EMPOWERMENT IN PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH CONDUCTED IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

Participatory action research advocates participation and egalitarian relationship among its participants. This study was conducted in Malaysia amongst the Malay society, where the Malay society has been labelled as having high power distance in its social structure. In a society that recognizes status differences among individuals in the society depending on their rank in the hierarchical structure, egalitarian or equal relationship among research participants could be quite problematic. This paper will outline the Malays social hierarchy and explore how members of a hierarchical society became empowered through a participatory action research. Through qualitative methods such as observation, informal conversations, journal reflections and semi-structured interviews, this study investigated the experiences of the two Malay teachers in negotiating the Western-based concepts in a participatory action research project. Due to the importance of reflection and action in a participatory action research, data was analysed through a Critical Reflective Analysis Steps (Author, 2013) which included the process of observing and noting personal reflections, confronting and thinking, and taking action. Findings suggest that through participatory action research, the participants of the research were somewhat empowered to challenge their traditional role in the hierarchical structure.

INTRODUCTION

Participatory action research advocates participation and egalitarian relationship among its participants. This study was conducted in Malaysia amongst the Malay society, where the Malay society has been labelled as having high power distance in its social structure. In a society that recognizes status differences among individuals in the society depending on their rank in the hierarchical structure, egalitarian or equal relationship among research participants could be quite problematic. This paper will outline the Malays social hierarchy and explore how members of a hierarchical society became empowered through a participatory action research.

The Malay society is often labelled as a hierarchical society, where different individuals have different status depending on their position in the structure (Asma 2009, Hamzah 1991, Norma & Kennedy 2000). Parents possess a higher position in the structure (Hashim 2008, Hashim, Normahdia, Rozira, and Siti Sarah 2012). A true Malay is signified by his ability to be loyal and obedient to his parents. It is considered the duty of children to serve their parents in a variety of ways. The loyalty and obedience towards parents were also recommended by Islamic teachings and since, the Malay culture is highly influenced by Islam (Hamzah 1991, Jeannot & Khairul Anuar 2012, Khairul, Jin & Cooper 2000, Othman, Zainal Abidin,
Rahimin Affandi, Nor Hayati & Norhidayah 2011, Zainal Abidin 2010), parents in the Malay society is highly regarded and hold a high position in the hierarchical structure.

The Malay social hierarchy also acknowledges the elders as having a high position in the societal structure. Jeannot and Khairul Anuar (2012) stated that all members of Malay society are encouraged to be courteous and respectful, especially to older people. This is because older people in the society are seen as people that are knowledgeable and possess the same status as parents. The Malay also has a popular saying to describe the elders which is “banyak makan garam” (eats more salt). This saying suggests that the elder people have eaten more salt thus they have experienced more in their life and know better about life than the younger people. Here, experience are highly regarded as much as academic knowledge. Othman et al. (2011) stated that in a Malay society the elders are the catalyst of the harmonious relationships in the society. They argued that elder people are “intellects, educator and the coordinator of social relationships so it can remain harmonious” (p. 74).

The Malay social hierarchy also has a high regard for people in authority such as community leaders. Hashim (2008) and Hashim et al. (2012) asserted that another Malay characteristic highlighted in traditional Malay poems and verses was that the culture of being loyal to fair leaders. As mentioned earlier, these traditional Malay poems and verse reflects the cultural values of Malay society (Hashim 2008, Hashim et al. 2012). According to Hashim et al. (2012), the following verse highlights how Malay perceive leaders in the community:

_Elok kampong ada tuannya, elok negeri ada rajanya_, (A good village has its master, a good state has its king)

_Adat hidup orang terhormat, kepada pemimpinnya ia taat._ (A ritual of respected people is to be loyal to their leaders)

Respect towards leaders is often materialized through loyalty and obedience. Mohd Faidz, Jamaie, Mohd Rizal and Mohammad Rodzi (2011) described that the traditional Malay political culture was based on loyalty and sensitivity towards the sovereignty of leaders such as sultans. They asserted that the people were usually submissive and subservient. According to Asma (2009) in the traditional Malay community, when a person is given a high position by a company, community or the government, Malays acknowledge their status and rank and expect the person to uphold his duties and responsibilities as leaders. As leaders, they were expected to be polite, courteous, trustworthy, and have excellent manners and good leadership qualities. Asma (2009) further suggested the Malay community expect leaders to have paternalistic roles where they become the ‘father’ in an organization and provide help and support for the workers or other people. As an exchange, the people will give their loyalty, obedience and commitment towards the leaders. Jeannot and Khairul Anuar (2012) suggested that in the Malay culture, a leader is always right and it is improper to contest their opinions. Mahfooz, Zainal, and Rehana (2004) stated that “societal norm dictates that juniors do not disagree with seniors (superiors or elders)” (p. 115). Similar points were also suggested by Lim and Asma (2001), who explained that leaders are entrusted to make the right decisions and other people are expected to obey and respect the leaders and not to question or challenge what they say.

The basic social structure of the Malay community can be summarised as below:
Older people in the community are considered knowledgeable due to their experiences in life.

People with leading positions also hold a high status in the community due to their leadership qualities.

Both elders and leaders are respected and hold a higher status in the Malay community.

Respect is materialized through loyalty, obedience and using the correct language in communicating and addressing people with a higher status.

The existing hierarchical relationship among members in the current research project proved to be a huge challenge in achieving egalitarian relationship among research members as advocated by the philosophy of participatory action research. The paper is going to answer the following question:

1. Can participatory action research process encourages active and equal participation among members who have different status in a hierarchical structure?
2. How the participants in a hierarchical structure can be empowered through participatory action research?

ISSUES OF EMPOWERMENT AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

Empowerment is a significant topic of discussion in research on participatory action research; it is difficult to pinpoint the exact definition of empowerment (Hipilioto-Delgado & Courtland 2007, Kasmel 2011). Aral (1997) described empowerment as a change of capacity to control, or an increase of power and the ability to use it. Empowerment relates to the concept of the ability of people to understand and control over personal, economic and political forces in order to take action to improve their life situations (Israel, Chekoway, Schulz, & Zimmerman 1994). Gutierrez (1995) defined empowerment as “the process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals, families, and communities can take action to improve situations” (p. 229). According to Hipilioto-Delgado and Courtland (2007), the main aim of empowerment theory is the liberation of marginalised people and communities. Based on the definitions, being empowered is about having the understanding and control to change the present situation. It is a process where individuals take charge and act to improve their situations. Baum, MacDougal and Smith (2006) argued that that participatory action research challenges the concept of knowledge control established through mainstream research. So, when people are involved in a participatory action research, they seek control through researching, thus establishing themselves as powerful agents.

In negotiating the issue of power distance in participatory action research, some research also shows that participatory action research did provide opportunities for empowering the research participants. Chowns (2008) suggested that even though the balance of power oscillated among her participants, in the end, through collaborative effort, the children were empowered in terms of knowledge about what they were facing and her study shows that children are more capable and articulate than adults think. She argued that through the collaborative effort of participatory action research, the children were empowered as the research inquiry put the children as “knowers, actors, and equals” (p. 568) and as an adult, Chown “endeavoured to assert this in word and action” (p. 568). Ospina, Dodge, Foldy and
Hofman-Pinilla (2008), upon reflecting on their participatory action research, argued that the control of the direction of the research process was eventually shared among the co-researchers; however, it involved a “lot of negotiation over who would do what, who would take ownership over what” (p. 425). They concluded that in their study the power dynamics were contested but the research participants were empowered through the negotiations of the research process.

It appears that participatory action research provides an outlet for people who were traditionally marginalised by the mainstream research to be empowered to change their own social practice. Atweh’s (2003) The Students Action Research for University Access (SARUA) project aimed to increase the participation of youth from targeted disadvantaged groups such as the Aboriginal students, Torres Strait Islanders students, women in traditional and post-graduates courses, students from certain non-English background as well as low income students in higher education. He began the research project with the notion of empowering students, who according to him have been exposed to research activities that are not genuine and do not engage the students in the decision-making or problem solving of real life problems. In addition, he advocated that students as stakeholders in the educational planning have often been left behind and through participatory action research these students were able to conduct research on themselves rather than be a subject or object of research. The project was conducted for eight years with the participation of university lecturers, school teachers and under-represented students. Atweh (2003) particularly highlighted that the students were empowered as they engaged in the research process. He said that the students demonstrated considerable research sense and critical appreciation of the research process. The students also gained knowledge and understanding of the university system through research activities conducted in the university and some students were empowered by the knowledge that they were considering studying in a university themselves. From the findings of this study we can see that participatory action research is an effective tool to generate empowerment among marginalised parties. It is achieved through active participation in research activities that helped people to gain further knowledge about their own social practice. Furthermore, participatory action research also provides a platform for developing practical ways to solve the issues.

What is intriguing about participatory action research is that it is not only restricted to the empowerment of marginalised groups, but it is also a suitable tool to improve any situation that requires practical solution. James (2006) talked about participatory action research as a tool for teachers’ professional development in her Colorado Educators Using Participatory Action Research to Study Homeless and High Mobility Students (COPAR). COPAR involved eight school administrators, eight teachers and one homeless shelter education provider. COPAR aimed to investigate the areas of educational disadvantage such as homeless children and high mobility students. James asserted that, at the initial stage, some of the participants felt frustrated due to the high-commitment needed by the research project and the complexity of action research concepts. However, as the research progressed, some of the participants demonstrated engagement with the research process through having more understanding of the issue and felt empowered to change the existing social practice. One co-researcher, a small town teacher, claimed that COPAR empowered him to investigate the issue further in practical ways that he thought he would never done before. He stated that
I never talked to the lunch lady before, until I needed to figure out why one of my homeless students wasn’t eating breakfast. I never talked to the homeless liaison before, until I needed to figure out why the bus wasn’t getting a student to school on time (p. 531).

It seems that participatory action research has emancipatory and transformative characteristics (Brydon-Miller & Maguire 2009, Cahill 2007, Langhout & Thomas 2010) because action is part of the inquiry process. Participatory action research process involves research groups in a dialectical process of planning, action, observation and reflection (Grant, Nelson & Mitchell 2008, Kemmis & McTaggart 2005). James (2006) stated that participatory action research was emancipatory because three of the 2003-2004 COPAR research group members were motivated enough to participate in another round of COPAR in 2005-06. Fazio and Melville (2008) initiated a participatory action research with the objective of improving teachers’ professional development through investigating the issue of implementing two government-mandated curriculums, which were students’ engagement and expertise in scientific inquiry and development of reasonable conception of the philosophical and the nature of science in the teaching and learning of science in Canada. The study was conducted with four science teachers and one researcher. Through the action research design, the research team successfully explored its own conception about the government-mandated categories in the learning of science. Fazio and Mellville stated that one of the outcomes expected from the project was modified curriculum practices that suit the two government-mandated categories. They asserted that by the end of the research project, the teachers “developed their own curricular practices suitable to their local school context” (p. 200).

Another study that reflected the emancipatory and transformative characteristic of participatory action research was reported by Swantz, Ndedya and Masaiganah (2006). The article reported the learning from Participatory Research to Explore Women’s Potential for Credit: a case study of Muungano Women’s Group in Ruangwa Tanzania. The study began with the notion of enabling women in the rural areas to make exploration of “potential opportunities and constraints to take the decision themselves whether or not to apply for credit for carrying out economic activities” (p. 288). According to the standard practice, the application for credit is usually made on behalf of the women where a government official will write up a project proposal and make decisions for the women. The study mapped out the research process of these women from deciding on producing bricks to generate income to analysing their needs to improve the brick-making activity. Through the research process the women decided to take a loan from a bank. The women’s leader stated that the women now had the knowledge on the cost of buying tools and had plans how to repay the loan, knowledge that they did not have before engaging in the participatory action research. It seemed that the women successfully transformed their own social practice. They were no longer waiting for things to be done for them but now managed to assess their own needs and plan for action.

In conclusion, participatory action research is a branch of action research with the emphasis on participation by members from all levels of a community, as equals to investigate practical issues in their own community by providing practical solutions. Studies showed that participatory action research became the catalyst for empowerment and social transformations.
The main question discussed in the current paper is whether participatory action research process in a Malaysian context, where individuals have different status depending on their rank in the structure, can empower the research participants to actively participate in the research process as equals.

METHODOLOGY

PARTICIPANTS
The current study was carried out by a research team which consists of a doctoral researcher, which is the author of the current article, and two Bakti Polytechnic (pseudonym) teachers; Siti and Arfah (pseudonyms), as co-researchers. The research team were investigating the implementation of the multiliteracies approach in a Malaysian English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom.

DATA COLLECTION
The inquiry process in the current study involved a recursive process consisted of action research processes of planning, action, observation and reflection stages. Data was collected through observation, informal conversation, journal reflection and semi-structured interviews. The author became a participant observer to observe and document the team’s professional conversations, so she gained personal insights into the teachers’ experiences. These conversations were audio recorded to be reviewed at a later time. Useful data such as the teachers’ responses, reactions and interaction during the professional conversations were also documented in a research journal. The teachers’ reflections on their experiences in a participatory action research project were also obtained through semi-structured interviews.

DATA ANALYSIS
Data was analysed through Critical Reflective Analysis Steps (Author, 2013) which included the process of observing and noting personal reflections, confronting and thinking, and taking action. At the observing and noting personal reflections stage, significant events were noted in the professional discussions through observation notes and journal entries. Then, at the confronting and thinking stage, significant points that emerged from personal reflections on the collaborative effort of the team members as well as from the verbatim transcription of the semi-structured interviews with the teachers were identified. Data were then classified into categories and possible themes. Next, a few practical solutions were provided to improve the participatory action research process. Finally, at the taking action stage, practical solutions were implemented to improve the collaborative efforts of the research team in the next research project.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

TEACHERS MOVING FROM SUPPORTIVE RESEARCH SUBORDINATES TO ACTIVE CO-RESEARCHERS

This section will discuss the status differences within the research team and how it influenced the collaborative research processes. It then highlights how the teachers, who became co-researchers in the project shifted from research subordinates to active co-researchers.
The collaborative effort among the team members; Siti, Arfah and me, worked well but the role each member played was initially influenced by our position in the Malaysian hierarchical structure. Figure 1.1 shows the power position between the individual team members.

Figure 1.1 Status position between the individual research team members

Figure 1.1 shows the hierarchical relationship and status position of the members of the research team. The status differences was influenced by age, academic experiences, academic position and social experiences from the Malaysian socio-cultural lens. In the Malaysian context, the age difference between Siti, Arfah and me determined the status positions of the research team members. I was 11 years older than Siti and Arfah and as mentioned earlier, older people usually hold a higher status in the Malaysian society, and thus culturally I had more authority in many areas such as in decision-making over Siti and Arfah.

According to the Malaysian socio-cultural lens, the superior rank that I had in the hierarchical structure was also attributed to my academic experience and position. My seniority was represented by my academic qualification in which I had a Masters degree and at that time was pursuing a doctoral degree, Siti and Arfah had just graduated from their first degree. I had nine years of teaching experience and they had just three months of teaching experience. In terms of the hierarchy of workplace, a university is at the top of the structure as compared to polytechnics, which offered diploma programs. Generally in Malaysia, a university is often viewed as having a higher rank than polytechnics. In this case, working in a university put me in a higher position as compared to Siti and Arfah’s positions as polytechnic lecturers. In addition, my position as a researcher boosted my power status. Gosin, Dustman, Drapeau
and Harthun (2003) discussed how researchers are socialized to believe that they are the experts and this puts them in a power position. This was also stated by Lofman, Pelkonen and Pietila (2004) who indicated that a researcher has been seen as “holding the power because of their knowledge base, membership of the intelligentsia and as managing the research agendas” (p.337). As a university lecturer, I had more resources, thus I had been given a higher position in the hierarchical structure as compared to Siti and Arfah in a polytechnic setting.

Based on a Malaysian cultural perspective, Siti and Arfah were at almost similar ranking in the hierarchical structure as illustrated by Figure 1.1. This was because they were at the same age and both had just graduated from their first degree. They both had three months teaching experience which was conducted in their final year of their first degree. They both started work at Bakti Polytechnic at the same time. Since they were at the same position in the structure, their relationship was more open and collegial.

At the beginning of the current research project, the role each of the team members played was influenced by our position in the hierarchical structure. Siti and Arfah took up supporting roles, in which they assisted me in every way to complete the research process. As a novice participatory action research researcher, I was also influenced by my higher status in the research team structure and took the leading role. Extract 1.2 shows an example of how I dominated the conversation in our second professional discussion. We were discussing ways to incorporate the English Language Department’s curriculum to our multiliteracies module. It appeared that the discussion was dominated by me because I was giving suggestions and making all the decisions. For example, I selected the curriculum item that we would cover in our multiliteracies module and it seemed that Siti and Arfah held subservient roles, as they agreed with my suggestions most of the time. They responded to my questions or suggestions with a “yes” or “all right”, indicating agreement. Furthermore, they did not elaborate or ask any questions based on the decisions I made.
In the collaborative research process in the Participatory Action Research Project, the authority to make decisions was solely given to me, and Siti and Arfah were providing supporting information to support the decision-making process. In Extract 1.3, we were discussing the type of assessment that could be included in the multiliteracies module. To ensure that everybody in the research team were involved in the decision-making process, I ran through my ideas with the group. It appeared that Siti and Arfah were not comfortable in the process of shared decision-making as they were silent in a few instances. When I expressed my opinion that allocating 100 marks for the first and second multiliteracies
projects was quite unreasonable, they did not state their stand on the issue. I continued the conversation by suggesting including only certain parts of the whole assessment scheme. Arfah responded by sharing her experience in assisting a lecturer for a previous year’s assessment process. I saw her input to the discussion as an opportunity of including the research team in shared decision-making process when I provided a provocation statement of whether the type of assignment mentioned by Arfah could be applicable for our multiliteracies projects.

However, the process of including Siti and Arfah in the discussion and the decision-making process was unsuccessful, as it appeared that they were willing to provide information but not contribute to the shared decision-making process. They left the decision-making to me. At one point, Siti stated her opinion; however, before ending her statement, it seemed that she asked for my approval, before deciding not to continue with her statement. This excerpt also shows that I made the final decision on the assessment issue based on the information provided by the research team members. At the end of Extract 1.3, I stated that the assessment included the career research presentation and the Majalah 3 (the first and second multiliteracies projects). I responded to Siti’s approval-seeking action with a final statement, suggesting that I was influenced by the authoritative position that I had in the hierarchical structure.
Extract 1.4 is another example where the decision-making process was not shared by all research team members. In this extract, Siti suggested a classroom activity that involves students recording their group’s role-play and the recording could be presented in the classroom. This suggestion was supported by Arfah, but I thought that it was not necessary. Siti stated that if I had decided that the activity was not necessary, she would just agree with my decision. Once again, I made the final decision about the topic of discussion. In this excerpt, I made my stand and closed the discussion on that topic by orienting the discussion
to a different topic. It appeared that I was hesitant in relinquishing the authority that I possessed in the research team structure and Siti and Arfah remained obedient.

Extract 1.4:

Fariza: I think maybe we don’t have to use computers in all of the lessons.
Siti: I was thinking of asking the students to record their role plays.
Arfah: Yup. We can ask them to take turns and later present their recordings. But this process will take time.
Siti: I think so too. But since you say we don’t have to, then it is okay.
Fariza: Umm, I think that would not be necessary. So, what else can we do here?

(Professional discussion 1, 10 November 2010)

In the beginning, there was a clear line that separated the roles and status of each research team members. It became apparent that I was dominant in the conversations and I had the authority to control the direction of the research project by having the final say in almost every issue discussed. Siti and Arfah also confirmed this point when in an interview carried out after the planning stage in the first cycle; they commented that they saw me as a person who guided them in the initial course of the research project. As illustrated in Extract 1.5, even though Siti and Arfah did not highlight the element of status differences in our research relationship, they described the dominant role that I played in the planning of the multiliteracies project. They mentioned that I was mainly guiding the discussion process by helping them understand the concept of multiliteracies and researching. Arfah stated that she saw me as having two roles, a facilitator and sometimes a co-researcher. She highlighted that I made efforts to listen to their ideas and incorporate their ideas in the planning of the module. Nevertheless, ultimately she viewed me as a facilitator. Siti jokingly indicated that I sometimes dominate the conversations; however, she reiterated that it happened because of their limited knowledge on teaching and researching. She stressed the point that they needed more guidance from me in most instances.
In short, I think that the element of power distance was evident in the initial stage of our research project. At this stage, the research team’s collaborative practice was highly influenced by the Malaysian cultural values and practices. In Hawkins (2010) participatory action research project, which was conducted in an Australian setting, she recorded a significant event when her research team did not do what she had intended to do. She stated that she was initially frustrated with the situation; however, later concluded that the situation signified the true undertaking of a participatory action research where the research process was a bit messy and unpredictable. In the case of my Participatory Action Research Project, I think the evidence of power distance was quite clear as indicated in Extract 1.2 to Extract 1.5. The lecturers, who held an inferior position in the hierarchical structure, were more subservient and I, who had a more superior position, dominated the discussions.

Active co-researchers
The initial stage of my Participatory Action Research Project began with the elements of status differences influencing the roles each research team members played in the
As the collaborative research process progressed, the roles of each member began to shift. It seemed that the research process empowered each member to improve their roles and contribute more to the research process. This section will focus on the way the participatory action research process helped to empower each team member.

As we moved deeper into the participatory action research process, Siti and Arfah were becoming closer to the research project by showing a sense of belonging to the project. At the earlier stage, the research project was often described as “Fariza’s research project”. Siti and Arfah kept on using the phrase “your research” whenever they were referring to the project (see the bold words in Extract 1.6).

However, as the action research project progressed, I noticed that Siti and Arfah displayed more of a sense of belonging to the research project by referring to the project as “our project”. The conversation extract in Extract 1.7 shows that Siti suggested conducting informal conversations with the students to see the students’ current view towards the multiliteracies approach. This time, instead of highlighting the word “your research”, she showed a sense of belonging by using the word “we” (see the bold words in Extract 1.7). Extract 1.7 illustrated her sense of belonging to the research project and she was no longer assisting me to complete my research project, but she was giving suggestions to improve the data collection method for the research project as a research team member.
Arfah also showed a sense of belonging to the research project by explaining that she felt connected to the research project as described in Extract 1.8:

**Extract 1.8:**

Arfah: *In the beginning, I seriously thought that this type of research would be tedious. That was my initial assumption. But then, when we actually carried out the research, we observed the class, then we discussed, and then we reflected on the data and discussed how to improve our teaching. It was really, really fun. I was so connected to this research project.*

*(Interview 3, 2 February 2011)*

Through the participatory research process, Siti and Arfah were empowered to move from research subordinates, who provided necessary information for the decision-making process, to the initiators of discussion by providing suggestions and alternative methods to better improve the research process. This point was evident in Extract 1.9, when Siti suggested alternatives for the existing data collection method after our unsuccessful attempt of getting rich data through the students’ interviews at the first cycle. In this excerpt, I voiced my concern regarding the students’ reluctance in sharing their opinions regarding their learning experiences. Siti, without hesitation, suggested using a written questionnaire to obtain richer data. It seemed clear that Siti was taking a different role from the one she took up at the beginning of the research project. She was no longer providing necessary information to aid my decision-making process, but she was initiating a discussion to improve the project. She had become an active member of the research team as she was suggesting alternatives to get
richer data. Siti used the word “we” to refer to the collaborative effort of the research teams (see bold words in Extract 1.9).

Apart from initiating discussions, Siti and Arfah were also taking part in the decision-making process. Extract 1.9 shows that the decision-making process was shared between Siti and me. In this extract Siti and I both negotiated ways to obtain richer data. Siti was quite fluent and confident with what she was saying. The conversation in Extract 1.9 did not show any signs of Siti seeking my approval to suggest ideas regarding the research project.

Extract 1.10 also shows that the decision-making process was shared among the team members. In this conversation, Siti, Arfah and I were conducting a reflective analysis on the issue of whether the students were showing any signs of improvement on their English language skills after learning using our multiliteracies module at the end of the second cycle. The input for this discussion was shared equally among members and was not dominated by any one member. I no longer dominated the discussion as I did previously and it seemed that Siti had more to say on the topic than I did when I mentioned that it was good that the students prepared scripts before recording their video and Siti elaborated on that point further by stating her opinion on how writing and preparing the scripts helped to improve the students’ English language skills.
The shared decision-making process was also evident in Extract 1.11. In this professional discussion, we were engaged in a discussion on the issue of whether the first multiliteracies project was a failure as we had assumed earlier. We anonymously agreed that the first cycle was not a failure. Instead, it was an experimental stage for us to improve and tailor the multiliteracies pedagogy to particular characteristics of our cultural context. This conversation excerpt shows that the decision-making process was shared equally among the team members. I did not dominate the conversation and did not have the final say on the topic of discussion. Siti and Arfah were also quite comfortable in expressing their ideas in my presence. It seemed that they had more to say on the subject matter than I did. For example, in Extract 1.11, Siti was the one who expressed the idea that our first cycle was a trial-run...
instead of a failure and Arfah added that the project would not be successful if we did not have the failures in the first cycle. This conversation shows that they were no longer subservient members of the research team, but had transformed into active co-researchers. They did not provide supporting information and they were no longer seeking for my approval when expressing ideas. This situation was really contrastive to the conversations we had earlier as depicted in Extract 1.3 and 1.4 where I dominated the conversations and controlled the direction and outcome of the discussions.

**Extract 1.11:**

**Fariza:** After we discuss all these things, I felt that it was not right to say that the first cycle was a failure. Do you consider the first cycle as a failure?

**Siti:** I don’t think it was a failure. It was a trial-run. It was like a catalyst for this cycle. If we don’t have the first cycle, then we would not have the success in this cycle.

**Arfah:** I think so too. Let us see it [the second cycle] like this, if we did not have the first assignment definitely we wouldn’t have this outcome [in the second cycle].

**Fariza:** It does seem like that, right?

**Siti:** We actually identified the flaws of our multiliteracies approach at the first cycle, and then we amended our approach for this cycle. So, if we don’t have that, we won’t have this outcome.

**Arfah:** I agree with you. If we did not improve our approach based on the outcome of the first project, we would not have this.

**Fariza:** Yup. We would not have realized the deficiency of our approach without a trial-run at the first cycle, right?

**Arfah:** Definitely we would not have realized.

**Siti:** Yeah.

(Professional discussion 5, 2 February 2011)

The most interesting situation at this stage was to see that Arfah and Siti were no longer reserved in expressing ideas that were contradictory to my statement and I did not dismiss their ideas like I used to do at the beginning of the project. In normal circumstances in Malaysian hierarchical society, it would be quite rare for members at a lower rank in the hierarchical structure to express disagreement directly to the person who was at a higher level of the structure (Asma, 2009). Extract 1.12 shows that the hierarchical gap between us had started to diminish.
In Extract 1.12, we were talking about the students’ videos. Siti and Arfah stated that the students had better presentation skills because they were not talking in front of real audiences. Siti stressed that the students felt more relaxed presenting in front of the camera because the recording could be edited. I suggested that it was possibly better for us to bring...
the second multiliteracies project to the first cycle, so that the students could overcome their fear of presenting in front of the audience through this project. Arfah was suddenly silent and expressed hesitations after listening to my statement and the discussion moved to another topic about the students’ creativity in the videos. After a few moments, Arfah stated her opinion regarding my statement earlier. She argued that if we have swapped the multiliteracies projects, we would not have the same outcome to the ones that we were having. Here, Arfah’s hesitation to voice her opinion was very much related to the Malaysian cultural practice of expressing disagreement with superiors. Arfah at that point might be evaluating and contemplating her intention of expressing disagreement to my statement. Contradicting a person especially people who have a higher status in the hierarchical structure is very complex. The action involves serious consideration of the issue of power distance, maintaining harmonious relationships and politeness. In most situations, subordinates would remain silent and avoid contradicting superiors. Arfah at this moment must be thinking whether it was appropriate for her according to her cultural values to express her disagreement. However, she did express her disagreement with me despite her hesitations and cultural values. In this case, her action of expressing a contradictory idea to mine, a person of higher status in the hierarchical structure was a big move. It shows that the collaborative and reflective process in a participatory action research process have empowered Arfah to challenge her role in the hierarchical structure.

In addition, through Extract 1.12 also depicts that I did not dismiss her idea as I did during earlier stage in the research project (refer to Extract 1.4). This shows that I was too through the participatory action research were also changing my assumptions about being the primary researcher to being a co-researcher. I was more willing to accept and listen to ideas from my ‘juniors’ in the hierarchical structure even though the Malays cultural norms dictates the unlikeliness of juniors expressing disagreement to seniors (Mahfooz et al., 2004).

Based on Extract 1.6 to Extract 1.12, it could be said that each of the team members were empowered to transform their roles in the research project. I was no longer in the leading role and Siti and Arfah were no longer playing the subordinating roles. These extracts (Extract 1.6 to 1.12) mapped out my journey from an authoritative facilitator who constantly controlled the direction of the discussion and made the final decision to a more collegial role. As the research project progressed, the cultural gap between the research team members and I as illustrated in Figure 1.1, became closer. Siti and Arfah also became closer to the research project. They showed signs of ownership of the research project Extract 1.6 to 1.12 also mapped out Siti and Arfah’s journey from subordinating members to active co-researchers. They were more involved in determining the direction of the research project by providing constructive suggestions and comments. They were no longer subservient but were more engaged in the discussion and decision-making processes.

CONCLUSION

Conducting a participatory action research in a hierarchical setting was challenging. The basis of participatory action research philosophy itself was a challenge to the basic principle of the hierarchical society in which I lived and worked. Participatory action research strives for egalitarian relationship among members of the research team; meanwhile, in a hierarchical culture, inequality is acknowledged, accepted and considered normal.
Conducting participatory action research in a hierarchical setting was like working in two contrastive worlds.

Based on the findings of this study, the participants of a participatory action research project in a hierarchical setting can also be empowered to contribute more to the research process. In the beginning, Siti and Arfah who were at a lower position in the hierarchical structure, played a supporting role where they provided necessary information for the discussion but refrained from giving ideas and contributing to the decision-making process. But, as they were more engaged in the collaborative process, they became active co-researchers as they were more comfortable in contributing ideas and making decisions. Similarly, I began the journey as an authoritative facilitator and as the research project progressed, I became a more collegial facilitator. These instances show that participatory action research in a hierarchical society would not only be influenced by the elements of power distance, but could also empower participants to disassociate themselves from the influences of the hierarchical power.

Data in the current study showed that elements of power distance are quite significant and visible in the interaction amongst the research team throughout the research process. It shows that the idea of total equality and egalitarian relationship in participatory action research in a hierarchical setting is almost impossible. My participatory action research project did not offer a totally free and equal power ratio in the research relationship but it allowed me to discover the significance of status differences and how to negotiate and manage it so that we could achieve a democratizing collaborative research effort. Even though the participatory action research process did not liberate the research members totally but it empowered us to challenge our roles as defined by our hierarchical background. That is the most significant learning from this study where collaborative principals in participatory action research process provides a platform for us to be empowered to contest our traditional norms to a certain extent.

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