIE), a section under the Ministry of Education (MOE) responsible for the preparation of resource materials (e.g.; textbooks) along with the organization of PD across the country. As is clear, this arrangement limits opportunities for teacher professional development, a point highlighted by some of the participants involved in my study:

Last year there weren't any workshops organized for language teachers by the school ... no such activities (PD) were conducted. But this year I participated in one but it wasn't particularly for language teachers (Heath, Interview one / 21/4/09).

AR seemed useful as a strategy for PD because of its localized nature. In the Maldives, because PD is organized by an external body (National Institute of Education (NIE), the materials may not have much relevance to the teachers because the local realities may not have been taken into consideration in the preparation of these materials. The Head of Department (HOD) of one of the schools made this point when he said, *"I have attended many workshops but I do not find much of these materials to be relevant to the classroom context that I find myself in"* (workshop, 20/6/09). Since AR is sensitive to local realities (Pryor, 1998) and because it involves teachers investigating their own practice and generating knowledge about it, teachers are more likely to relate to and understand this knowledge. This way, AR could help to bridge the theory-practice divide by making teachers more conscious of their own assumptions and beliefs about language teaching so that their practice may incorporate those innovative ideas as well as the theoretical knowledge the teachers might have gained from their teacher training and experience. With reference to Wallace (1991), Nunan (2001) argues that reflective teaching presents a way of integrating these two sources of knowledge (received (from training and experiential knowledge) with practice, and extending reflective practice to action research enhances the benefit as it brings in rigor and makes it more systematic.

Being involved in teacher training required me to keep in touch with both teacher trainees and in-service teachers. As a result of this, I had some knowledge about the perceptions of some teachers with regard to professional development. For many teachers (and teacher educators alike) professional development is seen as a means to an end. That is, learning a set of prescriptive approaches and transmitting these to learners in the classroom. When I asked teachers about what they do for professional development, many teachers mentioned searching the Internet and library books for ideas but I found that the majority of these materials were used in the classroom without much consideration for how it might be relevant to the background and level of the students. The teachers did not perceive PD as a process of learning, and AR with its inherent focus on continuous learning might be a useful means of building a culture of learning that is essential for the betterment of professional practice in the Maldives.

When I went into the field, I was positive AR would be a useful tool for teachers but my experience of facilitating AR made me aware of the multiple complexities involved in introducing an innovation like AR in an environment that has different qualities to those that sustain it in other contexts.

2.3 An overview of the research study

The research was conducted with eleven English language teachers from two secondary schools in Male', the capital of the Maldives. The data for the study was collected mainly through semi-structured interviews and observations. However, informal conversations, documents, research dairies (from participants and the researcher) as well as field notes were important data sources for this study. The research was spread across a duration of six months.

The project has an overall AR design. I was conducting AR myself, the first order action research phase, and I also facilitated AR with a group of teachers (defined in this study as second order action research) in the second phase of the study. I visited the teachers' classrooms several times during the first phase. Two interviews were conducted: the first one conducted during this phase was designed to find out teachers' beliefs about language teaching and learning, and how the teachers described their own practice. This interview was used as a methodological tool for consciousness-raising to encourage teachers to become more aware of their own practice and begin to reflect on what they do in the classroom. The other purpose was for me to get a better understanding of teachers' lives and their working contexts. The teachers were also requested to conduct action research themselves (the second phase). I facilitated this process, firstly by introducing the teachers to AR during a two-hour workshop and then supporting them during their projects. The second interview was conducted at the end of the teachers' action research projects to discern teachers' view of doing action research so as to determine how sustainable this process may be as a tool for teacher professional development in the context of Maldivian secondary schools.

2.4 How conducive is the context of the two schools for sustaining AR?

Facilitating AR in the Maldives has been a formidable challenge. There were many factors that inhibited teachers' engagement in AR. A lot of the barriers were what one might expect to find in any developing country context but the situation in the Maldives is far better than the situations in some developing countries. For instance, unlike the teachers in Stuart and Kunje's (1998) study in Malawi whose lack of training posed some challenges to their engagement in AR, most of the secondary school teachers in the Maldivian schools are well-trained. In fact, many of the teachers who participated in this study had a diploma or a degree in teaching English as a foreign language and one of them had obtained a master's degree, although there were a few who did not have a teaching certificate. The schools where these teachers worked were amongst the most well-resourced schools in the Maldives. In many countries in the South, the centralized authority left by colonial rule (e.g.; South Africa (Walker 1993, 1994) and Malawi

(Stuart & Kunje, 1998)) prevent teachers from developing a critical community, an integral aspect of the action research process. The colonial history of the Maldives has not influenced education as prominently as in some of the nations in the African continent. Nevertheless, what is similar in the Maldives to these contexts is the teachers' perception of themselves as mere transmitters of knowledge rather producers of knowledge. Being acculturated into a system like this, the teachers could not identify easily with the reflective teaching approach demanded by the action research process. These and other difficulties reported by teachers as preventing them from engaging in AR are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

2.5 The practical barriers

In this section I generally focus on what I found to be the practical barriers to teachers' lack of engagement in action research in the Maldives. One of the major reasons many teachers identified as having hindered them from engaging in AR more constructively was time-related issues like the prescribed syllabus aligned closely with a high stakes external examination – the Cambridge IGCSE Ordinary level examinations. It is this examination that drives teaching in the secondary schools in the Maldives, as two teachers succinctly pointed out; *“ours is a very exam based system”* (Heath3, interview one / 21/4/2009), *“the IGCSE exam requires us focus on certain things...”* (Leesha, interview one / 31/05/09).

Many teachers in this study noted that they did not have the time to carry out AR because they are expected to cover the same content (in terms of both the skills they teach and the materials that are used) uniformly in order to ensure that all students are prepared adequately and uniformly for the school examinations as well as the IGCSE O' level examination. The practice of resource preparation and distribution established in these schools in turn is organized to facilitate uniform content coverage across the grades.

Currently, we make the same lesson plans, materials for all our classes... In our coordination meetings, all the teachers decide on specific things for specific periods of the week and there aren't enough time slots in the week to include other activities along with what we are required to do already... (Usha, interview one / 16/05/09).

The insecurity the teachers expressed of being 'left behind' in relation to content coverage was evidently related to the expectations of the school administration for whom teaching is conceptualized in terms of a competition in pursuit of topping the league tables (referred to as the national top 10 results in the Maldives) as explained by some teachers:

Teaching here is very results-based... everything that goes on here is based on producing results... results means so much that the school identifies the 'cream' or the best students and drill them to perform in examinations. Exam results mean everything to the school (Leesha, interview one/ 31/05/09).

It is also related to the expectations of the parents. The recent changes in the school system placed accountability to parents as an important aspect of school policy. The teachers stated that they were unprepared to incorporate new ideas like AR because they were apprehensive about how parents might react to their children engaging in material that is different from the rest of their peers. According to the teachers, parents monitor their children's progress by comparing the content covered and how much of it is covered in the lessons. The general understanding is that since all the children in the same grade would sit the same examination, the teachers should be giving the same exercises at around the same time to all the students in the same grade. Many teachers use teaching approaches that they think will meet parental expectations. Hence, the teachers were reluctant to use AR because they perceived it to be incompatible with achieving parental expectations of content coverage. The following teachers highlighted this point during their interviews:

A lot of issues arise if we lag behind other teachers or if we do other things. Sometimes parents might complain that his or her child is in the same grade and doing something different to his friend also in the same grade. This has happened... (Usha, interview two/ 23/08/09)

The parents complain saying that this teacher hasn't done this lesson that all the other teachers in the grade have done...yes parents influence, we have to keep in mind they might complain if teachers give different things to different classes of the same grade... (Leesha, interview two / 17/08/09).

The teachers also identified workload as a constraint on time, hindering them from engaging in AR. What constituted "workload" for many of the teachers in this study were not the usual things that one might expect from developing countries (e.g., large classes, hectic teaching schedules) but other professional activities like marking books and exam papers, writing mid-term review reports, paper work, and so on.

The uncertainty expressed by the teachers in the Maldives in relation to the sustainability of AR is evidently linked to time-related factors linked to the content-driven curriculum mentioned

³ Note that wherever participants are quoted, their real names are replaced by pseudonyms.

here, but the issue of success and sustainability of AR in this context runs much deeper than these more practical factors.

2.6 Is it simply about the absence of a reflective culture or is the ‘reflective culture’ within AR the barrier?

I found that the lack of engagement in AR by the teachers to be related to the teachers’ lack of familiarity with the notion of systematic reflection and reflective practice within AR. This is not to suggest that teachers did not engage in reflection. However, the natural way the teachers reflected did not align with certain assumptions and practices or the ‘reflective culture’ within action research.

The teachers in this study were not familiar with the notion of purposeful, systematic reflection that involves subjecting oneself and what one does (e.g.: teaching) to critical analysis that aims to bring change and improvement. For example, many teachers clearly thought out their lesson plans and their implementation in the classroom, which was evident from the way some of their lessons were presented (e.g.: brainstorming, pre-reading activities leading to reading comprehension and then to writing exercises). However, these reflections appeared to be concerned with transferring content (for instance, a prescriptive set of rules about writing a summary) rather than improving practice. This situation may have arisen from the fact that the syllabus is prescribed, giving teachers very little control over the actual content to be taught. Hence, the teachers, seeing that they could exercise some control over the presentation, may have preferred to focus their reflections on planning instead of examining the effect of the content and their actions, and using this to improve their practice. This would also explain why, as the teachers themselves pointed out, teaching in general followed such a standard routine. Many teachers involved in my study were indeed reflecting. This was evident in the fact that some of the teachers were cognizant of their beliefs and were able to point out that a gap between their beliefs and their actions in the classroom did exist. However, these reflections did not involve being critical in terms of questioning the authority and established practices of the school as is encouraged in some forms of AR (e.g.: emancipatory AR). For instance, Abraham believed it is important to cater to the individual needs of his students and yet he pointed out that he did not do this as he generally used centrally prepared materials for all his classes and did not question the relevance of these materials to his students’ level and background. The teachers’ lack of engagement in critical reflection may be related to the cultural understanding of the wider society which values submissiveness to authority and discourages challenging established practices. Consequently, they might not have felt it appropriate to question the existing practices as they were encouraged to do as part of their AR process.

My claim that teachers may be unfamiliar with reflection is based on my observations of teachers’

practice in the classroom and lesson preparation meetings (referred to as coordination meetings or department meetings, organized weekly by the English language department of each school). For instance, in school A, the preparation and use of resource materials (worksheets for use in the classroom) seemed to be a mechanical process rather than an exercise founded on collaborative reflection. During the weekly coordination meetings, a teacher from each grade (e.g.: grade 8) was assigned the task of searching for and preparing materials for all the teachers in that grade. There are no further discussions regarding the materials (in terms of questioning the relevance or appropriateness of the level of these materials to individual teachers' unique classroom situations) with the teachers who simply use these without any modification. As a result, hardly any variations in the use of the resource materials was evident in their teaching regardless of the abilities of the students. Schon (1983) explained that a teacher who "reflects in action on the designs of her (or his work)" (p. 333) understands that "different students present different phenomena for understanding and action. Each student makes up a universe of one, whose potentials, problems, and pace of work must be appreciated" (p. 333). This means reflective teachers take into consideration various factors and adapt their teaching accordingly. While many teachers were aware of the importance of this sort of reflection, it did not appear to be a part of the standard practice of the English department in the two Maldivian secondary schools and this posed a major challenge to teachers' understanding of AR and engagement in it.

When the teachers began their AR projects, they were provided with some guidance (in the form a series of questions) about writing reflective journals and requested to keep one throughout the process. It soon became evident that the teachers were not used to writing down reflections. Only a few teachers were able to maintain a journal and the account in these journals were generally descriptive, replicating our discussions or presenting details of their individual AR projects. For instance, following our discussions on student writing and how they can be made aware of potential mistakes they are likely to make, a teacher wrote the following in her reflective journal:

*Rather than giving individual feedback, it's better to collect and analyze samples of students' work with the students... I think if they are involved in collecting their own mistakes it would be more benefitting for them
(Rai's reflective journal)*

Here, the teacher repeats the idea she had provided in the meeting as a possible way to address the problem of feedback and student writing. It may also be that the teachers found it difficult to maintain the journal because I failed to explain that the teachers could use their mother tongue to document their reflections.

It became clear that the normal way teachers in this context reflected did not align with

certain practices in AR (e.g.: the formal process of identifying problems, collecting data and reflecting on it, writing down reflections), preventing them from understanding and engaging in it. Additionally, certain assumptions within AR also played a crucial role. Here I consider two assumptions within AR that might have influenced the teachers' level of engagement in AR: the democracy assumption and lifelong learning assumption. According to Van Manen (1990) the 'democracy assumption' which sees the concept of democratic partnership as "inherently symmetrical, egalitarian or good" (Manen, 1990, p. 152) is often found in AR. Taking this perspective of AR suggests that top down relations are not facilitative of real change (Van Manen, 1990). This assumption might sometimes be at odds with the cultural understandings of the nature of relations in some cultures as in the case of the Maldives. The teachers in the Maldives are acculturated into a system founded on unequal relationships (between school principals and teachers, teacher educators and teachers, etc.). Thus, teachers would find it difficult to understand the notion of democratic partnership and assume such a role in any situation, including conducting AR with an outside facilitator / researcher who, like me, has taught some of these teachers in their teacher training programmes.

AR by its very nature revolves around the renewal of teachers' practical and theoretical knowledge to promote learning as an ongoing process. This notion of lifelong learning inherent in the AR process is linked to policy initiatives in education in the West where educational AR was first promoted. In places like the Maldives where educational policy only promotes lifelong learning at a philosophical level and does not encourage it in the practice and cultures of schooling, teachers may struggle to understand the concept of AR. Additionally, learning in the Maldives is generally regarded to be developmental where teachers see themselves as moving from the learning phase (their formal learning in school and the teacher training) to a knowledge transmission phase (i.e. qualify as teachers and join the teaching force). This means that many teachers do not understand the need to learn in and from practice and how this could help in the renewal of language teaching.

While teachers struggled because of their lack of familiarity with the 'reflective culture' within AR, the study pointed out that certain conditions were more conducive in facilitating the kind of reflection that can potentially help in the renewal of professional practice. The gap that I observed between teachers' expressed beliefs and their practice in the two schools sheds some light on some of these conditions. Much of the beliefs about language teaching and learning expressed by the teachers resonated with ideas and thoughts current in the language teaching field and literature, for instance, learner-centred language teaching, incorporation of multimedia, and individualized instruction. While, in relation to certain topics, teachers were aware of the gap between their beliefs and practice, there were discrepancies as well. The contextual difficulties I have mentioned earlier in this paper were influential in preventing teachers from implementing their beliefs. However, the gap between beliefs and practice

were more evident in one school than the other, suggesting that the practical constraints were not the only contributing factors. The teachers in school B were encouraged by the school management and head of the English language department (HOD) to innovate. This involved participating in discussions about innovations like theme-based language teaching. The process of implementing this innovation, as explained by the HOD, had some similarity with the collaborative reflective process of evaluation, review and revision.

After planning the themes were introduced to the teachers during the coordination meetings held weekly. We discussed possible changes and how to conduct these lessons. Teachers were instructed on how to conduct the lessons. It was a team effort once the themes were presented. If we found the themes and the lessons were not working, I encouraged teachers to modify lesson accordingly... (HOD, school B. E-mail communication 3/2/10)

It may be that engaging in this collaborative reflective process helped to align the beliefs and practices of some of these teachers by making teachers aware of these. Additionally, the support and encouragement the teachers received from the senior management to innovate might explain why some of the teachers in the school were teaching in line with their own beliefs and more open to trying out new ideas like AR.

The teachers revealed that the process of discussion and collaboration in school B eventually died once the innovation they were working to implement at the time (i.e. theme-based language learning) was in place. The school HOD confirmed that teachers individually make decisions about implementing theme-based language learning:

At present, the teachers are given complete freedom to organize the materials under my guidance / I suggest methods and ideas. Some teachers use the methods and some teachers opt for some other method (HOD, English language department, school B/ e-mail communication: 3/02/10).

Thus, as I observed, critical dialogue and collaboration was not a normal part of the teachers' daily practice in either school. In fact the only forum where teachers could engage in this kind of dialogue was the weekly department meetings (or coordination meetings). These meetings, however, were generally used to pass on messages from senior management to the teachers, circulate lesson materials and to simply decide on what has to be done the following week. This presented some challenge in creating a 'community of critical inquiry' that I had envisaged when I embarked on this study. I wanted to facilitate discussion and sharing of ideas amongst teacher as I felt collaboration will potentially pave a path for a culture of teaching more receptive to reflection as a means of improving practice and to bring about change.

2.6 Is it simply about the absence of a reflective culture or is the 'reflective culture' within AR the barrier?

It is true that many teachers were unable to identify with AR and see the benefits they might accrue from engaging in this process and this was significantly influenced by the fact that the kind of systematic critical reflection within AR was not a normal part of the teacher culture and practice. It is also true that the conditions in the schools where this study is based were not conducive either – a prescriptive syllabus tied to a high stakes examination placing huge constraints on teachers' time and shaping teaching as well as expectations; general understanding of teaching as transmission of knowledge and having to do other professional activities like paper work. Thus, it is not one single factor that will determine the sustainability of AR in the Maldives, which means developing a culture of reflection in itself will not be sufficient for its success. As Fullan (1982, p. 82), rightly states, innovations (AR in the Maldives is an innovation) when it occurs is a *"fortunate combination of the right factors – a critical mass"* (in Van Den Berg & Meerkotter, 1993, p. 17).

The factors that could determine the sustainability of AR in the Maldives would involve addressing the existing conditions in which teachers work, and most significantly, changing teacher culture and the school culture to ones that value teaching underpinned by lifelong learning. I would argue that developing a reflective culture that encourages and facilitates critical dialogue and collaboration, and aligns more closely with cultural understanding and social practices will lay the foundation for transforming existing cultures. Considering that the notion of reflective practice is not currently a part of teacher training, it may be that introducing a culturally sensitive form of reflective practice into initial training is the first step towards building a reflective teaching force. When teachers understand the notion of reflective practice and experience it first-hand in the supportive and safe environment of the teacher training phase, they may feel more confident to make it a more natural part of their teaching and professional development once they join the teaching force. When the notion of reflective practice permeates training institutions and schools, we can then begin to consider if and how AR may be adapted to suit the context of the Maldivian schools.

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