
Learning the Ropes to Conduct Ethnographic Research as a Teacher-Researcher

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ABSTRAK

Bagi seorang guru, melakukan penelitian etnografi bukanlah hal mudah karena dia memiliki dua peran yang kontradiktif. Umumnya, peran utama seorang peneliti dalam studi etnografi adalah sebagai peneliti dan orang luar, sementara itu, sebagai guru, dia sudah berperan sebagai orang dalam yang memiliki otoritas kelas. Berdasarkan disertasi di Universitas Edith Cowan Australia Barat, penelitian ini merupakan studi etnografi tentang rumah dan lingkungan sekolah siswa SMA Australia-Cina dan Anglo-Australia di sekolah tempat peneliti mengajar. Penelitian ini mengkaji permasalahan guru peneliti melalui sudut pandang *non-judgmental* berjarak (Woods, 1986) sambil terlibat dan mengenali lingkungan penelitian. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa guru peneliti tidak hanya menemukan kesulitan dalam mengatur jarak tetapi juga menghadapi kendala moral. Ketika berperan sebagai guru, peneliti merasa kesulitan untuk melakukan observasi karena dia terbiasa untuk memberikan saran, memaksa siswa untuk mentaati instruksi, dan menentukan apa yang harus dilakukan jika ada siswa yang nakal. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan kelebihan seorang guru-peneliti sebagai orang dalam yang memiliki akses lebih besar daripada peneliti orang luar.

Kata kunci: *teacher-researcher*, penelitian etnografi, sudut pandang *non-judgmental* berjarak

It is ironical that most research on school systems is conducted by the university academics who remain out of touch with what goes on in classrooms. At the very best they would spend a few months in classroom if it happens to be a qualitative study. On the other hand, the classroom teachers interact everyday with their students and are part of the classroom processes, they are in an ideal position to observe the events as they unfold naturally in the classrooms. Given proper research skills and resources, classroom teachers are best suited to conduct authentic and valid research, especially if the paradigm to be used is qualitative. This paper discusses the author's experiences, as a teacher-researcher, to conduct an ethnographic research of home and school settings of high school students in a Perth metropolitan school where the author taught the research students during the entire duration of conducting this research. The purpose of this paper is to discuss and share the experiences from a teacher-researcher's point of view to conduct an

ethnographic study of home and school learning environments of teenagers of Chinese Australian and Anglo Australian high school students.

Dilemma as a teacher researcher

To act as a researcher and as a teacher and at the same time to be an interested friend is hard (Ball, 1985). In an ethnographic study a teacher researcher's primary role is that of an observer and outsider whereas for the teacher alone the first established role is that of authority in the classroom. His/her first job is to teach. For a teacher researcher the problem arises out of his/her effort to 'become an observer with a non judgmental, distanced viewpoint (Woods, 1986, p. 56). A teacher researcher must be aware of the problems generated by his/her "involvement and commitment to the familiar territory" (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992, p. 2). Teacher researcher must have an open mind, induce a mode of reflection, question the basis

of his/her beliefs, accomplish role distance and identity of his/her prejudice. Keeping that in view, a teacher researcher has an advantage of access to the students' records, and can observe their behaviour in and out of classrooms. Students, their parents and teachers are informants and subject of study.

As a teacher researcher I embarked on an ethnographic study for which data was collected on a longitudinal basis for more than three years. These teenagers, their parents and teachers knew I was studying them. So they were observers as well as informants. During the period of conducting this study I taught at Paramount Senior High School, where all participating students were in my geography and society and environment classes; some for one year and some for two years. My data gathering techniques and access to the families were considerably influenced by my role as a teacher researcher. I confess, as a teacher there was a tendency, albeit unconsciously, for observation to be slanted towards a justification of a style of teaching normally used. Therefore, there was an element of subjectivity. I could not obtain the necessary distance and objectivity as a teacher researcher. On many occasions, I faced a moral dilemma. If a research student in my class did not follow the rules I confided to myself, "Should I observe his/her behaviour or should I force him/her to do the assigned task?" If I interfered, I realised that I had interrupted the natural sequence of events. Glenn and Ben (participating students) wasted time in class. If I forced them to work, they threatened not to cooperate in my research project. "You are not allowed to come to my house if you detain me after school (hours)... and if you tell my parents about my bad marks in my assignment", threatened Glenn. Quite often, Krista wasted time in my class writing notes to her boy friend and I was aware of it. I hesitated to adopt a high handed approach for fear that she might not share the information about her home and school life. Parents wanted to use me as a "window" to find out the progress of their children and their behaviour in school. When Ben's parents came to know that he was not doing well in his studies, his father gave me his work phone number and asked me to phone him if Ben misbehaved in class. I never phoned him to complain about Ben. I always talked either in a round about way or painted a better picture about

the research students in order to maintain good rapport with children and their parents.

It was difficult for me as a teacher researcher to observe because I was accustomed to giving suggestions, coercing the students to obey instructions and deciding on the spot what action to take if a student misbehaved in my class. After teaching in high schools for almost three decades I had fully turned into a teacher, a teacher who perceived his job to "transmit the contents to somewhat unwilling learners and punish those who resisted" (Woods, 1986, p. 56). Given my experience and closeness to the school it was hard to obtain the necessary distance and objectivity, but the trade off was that I had an easy access as an insider. I was in a position to understand the apparent trivia in classrooms. From the day to day routine things I could explain which students deviated and why. Also, I could trace out how cultural forms could be exhibited in individual behaviour. As a teacher, I had a relatively easier access to these families that allowed me to observe their daily routine, the mundane way the family members interacted with each other.

Finding the families and negotiating entry

Ideally, from both sub cultural groups I wanted to select research students with the following characteristics: male and female high school going children from the intact nuclear families living with biological parents. Anglo Australian families with British ancestry, and Chinese-Australian families that migrated in recent years from Southeast Asian countries. After talking to the principal I started to negotiate with the students who were willing to cooperate in the research project. I spoke to each student individually, telling them, "I am studying for my higher degree for which I have to write a big report. In my research I am investigating the quality of educational resources parents provide to their children and the type of education they would want their children to achieve. To collect data I will visit your home if your parents allow me". Initially, a larger number of the students and their families were contacted. It took a long time to get the trust of the parents and students to agree to participate in the research project. (see Malik, 2000 for full details). I had the disadvantage of not knowing the language of the Chinese students, as well as

not fully conversant with their customs and values. Amazingly, by learning a few words to greet them in their language and appreciating their cultural values brought hefty rewards. One Chinese Australian parent commented: "It is good you are doing research on such an interesting topic. I am glad you are doing it and not an Australian (Anglo) because you are a migrant (from India) Chinese and Indian customs are very similar. You can appreciate the Chinese customs better.... So you are welcome". I confided to myself: "melting the ice works... I hope the other Chinese families think of me the same way". Relatively, I faced lesser problems with the Anglo Australian families. They were open to talk about their home situation and about their children, although some of them pulled out because of their marital problems and some because of their children were undergoing behavioural problems. A working strategy I learnt was: *Go slow, melt the ice rather than break it.*

Once these families had agreed to participate in the research project, my next strategy was how to become an insider. In the early stage of my negotiations with the participating families I did not spell out all the details of my research project lest they refused to cooperate half way through. I camouflaged the real research questions to reduce self consciousness and the perceived threat (Hoffman, 1980, p 51). I told these parents that I was interested in broader issues like how parents related to their children and what it felt like to be in their families. The families were assured that the study would be so academic and abstract that no one, who participated, would be identified. During my first few visits to the participating families my aim was to put parents and their children at ease; data collection was secondary to getting to know the setting and the people. Early visits to the families were arranged by phoning the parents and took place at weekends after the evening meals. During these early meetings, which generally took place in the lounge and family room, children sat with their parents because they were very keen to know what type of information I would be collecting about them. Male children were interviewed in their study-cum bedroom, whereas female students were interviewed in the family room. Initially, some children were worried that I might disclose information about their behaviour in school to their parents. For example, Glenn Morrison asked me

after my second visit to his house: "Did you tell my parents about my behaviour at school?" "No, I don't visit your family to discuss your behaviour at school", I assured him.

During my first visit most parents treated me with formality. I sat with them and their children in the lounge room and was greeted with tea or coffee. Mrs. Morrison always served me tea in a cup put in the plate and some biscuits. Other Anglo Australian families served tea in a mug, whereas all Chinese-Australian families were more formal and served Chinese delicacies. I was put at the centre stage to do most of the talking and parents and their children listened with the dedication of a devotee in the temple. I talked about my background (which they found interesting), my family and the purpose of my research. At this stage I did not tell them that I would be visiting them for two years. To talk about my family, my intention was to let them know that I was married with four children. About my children I said that my eldest born had finished studies and she was a doctor, while the other were still studying at the university for professional degrees. Different parents processed this information differently. In some of the Anglo Australian families their children were not doing well at school. They felt a sense of inferiority. As one parent couldn't hide his feelings and commented: "I don't know how you bloody Asians do it. We find it hard to motivate our children" (in school work). On the other hand, some Chinese-Australian parents said, "Tell us the secret how to make a doctor, an engineer and a lawyer from a child."

Maintaining Relationships

Despite my relative success in gaining entry, the process of maintaining good relationships with the participating families, research students and the teachers of these students was quite a challenging task. To gain trust and to develop rapport it took several months. I assured the participating students that whatever information they gave would be kept confidential and would not be discussed with their teachers and parents. The early interviews, which were focused on rapport building took place fortnightly. Initially, I asked questions in such a way as to enable parents and their children to talk about what was on their minds and what was of concern to them without forcing them to respond to my

interests, concerns and perceptions. Knowing what not to ask was just as important as knowing what to ask. But once they started asking I encouraged them to say more about topics in which I was interested. The rapport building phase tested my patience, tolerance and sensitivity to the values of the participating families, especially about the topics which they 'held close to their bone'. I never began an interview with personal questions but reached there gradually as conversational intimacy got going, and when I felt that it was more appropriate to ask more personal questions. Generally, I capitalised on cues and could see when they were going to open up with something quite personal. At such moments I encouraged them by citing my personal experiences or events related to my family. It became a give and take exchange. This approach paid off and parents started to share freely their views about the education of their children and their 'native theory' to success in life.

To gain "intimate familiarity" (Lofland, 1976, p.8) I invented my own device that differed with each family. Undoubtedly, the level of intimate familiarity was affected by my position as a teacher of the children from the participating families, my personality, my ethnicity, research settings, and participants' feelings and responses to my research project. In the early stage of data my clumsy approach and ignorance of the norms of the participating families was not very helpful. In some cases I jumped the gun too quickly to show my familiarity. In fact, by showing over familiarity with the children from one Chinese-Australian family I had almost lost the cooperation of the family. I reflected back on my approach and reminded myself that to understand participants' thought processes and feelings I must be sensitive to their norms and values. Thus, I kept in mind the caveat: "How one gets in and manages to stay in will shape, if not determine, what one gets out of site and its host" (Schaltzman and Strauss, 1973, p. 227). The process of gaining access to a setting like home and school lent insight into how people related to one another. The field notes collected at this time helped me later to understand how I was viewed by parents and teachers.

My personal attributes and participants' judgment of men undoubtedly played a crucial role in cultivating rich relations with them. Children from these families knew that I was in close contact with their parents as well as their teachers. If they

decided not to tell me about their hide outs where some of them had their 'bong party and smoked marijuana' I respected their rights to privacy. Instead, I let them choose their time to tell me the things when it suited them. When children like Ben, Clint, Glenn and Chris started calling me "Mr Malik is our mate.... He is a good man" they took me to their smokers' corner at the far end of the school playground camouflaged by bush, invited me to play ping pong, billiards and listen to their favourite music in their study rooms. It is at this stage they started to talk about their friends and types of the things they did in their company, and talked about their parents and teachers. About her Asian language teacher one student commented: "I think she should get her head examined. It is because of her some of my good friends have decided to drop out of that subject". Said another, "You know my maths teacher can suck eggs. I hate him". Some teachers used comments about their students in my research study that were very derogatory. "Glenn is dead shit. Nothing is there in his brain. Class will be much better off without him. His parents think that I pick on him". Talking about her parents another research student said, "You will not tell my parents (about my secret dating with my boy friend). If they come to know they will ground me".

In my attempts to establish rapport with parents I had a better success to accommodate myself to parents' routines and their ways of doing the things. For instance, Mrs. Marshall liked to talk to me while ironing her clothes or cooking. Mrs. Smith smoked whenever I sat for an interview with her, even though I suffer from hay fever. Mrs. Kok was kept busy by her toddler whenever I visited her family. Also, I found it a useful strategy to find something in common with these families. Mr. Cheong, Mr. Goh and Mr. Smith liked to play golf. A number of times, on separate occasions, I played golf with them. Whether it was a game of golf or tennis I never played with more than one family at a time. Conversations, especially after the game while sharing drinks with parents, gave invaluable insights into their belief systems. They talked freely about their interests, hobbies and views about the education of their children.

Also, I found it a useful approach to gain parents' and teachers' trust by doing favours for them. Glenn was unhappy with his maths teacher. His mother asked me how she should go about to shift Glenn to a different class. The Kwangs

were very keen for Hongzia to study medicine. They asked me what subjects she should select and what aggregate score was required to enroll for medicine. When Krista ran away from home I consoled Mrs. Smith. Although such favours helped cement rapport with these families, some parents started to use me as a contact person to get information about school. In such situations instead of providing information to them I gave them the contact number of teacher concerned. However, in some cases, parents wanted to use me for their own reasons. For instance, one parent got in a bitter argument with the school principal when her daughter ran away from home but was still attending the school. She sought my assistance to lodge complaint to the Education Department against the principal. When politely I told her that it was not possible for me to do so, she refused to cooperate. Fortunately, by then I had already collected the data from all the families. Similarly, Ben, Glenn, Chris and Krista took advantage of the situation and held me at ransom. Quite often, they did not complete their homework because they knew that I would not complain about them to their parents. At school, in return for the time some teachers spent with me to talk about the research students, I compensated them by doing yard supervision for them, whenever it was convenient.

In spite of these minor problems, with the passage of time my rapport with these families kept on improving. I shared meals, joined them at barbeques and invited them (on an individual basis) to my place. I learned a number of phrases and words from Bahasa Malaysia to greet the Chinese Australian families. I visited the Anglo Australian homes casually dressed and Chinese Australian homes dressed semi formally. With a few families (especially Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Kok) I spent an enormous amount of time listening to their stories. Informants like Mrs. Smith shared those aspects of her life in which she wanted to be seen in a favourable light and she down played what her husband did for Krista. In the later stage of the data collection, I selected my own times to observe the parents in their homes. Listening to their stories, which were not always related to my research, cost me a great deal of time but patience paid off. As no tape recorder was used to record data I paid particular attention to what parents, their children and teachers in various settings said. Gradually, I shifted the focus from a "wide angle

to a narrow angle lens" (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992) and looked for 'key words and phrases in the informants' remarks and left the setting as soon as I had observed as much as I could remember.

Ethical Considerations

As this study partly featured the social lives of the participating families, ethical issues were inescapable. While my prime goal was to collect rich and thick data and to give accounts of their situations as faithfully as possible, the participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. All names, including the name of Paramount Senior High School and the suburb where the school is located, were fictitious. I aimed at striking a balance between gaining some access to events while remaining sensitive to the problems caused by the access. In this study the trust of students and teachers had been gained through my position at the school and entry to the families was facilitated by research cases and the principal. The participating families, teachers and principal were given a fair idea about the purpose and nature of the study. A close relationship between the researcher and the researched was of vital importance but the former was fully aware that his relationship implied respect for the rights of the individuals whose privacy was not invaded and they were not harmed or exploited. Also, as the study explored some sensitive and controversial issues such as comparing the home environment of children from two contrasting cultural backgrounds I avoided any race related discussion and parents from one family did not know who the other families were participating in this study.

Being a teacher researcher at this school posed a number of dilemmas. How am I going to overcome my knowledge of these students in rewarding or punishing them in my class? At school I wanted to get close to the world of these teenagers. They invited me to their "piss and bong parties". Though I was tempted, I was fully aware of my position and the danger involved. One parent enticed me to talk about my married life and her strained relation with her husband. She showed me some documents regarding her dispute with her husband on sharing the property. When her daughter ran away from school she blamed the school principal. This parent wanted to seek my assistance to take a legal action against the principal. I found myself between the rock and the devil. When I did not help her she banned my visits

to her family. Some insightful accounts of these families have been deliberately taken out because of the sensitivity of the material. I avoided taking risk to antagonise the target cases and at the same time aiming to get the relevant information. Burgess's advice gave a lot of encouragement to carry on my task: "There is no solution to the problems identified by the researchers. Such a situation means that researchers need regularly reflect on their work so as to develop their understanding of the ethical implications associated with social and educational investigations" (1989, p. 8).

Summary

Research which produces nothing but boos is inadequate (Lewin, 1948). Action research is a powerful tool to affect changes and improvement in our schools. Teachers are well placed to evaluate the effectiveness of educational innovations and the various aspects of teaching and learning. Teachers can undertake action research individually, as a team of teachers or in collaboration with professional researchers. If we are to bring effective changes in our educational system we must take teachers on board and encourage them to review their pedagogical practices by undertaking small research projects at classroom level. Teachers can undertake a meaningful research if they are equipped with proper research tools and if they are sensitive to the moral issues involved in such research at a local level. This paper has, hopefully, given some guidelines to undertake action research by teachers

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