Participant Observation Research: A deconstruction of researcher- participant relationship.

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The role of the researcher in participant-observation research can take a number of forms. At one extreme the researcher may attempt to remain neutral—asking questions and clarifying but not contributing in any way to the topic under exploration. Alternatively the researcher may decide to engage in dialogue and conversation with participants in a process called active interviewing (Holstein & Gubrium, 2002). There may be many points along the continuum between neutrality and active interviewing. Before undertaking a research project, researchers need to make a conscious decision about their roles and relationships with participants. In this paper, the relationship between one researcher and her six subjects is analysed.

The Project

In undertaking my research into teachers' responses to the reading difficulties of upper primary students, the research question influenced the methodology. I was interested in how teachers dealt with diversity, particularly with respect to differential reading ability and how teachers responded to this in upper primary classes. I wanted to investigate the adaptations made by teachers in response to reading difficulty. I was also interested in exploring the issue of adaptive teaching and investigating why some teachers were more adaptive than others. Qualitative research methods, appropriately applied, appeared to be likely to yield the data needed in order to explore these issues.

Having decided to undertake qualitative research and knowing that I wanted to both observe teachers and interview them, I then made a conscious decision to view the world of the teachers as an insider—to be viewed by participants more as a colleague than a researcher. This was not difficult to achieve as at the time of beginning the research I had spent over fifteen years in classrooms as a teacher, administrator and consultant. I had less experience

as a researcher and therefore felt allied to the participants. Participant observation appeared to be the most suitable means of collecting the data I required. At the time I did not question this. I was reflective about the process—carefully formulating the aims of the research and discussing sampling procedures with colleagues and supervisors. I also thought that I was being reflexive (Wellington, 2000) as I did reflect, and at an early stage comment, on my own experience and background and how my presence might influence participants. In fact, I thought that I had dealt with that aspect of participant observation research well. It was only later that I came to question the depth of my reflexivity. That is the danger with research. One can meet all the technical requirements but do so at a superficial level or with less rigour than is desired.

Becoming an Insider

I believed that the best way to gain information from teachers was to become actively involved in the classroom situation in order to gain insights into the ways the teachers worked with their groups and the dynamics of the classrooms. This was achieved in a number of ways. Firstly, I described my need to take observation notes during literacy sessions but I offered to co-teach with participating teachers for the remainder of the school day. During observations of literacy sessions I functioned primarily as an observer, but at other times I participated in lessons. In this way it was possible to develop rapport with all members of the classes and also to formulate a better understanding of the functions and relationships that existed in the classrooms. As I had recently been working in a school setting, I was very aware of how precious planning time is to teachers. It was agreed that I would interview teachers once a week when their students were attending a specialist session (usually P.E. or Art). As I did not want teachers to be disadvantaged by missing out on their preparation and planning time, I offered to make this time up by taking the class for one session (usually 45 minutes to an hour) a week.

In each case I offered to teach any topic or subject the teacher elected, or I would teach a weekly Drama session. All teachers participating in the study took up the offer of the Drama session. Teachers commented that this was not an area of expertise for them and their students rarely had an opportunity to engage in drama lessons. It is also possible that in opting for the drama lesson, teachers recognised that they did not have to brief me, pre-prepare material or engage in follow-up lessons. The fact that I was able to engage with students in an activity they considered to be fun was useful to me as a researcher. I developed some credibility with the students, as I was alone with them for this period each week.

The students generally wanted to participate and to please and, by developing this contact with all students, it was easier to approach those students nominated as experiencing difficulty with reading and, with permission from their parents, formally assess their reading ability. The only complaint I received was from other students who felt they missed out on a turn at working in a one-to-one session, or students asking if they could come to another assessment session. I was surprised at how much some of these students craved individual attention. Another benefit of taking the Drama classes was that they afforded me an opportunity to draw out and view student abilities as well as weaknesses.

Taking the class for one session each week also strengthened my relationship with the class teachers. All teachers asked about the students' response to the lessons. They were interested in how students participated and wanted to know about the behaviour of members of their class. There was a genuine collaborative exchange of information about students during these informal discussions. Co-teaching with participants during the week further served the purpose of enabling the teacher participants to view the researcher as a colleague, dealing with everyday teaching situations in a collaborative way. I very much left the amount of time I spent in the classroom up to the teachers in the study. It was my aim to be involved in extended engagement in classrooms. In three classrooms that meant I was in the class for most of the day for three weeks. In two classrooms I was in the class each morning for three weeks. In only one classroom was I in the class for language sessions I observed, the interviews I undertook and the lessons I took with the students.

The combination of detached observation and participant observation meant that I could be seen to be part of the daily programme but could also withdraw from the class to take field notes when required. I set up a laptop computer, usually before the school day, in a place where I could view all students and the teacher. A notebook was kept by the laptop in case I needed to move around the room to take notes. Before the first observation I either introduced myself or was introduced to the students in the class. It was explained that I was a teacher from a local university and that I would be working with the class sometimes but at other times I would be taking notes on how reading was being taught in this class. Students were made aware that I wanted to get to know them but when I was working at the laptop I should not be disturbed. Once their questions were answered, students paid little attention to me when I was note-taking. This generally occurred by the second or third day of the research. The majority of children accepted the presence of the researcher without question. Their teachers explained

that this was probably because they were used to having student teachers present in their classrooms. Several students asked questions, for example: 'When will you be a real teacher?' indicating that they perceived that I was a student or associate teacher, relating the presence of a researcher to their previous personal experience of observers in their classroom. Whilst the students had some difficulty understanding where I fitted in, I perceived that the teachers accepted me as a member of their community. I never felt excluded from discussions and felt I developed rapport with each of the teachers in the study.

Relationships Develop

At the time of the research and during initial data analysis, I saw little problems with the fact that interpersonal relationships with teachers, and to some degree with students, developed. I believed that participant observation and the chance to develop relationships afforded me opportunities to gather thick and rich data. Like Cotner (2002), I felt at home in the classrooms and perceived that I was welcome. I believed that I was fully accepted in all but one of the classrooms. Indeed—the teacher who suggested that I spend less time in her classroom confided that as I really didn't need to be there to observe more than the language lessons, I could go home and write up my data. She was a less adaptive teacher and it is possible that she was less comfortable with being observed and interviewed than the other teachers; however I never felt unwelcome in her class. This teacher didn't want me to participate more than absolutely necessary but she appeared willing to answer all questions, spent time talking to me during school breaks and was friendly in her approach. At the time I believed that my data collection was not compromised in this setting. My general impression was that I was accepted as a colleague and that teachers were comfortable enough to disclose information to me because I was a peer—a person who had shared the joys and responsibilities or teaching. In fact, sometimes I might have been privy to information that colleagues working closely in the same school setting would not receive, as I was considered a peer but not part of the system. I attempted to construct the reality of each classroom from the perspective of participating teachers, recording their different levels of experience and information about their training, and trying to discover the knowledge and beliefs they held and acquired about teaching and learning.

The ontological basis of my study was constructivist. In the complex situation of the classroom it is impossible to talk about absolute realities. It was possible to observe individual responses to student diversity but I acknowledged that the six participants in the study made both implicit

and explicit decisions about how to respond to student diversity. These decisions were based on personal experience, social conditioning, personal beliefs, intuitions and knowledge. In observing teachers I would make my own assumptions about the reasons for their responses or behaviour and attempt to explore these or seek to understand the reason behind the use or selection of particular teaching practices through the interview process.

I recognised that in co-constructing understanding with participants, it was impossible to be totally distant and entirely objective. There was an attempt to build relationships and to engage in conversation and dialogue with teachers, particularly in informal situations, but I did not intend to influence teacher opinion and beliefs directly through my presence in classes. It is through mutual engagement that researchers and participants construct the subjective reality that is under investigation during the research process (Hatch 2002, Magolda & Weems, 2002). Magolda and Weems (2002 p.493) state clearly: 'The relationship between the researcher and the respondent is paramount and takes precedence over traditional goals such as the quest for truth'. This concept of truth requires further analysis. Wellington (2000) writes that interviews are designed to elicit views and perspectives, not to establish inherent truth. He acknowledges multiple truths in social situations and the fact that there is no single absolute truth. In the view of Wellington, Hatch and Magolda and Weems, the relationship between the researcher and participant, built on face to face contact, mutual respect, trust and mutual obligation, is paramount. Our shared experience of being teachers provided a basis for the development of trust.

I was open about the aims of the research with the teachers in the research and, to some extent, the students. The six teachers were fully apprised of the aims of the research. They were aware that I was observing their interactions with the students they nominated as experiencing difficulty with reading, noting adaptations and modifications that were made in response to student need. The interview schedule was discussed prior to my introduction to the class. In discussing the proposed research with colleagues at the university, there was some concern that the data would be contaminated by teacher knowledge of the project. I had few concerns about this. Teachers could use strategies and techniques more frequently as a result of being observed but they couldn't use strategies and techniques that were not part of their teaching repertoire. I wanted to be honest with participants about my reasons for being in their classrooms. Deception was not necessary and, if possible, I wanted to see the full range of adaptive teaching practices that teachers employ in regular classrooms.

As I spent more time in classrooms, the teachers and I further

established shared experiences and knowledge. Wellington (2000) calls this trading. I believe that this happened more in informal talks in the classroom or the staffroom between lessons and after school, and did not believe that the reciprocal give and take occurred during the formal planned interview. In interviews I aimed to be more neutral, asking questions and engaging in some probing. The weekly planned interview was semi-structured. I had developed an interview guide but was fairly flexible about the range and the order of questions. I wanted teachers to be able to talk about issues that were important to them as educators in diverse settings, working with different groups of students. In the analysis of my data for thesis writing I was so intent upon finding patterns, I did not look closely at the way I had elicited the information. Scrutinising my interview data now, I am able to see that I became more involved in conversation than I had planned. The first interview with Brian (pseudonyms have been used in all references to participants and students), the second participant in my study, is provided as an example of how an interview actually proceeded.

Example of an Interview Process

At the beginning of this interview, undertaken after three days in the classroom, Brian began talking about some of the children I had been working with that morning. Totally unsolicited, he provided detailed information about the home life of two of the children. He was most concerned about their treatment. After a few minutes I suggested that we rewind the tape to ensure confidentiality. I then asked Brian how students' background impacted on their reading. The discussion went from student vocabulary, to parenting programs available in the community, to the availability of interpreters for school interviews. I then asked Brian how long he had been teaching. This led to a report on Brian's training, his current workload and the difficulties of managing post-graduate study, work and home-life. The discussion moved on to in-service education. I directly asked Brian whether he had attended any professional development on the topic of reading. This led to a report on the professional development provided on behaviour management, maths and physical education in-service programs, to discussion on school committees, state-wide testing and questioning techniques required with students of non-English speaking backgrounds. I then asked Brian to talk about the students I might assess as part of my research. He spoke about two students before turning the discussion to withdrawal programs and the reading groups he had operating in his class. I asked him about the notes I had observing him making during reading groups. This led to a discussion on selecting reading material and resources for reading.

Up until this stage in the interview I had been fairly non-committal, asking questions to change tack when I felt we had exhausted an issue, asking clarifying questions for example, 'How often are they withdrawn?' and 'How big are the groups?' or making reflective statements such as 'You operate your reading in three groups.' Brian was talking about resources for reading in his school, commenting that students are exposed to TVs and computers with fantastic graphics and sound but that reading was a different story and teachers had to find a middle ground. At this point my response was less impartial. Brian had touched on a topic I felt passionate about and I did not remain totally neutral. I stated: 'I think more and more we need to explore different ways of teaching different children.' Brian responded:

> That's right. I think they learn more and more because of you, rather than what you actually do ... just because there's someone there to point them in the right direction. The more I reflect on the way we were taught ... . We used to have the fifth grade reader and all this sort of thing and in the end we could read. We weren't really taught how to read. We just read. It sounds stupid. We used to hate it when the kid who couldn't read got to read. That used to always be the pits.

A discussion about changes that had occurred in society ensued. Brian then stated:

> When you said you were coming here I started to think more about what I was doing. I started to realise that I probably don't know what I am doing. I thought, 'The poor kids.' Now I realise I really don't know what I'm doing. I looked at the Curriculum Standards Framework documents and those things and they don't clearly explain what you're supposed to be doing anyway.

Brian then talked about his experiences at teachers' college and his lecturers. I commented: 'That's the thing that I'm interested in. What drives you?' He responded that the most important thing for him was fostering achievement and success in his students. He spoke about individual students and, as the bell rang, I commented: 'You'll see the transcripts and see the feedback you give kids. You'll have access to all this data. You might find it useful.' He responded: 'I've got trust in you.' It was only later I recognised what placing that trust in me meant.

Responsible Researching

It has been claimed that few researchers critically examine the relationship between themselves and their research participants (Ritchie & Rigano,

2001). Upon reflection on the data and the way in which it had been collected during the later stages of data analysis I became aware of the fact that in developing relationships with teachers I had in fact come to a position where I felt obliged to report accurately on the observations I had made in their classrooms but I also felt morally obligated to protect them from harm as a consequence of reporting their actions in what could be construed as a negative light. As teachers were given pseudonyms, it would be difficult for outsiders to recognise them from descriptions provided in the research reports but insiders such as administrators or colleagues in the schools in which I worked could possibly recognise the participants from descriptions of activities.

Jones (2002) writes about the need to attend to the complex dynamics that emerge as a result of the research process and the social responsibilities that should be acknowledged by the researcher. I did not feel that any of the participants in the study were bad teachers per se, but two of the teachers were less adaptive than their peers in the study. One of the research questions was to seek reasons for differences in adaptive teaching practices. When I was in the final stages of data analysis I had to ask myself—was I protecting some teachers by not asking them difficult questions? I had a list of questions pre-prepared but tended to let the interviews take the form of conversation or discussion about lessons and students' responses. I found myself asking more probing questions of the more adaptive teachers and possibly less probing questions of the less adaptive participants in the study. This could be partially explained by the fact that these teachers did not always have the language or the self-knowledge to explain clearly their own teaching behaviours and, as one might suspect, being less reflective they had less experience thinking about and discussing their teaching practice and the knowledge, beliefs and theories that led them to respond to students in particular ways. I was not aware at the time of doing this. I felt I was collecting rich data from each of the participants and I was aware that some participants were more articulate than others, accepting this as a reason for differences in data collected. I did not look to my relationship with the participants as a reason for differences in amount or depth of data collected.

Positioned as colleagues, participants shared information with me that they may not have shared with an outsider. The teachers made reference to sensitive background information of some students, their own experiences in teaching and learning and their relationships with administrators. These references to students, colleagues and their own backgrounds contextualised the practice I observed. It assisted me to make meaning of the situation but made me vulnerable in some

respects, as a sense of collegiality and with it a sharing of information developed. I was careful about what information I shared, trying to acknowledge various points of view, but I think that participants were fairly aware of where I stood.

Ritchie and Rigano (2001, p.755) write about openness: 'The interviewer should establish a climate for mutual disclosure. This demands that the researcher depart from the sterile practices of conventional interviews and demonstrate a willingness to share personal values and beliefs.' It had not been my intention to share opinions and personal values with participants, but this did happen to a degree. I was interested in the fact that I perceived that all participants believed that I agreed with their teaching methods. This may have been due to the fact that I smiled and nodded as I took notes during interviews and did not disagree with anything that was said. In fact I did not agree with some of the practices I witnessed, particularly those of the two less adaptive teachers but I did not offer them alternative actions. I was of the opinion that it was not my role to control events or to intervene. I was there to observe and attempt to discover reasons for different behaviours. I knew that my presence, however, had some impact on one of the less adaptive teachers, forcing her to be more reflective of her practice. I was asking her about instructional adaptation when she responded:

> I'm a great one for individual needs, I suppose I've never thought about it in terms of instruction. You can tell the ones who don't understand. You need to be able to give instructions to different groups. You need to be able to cater for them ... give them separate work. At the beginning of the year I had five or six groups working.

She had abandoned the practice of group work, as she perceived that the students were too distracted and there were too many behavioural issues that required addressing. In another part of the interview she commented: 'I don't like to draw attention too much to children.' This was a teacher who was highly respected by her Principal for her modern teaching methods. It is possible that participation in the research encouraged Amanda to reflect on the success of her practice and perhaps explore other means of responding to diversity. I felt in some ways that I had let this teacher down. It is possible that I could have engaged her in discussion about alternative ways of teaching and possible adaptations she could have trialled. It is no wonder that I came away from her classroom with headaches. Apparently I had been clenching my teeth most of the time I was in her room. I did not feel it was my place to be critical of her style and I felt obliged to maintain a good relationship with her.

I also felt some degree of obligation to the students in the study. It was important to tell their story and so a balance needed to be struck. At times this was easy, as in the case of Jay who made an unprovoked statement about Amanda at the end of the formal assessment he undertook to ascertain the level of difficulty he experienced with reading. This child may have had severe reading difficulties but he was very insightful. He commented:

> (Amanda's) not my type to get teached by her. She gives me hard work. (The other Grade 5 teacher) gives me reasonable work. (Amanda) lets us read in the classroom but when we read I don't read. I want to look at stuff like bike books and cars. I'm interested in motors and stuff.

One of the most difficult aspects of the research project was watching students struggle and observing some teachers do very little about this. There was little I could do for these students other than tell their story and hope that by clearly identifying adaptive teaching practices and the qualities of such teachers, I might add to the body of knowledge. I was not in a position to instruct teachers. This was not my role. I could however encourage more reflection than had previously taken place. As Jones (2002, p.470) reports: 'The goal is to encourage self reflection and deeper understanding on the part of the researched.' The power of this process should not be underestimated. It is my hope that my foray into these classrooms was beneficial for all who participated. Upon reflection, I will enter my next research project with clearer expectations in terms of outcomes for participants.

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