

Facts and fallacies of doing research: some methodological issues

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Abstract: This paper presents some methodological issues in the context of ethnographic fieldwork. These issues include sampling, gaining access, collecting evidence and last but not least the utility of the research. These issues are analyzed with reference to the researcher's personal experience on field work in Hong Kong. While reflecting on the constraints and difficulties of fieldwork, this presentation aims to emphasize the importance of the collaboration between researchers and practitioners. It is hoped that this paper will shed light on the role of both researchers and practitioners in the development of knowledge.

Keywords: sampling, gaining access, collecting evidence, fieldwork in Hong Kong

Introduction

The paper is based on the tradition of ethnographic inquiry where the researcher's experience is treated as an important piece of information. The practical account of the researcher could explain the reality of researching more than any research textbooks (Walford, 1998).

Sampling

Sampling is an important aspect of a research design and plays a significant role in the generalizability and external validity of the study (Robson, 2002). Randomization brings rigor to the study and helps in understanding the effectiveness of an intervention (Gueron, 2002).

In the pursuit of obtaining the best representative sample, I sent out letters to a list of schools downloaded from the EMB website. The three responses out of the ten letters sent, gave me hope and I headed for my first field of work. The first question I faced was 'why did you select our school?' My truthful (which was stupid as I reflect in hindsight) reply was 'I picked your school randomly'. My response was received with coldness. I had lost my first chance of collecting data. It was a top end school in Hong Kong and I was supposed to mention that.

Gaining Access

Gaining access to particular institutions shape the result of the research (Burgess, 2006; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). The ethnographic literature is replete with advice on how one should gain access and maintain trust and confidence of the people in the institutions. In a place like Hong Kong where teachers are overloaded with work, how does one communicate with school authorities and teachers, leave alone maintaining trust. I was advised to do more than send letters as these letters often find their way to litter bins.

Access, moreover does not end with gaining entry to an institution. It is essential to maintain rapport with both the learners and teachers over the entire period of data collection.

I believe in having my subjects and their teachers as active partners in the process of collecting data from them.

Search for evidence

The researcher's main objective in going to field is to collect evidence for the research questions. Claims are made on the basis of the evidence (Pring, 2000).

The experimental design of my study seeks evidence on the effect of reading from books and e-books on the literacy development of children. I presented the purpose of my study to an experienced NET in Hong Kong and got a very scornful reply from her about the absolute futility of my endeavor. According to her, e-books can never replace books. I wanted to tell her that I would agree with her only if I could find adequate evidence. This would require rigorous investigation which is more than a single teacher's opinion.

Teachers are often confident about the practices they adopt in their classrooms. As they say 'we know what works for our students'. However, it is important for teachers to base their practices on informed choices rather than on intuition and experience alone (Macaro, 2003).

Utility of research

There have been debates and discussions (Hargreaves, 1996; Hammersley, 2002) about the utility of educational research especially in the context of Britain. While good educational research should aim for providing practical solutions to practical problems (Hammersley, 1995), the scope of educational research is by no means confined to this goal. It is important to have relevant research questions which would provide new information through ethical procedures.

I hope to get answers to my research questions by adopting good practice and 'trust to its utility' (Paechter, 2003).

Conclusion

By analyzing the personal experiences and objectives of the researcher this article has shed light on the difference of aims, opinions and attitudes of researchers and practitioners.

Theory and practice are inextricably linked and are mutually dependent (Cole and Knowles, 2000). Researchers through their knowledge of theory can only hope to influence practice through carefully designed research. However, the whole process of examination, intervention and implementation depends on the gatekeepers and shapers of the learning scenario. The role of teachers, learners and policymakers in the whole process should never be undermined.

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