

TEACH^R

Research from the inside: One teacher's research journey within a school setting

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Abstract

In a secular society such as Australia, why are more and more parents sending their children to faith-based schools? This question led me to pursue PhD research exploring the reasons why parents choose faith-based schools. As I began my research I was confronted with unexpected complexities of researching my own setting. Researching one's own professional context or occupational setting is known as insider research and this type of research is becoming increasingly common, especially in the field of Education. This paper explores some of the experiences I encountered as an insider researcher, and I present typical advantages and challenges associated with insider research. I also provide a discussion of the importance of reflexivity for insider researchers. By acknowledging the issues inherent with insider research, the usefulness of studying one's own setting will be evident. I conclude that teacher-driven insider research is valuable to understanding of the practice of Education.

Introduction

There has been a rise in the popularity of faith-based schools in Australia over recent years and this seems to be counter-intuitive given that western culture, and Australian culture in particular, is considered secular and has been since Federation, 1901. According to the Australian Bureau 34.4% of students in 2020 were enrolled in non-government schools. Furthermore, according to Independent Schools Council of Australia (2020), 84% of all non-government schools had a faith affiliation in 2019.

My interest in parental reasons for school choice stemmed from my fifteen years teaching in a faith-based school system. During this time I heard, anecdotally, many and varied reasons parents gave

for sending their children to a faith-based school. Reasons such as desiring a caring environment, the explicit teaching of family values, academic rigour and value for money were commonly expressed by parents. These sentiments came from parents with a faith-based background but also, interestingly, from parents who claimed they had no faith affiliation. From these informal interactions I began my PhD research. Expanding from investigating only the school where I was employed as a teacher, I included three other schools from the same faith-based school system. Two schools were from urban regions and two were from rural regions.

The research question I chose is a critical element that guides my entire research: An exploration into the factors that influence parents when choosing a faith-based school. The research question chosen was intimately related to my work as a secondary teacher within a faith-based school system. Flick (2009) purports that research questions,

do not come from nowhere. In many cases, their origin lies in the researchers' personal biographies and their social context. The decision about a specific question mostly depends on the researchers' practical interests and their involvement in certain social and historical contexts. (p. 98)

The research question drives the research design and I decided that a mixed methods approach would be used, both quantitative and qualitative methods, to help answer the research question. The mixed methods process would enable me to glean a more comprehensive understanding than using a single method (Biesta, 2017; Coe, Waring, Hedges, & Arthur, 2017). Furthermore, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative phases in research provides greater insight into a phenomenon than either could do alone (Bryman, 2012; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A survey was used to collect quantitative data where respondents could opt in to

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participate in interviews to delve deeper into their school choice decisions. Using purposeful sampling twenty-one parents were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews to collect qualitative data. This paper will focus on insider research as it related to my experience in the collection of qualitative data.

Insider research

Insider research is research that is conducted within the researcher's own context or setting. Sikes and Potts (2008) clarify that this research is from "an individual's own professional or occupational group" (p. 3). Greene (2014) explains that insider research "is that which is conducted within a social group, organization or culture of which the researcher is also a member" (p. 1). Insider research has become increasingly more common especially in the area of educational research (Herr & Anderson, 2015; Mercer, 2007). Greene (2014) asserts that this rise is a consequence of professional doctorates such as Doctor of Education, as opposed to PhD programs, where teachers are involved in researching their own educational institutions.

Outsider research, on the other hand, is research conducted by a researcher that has no connection with the setting being researched. Indeed, Brannick and Coghlan (2007) describe outsider researchers as "onlookers" where their "relationship to the setting is detached and neutral" (p. 60). There is a certain objectivity implied here that is seen as a type of protective armour against the pitfalls of subjectivity in research that is inherent within insider research.

It is important to appreciate that it is possible for a researcher to be an insider researcher as well as an outsider researcher simultaneously or fluidly during the course of their research (Halilovich, 2014; Hellawell, 2006). Hellawell (2006) states that "there may be some elements of insiderness on some dimensions of your research and some elements of outsidership on other dimensions" (p. 490). This is certainly evident in my research. For example, I am an insider within the school where I am employed, but an outsider to the other three schools that are part of the research. I am also an insider to the parents that are affiliated with the same faith as I. This also makes me an outsider to parents who have another faith affiliation or no faith affiliation.

Positionality is closely tied to the understanding of what it means to be an insider researcher. Jacobson and Mustafa (2019) interpret positionality as the "position from which we see the world around us" (p. 1) and that it impacts all aspects of research. It is suggested that the positionality of the researcher changes during the qualitative research process. It is accepted by many scholars that researcher positionality is rarely static and indeed is fluid along

the research continuum (Atkins & Wallace, 2012; Hellawell, 2006; Hoare, Buetow, Mills, & Francis, 2012; Mercer, 2007; Ross, 2017). Herr and Anderson (2015) explain the positionality of a researcher as "a continuum of positionalities" (p. 41) or "gradations" (p. 52) and assert that "each of us as researchers occupies multiple positions that intersect" (p.55).

Much is discussed in the literature about the advantages and the challenges of insider research (Atkins & Wallace, 2012; Brannick & Coghlan, 2007; Greene, 2014; Hellawell, 2006; Mercer, 2007; Sikes & Potts, 2008; Unluer, 2012). Some of these advantages and challenges will be discussed in this paper as I encountered them in my research.

Advantages of insider research

There are strong arguments in the literature that outline the advantages of being an insider researcher. Three common advantages of insider research include easier access to participants, cultural understanding and intimate organisational knowledge that it affords (Chavez, 2008; Greene, 2014; Mercer, 2007).

Writers such as Atkins and Wallace (2012), Greene (2014) and Mercer (2007) claim that being an insider can provide **easier access to participants**. In this research being an insider, a member of the school system, certainly provided easier access to each school. Each school principal was amenable to my request in accessing parents to participate in interviews. In fact, each principal gave me access to their personal assistant or receptionist who supported me in contacting parents. Some personal assistants even went so far as to email interview reminders to parents. I was also able to negotiate the use of an interview room at each school with ease with the help of the personal assistant or receptionist. This way there were no double bookings of the room and each parent was escorted into the room efficiently.

Atkins and Wallace (2012) state that participants are more likely to participate with research and participants may disclose more because they feel comfortable with an insider researcher. This was certainly the case in the school where I work. The number of parents that were agreeable to participating in interviews at my school was the most of all schools, almost double the number of the other urban school which had similar student numbers. The rural schools in my research had less students enrolled and also had less parents opting into the interview process. However, there were enough parents to conduct useful qualitative interviews. Some parent participants seemed more comfortable discussing their school choices with me because they knew that I was a teacher within the school system. Many were enthusiastically open about the

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reasons for their school choice; others needed some prompting to open up about their experiences.

Another important advantage of being an insider researcher is the **cultural understanding** that it provides (Atkins & Wallace, 2012; Greene, 2014; Heslop, Burns, & Lobo, 2018; Unluer, 2012). Chavez (2008) explains that “Insiders can understand the cognitive, emotional, and/or psychological precepts of participants” (p. 481). In this research it was certainly advantageous to understand the faith-based culture of the schools. I understood the context of the schools I was researching. I knew the historical context of each school and I was certainly aware of the faith-based culture of the schools. I found that I was able to relate to parents that were faith-based themselves and to understand intimately why they chose the school. I was also able to probe deeper to understand why parents of other world faiths and parents that were not affiliated to any faith chose the school for their child. I was able to use faith-based language with those parents who were familiar with the language, but I was also aware that I needed to avoid faith-based jargon with those parents who were unfamiliar with faith-based language. Understanding the culture of the school allowed me to garner information that would seem foreign to someone outside of the faith-based culture of the school.

Also, another advantage of insider research is the **organisational knowledge** that it grants (Floyd & Arthur, 2012; Greene, 2014; Ross, 2017). Mercer (2007) explains that insider researchers have a better understanding of the setting and context of their research and importantly a knowledge of useful avenues of enquiry (p. 6). Chavez (2008) adds that insider researchers “possess a more profound knowledge of the historical and practical happenings of the field” (p. 481). There is no need to orientate oneself about the research environment or its operational structure. As an insider, a teacher within the school system, I understood the organisational structure of the school and this was useful in ascertaining who to contact to enable the research to be conducted. I had easy access to the appropriate staff who would provide me with access to interview rooms and facilities that I may need during my visit. I was able to work within the school’s daily program as I was acutely aware of school schedules and time constraints. I was also able to schedule all parent interviews during school hours and some parents were grateful for being able to conduct their interview soon after drop off in the morning or close to pick up in the afternoon. Others were happy to come during the school day, when available. I was able to discuss the year levels of children and where this fitted in with their school choice decisions. I was able to discuss reasons of choice with parents if they

differed between primary school and high school. Some parents of primary school aged children had different reasons for choosing a primary school to a high school.

Understanding the organisation of the school system I was able to probe deeper into the reasons why parents would have different reasons for choosing primary school versus high school. These nuanced responses could be missed by an outside researcher who does not have intimate organisational knowledge.

My experience of insider research was that there were advantages to my research, including the practical aspects of access, cultural understanding and organisational knowledge. Sikes and Potts (2008) summarise these advantages well,

... inside researchers readily know the language of those being studied, along with its particular jargon and are more likely to empathise with those they study because of in-depth understanding of them... are often more willing to discuss private knowledge with those who are personally part of their world, are often more likely to understand the events under investigation... Inside researchers find that those they study are often more likely to volunteer information to them than they would to outsiders (p. 177).

Challenges of insider research

Equally strong arguments are provided in the literature that outline the challenges that insider research brings to qualitative research. Three commonly cited challenges are bias, role duality and power relationships (Atkins & Wallace, 2012; Brannick & Coghlan, 2007; Greene, 2014; Ross, 2017; Unluer, 2012).

Insider **bias**, where a researcher’s own beliefs and experiences can influence results, is an important consideration. Preconceptions and assumptions can creep into analysis of research and taint conclusions. Greene (2014) reminds the researcher that “The insider researcher must then be wary of projecting one’s own views onto participants, or the data analysis” (p. 4). Patton (2002) claims that neutrality, the absence of bias, is not easily attained but that “all credible research strategies include techniques for helping the investigator become aware of and deal with selective perception, personal biases, and theoretical predispositions” (p. 51). Seidman (2006) exhorts researchers to “let the interview breathe and speak for itself” (p. 117). Throughout the interview process I made a concerted effort to avoid potential biases from entering research results by allowing the interviewee to speak with little interruption or direction from the researcher.

However, I concede that bias may not have been completely eliminated. I had to be conscious of

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assuming I knew what the interviewees meant when they were sharing their experiences. I became aware that the parent, at times, needed to explain what they meant in more detail. For example, it became clear that the term 'values' was used differently by parents and there was no consensus on the meanings intimated by parents. It was important that I probed the interviewee to gain a clear understanding of what they actually meant when using the term 'values' in the interview, rather than place my own interpretations on meaning.

Role duality is another challenge of which insider researchers must be aware. Brannick and Coghlan (2007) warn that "... insider researchers are likely to encounter role conflict and find themselves caught between loyalty tugs, behavioural claims, and identification dilemmas" (p. 70). Role duality, in this research being researcher-teacher, was certainly a consideration in my research. I was the researcher in one role and a teacher in another role. My role in one of the schools being researched was well-known. Naturally, some parents of the school have had direct interaction with me as a classroom teacher and Year Advisor. I had taught and/or been the Year Advisor for three of the parents interviewed. This was a challenge for me with familiarity with some parents. Inasmuch as this can be an advantage in creating easy rapport, I was keenly aware that the participant may assume that I would have certain knowledge and not provide the explicit detail needed. This did happen at times with statements such as "you know" and "you know what I mean". However, being aware of this potential issue, I was able to ask the participant to explain elements that had been only vaguely mentioned. Occasionally, this familiarity was felt with some parents wanting to chat about their child or school issues that were unrelated to my research. When this occurred, I gently had to redirect discussion back to the research.

The challenge of role duality was not as acutely felt in the other three schools under research. I was not a teacher at those schools, however, in my introduction letters I did identify myself as a teacher and PhD researcher. This insider duality did become an issue when a parent would deviate from the topic of school choice and divert the conversation to problems they had encountered at the school as they thought that I was in a position to help them resolve it. This happened with at least one parent from each school. In this situation I encouraged the parent to directly contact the appropriate staff member at the school and redirected the interview back to my research.

Power relationships can exist between the researcher and those being researched. This may result in a situation where the participant may

feel obligated or coerced to give information that they feel the researcher wants to hear. Greene (2014) encourages insider researchers to "work at impression management to establish respect and avoid a power struggle with participants" (p. 6). To mitigate this potential issue, it was important that each participant understood their personal agency. I was intentional in stating to each parent that they should only answer questions they feel comfortable answering and they can discuss whatever they would like to discuss about their school choice experience. I also clearly articulated that the participant was able to withdraw from the interview at any time. Another example of the problem of power relationships in this type of research is that interviewees can also omit information that they feel may compromise them in some way. However, the parent interpretation of power relationships can be difficult to ascertain but should be acknowledged as a possibility. Data was also collected from schools where parents had no direct connection to me. In this situation there was a researcher-respondent relationship rather than researcher-parent relationship. I addressed any potential concerns by explaining the purpose of the research to the participant and how confidentiality would be preserved.

Bias, role duality and power relationships are a few of the challenging aspects of insider research. As an insider researcher I encountered these in the qualitative phase of my research and used various techniques to maintain research integrity. However, rather than avoid or discount the complexity this added to my research I negotiated my positionality within the research and began to reflect on its impact and practise reflexivity.

Reflexivity

Acknowledging the challenges of insider research allows the researcher to consciously reflect on positionality and the research process. Holmes (2020) points out that positionality acknowledges the researcher's worldview and how this impacts their research. Hellawell (2006) suggests that recognising one's positionality is a necessary component of insider research, stating "this ability objectively to stand outside one's own writing, and to be reflexive about it, and about one's own relation to it, are some of the hallmarks of a good thesis" (p. 483). Reflexivity can be a useful tool to understanding and recognising the dichotomy of insider/outsider research. Creswell (2007) explains that reflexivity "...means the writer is conscious of the biases, values, and experiences that he or she brings to a qualitative research study" (p. 243). Hellawell (2006) and Greene (2014) urge researchers to practice reflexivity in their research. Brannick and Coghlan

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(2007) add that reflexivity is intimately involved with exploring and dealing with the relationship between the researcher and the researched. Jacobson and Mustafa (2019) provide a useful reflexive tool, a Social Identity Map, to help researchers identify their positionality. Their Social Identity Map provides tiers with categories to fill in to help researchers recognise “how we approach, investigate, and analyze data” (p. 8). Furthermore, the authors point out, “Mapping our social identity is by no means the end to understanding our positionality but instead is a starting point and a tool to help researchers be explicitly reflexive about their positionality” (p. 3). The Social Identity Map is only one method of supporting reflexivity within research.

I appreciate that reflexivity is not always easy, but I have attempted to be reflexive in my research. This was done by contemplating and acknowledging my position within the research and identifying methodological considerations (Greene, 2014). I acknowledged my position as a teacher in one of the schools within the study. I recognised the bias at the beginning of the research by acknowledging that I am a member of the faith-based organisation that is aligned with the research. Although there may have been concerns about impartiality and participant relationship before the start of the research, in practice, an insight into the faith-based worldview and having a status of membership worked to the advantage of participant relationships. Oftentimes, trust was established quickly on grounds of mutual understanding of the school system or faith connection. I also used the Social Identity Map to visualise and better understand my positionality within my research. This method certainly allowed me to reduce some of the challenges such as bias and assumptions whilst conducting interviews. While strict boundaries of protocol were maintained, I am confident that interviews were conducted in a relaxed atmosphere where every effort was made to ensure participants felt valued.

Conclusion

This paper is not meant to provide an exhaustive literature review of insider research. It is not meant to provide significant methodological considerations pertaining to insider research. Nor is it meant to report on the results of my research conducted as insider research into school choice in a faith-based setting. The purpose of this paper is to simply share my experience of educational research as an insider and to contemplate where this research sits within my context. My musings may certainly not be typical of another researcher’s experience, even within the same context, researching the same question. However, it is my desire that my insider research into

school choice will make a significant contribution to understanding parental reasons for sending their child to a faith-based school.

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on and share my experience as an insider researcher. Understanding the concept of insider research or “practitioner enquiry” (Hellowell, 2006, p. 484) is particularly pertinent to my research as a teacher enquiring about parental reasons for school choice perceptions within a faith-based school system where I am employed. I have provided a discussion of three advantages and three challenges that I experienced in the course of my research. I also assert, however, that despite all efforts to the contrary, a neutral qualitative researcher is a fallacy and there is no denying the subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, influence of researcher’s identity and worldview (Holmes, 2020). Finally, as Herr and Anderson (2015) aptly claim and I concur, “... that knowledge production from all positions is valid as long as one is honest and reflective about one’s multiple positionalities” (p. 48). Rather than being afraid of an intimate connection with one’s own research setting, I hope that this discussion provides valid reasons as to why research into one’s own setting is useful and, indeed, valuable to academic discourse.

As I reflect on my own research process, I can say that researching my own setting, in this case the school system where I am employed, has been an enjoyable experience, that has contributed to my own professional development. My research has certainly benefited from the advantages of researching my own setting, but it has also forced me to appreciate and overtly acknowledge the challenges that are inherently embedded within this type of research. I hope that my journey with school-based insider research provides a springboard for further interest in teacher-driven research within your own school setting. **TEACH**

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