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Rethinking researcher–teacher roles and relationships in educational action research through the use of Nel Noddings’ ethics of care

Ulrika Bergmark

Department of Arts, Communication and Education, Luleå University of Technology, Luleå & Piteå Municipality, Piteå

ABSTRACT
Action research approaches have evolved out of a criticism of previous research traditions, where teachers have been seen as research objects, at risk of being marginalized. Such approaches have also arisen out of the view that teaching, learning, and educational research are interrelated. In action research, teachers are seen as professionals, raising their status to subjects, conducting own research. The research is carried out with or by people rather than on someone, which changes the roles and relationships. Ethical dilemmas can arise, especially evident in action research, where the distinctions between researcher and researched are blurred or removed altogether. This paper aims to explore the changing roles and relationships between researchers and teachers in action research through a philosophical analysis based on the writings of Nel Noddings, especially the concept of ethics of care. The analysis creates an opportunity for a rethinking of researcher–teacher roles, focusing on responsibility and knowledge as well as reciprocity and communication. Based on the author’s own action research experiences, various dilemmas are discussed. Obstacles to and opportunities for developing caring relationships between researchers and teachers will also be highlighted. The implications of the study include valuing both researcher and teacher expertise and learning to understand each other’s perspectives as well as giving tailored care. It is also vital to find strategies to contextualize and enact these views and beliefs within the researcher–teacher relationship. Neither researchers nor teachers will have total control over the process, as they stay open to each other’s perspectives and needs based on a caring relationship.

Introduction
Schools are meaningful sites for research, which often involves teachers as researchers. Such research approaches have evolved out of a criticism of previous research traditions, where teachers have been seen simply as research objects, and thus at risk of being marginalized. Such approaches have also arisen from the view that teaching, learning, and educational research can and should be interrelated. In action research approaches, teachers are positioned as professionals with knowledge and action competence for
studying and changing their teaching practice, raising their status to subjects in the research. Accordingly, teachers can both participate in research initiated by, for example, researchers from academia, but also conduct research themselves (Johnson and Golombek 2002; Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1999). Action research is carried out with people or by them rather than on someone (Heron and Reason 2001; Ponte 2002) and often adopts an ethically aware and qualitative inquiry (Campbell and Groundwater-Smith 2007).

Research involving humans is regulated by ethical codes of conduct, for example, informed consent, confidentiality, benefit, and avoiding harm. Despite this, ethical dilemmas can arise, especially in action research, where the distinctions between researcher and researched are blurred or removed altogether, raising questions about anonymity, decision-making in the research process, ownership of research results, and the implication of those results (Campbell and Groundwater-Smith 2007; Locke, Alcorn, and O’Neill 2013). Therefore, considerations of ethical issues lie at the heart of action research. Mockler (2014) argues that ethics could be regarded as a framework for quality in action research, which relates ethical practice to, for example, ‘understanding power dynamics’ and ‘exercising sound judgement’ (155).

In previous research, I have experienced various dilemmas relating to roles and relationships, including issues on voice, participation, responsibility, and communication (see Bergmark 2008; Bergmark and Kostenius 2009, 2011; Ghaye et al. 2008). Elsewhere (Bergmark 2009), I have discussed the need to reflect on and address ethical issues when academic researchers collaborate with teachers and students in projects, researching their own practice. I have a background as an upper secondary school teacher, and after some years of teaching, I was intrigued to purse a PhD, where action research was a fruitful way to explore ethical relationships in teaching. When conducting my PhD, and in subsequent research over the years, I have considered myself as both a teacher and a researcher, mostly working in a higher education setting, but always with a strong connection to municipalities, often part-time employed, with the mission to work with school leaders, teachers, and students in various projects. Based on my experience, I find it meaningful to view the researcher–teacher competences on a continuum, where academic researchers can possess both teaching and research experience when working as a researcher in academia and vice versa: teachers working in schools possess both teaching and research experience. Where on the continuum persons position themselves is often determined by the formal role and the tasks at hand, resulting in overlapping roles between researchers and teachers. In this paper, I use the terms researcher and teacher throughout, even though I concur with the fact that both researchers and teachers are practitioners who can conduct research. In my case, I was assigned a researcher position at a university, and the teachers were assigned positions as teachers in a school, with the main tasks to work with research and teaching, respectively. Therefore, in this study, I specifically look at models where researchers and teachers take different roles, but both parties have teaching and research competence.

I have found that the philosophy of the American educationalist and philosopher Nel Noddings, especially the concept of ethics of care, is a valuable perspective when exploring roles and relationships between researchers and teachers in action research. This is based on the fact that such research is relational and also situated, which is central to the ethics of care. Nel Noddings’ ethics of care has been explored extensively
in relationships between teachers and students in schools; however, it seems that the concept is sparsely used when reflecting on researcher–teacher roles and relationships. Although the concept ethics of care has also been elaborated on by other researchers (cf. Gilligan 1982), here I focus on Nel Noddings’ writings.

This paper aims to explore the changing roles and relationships between researchers and teachers in action research through a philosophical analysis based on the writings of Nel Noddings, especially the concept of ethics of care.

**Conditions for researcher–teacher roles and relationships in action research**

Examples of action research orientations that emphasize teachers as researchers are Teacher Inquiry (cf. Clarke and Erickson 2003), Teacher Research (cf. Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1999), Practitioner Research (cf. Burton and Bartlett 2005), Self-study (cf. Hamilton 1998), and Narrative Inquiry (cf. Clandinin and Connelly 1998, 2000). Common features of these types of research efforts are, for example, that the research can be carried out by teachers themselves and is based on what they perceive needs to be improved. The research is also interactive and carried out in collaboration with others: colleagues, school leaders, students, and researchers. The teachers’ own stories of their experiences in school are central to these research areas.

Besides being emphasized in educational research, teachers as researchers are also underlined in the educational policies of multiple countries. For example, policies in New Zealand, Scotland, Sweden, and the UK, state that teachers should apply evidence from research and their past practice in their teaching, as well as lead and collaborate in practitioner inquiry processes (New Zealand Ministry of Education 2007; The General Teaching Council for Scotland 2012; Swedish Government 2010; United Kingdom Department of Education 2018). For example, in the New Zealand policy, teaching is viewed as inquiry, where teachers (together with their students) investigate teaching and learning situations in a cyclical process: reflecting on the current learning situation (what the students have learned and what they are supposed to learn next), finding successful strategies for student learning (teachers using research evidence and their past experience) and evaluating the results, and finding ways forward. In this inquiry process, the teachers are researching their own practice.

Together with the aforementioned educational studies on teacher research, these policies indicate that it is a contemporary and growing area of interest, which challenges taken-for-granted notions on how educational research is carried out, thus raising new questions.

Changing the research focus to with, as in my case, or by (rather than on) affects the roles of the various actors within a research site, and accordingly the relationships between them. There exist preconceived notions of what it means to be a teacher and a researcher, which might hamper the collaborative process (Meyer Reimer and Bruce 1994; Tiller 2009; Bergmark and Kostenius 2011). Such preconceived notions can result in accentuating asymmetrical relations between teachers and researchers, underlining the belief that teachers are in need of support from researchers, who possess the necessary knowledge (Olin, Karlberg-Granlund, and Moksnes Furu 2016). For researchers and teachers, their goals of engaging in action research can differ. Beveridge, Mockler, and Gore (2018) describe how academic researchers might mainly be interested in
disseminating the results through, for example, seminars and publications (an essential part of academic work), while teachers are mainly focused on developing their pedagogy and student learning (an essential part of teachers’ work). Moreover, the authors propose that the expectations of teachers and researchers are often contradictory, which implies a need to create a shared understanding of the expectations, and hence responsibilities.

According to Wall and Hall (2017), handling and negotiating the roles and responsibilities of teachers and researchers in action research is a ‘balancing act’ (37). Campbell and Groundwater-Smith (2007) argue for ‘ethical probity where each party recognizes, understands and respects mutual responsibilities’ (2). As well as the challenges associated with action research, there are also opportunities. On the one hand, action research processes might provide the researcher with first-hand learning experiences about how educational policies and programs are implemented in teaching and the possibility of learning from narratives embedded in a school context (Postholm and Skrøvset 2013). On the other hand, teachers can find opportunities to contextualize teaching knowledge in action research processes (Postholm and Skrøvset 2013) and learn how to find fruitful ways for improving teaching through reflecting on the research (Beveridge, Mockler, and Gore 2018). Also, research collaborations in which teachers and researchers recognize each other’s abilities and knowledge benefit learning and development within a school practice (Olin, Karlberg-Granlund, and Moksnes Furu 2016). These opportunities and benefits reflect a ‘win-win’ approach, impacting positively on both schools and universities.

**Ethics of care**

Nel Noddings’ first book on ethics of care was *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, published in 1984. This book has been revised three times; the third edition was published in 2013. After the first edition of *Caring*, Noddings published additional works relating to ethics of care, but also on other philosophical questions concerning education. In this paper, the philosophical exploration is based on the following writings of Noddings: *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (3rd edition, 2013), *Educating Moral People: A Caring Alternative to Character Education* (2002), and *Philosophy of Education* (3rd ed. 2012).

The concept of ethics of care implies a perspective on ethics as being relational and also situated. Actions are not motivated by reasons and principles – but instead by the needs of and the responsibility for others. The relationship with and the needs of the other are the motives for actions, not rules or virtues (Noddings 2012, 2013).

I have to respond to the cared-for who addresses me in a special way and asks me for something concrete and, perhaps, even unique. Thus what I as a carer do for one person may not satisfy another. I take my cues not from a stable principle but from the living other whom I encounter (Noddings 2012, 188).

This quote underlines the situated nature of ethics of care and the responding to the other’s needs. Care is a reciprocal act – a relationship between a giver and a receiver of care, for example, teachers and students. To give appropriate care, teachers must come to know their students well. It is a matter of looking for signs that the caring has been received, which
complete the caring relationships. Ethics of care does not imply contractual reciprocity; therefore, humans cannot expect mutual care. People are solely responsible for their own actions to facilitate the development of caring relationships. In structurally equal relationships, for example, between two adults, the parties can exchange places as carers and cared-for (Noddings 2013). It is here I find the argument for using ethics of care in relationships between researchers and teachers in action research.

‘Carer’ and ‘cared-for’ are not permanent labels attached in stable and distinct ways to two different sets of people. They are labels for the parties in an encounter or in series of encounters in continuing relationships. Except in structurally unequal relationships (e.g. parent-child, teacher-student, physician-patient), both parties are expected to act as carers when they are so addressed by another (Noddings 2012, 235).

Accordingly, both parties are expected to act as carers and cared-fors. All humans can care, which is why we have a moral obligation to use this ability to acknowledge and meet others’ needs (2013). In research relationships, the researcher and teacher both can give and receive care to each other. To look out for each other could entail showing interest in each other’s views and perspectives as well as adjusting to the situation at hand, which may involve compromises. Researchers and teachers can actively seek out the other’s needs in the beginning of a process through, for example, discussions or written reflections on expectations for each other. Questions to consider in such reflection can entail: What are the driving forces for engaging in the action research? How do we wish to treat each other? What kind of responsibility is expected from the two parties? What do we hope to achieve through the process? Later on in the process, researchers and teachers can return to these expectations and compare to the present situation and if necessary adjust the relationship to better align to the expectations and needs.

Noddings has met with critical voices who question the role justice plays in the ethics of care (Strike 1990). This might imply that there are limitations in using care as a basis for actions in educational settings, and thus educational research. These criticisms have opened up a debate about how ethical principles of care, as well as justice, can influence school practice. Noddings and Strike acknowledge each other’s standpoints and explain that both ethical perspectives can contribute to the understanding and development of education. Nevertheless, there are still historical differences between these perspectives (Katz, Noddings, and Strike 1999). A relational and situated understanding of ethics emphasizes that actions are motivated by, and adjusted to, the specific needs and abilities of individuals; it is ‘a feeling with, and for the other that motivates in natural caring’ (Noddings 2002, 14). This does not indicate that thinking and action cannot be influenced by ideals and principles – it simply indicates that practice is more complex than rules might imply.

Noddings (2013) has also reflected on the critique that ethics of care has received during the years since she first started to explore the concept. One example is the association with feminine and maternal perspectives. In the first edition of Caring (1984), she used the subtitle A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education. In the preface of the 2013 edition of the same book, she introduces the word ‘relational’ instead of ‘feminine’. This change of wording is based on the fact that interpreters of the term ‘feminine’ highlighted that males would be excluded from
the ethics of care perspective. However, this was not the intent by Noddings since the ‘relation is more fundamental than the individual’ (xiii). This amendment allows for a widening of the ethics of care concept; it is not associated to a specific sex.

**Rethinking roles and relationships in action research**

Noddings’ philosophy can be used to understand and rethink relationships and roles between researchers and teachers in action research. A researcher’s role can vary considerably; from occupying a position as someone who builds active, collaborative relationships with teachers, to that of a researcher who adopts a more detached academic approach (Cook-Sather 2007). In the latter case, a researcher has the academic expertise, assuming responsibility for carrying out the study. A teacher within this paradigm has teaching expertise, which implies a lack of academic knowledge. Accordingly, the researcher enjoys a higher position, which gives the power to act. In the detached academic approach, the teacher is assumed to be in a ‘lower’ position in academic terms and the discretionary power diminishes.

In action research processes, a researcher is often positioned as someone who builds active, collaborative relationships with teachers or that teachers themselves are conducting research (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1999; Cook-Sather 2007). This means that relationships are created between two professional groups: teachers and researchers. Therefore, when researchers and teachers collaborate in action research, the hierarchical power positions and the responsibilities that follow the position are questioned, which creates new conditions (Bergmark and Kostenius 2011). The power relations are, therefore, not set in stone, which implies a need for a reconsideration of power relations and responsibilities. Researchers and teachers represent different professions with distinctive competences, both useful in research and in teaching. Relating this thinking to Noddings’ philosophy, she claims that the roles of caregiver and cared-for are not defined in symmetrical relationships as they are in asymmetrical relationships, such as, for example, between teachers and students (2013). Researcher–teacher relationships depend on the situation and competence. Both teachers and researchers can give and mutually receive care. Otherwise, an asymmetrical relationship will be emphasized.

When writing this philosophical paper, I reflected on more than 10 years of work with research projects involving teachers and students and decided to include examples of my experiences relating to researcher–teacher relationship, specifically addressing the scenario in which researchers and teachers take different roles, but both parties have teaching and research competence. For this paper, I have, therefore, written reflective accounts introducing two key dilemmas, relating to the roles and responsibilities of researchers and teachers in action research. These dilemmas should not be seen as empirical data per se, but instead as my reflected experience forming the point of departure for the philosophical discussion of tenets within ethics of care.

**Responsibility and knowledge**

As a researcher, I have experienced one dilemma that relates to responsibility and knowledge: fixed plans vs. flexibility. The dilemma revolves around the question: Who will set up the plans and decide the research process?
I [Ulrika] have experienced as a researcher working with teachers and students, that there is an expectation that I should take the lead and give detailed plans and suggest steps forward. In action research, this does not feel right to me. I want the participants and I to bring forward our respective needs and wants and then make up the plans and decide jointly. This is not so easy, as both the teachers and I may have understandings of what it means to be involved in research processes, emphasizing that the academic expertise be valued over teacher expertise. For instance, I know that I, as a researcher, sometimes stepped back and deliberately waited for the teachers to impact on the situation, which means that there was no exact plan set up in the beginning. My thinking was that the process should evolve once underway. This resulted in frustration for both me as a researcher and the participants as it sometimes implied taking steps into something unknown. However, I have also experienced examples when we have collaborated on decision-making, resulting in mutual engagement of both I and the teachers, as the decisions were grounded in both of our perspectives (reflective researcher account).

The dilemma implies negotiating between different perspectives and needs on behalf of the researcher and the teachers involved in action research. Who is responsible for what and whose knowledge is valued? Noddings states that ethics of care involves ‘an invitation to see things from an alternative perspective’ (2013, 32) and ‘[t]he one-caring assumes a dual perspective and can see things from both her pole and that of the cared-for’ (63). The researcher is mainly responsible for the research process, which might result in teachers feeling inferior and lacking knowledge. However, to promote a symmetrical relationship, a researcher might invite the teachers to participate in the research process and provide their perspectives. A researcher might also adjust the plans according to teachers’ needs and wants, based on their contextual teacher competence. The opposite is also important to consider: a teacher might also tune in to the researcher’s needs and adjust accordingly. Noddings recommends that ‘we carefully, deliberately, and generously dismantle the professional structures that separate us into narrow areas of specialization’ (2013, 188). If researchers and teachers are putting certain labels on what it means to be a researcher and a teacher, it will run the risk of separating each other, over-emphasizing the differences, and failing to recognize the commonalities.

Furthermore, to question the duality between researcher and teacher expertise, many educational researchers have previous teaching expertise, and teachers involved in research might have research expertise through previous academic education. Equal relationships between researchers and teachers, accordingly recognizing each other’s knowledge and competence, form the foundation for mutual responsibility. If researchers and teachers both act as carers and cared-fors, it might emphasize the need for both research and teaching expertise in educational research. ‘The ethic of care binds carers and cared-fors in relationships of mutual responsibility … requires each of us to recognize our own frailty and to bring out the best in another’ (Noddings 2012, 235). Therefore, it is important to take on different perspectives and dismantle professional structures that hinder caring relationships.

There is a value in both having fixed plans and flexibility, which complicates the situation. It is a matter of realizing when to set up detailed plans and when to ‘go with the flow’. This requires tact on behalf of both researchers and teachers, which can be developed through experiencing action research processes built on the ethics of care. Also, even if symmetry between researchers and teachers is emphasized through the ethics of care, it may be easy to fall back into more distanced and hierarchical relationships and roles. To challenge roles and relationships involves continuous reflection on power relations, responsibility, and knowledge.
If the researcher–teacher relationship is based on detached and hierarchical views on roles and responsibilities of researchers and teachers, it may hamper a real encounter, further emphasizing asymmetry. Accordingly, challenging and rethinking the roles and relationships of researchers and teachers might also involve courage to meet each other in ways that promote asymmetry, where both researchers and teachers might feel vulnerable. Moreover, Noddings (2013) suggests that caring also requires hard work and continuous reflection on the relationship. This implies that caring does not come by itself, automatically. How often the reflection should be done depends on the specific situation and the duration of the project. In my experience, I have found it valuable to, at the beginning of a project, reflect on the expectations of each other, and then to re-evaluate this as the project develops: what is working well and if something ought to change and, ultimately, to analyze the relationships and pay attention to the lessons learned. Methods for the reflections can be oral or written.

Furthermore, lack of care can result in negative consequences, Noddings warns, running the risk of objectifying the other: ‘he is treated, handled by formula... To be treated as “types” instead of individuals, to have strategies exercised on us, objectify us’ (2013, 65). Therefore, researchers and teachers taking on each other’s perspectives and viewing each other as subjects are central when using ethics of care in action research processes. It is not only lack of care that can hinder caring relationships to develop. Care actions can, according to Noddings (2013), aim too wide, not being adjusted to the needs of the other in the specific relationship. Researchers in action research processes can, for example, care for teachers on a general level, thus treating them as a group with the same needs. This can result in a feeling that the individual teacher’s needs are not met. If the care actions are aimed too wide it can depend on, for example, organizational hindrances or lack of knowledge. There might not be sufficient time or resources in the organization for the researcher–teacher relationship to develop, or that the researchers and teachers are not aware of the importance of building relationships in research processes, or do not possess the knowledge how to build caring relationships.

**Reciprocity and communication**

As a researcher, I have experienced a dilemma that relates to reciprocity and communication: *one voice vs. multiple voices*. The dilemma centers around the question: Who is entitled to prerogative in the research process?

*As I [Ulrika] started out my dissertation research in schools, I learnt multiple ways of doing research, where action research was seen as a way for doing research differently, both theoretically and methodologically. As I wanted to collaborate extensively with teachers and students in my research project, I questioned research methods where a researcher ‘harvests’ empirical data from participants and then leaves the research site. Therefore, I invited teachers and students to participate in the data collection and analysis. For me, it was a way for making multiple voices heard and drawing on additional perspectives than my own. It was a rewarding process where the participants’ perspectives and knowledge were valued. In shared data analysis, I learnt to know how the teachers and students interpreted responses they had created. Some interpretations confirmed my tentative analysis and other thoughts made me aware of new aspects in the data, which I had not paid attention to. However, it was also a demanding process to ensure all participants felt involved and perceived they could contribute. Challenges related to, for example, how do I arrange the data analysis? How should the groups...*
be organized? What questions are to be asked? How should they document their analysis? How do I combine mine and their analyses? I felt that neither teachers, nor students, were used to reflecting and analyzing in this way, which required some practice and time to develop. Sharing the responsibility for data collection and analysis involved stepping out of my comfort zone as a researcher. I could not entirely predict what would happen. It both scared and thrilled me. All in all, it really challenged our understandings of what it entails to be a researcher and a teacher/student. We were breaking new ground (reflective researcher account).

This dilemma raises questions about reciprocity and communication. How do researchers and teachers relate to each other and how do they communicate? Because ethics of care is situated, receptivity – seeing and feeling with the other – is central (Noddings 2013), which also relates to relationships between researchers and teachers.

I must see the other’s reality as a possibility for my own… Apprehending the other’s reality, feeling what he feels as nearly as possible, is the essential part of caring from the view of the one-caring. For if I take on the other’s reality as possibility and begin to feel its reality, I feel, also, that I must act accordingly; that is, I am impelled to act as though in my own behalf, but in behalf of the other (Noddings 2013, 14, 16).

It is a matter of getting to know each other’s perspectives as teachers and researchers and building reciprocity when collaborating in research. Noddings suggests (2013) that reflection and communication are ways for learning the other’s perspective and, therefore, to promote a caring relationship. ‘The attempt to maintain a caring relation is an attempt to keep the doors of communication open … requires continuous reflection on part of the carers’ (xvii). Noddings helps us understand the nature of communication and especially dialogue, by emphasizing that the dialogue focuses on the other as a person, not just on the topic of the conversation. Communication is linked to the value of others and their contribution to a process. ‘People in true dialogue within a caring relation do not turn their attention wholly to intellectual objects, although, of course, they may so for brief intervals. Rather, they attend nonselectively to each other’ (Noddings 2002, 17). This implies that the person who communicates the message is important to consider and, accordingly, to listen to. To really hear a message, the attention must be turned to the person who talks. Reciprocity and the will to understand each other’s perspectives are, therefore, central in dialogues. ‘But throughout a dialogue, participants are aware of each other; they take turns as carer and cared-for, and no matter how great their ideological differences may be, they reach across the ideological gap to connect with each other’ (Noddings 2002, 17). In dialogue, if researchers and teachers take turns as a carer and cared-for, this might overcome the sometimes-existing duality of researchers and teachers, which enables different perspectives to be heard in research.

In some research traditions, the researcher is solely responsible for data collection and analysis. However, in action research, this can be criticized for leading to only one voice being heard – the researchers, which gives the prerogative to researchers, resulting in a lack of dialogue between researchers and participants. Accordingly, action research encourages researchers to find methods which enable dialogue and multiple voices to be heard in research. This can, for example, be done when formulating the research questions and in shared data analysis with teachers, as in the example of the dilemma. If teachers participate in formulating research questions, data collection, and analysis, this might contribute to engagement in the research process, and multiple
perspectives can be brought forward which emphasizes the value of teacher knowledge. The teachers can give a contextual understanding based on their professional knowledge, and the researchers might bring a theoretical perspective, based on their academic knowledge. However, in the analysis, disadvantageous aspects of teachers and students can appear, which puts pressure on the researcher and the researcher–teacher relationship. If the results are presented in a non-caring way, it jeopardizes the relationship. Therefore, to avoid reinforcing a blame culture, it demands careful consideration on behalf of the researcher about how to present the result and put them in a wider context that recognizes that individual teachers act within an organization that affects, and sometimes even constrains, what is possible to do for individuals. The results can indicate how an organization, rather than individuals, can improve.

To enable dialogue and multiple voices to be heard in research is a challenge. It might be the case that both researchers and teachers are mostly used to a distanced and hierarchical researcher role, which reduces the possibility of a real meeting between them. On the one hand, the researcher can fail to create the prerequisites and tools for teachers to participate in formulating research questions, data collection, and analysis. On the other hand, the teacher might take a step back and wait for the researcher to act, which disengages the teacher from the process. Also, to promote dialogue and multiple voices to be heard, it is important to create a research project that is relevant and meaningful for teaching practice (i.e. based on teachers’ needs and questions), but at the same time, is investigating a research gap in the previous literature in the field of education. In my experience, I have found it vital to create trust in the relationship between us, which forms the basis for open communication and dialogue. One practical strategy could be to initiate dialogues on expectations, roles, responsibilities, fears, and concerns. If I (as a researcher) am the appointed leader, I believe it is important that I state that we are in this together and that I will do my best to help the teachers in the process. This, I find, promotes transparency and openness between researchers and teachers.

Relationships characterized by reciprocity and dialogue are created where trust and understanding are present, often developed within long-standing relationships and time spent together (Noddings 2013). However, in an action research process, there might exist lack of time for teachers and researchers to develop close relationships with researchers, due to heavy workload, where instruction or other tasks are prioritized over research. Moreover, teachers and researchers might not relate to each other on a personal level, which hinders the development of the relationship, and accordingly the reciprocity. There could be a lack of dialogue between the two parties or that one part dominates the communication. It could also be the case that the research process is initiated by a researcher, which might impact negatively on the likelihood of teachers and students participating as equal partners in the research. Also, teachers, with their expertise in teaching, might feel inferior to researchers as they usually possess greater academic competence. This could lead to teachers’ stepping back and the risk of being silenced. Then, researchers are assigned a more dominant role, emphasizing asymmetry.

**Conclusions and implications**

To sum up, I have argued for the need of negotiating the researcher–teacher roles and relationships in action research, where researchers and teachers take on different roles
as they collaborate equitably as intellectual partners. In this paper, I have reflected on the researcher–teacher roles and relationships from a philosophical perspective based on the writings of Nel Noddings, especially the concept ethics of care. The philosophical exploration, in combination with my own experiences as a researcher in action research processes, has highlighted both hindrances and opportunities for developing caring relationships between researchers and teachers, relating to responsibility and knowledge as well as reciprocity and communication.

At first, it may feel like a utopian view to aim for developing caring symmetrical relationships, signified by shared responsibility, building on both teacher and researcher’s competence, reciprocity, and open communication. Ethics of care highlights togetherness and collegiality, in Noddings’s words: ‘moving away from self’ (2013, 13). This perspective goes against the grain of the grand narrative of today’s society, emphasizing individuality, which can account for why ethics of care can be perceived as something problematic to achieve. Other aspects can also be real threats to the flourishing of caring relationships. For example, hindrances that can appear include maintaining hierarchical and distanced relationship between researchers and teachers, care actions aimed too widely, not adjusted to individuals’ needs, too little time for a caring relationship to develop, and personal controversy and lack of dialogue. Embracing the challenges might create awareness of the pitfalls and possibilities. Noddings (2013) encourages a study of the conditions where caring relationships can flourish. Based on the theoretical exploration in this paper, some conditions for creating caring researcher–teacher relationships include valuing both researcher and teacher expertise, recognizing the importance of researchers and teachers learning to know each other and their perspectives, and giving care specified to needs based on a particular situation. Also, it is important to stress that these conditions cannot be seen as solely fundamental views and beliefs not connected to a specific context. Therefore, it is important to find ways and strategies to contextualize and enact these views and beliefs in the researcher–teacher relationship on an every-day basis.

Building on experiences from school-university partnerships in research, Beveridge, Mockler, and Gore (2018) give powerful insights, enriching the philosophical analysis in this paper. It is important that schools are part of the process when academic partners are assigned to a project. The better the academic partners’ knowledge, competence, and physical proximity match the schools’ needs and location, the greater the opportunity for positive contributions to the success of the project. To create a shared understanding of roles and responsibilities between researchers and teachers, Beveridge, Mockler, and Gore (2018) propose the use of a ‘Memorandum of Understanding’. This is an agreement that: ‘clearly articulated the roles and responsibilities of all team members’ (30). Moreover, Beveridge, Mockler, and Gore (2018) stress the importance of teachers’ ownership of their project with locally identified issues, where researchers act as facilitators, ‘critical friends’, in the process. Teachers and researchers work side by side, critically reflecting on teachers’ questions and exploring possible ways forward.

I concur with Wall and Hall (2017), who emphasize that it is a matter of balancing between different perspectives when handling and negotiating roles and responsibilities in researcher–teacher relationships. Such a balancing process is facilitated by careful reflection, consideration, open communication, courage, and the preparedness of being open to adjustments and compromises. Based on the experiences of leading action
research processes, Postholm and Skrøvset (2013) found that unforeseen events occurred, which demanded the researchers to reflect and adjust the plans and act accordingly. This process required creativity and the competence to envision alternative ways forward. Neither researchers nor teachers will have total control over the process, as they stay open for each other’s perspectives and needs based on a caring relationship. I will conclude the paper with a quote by Noddings (2013), that underlines the relational and situatedness of caring relations. ‘How good I can be is partly a function of how you – the other – receive and respond to me’ (6). Such an outlook on relations creates possibilities for a rethinking and negotiating of roles and responsibilities in researcher–teacher relationships in action research.

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ORCID

Ulrika Bergmark http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7952-5111

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