

A Case Study: Exploring the sociology of the food environment at Peartree Academy – Methodological considerations, ‘insider versus outsider’

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Abstract

This article aims to provide a snapshot of my overall doctoral research study and highlights some of the key methodological concerns raised. The study involved carrying out an ethnographic investigation in to the school meal situation at one particular school, which for reasons of confidentiality was name Peartree Academy. The study involved collecting data through interviews, observations, documentary evidence and field notes. The underlying aim of the study was to re-establish the Sociology of Food (Murcott, 2011) as a research area, with a particular focus on interactions that take place between pupils, parents and staff in the school dining hall at Peartree, which is known as the school ‘restaurant’. It begins with a background into the study with a description of the research design and details some of the key methodological studies used to influence the overall make-up of the methodological stance. This article is made up of the following sections: (1) a methodological view (2) ‘insider’ versus ‘outsider’. Having worked in the teaching profession for a number of years, roles within the school tended to shift from researcher to teacher and teacher to researcher. For this study, a social constructivist theoretical framework was adopted which was influenced by the works of Vygotsky and his study of social situation. Overall it was found that the lines between what constitutes an insider and outsider are very much blurred in the realm of field work.

Keywords: School Meal Situation; Case Study; Ethnography; Methodology, Insider and Outsider; Interviews; Observations.

Introduction

Respondent

Question from pupil sitting at a table nearby in the school restaurant:

Marie Daniels

– “So who are you? What are you doing today?”

Researcher

– “I’m just doing some research on the school and the restaurant”

Marie Daniels

– “Oh...ok...it’s really nice to meet you”.

In a previous article on this study (Lalli, 2014), part of the literature review was discussed in relation to the overall research aims alongside the sub questions. Reference was made to the school under inquiry which was known as Peartree Academy. This article aims to address some of the methodological implications, namely my position as researcher and whether I established a position as an ‘insider’ or ‘outsider’. This paper aims to unfold the two terms and establish a context for each. In order to build a suitable context, ethnography as a concept is discussed. Prior to this, a map of the research design will be presented in order to build the methodological context in question.

A methodological view

Key methodological recognition was given to the following studies (Nasirian, 2013; Mckee, 2011; Pike, 2010; Burgess, 1983, Ball, 1981), which in turn had a major influence on adopting an ethnographic case study approach to the study. These studies are placed in both traditional and contemporary times and spaces through which recognition of this approach began to grow. There is a growing concern of what it means to be ethnographic and the many myths that surround the ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’. It is important to establish my background as a teacher and clarification of this was available to all participants who had access to an information background sheet on the research aims and a biography of the researcher. It is the shifting roles between researcher and teacher which are particularly relevant in the latter half of this article.

Firstly, however, it is important to draw on some of the definitions offered with regards to ethnography as a concept. So how is ethnography being described in the context of the investigation of the school meal situation? Before proceeding with this, it is important to highlight the key characteristics of the overall research design.

Research Design

In total, 54 interviews were carried out alongside 80 hours of structured observations between October 2013 and June 2014. Interviews were carried out using an opportunity sample, although more specifically 26 interviews were carried out with a wide range of staff which including the leadership team, teachers, support tutors, midday supervisors and the administration team; 12 parents and 16 pupils (8 male and 8 female). There were no conscious decisions made to interview the parents or teachers who had contact with those particular pupils. Observations were conducted in the school restaurant and were recorded in the form of charts (See Appendix 1) and field notes (See Appendix 2).

What is ethnography?

Walford (2008) discusses the nature of educational ethnography and highlights a number of four particular cases; all of whom are in their pursuit of completing their doctoral studies and he uses these examples of illustrate how varied educational ethnography can be in its empirical focus. He describes the activities carried out by these individuals, which range from one doctoral student spending multiple months in a slum across South Asia, amongst a group of heroin addicts, in an attempt to address peer learning to help build an awareness of how future programmes might be developed more appropriately; another student who travels to far east Asia for over the period of a year to examine the processes by which knowledge of medicine is transmitted in three different contexts; student three is an academic who spends numerous days each week based in a primary school setting, using a tape recorder and his careful ear to record notes on observations whilst

student four can be typically found scribbling notes one or two evenings each week watching a group of young men and women and their teacher involved in a form of dance (Walford, 2008, p.1).

For this particular study, the ethnography involved the UK school and activities which involved using a digital recorder to store interviews and making notes on a continuous script of an A4 notepad alongside depositing information in certain columns on the structured version of the observational data (See Appendix 1). The fundamental critique here is that, like in most of social science, the word definition is not always helpful. The term ethnography derives from the two Greek words *ethnos*, meaning race, people or culture group, and *graphia*, which is translated as writing or representing a certain field (Walford, 2008, p. 2). For this study, the ethnographic technique adopted were very much overt in nature, in that all participants were aware of the observer at all times, be it the pupil, parent or staff member; everyone knew me. Upon embarking on the study, I was reading into a number of popular studies, namely *Street Corner Society (1943)*, which was a groundbreaking text for the urban ethnographer in particular, but in an interdisciplinary research environment, it was quickly became subject to Sociology degree courses and this is where it was first introduced to me. Whyte (1943) was a covert participant observer in his study and this was a desired position even for the contemporary ethnographer; a position where richness and fruitful data is seen to emerge. This is a view that I also shared in my study which led to the discovery of the ‘insider’, with little or almost no regard to the idea of an ‘outsider’. Key questions began to emerge; as a participant observer, was I an insider? Where the line should be drawn in terms of exactly who can be described as participant observer? As an overt participant observer, where my routines and activities involved interactions with participants in the school, eating around the same table and engaging in conversations, would this allow for valid, accurate and representative data to be interpreted? There are philosophical justifications which challenge the word level interpretation for exactly what it is that would

constitute 'relevant' educational ethnography. It is this point that is being illustrated here and that there are a number of complexities in reading around issues of validity, reliability, representation and accuracy; issues which will certainly be discussed in future works upon publication of the doctoral thesis (Lalli, 2015).

'Insider' versus 'outsider'

This is a debate that has been on-going for quite some time, during the doctoral thesis writing and it is during these latter stages of refinement that I am able to reflect and continue building a context (Lalli, 2015). In research on schools, the ethnographer has sometimes taken on the role of a teacher (Mac an Ghail, 1988; Burgess, 1983), but sometimes they have not (Riddell, 1992; Stanley, 1989). Of course, the decisions about the type of role to adopt in a setting will depend on the purposes of the research and nature of the setting (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 86). It is interesting to come across the works of Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) as they draw on the shifting roles during the course of fieldwork. For the research conducted at Peartree Academy, roles were certainly shifting as I moved from researcher to teacher.

One perspective by Styles (1979) provides a discussion on insider and outsider myths. In its simplest word level form, an external view is processed by the observer whereas an internal view is processed by participants. Further clarity is provided and Styles (1979) states that outsider myths assume that only outsiders can conduct valid research on a given group and it is only outsiders that are in possession of the required 'objectivity' and 'emotional distance'. For outsider myths then, insiders habitually present their group in an unrealistically bias light. Similarly then, insider myths assume that only insiders hold the level of competence required for conducting valid research in a particular group and that all outsiders are unable to recognize the accurate characters of the group's life (Styles, 1979, p. 148). This was one key concern at Peartree Academy as I did not entirely feel like an insider based on rational thinking. As the weeks and

months of fieldwork progressed, my behavior certainly became more habitual and there were fewer questions asked regarding my role as a researcher. For *Marie Daniels (a pupil-respondent)*, there is an interest in knowledge of ‘visitors’.

Insider and outsider myths are not seen as experiential generalisations about the relationship between the researcher’s social position and the character of the researcher findings (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 86). Essentially, the insider and outsider distinction creates an important phenomenon about the variety of roles that an ethnographer can play in field work. Having a keen interest through a background dealing with issues in education on food and eating as a situation, a context based identity is created. In addition, previous work in the teaching sector also creates a further justification towards a validity to carry out empirical research within the school; or at least certainly a level of self-competence as a researcher. However, regardless of whether an ethnographer establishes him or herself as an insider, there is a methodological danger imposed here; one which Labaree (2002) points to is ‘going observationalist’. Therefore, due to a lack of questioning of respondents who are subject to the observations conducted, there is no validation via questioning to clarify what is initially inferred by the observer (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Indeed there is much more to explore in order to present a deeper understanding around the complexities of observational research in education.

Overall, there is much evidence to suggest that the shifting roles of researcher and teacher play a key part in the overall interpretations of educational ethnography. It is this type of ethnographic research that allows for critique on word level descriptions of concept such as ethnographer. The underpinning conclusion here is that regardless of the duration or level of influence or involvement in this study, the research at Peartree Academy had an impact on the life experiences of both participants and researcher and it is this identity that is created; one which is surrounded by complexities of validity and ethics. This is another area of methodological

concern, but it is through the recognition of these implications that a researcher is able to establish a methodological frame for the overall study; one which can be transferable knowledge to the relatively new educational ethnographer.

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Appendix 1: Chart

<i>Information</i>	<i>Description</i>
<i>Date</i>	
<i>Time</i>	
<i>Duration</i>	

<i>Period/ Situation</i>	<i>Who (Year group)</i>	<i>What I have observed</i>	<i>What I heard</i>	<i>Further thoughts</i>

Appendix 2: Field notes

Wednesday 20th November 2013

Breakfast

8.15am

8.34am

Conversation with a midday lunchtime supervisor

9am

9.14am

9.36