A Reflective Journey of a Stranger in a primary Academy in England

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Abstract

This paper explores my ongoing research journey and the implications my personal biography might have on my study. Specifically, I reflect on my Polish origin, age and gender as well as my educational background and experiences. I also consider my own positioning as an outsider and my role in the research setting, and how all the aforementioned factors influence the research process and the research participants during the course of my PhD study.

This research is undertaken with the motivation to illuminate, describe and make sense of the changing nature of teachers’ work and the live experience of the working environment of a primary Academy. The rationale for this study lies in the growing number of primary schools that have acquired an Academy status as a result of the Coalition Government’s educational reforms. In 2010, the Coalition Government for the first time invited primary schools to become Academies. This allows state-funded schools to govern themselves independently of local authority control.

In my study, I employed ethnography as my research approach using participant observations, photographs, documentary analysis and interviews as the methods of data generation. My fieldwork started in September 2014. Since then, I have spent four days a week in the school working alongside my research participants who are primary teachers working at Sunnyside Primary Academy (pseudonym) located in the North West of England.

In the initial stage of this study, I questioned whether I was the right person to conduct research in an English primary school. I wondered whether my knowledge of the English education system obtained through studying Education Studies & English at undergraduate level and previous experience of conducting small scale research were sufficient to produce valid research since I have no personal experience of schooling in England. Although I understood the importance and the benefits of my training and educational background, what I needed to do was to recognise their implications for the way I interpret and make sense of the events around me. I came to realise that the lack of personal experience of the education system would allow me to maintain an emotional distance from matters affecting the English education system.

When I entered the research setting, I felt like a Stranger described in the essay by Schuetz (1944). When I moved to England seven years ago, everything was very new and unfamiliar to me. In order to be accepted by the community in which I intended to live, I have been trying to learn and understand the culture of this country. Similarly, when I started my research, I have not had any teacher training experience. Therefore, the culture of the
primary school as well as the culture of the teaching profession has been unfamiliar to me. As a result of this, I have spent every day of my research trying to understand the culture, social structure, power relations, social meanings, and activities people engage in.

Throughout the course of my study, I have been wondering how I am perceived in the research setting and what my role is. Being an outsider to the group I am studying has caused many challenges with building rapport with the teachers, negotiating access into the group, and gaining the participants’ trust. These factors greatly impacted the quality and amount of data that was generated and provided some limitations for my research.

To conclude, researcher's biography and personal characteristics unavoidably influence the process of research and the way the data is interpreted. However, when conducting a study, it is very important to carefully consider how we as researchers impact our studies and to reflect on challenges and positives that can result from it.

Reference List: