CONDUCTING ACTION RESEARCH IN KENYAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS: A NARRATIVE OF LIVED EXPERIENCES

Ruth Otienoh  
Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology, Kenya

ABSTRACT  
This paper is a narrative of my personal experiences of conducting action research in Kenyan primary schools. It highlights the opportunities, successes, challenges and dilemmas I encountered during the process: from the school hunting period, to the carrying out of the actual research in two schools, with four teachers. This study reveals that although it may be challenging to conduct action research in schools/classrooms due to the stakeholders’ perceptions and attitudes about teaching and learning in an exam oriented context, the researcher’s disposition in terms of how he/she relates and interacts with participants may, to some extent, determine the level of a study’s success.

KEY WORDS: Narrative, challenges, opportunities, dilemmas, action research.

INTRODUCTION
Action research is a laborious experience due to the extended time, duration and activities undertaken at every stage (reconnaissance, intervention and post intervention) of the procedure. It is a type of research that is known to have high attrition levels (Grant, Nelson, & Mitchell, 2008) because, as Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) argue, participants find it challenging to sustain the iterative process. The foregoing notwithstanding, I conducted a collaborative action research that included four teachers in two primary schools with large classes in Nairobi, Kenya. The main aim of the study was to improve teaching and learning in large classes by creating interaction opportunities for learners. Hence, interactive
teaching and learning strategies of pair and group work were cyclically improved upon, and implemented.

This implied:

- A close collaboration with the teachers in the process of action research
- Trying out certain interactive teaching and learning strategies (specifically, pair and group work) of which teachers were aware, but apprehensive to implement due to the complexities of teaching and managing large classes
- Teachers modifying their classroom routine and culture to accommodate interactive approach to teaching and learning.

In addition, teachers were of the perception that implementing interactive strategies would impede syllabus coverage which was crucial in a context where passing exams is critical; which, as perceived by most education stakeholders, is determined by how much revision of content is carried out after completion of the stipulated syllabus.

With intense rigour associated with action research, and the focus of the study, it was envisaged to last for a period of five to six months. This paper is based on my personal experiences while conducting action research in Kenyan primary schools. It highlights and analyses opportunities, successes, challenges and dilemmas. I examine my experiences from school hunting to actual process of conducting action research. Certain incidents are discussed in relation to literature.

It should be noted that I am a Kenyan educated in Kenyan schools. I also have taught in various secondary schools in the county. I am therefore familiar with Kenya’s educational system. However, during this study, I was a doctoral student at a university in the United Kingdom. In addition, a follow up study is yet to be carried out to explore whether teachers continued to use the interactive teaching and learning strategies after the research period.

**Methodology**

This paper is based on detailed chronology of my experiences of conducting action research in Kenyan primary schools as they unfolded over a period of time. Thus, it is story oriented (Creswell, Hanson, Clark Plano, & Morales, 2007; Denzin, 1989). It is therefore a narrative; a written word text of remembered series of events of how I experienced the world (Moen, 2006; Clandinin & Huber, 2002) of conducting action research in schools as communities, including administrators, teachers and learners. It is also a life experience consisting of images, feelings, sentiments, desires, thoughts and meanings known to me as the person who lived the experiences (Moen, 2006). As a narrative, the life experience is infused with meaning as I interpret my encounters for personal meaning making (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007; Cortazzi & Jin, 2006). As a characteristic of narratives, it also is an analytical examination of the underlying assumptions and insights of my experiences (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

For this paper, a narrative approach was deemed appropriate because the richness and nuances of what I encountered would not have been vividly captured in definition or
abstract terms, but could only be demonstrated or evoked through a story (Moen, 2006). Through this narrative, I am able to present my experiences holistically in all their complexities and richness (Webster & Mertova, 2007) which are a result of the diverse encounters before and during the study.

Why the Narrative is Important

Clandinin et al. (2007) argue that a narrative study has to be justified in terms of its importance either to the researcher, to the target audience, and how it would be insightful to changing or thinking differently about the researcher’s own or others’ practices. Accordingly, although this study generally exposed me to diverse opportunities and challenges from which I learnt immensely, hence, enhancing my knowledge and skills as a teacher educator, I am of the opinion that this narrative may enable certain educational stakeholders in Kenyan schools to perceive conducting research in schools from a different and/or more positive perspective:

- It would act as a preparation to potential school researchers to be psychologically prepared for the type of reception they would experience and educate researchers about how to deal with certain ethical issues that could emerge during the process of action research
- Education stakeholders in our context to be at ease with, and welcome research activities in schools, since these mostly are meant to benefit teachers and schools in one way or the other
- Education stakeholders, particularly in schools, to be informed, and made aware that genuine researchers, in most cases, are not interested in other aspects of schools’ functioning other than their research focus.

Methods of Data Collection

Data for this narrative were in the form of field notes written from the time I commenced school hunting, as I observed the process of the research, and as I reflected and interpreted issues, events and situations. I maintained a research journal and recorded my thoughts, feelings and impressions for the whole duration of the study as I interacted with participants (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Retallick, 2004; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Reflections were also mainly focused on our roles (participants and researcher), and they documented the study’s progress. Thus, I recorded the study’s history as I interpreted events and situations which eventually assisted in writing this paper (Kemmis et al., 2004). I also used my diary as a source of data which I maintained throughout the study. In the diary, I recorded details of activities and whether they were carried out, or postponed with reasons for postponement (see Appendix 3).

The Narrative

School Hunting, Head Teachers and Teachers’ Reactions

Hunting for and negotiating with schools’ head teachers took a period of four and a half weeks. Whilst it was relatively easy to get into the first school I approached, it was challenging to find one other school for this study. The first school was more receptive due to the Professional Development (PD) relationship that had been established with our institution. In this regard, my journal entry read:
The first school I approached was very receptive and cooperative. I attribute this to our institution’s long PD relationship with this particular school. We have been conducting certificate programs in this region for a while, and this school has had a long relationship with us. It is a school whose teachers and management appreciate our work in teacher development (Reflective Journal entry, 9th April 2010).

Despite the acceptance in the first school, of the two teachers who volunteered to participate in the study, only one seemed positive and enthusiastic. Regardless of my explanations of the nature of the study, the other teacher had the perception that action research was an evaluation of his teaching, and not a learning process for improvement of practice. However, this thinking was bound to occur since action research is uncommon in this context. The teacher said, “I will agree to it for the time being, and see how it goes.” This reaction worried me since according to research ethics, participants are at liberty to withdraw from research if not ‘comfortable’ in any way. The teacher’s sentiments indicated feelings of reluctance that could easily lead to unprecedented withdrawal.

This initial reluctance is reflected in the teacher’s sentiments expressed below at the post intervention interview:

To me, I had a negative attitude, but at the end, I have seen it [research] really working. Because, like I just doubted the idea because I thought the time was very little and those activities should be done, but at the end of it, I realized that I can even finish [planned classroom activities] and then, there was even time to ask questions.

However, questions may be raised whether his negative attitude was due to the short lesson time duration or other fears. Nonetheless, these sentiments reflect a change of the teacher’s attitude towards action research.

Acceptance in other schools was an uphill task. The next three schools I approached were very apprehensive about my study for diverse reasons, and did reject me. In one of the schools (catering to middle upper class children and performs fairly well in national examinations) the deputy head teacher whom I first spoke to thought the study was viable and would benefit teachers. During the negotiation session, he asked whether I would conduct a workshop for teachers after the completion of data collection period, to which I gladly agreed, since this activity was part of my reciprocity plan. My journal entry on that day read, “Here is someone who knows how to positively take advantage of researchers’ presence in school” (28th April 2010).

This deputy head teacher enabled me to talk to teachers and two readily volunteered to participate in the study. I went further and drew a time table for research activities and we exchanged phone numbers for ease of communication. What remained was an approval from the head teacher.
I met the head teacher when he reported back to school. During our meeting, I gave information on the aims, objectives and activities of the research; from the reconnaissance to post intervention stages. I also divulged the time duration I anticipated for the whole data collection period, culminating into a workshop for teachers. However, from the head teacher’s body language, I had a feeling that he was not keen on having the study carried out in his school. He also raised concerns about how the study would impact syllabus coverage, and parents’ reaction to my presence in the classrooms. I then informed him of the research ethics to which I was to adhere.

Nonetheless, a decision had to be made before I was officially allowed to embark on the study. A few days later I received a short text message from the deputy head teacher declining my request to conduct the study in the school. It stated: “Hi, looks like it is not working, the teachers feel it is going to interfere with syllabus [coverage]. The boss [head teacher] feels the parents will bring issues. We are sorry.” I was obviously frustrated and infuriated, particularly because the school rejected me after ‘leading me on’ for a while, resulting to the loss of time meant for data collection.

Interestingly, one of the teachers called to find out why I had not honoured the appointments I had made with them. I explained what had transpired. The teacher argued that the administration was perhaps apprehensive because the long term contact I was to have with learners would put them in a vulnerable position. They were suspicious that I would access information that was perhaps ‘sensitive’. Nonetheless, the possibility of such an occurrence was minimal considering the study’s focus. Although I would have had some contact with learners, my focus was more on the teachers. However, I am not in a position to ascertain the teacher’s allegations.

In my search for schools, I went to another school which also catered to upper to middle class children. The visit here was brief. The head teacher was adamant that teachers would not be willing to participate in such a long term study since it would not only impede syllabus coverage, but would also negatively affect learners’ examination performance. He did not allow me to talk to the teachers.

Since I was getting frustrated, I engaged a friend who had had a long teaching experience in many schools in Nairobi for assistance because she could access many head teachers. With this teacher friend, I visited another school. In the absence of the head teacher, I explained my study to the deputy who perceived it as meaningful for teachers. She also stated: “You are looking for something we can offer, why not.” I talked to two teachers as recommended by the deputy head teacher. Although they seemed to agree to participate from my observations there were indications of reluctance in their body language. Nonetheless, I went ahead and made subsequent appointments and exchanged phone numbers. It was rather ambitious of me to do this since I had a hunch of what their feelings were. But I did not take chances at this stage since time was running out. Perhaps the deputy head teacher should have let me explain my study to all teachers of social studies instead of selecting two who she thought would readily agree. But she thought she knew the teachers well.
Going back for my appointment with the teachers, bad news awaited me. I learned from the deputy head teacher that the teachers had had a meeting with the head teacher and expressed concerns of the study in terms of time, and coverage of syllabus, and that they were not willing to participate. Although I was disappointed, the teachers decline was not a surprise.

The next school I visited was situated in a lower middle to low income area. Again, in the absence of the head teacher the deputy head teacher was the first administrator I met. He seemed appreciative of the study but understandably said that their final permission would only be from the head teacher. However, meeting the head teacher, he first bitterly complained about some of the challenges he was experiencing in the school. I nevertheless explained the purpose of the study. He however appeared very apprehensive about the study and without consulting the teachers he informed me that they would find it difficult to participate in my kind of research.

The foregoing experiences reminded me of what literature asserts about teachers’ responses to professional development in sub-Saharan Africa:

Research into teacher development in Sub-Saharan Africa suggests that changing pedagogic practices is difficult because of the strong cultural and social influences that shape teacher’s assumptions about the purpose of schooling, the nature of the teaching and learning process and adult-child relationships (Abdi-Kadir & Hardman, 2007 p. 11).

The preceding is reflected in some of the head teachers and teachers’ concerns about syllabus coverage; different methods (interactive) of teaching. Similarly, this concern is also reflected in the short text message cited earlier. The parental concern (bringing issues) is reflected in the social cultural factors. The syllabus must be covered for learners’ preparation and good performance in the exams.

Moreover, Abdi-Kadir and Hardman (2007) argue, “it has been found that teachers often view knowledge as fixed, objective and detached from the learners, so that they see it as their role to transmit this knowledge to pupils through rote-learning techniques” (p. 12). This view perhaps explains why some teachers did not seem to appreciate the modification of the classroom process to the constructivist interactive approach I was seeking to introduce.

**CONDUCTING THE ACTION RESEARCH**

The foregoing rejections notwithstanding, two schools and four teachers accepted to participate in the study. However, there were reservations expressed about the focus of the study. For example, a deputy head teacher in one of the schools blatantly said that from his long teaching experience, and having attempted child-centred approach, interactive strategies cannot work, and more so in large classes.
The Participants
Pseudonyms were used to identify the participant schools, teachers and the focus group discussions. The schools were identified as Kabaya and Kona primary schools. The teachers were identified as Florence (female) and Maina (male) from the Kabaya School. Both teachers from the Kona School were female and were identified as Alice and Agnes. The focus groups’ discussions for learners in the Kabaya School were identified as Kabaya-DG 1 and Kabaya-DG 2. While in the Kona School they were identified as Kona-DG 1 and Kona-DG 2. Learners from both schools were between 10-12 years old.

Whilst in the Kabaya School I was totally accepted and treated as one of the staff members; allowed to attend staff meetings whenever possible and was also included in certain school functions. In the Kona School I seemed to be partially accepted. Only the teachers of social studies that I had initial contact with and the participant teachers had information about my presence in the school. The others, according to my participant teachers only referred to me as visitor. In this school I used to operate from a bench outside the administration block, where parents and other visitors would sit waiting to see the administrators. The bench became my “makeshift office” as ascertained by the school head teacher. On the bench is where the participant teachers and I conducted our planning and reflection sessions.

Experiences During Reconnaissance
The reconnaissance stage was a period of fact-finding or information gathering, describing, explaining, discussing, negotiating, and amending (Kemmis et al., 2004; Mertler, 2009). To curb attrition associated with action research, the teachers and I discussed the anticipated constraints and agreed on how we could mitigate them (Kemmis et al, 2004) (see Appendix 1). In addition, we discussed and drew feasible time tables for the action research cycle of planning, observation and reflections for the two schools (see Appendix 2a and 2b). During this period I also discussed and agreed to conduct interviews with the participant teachers, head teachers and others involved in the schools’ administration to explore the overall perceptions of teaching and learning in large classes. I also carried out classroom observations (three per each of the four teachers) for ascertaining the type of classroom process which would inform the intervention activities.

The interview process
As much as it was fairly easy to interview teachers and learners, understandably, it was more challenging to interview administrators; especially head teachers due to their heavy administrative workload. It was, however, difficult to convince two deputy head teachers in one school to agree to an interview. One of them asked what type of questions I was going to ask. When he learned that I had interviewed the head teacher, he wondered why I should interview him. He argued that by interviewing the head teacher I had obtained all the information I needed. I had to explain to him the importance of data triangulation which did not convince him. He then asked me for the questions so that he could prepare for the answers in advance. The above sentiments could be an indication that teachers in this context are not aware of the process and demands of research. Moreover, they could also imply the power of hierarchy in the school.
Due to my persistence he eventually agreed to be interviewed. He however, understandably, declined the interview to be audio recorded forcing me to write his responses. The interview session took longer than anticipated as I tried to write and capture some of his responses verbatim. However, I did not perceive this incident as an issue since the consent form which participants had signed indicated that they could reject any process that made them uncomfortable. Brydon-Miller (2008) writes that respect for participants is limited to providing opportunity to decline to participate in a particular study [or an aspect of a study].

After the interview, and perhaps realizing it was fairly easy to answer questions, he asked, “Is that all?” When I responded in the affirmative he disclosed how he thought he would not be able to appropriately respond to questions, hence, was afraid of failure. This fear could be attributed to the culture where questioning is associated with testing and examinations and failure is embarrassingly unacceptable. Nonetheless, the fear of being recorded might have emanated from the fact that he was not sure of whether my questions would be intrusive about the school’s administration and/or his personal life, hence treating me with suspicion.

Convincing the second deputy head teacher for an interview was a real uphill task. He gave me two appointments which he did not honour; perhaps an indication that he was against being interviewed and to discourage me from following him. But I was relentless. When I met him for the third appointment he asked for a questionnaire which he said was easier to deal with, prompting me to explain my research design. When he eventually agreed to be interviewed he also declined for the interview to be audio recorded. During the interview I noticed that he was very guarded as he responded to questions. At one point he asked the person in the next room to affirm what he was saying making me realize that there was a next room, and someone else, who all the while had been listening to the interview, which explained his apprehension. I realized how unsuitable it is to hold interviews in offices in schools, since they are not soundproof, and can be heard by other people not involved in the study. However, due to inadequate facilities in many Kenyan public schools finding a quiet isolated place would be a challenge. This situation prompts the argument that it is challenging to keep participants anonymous and, at times, what they say confidential in schools contexts. Confidentiality and anonymity could however be possible in the research reports.

Reflecting on the foregoing, I ask myself whether it is acceptable for one in the position of a researcher to relentlessly persist to interview somewhat reluctant participants. Perhaps, after recognizing that they were not keen for interviews, should I have withdrawn my request? However, some of the information from the two was considerably diverse, thus enriching my study. Thinking back, I realize that I should have shared my interview schedule with these particular participants. Having the questions well in advance would perhaps have made them less apprehensive.
Having group discussions with learners was not a challenge per se. However, though teachers were able to identify the learners, finding space and adequate time was a challenge. I was only able to interview them during a thirty minute break which was reduced to about 15 minutes as learners had to be mobilized to get to the interview room. This situation resulted in data that was not as rich as I had expected. I discovered however that rephrasing the same questions for children results in more diverse responses contributing to richness of data.

After I managed to interview all the participants my reflections read:

> I have had a difficult time getting appointments for interviews. It is like you literally have to beg. You are at the mercy of the school administrators and teachers. You have to humble yourself. It is so delicate that at times I feel I am walking on egg shells. I feel like anything happening could make the whole study collapse. I hope this will not happen (Reflections, 2nd June 2010).

**Classroom observations**

After drawing the research activity time-table with the four participant teachers, I expected classroom observations during the reconnaissance to be over within my planned schedule. Although I had proposed to observe four lessons per teacher, I observed three since the observation schedule was marred with cancellations due to teacher absenteeism and unprecedented change of school routine (see Appendix 3). Whilst the first lesson observation was carried out on the 2nd of May 2010, the last was on 4th June 2010. Though this seems to be a short time lapse due to various cancellations, I used some of the time I had scheduled for initial intervention activities. At the completion of lesson observations my reflections read: “A milestone—completed observations, hence reconnaissance” (Reflections, 24th June 2010). These sentiments indicated the relief I felt but I also realized that it would be equally challenging to satisfactorily carry out the subsequent intervention activities.

**Experiences During Intervention**

During intervention, pair work and group work were improved upon for the creation of interaction opportunities for learners. Whilst pair work was improved to ensure individual or pair interaction accountability, group work was improved to incorporate certain elements of cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1985; Gillies, 2007).

**Implementing pair work**

During pair work cyclic implementation, we emphasized individual and/or pair interaction accountability (Johnson & Johnson, 1990), and either individual or pair written products were evidence of this accountability. Consequently, simple regular pair work of think-pair-share was improved to think-pair-share-write; think-write-pair-share; and turn taking pair work, which also had a pair written product (see Figure 1 below). These improvements were an extension of Kagan’s (1994) idea of think-write-pair-share.
Implementing group work

Group work was improved by intermittently incorporating certain elements of cooperative learning. Certain learners were selected to play certain roles to coordinate members' efforts for successful completion of tasks. These were: group leaders to keep members on task; secretaries to jot down groups' discussed ideas; and presenters to prepare and present the group's work to the class. These roles were also strengthened for more effective group work activities. To balance interaction among group members and reduce interaction dominance by certain learners, we decided on the role of idea generators (Brown & Thomson, 2000), (See figure 2 below). To ensure that all learners interacted and supported each other's learning (Barnes & Todd, 1995), we had small mixed ability and gender groups of six. This was meant to circumvent demerits of large groups in relation to interaction: For example, learners who get lost among members (Gillies, 2007); others being marginalized (Barnes & Todd, 1995); or making communication lines too complex for all to interact (Kagan, 1994).
Although I was able to complete the intervention cycles fairly successfully, they were marred with challenges due to teacher absenteeism and unprecedented school routine changes resulting in postponement and delay of some activities. As a result, a total of 49 days with exception of school holidays were not utilized as planned (see Appendix 3). These had implications on the initial time table we had drawn during reconnaissance. We therefore resorted to having research activities at the teachers’ convenience, which resulted in the extension of the proposed schedule.

Implementation of the interactive strategies by the teachers implied diversifying classroom activities. Undoubtedly, this diversification was challenging since they had to plan for extra activities within the short lesson duration of 35 minutes. However, teachers recorded certain successes at different levels, as they implemented the two strategies in terms of accrued benefits.
Benefits of the Two Strategies

Teachers experienced certain benefits as they implemented the two strategies.

Inclusiveness in the Classroom

Teachers agreed that both strategies made the classrooms more inclusive. All learners, including the passive/shy and slow [below average] learners interacted. Agnes argued that unlike the previous teaching approach where the teacher tends to move along with the fast learners, “but as they [learners] work in groups, even slow [low achievers] ones try to catch up with the others. They [learners] help each other in learning.” Florence and Alice gave examples of passive/shy and slow (low achievers) learners participation in the learning process through group interaction. Conclusively Alice said,

...there are those who don’t talk…like when I could come and use the lecture method…I would go out without half of the class talking at all. But now with these strategies they are able to talk. At least every child talked...

These sentiments confirmed her revelations during the intervention stage of one learner, although always passive was able to contribute to group discussions. Florence reiterated the same and said, “But after this [intervention] those ones who were not discussing, those who are slow [below average] learners, and even average were now able to discuss.” She singled out one learner who, apart from being shy, passive, slow and below average; and also in the initial stages seemed, as observed by the teacher, to resent group work sessions, eventually opened up and interacted.

Creating interaction opportunities through the use of these strategies seemed to empower most learners. Florence argued,

But after this those who were not discussing … who are slow or even average were now able to discuss. It changed their attitude whereby they were thinking that only the higher achievers could talk, and now it changed that everybody could talk, anybody could talk; everybody could give an idea....

Learners reiterated these sentiments and said that in groups everybody talks (Kabaya-DG 2). This interaction was also observed during group work sessions.

Learners’ Attitude Towards Subject

Teachers noted that learners’ attitude towards the subject became more positive. This change was indicated by:

1. The reception Maina received whenever he went for his lessons. The class teacher disclosed to him “What is wrong with that class… the moment they see you, they just welcome you, they are ready to learn…” Hence, Maina concluded that “they [learners] are so much interested in the subject…they wanted to learn.”
2. The several teaching requests Florence received from the class whenever they did not have a teacher. Apart from Florence disclosing this during the study, I also
observed on two occasions, learners requesting her to go to their class to teach them.

3. The excitement (clapping) expressed by Agnes’ learners whenever I accompanied her to class. They would also shout, “Come tomorrow” whenever Agnes and I left the classroom after the lessons. She confirmed this enthusiasm when she said, “According to my assessment, the children enjoyed the lessons, and they loved you so much. They wanted you to come again and again.”

Although there were no observable emotional outbursts in Alice’s class, she said that, “...especially cooperative learning, they [learners] enjoyed it more.”

The change of learners’ attitude could be attributed to their involvement in the classroom process through peer interaction. Learners enjoyment of cooperative learning activities was confirmed when they stated that they were happy and loved “explaining to their friends what they had written, and what they could not understand (Kabaya-GD 2). Kona-GD 1 summarized learners’ positive attitude towards the subject when they said, “People became overjoyed and were happy when it was time for social studies.”

**CHALLENGES OF IMPLEMENTING THE STRATEGIES**

The foregoing benefits notwithstanding, teachers encountered certain challenges as they implemented the two strategies in their classrooms. These were in terms of time management and grouping issues. Although I had observed that high noise level posed a challenge, none of the teachers mentioned it. There is a possibility that teachers did not hear the noise so much as active learning.

**Grouping of Learners**

Teachers agreed that initially it was difficult to make some learners accept to work with their designated partners or groups since most had preferences in terms of gender and/or friends. Maina recalled,

> Like when we started, you would find that one would just run away from a certain person...I could make him sit in a certain place only to realize he has moved. Why? Because I have made him sit with a girl...boys never felt like they should interact with girls.

Florence also said, “They were not ready to work at first because some were separated from their friends...” Movement of learners was also observed in Agnes’ classroom. However, she attributed this resistance to their egocentric character: “It was difficult because they were egocentric, they never wanted to share.” Resistance to sharing and egocentrism displayed by the learners could also be attributed to the competitive nature in the Kenyan education system where higher marks attained by individuals are applauded.

To resolve this issue, teachers took the following measures:

- Talked to learners about the importance of working with another person- “...After we sat and told them the importance of sharing, they had no problem at the end”
(Florence). For example, Agnes also informed learners, “You learn more when you share.”

- Constantly reminded learners the set rules to be adhered to.

Florence said,

But as time went by ...we had to set some rules so that whichever group the teacher places you, you should remain there. So, through rules and reminding them from time to time that they have to be in their places, I think they got used to each other and they started working.

**Time Management**

Time management was the most mentioned challenge. Apart from Maina, the other teachers felt that the lesson time duration was not adequate to cover all aspects of their lesson plans, including interaction activities. Seemingly, summarizing other teachers sentiments, Florence said,

Time management was a challenge because settling the pupils and them starting the lesson could not enable one to cover what we were supposed to cover. The [interaction] task needed time ...the 35 minutes were not able to cover what one was supposed to cover. So most of the lesson,... as much as I tried to cover everything, sometimes I was not able to because of the task, settling the children to get ready, and winding up the lesson. All that could not be covered within the 35 minutes.

To adequately teach all that they had planned for, including content and interaction activities, teachers devised the following:

- Florence took advantage of other teacher's lateness and/or absenteeism and used more than the stipulated lesson time of 35 minutes,
- Alice, until cautioned, did not monitor interaction activities, rather she used the time for writing notes on the blackboard,
- Agnes could omit certain activities.

Maina however claimed that although at first he thought time would not allow interaction activities, he eventually realized that time was not an issue. He said, “...I was doubting the idea because I thought the time was very little. ....But at the end of it, I realized that I can even finish [the lesson] and then there is even time for me to ask questions.” However, Maina managed to have questioning time because he, in many cases, as observed, rushed over interaction activities.

These implied that teachers found it challenging to complete all the planned interactive activities within the 35 minutes lessons.

**Ethical Issues Encountered**

Research ethics demand anonymity of participants and confidentiality of their discourse whatever the circumstances (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). However, it may be challenging to
adhere to these ethics in a long term study carried out in Kenyan school contexts. Evidently keeping participants anonymous was challenging as research activities of planning, classroom observations and reflections were open to others. Whilst in the Kabaya School, reflections and planning took place in the staffroom. In the Kona School they were carried out on a bench outside the administration block. Confidentiality of interview discourse may also be a challenge due to lack of isolated sound proof rooms, as realized while interviewing one deputy head teacher in the Kona school. Under these circumstances efforts should be made to maintain confidentiality and anonymity in the research report.

Whilst seeking for permission to interview various participants, I was in a dilemma as to whether it was adequate for head teachers to consent on learners’ behalf to participate in the study. Teachers argued that they did not need to ask parents and guardians since they did not think that the learners would be vulnerable in any way. Although I had a feeling that parents should be consulted, I had certain reservations: Would all parents understand what such a research entails and the implications of letting their children participate? How long would it take for parents to respond and grant permission for their children’s participation? Perhaps getting parents to respond in good time would have involved following them through their children, thus, subjecting both to unnecessary pressure. It is therefore my opinion that under the circumstances, and in a context where many parents have not experienced research issues, the decision taken was perhaps appropriate.

Ethical dilemma was also encountered when one head teacher inquired about how the teachers were fairing on with the research activities. As much as this question was innocently asked, it touched on the issue of confidentiality. The head teacher wanted details of teachers’ performance in the classroom. Being aware of the implications of such information, and how it would impact the relationship between the teachers and head teacher, I simply said they were doing well and that we were learning from each other. This response was plausible since I had made it clear from the beginning that the study was meant to create a learning environment for all of us.

Another ethical concern arose towards the end of the research. For reciprocity purposes, I had informed and requested the participant teachers about conducting a workshop for other teachers in which they would share their experiences. The head teachers had to be involved for permission and setting a convenient date, time, and to inform other teachers. While in the Kabaya School all seemed to go well; in the Kona School some misunderstanding arose that placed me in a vulnerable position. After discussion with the head teacher and we agreed on a date and time, she instructed me to pass the message to the two participant teachers. Whilst one was comfortable with the arrangements the other seemed to have other commitments on the said date, necessitating change of plans. The head teacher perceived the change as insubordination of some kind and confronted the teacher, who in the end boycotted getting involved in the workshop altogether. Although I felt like I contributed to the conflict, on further reflections, I was simply trying to fit in people’s schedules which were a challenging balancing act. The foregoing incidents resonates Glesne (2006) sentiments that “ethical considerations are inseparable from one’s
everyday interaction with research participants and with one’s data” (p. 129). Despite the foregoing issues, I managed to conduct workshops for other teachers in the two schools.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

As a result of the foregoing experiences, there are certain recommendations I would make that would help potential researchers in this context:

- Head teachers are the ultimate decision makers in schools. Therefore researchers have to convincingly present their research cases to them if they are to be allowed to conduct research activities in schools.
- If teachers have to be participants in research, the researcher has to emphasize on their voluntary participation rather than the head teacher identifying them. Voluntary participation may curtail unprecedented withdrawal from the research which could have huge implications on the study.
- Since some participants may not be sure of the researcher’s intentions, hence apprehensive about being interviewed, it may be advisable for the researcher to share interview schedules with them to make them more comfortable. However, questions may be raised about the spontaneity of the interview process.
- Due to unprecedented changes of school routine and teacher absenteeism, it may be advisable for the researcher to schedule more time for research activities to accommodate activities that would not be undertaken as planned.
- Due to the long duration of action research activities in schools, familiarity with school administrators is established which may lead to discussions of research activities and teachers involved. Although done in good faith and innocently it may lead to teacher victimization. Researchers should therefore always adhere to research ethics for confidentiality purposes.

**LESSONS LEARNED**

**About Schools**

- Head teachers are the ultimate authority in decision making in schools
- It may be difficult to access schools catering to children from middle to upper class families, whose parents are keen to have better exam performance, hence, put pressure on head teachers. Research in these schools, particularly involving introduction of changes in classroom practice, seem to be perceived as a waste of time, impeding adequate preparation of learners for passing exams
- In some cases researchers are perceived as having ulterior motives even after sharing their research objectives with participants. Hence, it becomes very challenging for one to carry out the planned research activities. For example, either some participants become very scanty with information or they carefully choose the information they give. This could be mitigated by emphasizing the researcher's adherence to research ethics.
About Teachers
- Working with teachers, one has to learn their individual differences and interact with them accordingly.
- Researchers have to be aware of varied teachers learning styles for creation of a meaningful learning environment for the teachers.
- *Humility*, appreciating and accepting who they are, and their working situation are essential while working with teachers. The researcher’s attitude and conduct enables teachers to accept the researcher and may be able to sustain the relationship for longer periods of time.
- Teachers’ commitment to the study’s activities may determine the type of data collected.
- Persistence on the part of the researcher while working with teachers may pay off.

About Learners
- While interviewing learners, rephrasing questions may elicit diverse, useful and rich data.
- Learners prefer interactive strategies that involve them actively in the classroom, teaching and learning process.

CONCLUSION
Conducting research in Kenyan schools is a venture consisting of moments of successes, challenges and milestones due to little awareness by educational stakeholders about the implications of participating in the action research process. It is an experience that calls for patience, understanding and most of all humility on the part of the researcher for any success to be recorded. As a researcher, one has to be aware of situations that could cause conflicts. I therefore suggest that one avoid situations that would lead to discussions of the research proceedings with other participants. I also advise that contact with other teachers should be very limited. Meetings with head teachers may be necessary depending on the type of persons they are, which the researcher should quickly learn. However, there should be that professional line that should not be crossed in consideration of ethical research issues.

REFERENCES


Appendix 1

Anticipated constraints and mitigation measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constraints/Negative possibilities</th>
<th>Mitigation Measures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time constraints for reflections and planning</td>
<td>Negotiated with teachers to have these activities at the end of the school day or when not in class; once a week per teacher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers’ concerns of syllabus coverage</td>
<td>One lesson a week per teacher was set aside for intervention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate or lack of teaching and learning resources</td>
<td>Used low cost materials (papers and manila papers) available in schools. However due to rationing and unwillingness of the person in-charge to provide, on few occasions the researcher had to buy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack/inadequacy of teachers analytical critical thinking skills</td>
<td>More questioning, probing and prompting was done by the researcher to have teachers analyse their lessons and identify areas of improvement, and suggest how this could be done.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher absenteeism - Unprecedented school routine interruption</td>
<td>Certain research activities were postponed and carried out later.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix 2a

Research activities timetable for school A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Planning Days</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Teaching and Observations</th>
<th>Reflections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tuesdays</td>
<td>3-4pm</td>
<td>Wednesdays - Maina - 2.00-2.35 pm Florence - 2.35-3-10 pm</td>
<td>During planning sessions (Tuesdays)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 2b

Research activities timetable for School B

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Planning Days</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Teaching and Observations</th>
<th>Reflections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thursdays</td>
<td>From 3.10 pm</td>
<td>Fridays – Alice- 8.55-9.30 am Agnes -9.30-10.05 am</td>
<td>During planning sessions (Thursdays)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix 3

Schedule of research activities postponed and reasons why

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Reason</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2nd June</td>
<td>Kona school’s routine was unprecedentedly interrupted for sports; was able to observe BF2 though had scheduled to observe both teachers. Kabaya School :Unable to observe both Florence and Maina as scheduled since they were out for a seminar - teachers called to give the information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th – 11 June</td>
<td>Midterm tests for Kabaya school- No visits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th – 8th June</td>
<td>Scheduled observations in Kona school canceled- teachers away for a two –day seminar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th – 11th June</td>
<td>Mid-term exams for Kabaya school - no visits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15th June</td>
<td>Unable to observe Maina- he was away</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17th June</td>
<td>Lesson planning with both Alice and Agnes postponed due to midterm exams scheduled for the following week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18th June</td>
<td>Scheduled lesson observations for Alice and Agnes postponed due to midterm exams in the following week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21st June- 23rd June</td>
<td>Mid-term exams in Kona school - no visits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23rd June</td>
<td>Planning sessions with Alice and Agnes cancelled due to marking and revising of the midterm exams- Teachers called to cancel and promised to call the following week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25th June</td>
<td>Alice and Agnes called to cancel observation session due to revision for midterm exams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th July</td>
<td>Unable to interview Deputy head teacher for Kona school- came late for appointment  Unable to plan with Maina due to marking he was involved in</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Unable to observe both Alice and Agnes, as they were busy returning papers and verifying marks with learners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7th July</td>
<td>Observations for Florence and AM were not carried out as teachers were away from school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12th July</td>
<td>Planning session with Maina not carried out since he was away from school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15th July</td>
<td>Planning sessions with Alice and Agnes cancelled due to end term exams scheduled for the following week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16th July</td>
<td>Lessons observations for Alice and Agnes canceled due to exams the following week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th August - 6th September</td>
<td>Schools closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th - 14th September</td>
<td>Time table not stable enough to schedule for lesson observations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15th September</td>
<td>Lesson observations Florence and Maina cancelled for both teachers. Maina was away as a polling officer in a by-election, whilst the Florence was in charge of the schools as the head teacher was also away. The whole school was also involved in doing exams- no teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20th September</td>
<td>Lesson observation Maina canceled- there was no school as it was a polling station</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28th September</td>
<td>Unable to plan with teachers in Kona school. Florence had a parents meeting in her child’s school. Maina was not in school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30th September</td>
<td>Not able to observe Maina as scheduled-teacher was a way for a meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th October</td>
<td>Unable to reflect and plan with Alice Not feeling well.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12th October</td>
<td>AM not observed- was away for a seminar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12-18th October</td>
<td>Midterm exams for Kona school – no research activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13th October</td>
<td>Observations for Maina not done- away from school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18th October</td>
<td>Observations for Maina not done- He was sick Planning and reflections sessions for Alice and Agnes not carried out. Teachers were busy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Biographical note:**

Dr. **Ruth O. Otienoh** is a lecturer at Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology in Kenya in the Department of Curriculum Development and Educational Management, School of Education. Her research interests are in the areas of curriculum and progressive classroom pedagogy, specifically, in large classes. She is also interested in action research and reflective practice.