What is Next in Educational Research?

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What is Next in Educational Research? enables the reader to peek into research at the forefront of a diverse range of education fields as it is being conducted by beginning researchers. The book illustrates the extensive range of research being undertaken in education through a broad range of issues, topics and methodologies that will underpin and provoke research well into the future. The five sections address a range of topics, including: issues in design and methodology, social integration, language education, leadership, and issues in contemporary education. Each chapter makes a valuable contribution to existing educational research, and is a testament to the potential of these researchers to lead innovative educational research projects. Both higher degree by research students and their supervisors will find this book particularly useful and interesting as it provides examples of quality research higher degree writing, illustrates a variety of contemporary methodologies, and supports the early publication of student work.
What is Next in Educational Research?
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Edited by

Si Fan and Jill Fielding-Wells
University of Tasmania, Australia

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FOREWORD

What is the role of educational research in contemporary society? Is it to provide an evidence base for policy and practice decisions? Or, is it something that is disconnected from the real world and done by academics and researchers simply as part of their employment? Or, is it…? These and other questions have come to mind following attendance at several recent international conferences. At these events much of the conversation in the breaks between sessions and during the informal social occasions has been about the perception that in many countries important educational policy and practice decisions have appeared not to be evidence-based when proposed and implemented. Some of the reasons suggested for this situation included, a focus on educational topics and issues not relevant to policy makers, the fact that the policy maker wants the research findings for use today and the data are not available, that the findings do not support the present political milieu, and that the resources available mean that pragmatic decisions, rather than ideal, need to be made. Clearly, there are many researchable topics here!

In this context of asking “what is the purpose of educational research?” the present volume is a welcome and positive addition to those of us who see education as being informed – and changed – by good research. The volume helps us see directly how we can conduct research and use data to inform policy and practice. However, it is a volume that does not preach but seeks to persuade through the presentation of well conducted studies and through the demonstration of usefulness for researchers and policy-makers.

The editors have arranged the chapters into five sections, broadly they cover: methodological issues, English as a second language learning, students and their social and educational integration, leadership in school and other educational contexts, and contemporary issues in education. The chapter authors have described the doing of research and also the important findings and outcomes of research.

This collection offers much to the beginning researchers looking for insights into methodology, to the senior graduate student investigating similar topics particularly in a cross-cultural context, and for those who are concerned about education policy and how an evidence-base might be utilised.

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PREFACE

What is Next in Educational Research? is the second in a series of books, with the first book The Future of Educational Research: Perspectives from Beginning Researchers published in 2014. The series of books showcases the work of higher degree by research (HDR) students from the Faculty of Education at the University of Tasmania, Australia. It sets an example for good practice in HDR supervision and publishing. Along with the growing number of HDR students in the Faculty, there is the increase in the number and quality of publications lead by these students, and the richness in the types of research methodology. Many students enter their study with an understanding that research must be published to achieve its value, and with this desire to sharing their research outcomes with a wider audience. What is Next in Educational Research?, together with the first book in the series, advocates for early opportunities and practice for HDR students to publish their research, in a guided and supportive way.

The chapters in this book demonstrate broad interests of the HDR students, ranging from research methodology to teaching pedagogy in school contexts, from early childhood education to teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL), from perceptions of teachers in Fiji to language teaching in Nepal, and from citizenship education research in Pakistan to a context based professional development (PD) program in Ethiopia. The collection demonstrates a rich combination of research areas and a global perspective. Also presented in the book, is the richness in research methodology. The data collection and analysis methods range from survey questionnaires to semi-structured interviews, and from action research to program design. Yet some have reflected on the journey of how they embarked into research, and how they understanding of research evolved over time. What can be seen in all the chapters is the researchers’ passion in educational research and their desire to contribute to a better understanding of educational practices.

HDR students at the Faculty of Education, University of Tasmania, gather at a Post Graduate Conference in November each year to share their research with other colleagues from the University and audience from the community. All the chapter authors in this book presented at this conference and constructed their chapter with consideration of the feedback obtained. Each of the sections in this book includes one introductory chapter and a number of beginning researcher chapters. All introductory chapters are authored by established, and in some cases eminent, researchers in the relevant fields from the University of Tasmania, with an interest in educational research. All the beginning researcher chapters in the book are first-authored by an HDR student, with some of the chapters co-authored by their supervisors. The collaborative spirit of the beginning researchers and supervisors is a highlight of the book.
PREFACE

All the beginning researcher chapters in the book underwent a double blind peer-review process. These chapters were first reviewed by the researchers responsible for writing the introductory chapter for the relevant section. The chapters were then refined with consideration of the feedback, before they underwent an external peer review process, which were conducted by established researchers in the relevant fields. The external reviewers are, in most cases, external to the University of Tasmania. A list of external reviewers is provided after the chapters.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The book is divided into five sections, each of which is introduced by a chapter written by an established researcher/s in the field. The sections are:

• Issues in educational research design and methodology;
• Social integration in education: Non-traditional students;
• Researching language education;
• Leadership: Implementing educational programs;
• Issues in contemporary education.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We acknowledge Sense Publishers for their support and assistance in managing the publishing process. In particular, the advice and communication of Michel Lokhorst assisted in bringing the series of books to publication.

We would like to express our appreciation to the Faculty of Education, the Institute of Learning and Teaching, and colleagues at the University of Tasmania, who provided support throughout the process of compiling the book. Especially, we thank Dr Noleine Fitzallen, the lead editor of the first book in the series, for her generous mentoring during the compilation of this second book. We also thank Professor Kim Beswick who got us started on this endeavour, and Linda Page who provided invaluable administrative support and facilitated the peer review process.

We thank Dr Bill Baker for allowing us to use his painting on the cover of this book. This painting was selected from Dr Baker’s art work exhibition, hosted by the Faculty of Education, University of Tasmania, after the completion of his PhD study. This art work, Lilac Snow, represents the aliveness and brightness of lilac blossoms, which relate to our chapter authors who are embarking on their research journey.

Our words of gratitude also go to all the beginning researchers who so willingly shared their research stories and experiences. We also acknowledge the supervisors who supported their higher degree by research students in the design of research projects and/or the writing of the chapters.
SECTION 1

ISSUES IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH
DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY
1. TURNING GOOD IDEAS INTO QUALITY RESEARCH

Often the good ideas and questions that beginning researchers wish to explore are influenced by extensive professional or personal experiences and well established views about the fields of study (Holbrook & Johnston, 1999). It is, therefore, important that subsequent educational research projects not only honour those views, to maintain motivation and interest, but also positions the views within a scholarly frame. In order to convince the research community that the research has integrity and legitimacy, it must extend beyond an expression of personal opinion, or exploration of a narrow context. This can be achieved by embedding the personal interests and ideas within a research approach that is grounded in a theoretical perspective and informed by scholarly literature.

Educational research encompasses a field of inquiry that is both broad and deep. It brings together a range of research approaches to investigate questions and further knowledge. Musing on educational research, Applebee (1987) contends that:

Educational researchers represent many different academic disciplines, as well as different schools of thought within each discipline … At the same time, each of those [disciplinary] frameworks offers a different and of necessity partial picture of the educational process. (p. 714)

Being true to each of the disciplines and deciding how the different schools of thought are acknowledged, represented, evidenced, and reported in projects falls upon educational researchers. It is incumbent on them to convince the research community and other stakeholders that the approach taken is best practice in terms of the facilitation of answering research questions and gathering evidence needed (Bordage & Dawson, 2003; Litchman, 2013). The selection of a methodology is seen as a way of addressing those issues.

From the perspective of methodology, Creswell (2003) outlines three framework elements important for research. The alternative knowledge claims that underpin the research; strategies of inquiry that are followed, and the methods of data collection and analysis (p. 6). Each of these elements has multiple dimensions and the potential combinations of those dimensions across the three elements are manifold, making the decisions about which approach to adopt a daunting one for early career and experienced researchers alike.
Creswell’s (2003) three elements are often expressed collectively in the designation of the methodology for a particular study, which may be qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods. These broad terms, however, do not convey the nuances of conducting the study or the underpinning theoretical perspectives that guide the research. It is, therefore, not surprising that educational research in itself is difficult to define through methodological approaches. Knowing whether data are quantitative or qualitative as per the choice of a methodology does not give a direct indication the research approach taken or the considerations given to the collection and analysis of the evidence needed to answer particular research questions.

The choice of a research approach is very much interrelated with the purpose of the research and the intended audience. It can be argued that the audience for educational research projects stretch across four broad levels. These are the level of policy and strategy (influencing high level or government initiatives and policy), inquiries to inform systemic initiatives (e.g., curriculum evaluation and reform; educational change agendas), research that aims to understand individuals and their learning (knowledge of learners [or teachers] and their individual contexts) and the implementation of practice-based projects. In many ways it is the latter category—that what happens in practice—that brings together the more theoretical findings of the first three categories in the rich, complex contexts of learning and teaching. It is these practice-based projects that bring together teachers and researchers, or (increasingly) teachers as researchers, to provide the evidence-based research needed to develop education policy and transform educational practices to promote improved learning outcomes (Fitzallen & Brown, 2006; Shavelson, Phillips, Towne, & Feuer, 2003; Slavin, 2002). These advocates, agree that for such research to have merit, it needs to be based on scientifically valid strategies that test theories and generate new knowledge (Bordage & Dawson, 2003). Shavelson et al. suggests this occurs best:

… in the crucible of practice; in working collegially with practitioners, co-constructing knowledge; in confronting everyday classroom, school, and community problems that influence teaching and learning and adapting instruction to these conditions; in recognizing the limits of theory; and in capturing the specifics of practice and the potential advantages from iteratively adapting and sharpening theory in its context. (p. 25)

The nature of educational research, especially at the practice level is such that it occurs often in “naturalistic settings [that] may carry threats to the validity of the study such as loss of subjects, selection bias, historical events or maturation” (Bordage & Dawson, 2003, p. 379). Careful consideration of the likelihood of such factors to impact on the successful implementation of a research study occurs when a methodological approach is selected. For example, when embarking on longitudinal qualitative and quantitative studies that track the progress of development of
understanding of student learning, data needs to be collected at various stages of the research. That data needs to have a common thread from the initial stages through to the final evaluation to make judgements about that developmental phenomena valid and credible (Callingham & Watson, 2007). Not recognising the need to collect the same data throughout the study when developing the research design may lead to a data deficit and an inability to answer research questions.

Drawing predominantly from the social sciences in terms of methodological approach, educational research aims to offer “new insights, acknowledging the subjectivity of researchers, the impact of the research process itself on subjects and outcomes, and the agency of the subjects of the research” (Firth-Cousins & McKimm, 2012, para 4). Importantly, the methods utilised should be selected on their ability “to fit the specifics of the problem and situation, and may consist of any one or a combination of explanatory, interpretive, experimental, computational, mathematical or exploratory methods” (Sloane, 2006, p. 44). What is critical, however, is that the “researchers need to make a convincing argument about the appropriateness of the design chosen, given the particular circumstances of the study” (Bordage & Dawson, 2003, p. 379). To do this, consideration of Creswell’s (2003) framework is useful. Of particular interest to this chapter is the first element, alternative knowledge claims (p. 6).

Commonly called research paradigms (Bryman, 2004; Creswell, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 2003; Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006), alternative knowledge claims describe the basic beliefs (Lincoln & Guba) or assumptions (Creswell) about what and how researchers will learn during their inquiries. Paradigms are shared by a research community and guide the enactment of the research (Bryman). The terminology, however, used to describe the various paradigms associated with social research in the literature is similar but does vary. Some examples are in Table 1. For the purposes of this chapter, the paradigms outlined by Creswell will be used as organisers to discuss the chapters in this section. Positioning research within a paradigm allows for an integration of the three methodological elements described by Creswell. It also demonstrates that a scholarly approach to the research has been undertaken with due consideration to the purpose of the study.

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THE CHAPTERS

The authors of the chapters to follow each describe a qualitative methodological approach that encompass three of the four philosophical paradigms outlined by Creswell (2003). Satariyan and Reynolds, and Getenet and Beswick provide examples of strategies of inquiry consistent with a pragmatist world view. The advocacy/participatory paradigm is represented by the chapters from Zehntner, Swabey and McMahon, and Gube, whereas Muhammad and Brett, and Zicus provide illustrations of research within a constructivist paradigm.

Litchman (2013) describes 10 critical elements to qualitative research. One of these, is consideration of the role of the researcher. “She is the one who decides who to study and what to study. The researcher is the conduit through which the information is gathered and filtered” (p. 25). This brings into focus the personal influences that drive the nature of research. Researchers counter the potential biases by putting forward academic arguments that draw on established research strategies to justify and support methodological choices made. This is often done by reflecting on the development of research plans to enable a testing of interpretations, followed by a modification of actions. The importance of reflection in helping a researcher (or professional practitioner) make sense of educational practice is a recurring theme in the chapters that follow.

The role of the researcher is explored by Gube, who reflects on “the relationship between the personal values of researchers and their research.” Reflection not only on his own experiences, but also on the power of ethnographic approaches to explore lived experiences was a critical starting point for his work. The chapter describes his journey towards arriving at a methodology that was shaped through his world view, consistent with the theoretical frameworks that were informing his reading and question formation. His own personal values, and interactions with participants were also influential, resulting in alignment of his research with the advocacy/participatory paradigm described by Creswell (2003). Characteristics of this paradigm, in particular empowerment, collaboration, and change-orientation are seen clearly in Gube’s discussion. Also consistent with an advocacy/participatory paradigm, is the qualitative approach of using ethnographic and narrative strategies of inquiry. Gube poses open ended questions and adopts practices of research that have the researcher positioned firmly as a participant. Bringing personal values, sharing and collaborating with the research participants and studying the setting of the participants are accepted practices in such an approach (Litchman, 2013).

The role and voice of the researcher is also clearly evident in the chapter by Zehntner, Swabey and McMahon, which demonstrates the use of story in research. Through the choice of a qualitative, autoethnographic approach (Litchman, 2013), underpinned by the advocacy/participatory framework, the authors explore the power relationship within formal and informal mentor-mentee relationships. The chapter advocates for the use of story to communicate, facilitate learning, illustrate complex
social phenomena and catalyse change. Their use of personal story enables a rich and deep contemplation of data to the redress the power differentials inherent in the research. It also provides good evidence about the everyday lives of the research subjects and the meanings they attach to their experiences (Elliot, 2005). Zehntner, Swabey and McMahon focus on “how a sense of social order is created through talk and interaction” (Elliot, p. 18). Their approach is in strong contrast to pragmatist data analysis approaches that seek to draw both the themes and the subthemes from the literature illustrated in the Satariyan and Reynolds, and Getenet and Beswick studies.

Whilst practice-based research can be conducted by researchers alone, or in combination with teachers, inquiries by teachers themselves are gaining significant traction. The notion of embedding action research into the practice of teaching is increasingly becoming an expectation as teachers respond to the professionalization of teaching agenda. This is primarily due to the understanding that expertise in teaching, and improvement in student learning outcomes, is developed through intentional reflection, enhancement and evaluation. Drawing on the seminal work of Schön (1983), action research involves both reflection and action (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). Engaging in action research, however, requires a level of understanding of the process, and its theoretical basis. The chapter by Satariyan and Reynolds provides a succinct account of the relationship between reflection and action research as a foundation for teachers who are embarking on this process. Firmly anchored in the pragmatist paradigm, action research relies on multiple sources of evidence, collected in the real-world, with a focus on “what works” (Creswell, 2003).

By outlining a framework for conducting action research projects Satariyan and Reynolds provide a road map for teachers wishing to adopt this practice. Their five stage process, underpinned by the reflection literature, provides key questions for action researchers to ask. The question-based framework is adaptable in terms of time frames and scope of project, yet aims to embed continuous and purposeful reflection into the cycle of planning, action, and evaluation, which are key elements of action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). The approach taken seeks to link theory and praxis through purposeful exploration of the research problem. There is an emphasis on developing an understanding of what works and examining solutions to problems to derive knowledge about the problems (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006).

Also emerging from the pragmatist paradigm, is the study by Getenet and Beswick using Educational Design Research (EDR). EDR aims to design and evaluate interventions to transform classrooms, through recognising the systematic nature of learning, teaching and assessment (Brown, 1992). As a methodology it is both systematic and flexible using iterative processes to improve educational outcomes (Wang & Hannafin, 2005). Having many parallels to action research, EDR goes further to involve researchers and teachers in a collaborative arrangement. This is
to ensure what is found in practice is underpinned by, related to, and contributes further to, relevant theory (Barab & Squire, 2004).

Getenet and Beswick chose EDR to investigate the efficacy of a professional development program for teachers. In their discussion of the study, they clearly outline the justification of this methodological choice, and how the EDR process was followed to enact the inquiry. The relevance of, and relationship between, the quantitative and qualitative data collected are clearly outlined and provide an exemplar to how this methodology can be employed in practice. As a collaborative model between researchers and practitioners, Getenet and Beswick’s study aims to encapsulate “the specifics of practice and the potential advantages from iteratively adapting and sharpening theory in its context” (Shavelson et al., 2003, p. 25).

The chapter from Zicus, illustrates a project underpinned by the constructivist paradigm (Creswell, 2003). Her research draws on her lived experiences of collecting data as a participant/observer. Zicus conveys her research through an ethnographic approach that draws heavily on the linguistic challenges she faced. Her research journey through Asia, South America, and Greenland highlights how language and linguistics are bound within cultural constructs that are difficult for a researcher to traverse as a non-native speaker. Zicus highlights the importance of working through language difficulties to arrive at mutual understandings with collaborators and research participants. This is necessary to negate the impact on research that could lead to an imperfect or superficial understanding of conversations and cultures due to the lack of fluency in the languages.

Like the research undertaken by Zicus, Muhammad and Brett’s research is ensconced within a cultural context that poses challenges for conducting research. Adopting an interpretive analysis framework as an approach that draws on those with “local knowledge to [inform] successful policy analysis” (Yanow, 2007) is an important feature of their methodology. Connecting with those participants whose views of the situation you wish to include, however, is not always straightforward. Muhammad and Brett provide a powerful narrative of the importance of context, and how profoundly it can influence a planned research study. Drawing on a lived experience of data collection in a politically volatile country, the account is testimony to the commitment of educational researchers who are motivated to gain insights that will move the educational agenda forward.

CONCLUSION

Each of these beginning researchers began with a strong personal motivation towards answering a research problem. The power and influence of their personal values and interests can certainly be seen, as they worked through a systematic choice of appropriate methodologies and informing literature. This is clearly expressed by Gube who described his personal commitment as the “powerful motivational tool to steer and sustain the research project.” Although not always expressed as
explicitly as Gube, the personal commitment exudes through their chapters and conveys a passion for the research problems and questions they each explore. All the researchers are thoughtful and reflective about both the consequences of the research and the research approach taken. Their “good ideas” have been shaped into quality research through the employment of well-justified methodological approaches that will bring understanding, interpretation and meaning to their results as they study the contexts and phenomena to which they are personally bound. In doing so they add to the richness of their discipline and extend the understanding of their colleagues and those who engage with their research.

REFERENCES


2. MUSINGS YESTERDAY AND KNOWLEDGE TOMORROW

Beyond Reflexive Accounts of Research Encounters

... I would NEVER attempt a PhD myself. As the saying goes “Never say never!” Three years later living in Hong Kong, to my own horror, I changed my mind. This was when the early seeds of my PhD thesis started embedding themselves in my mind as I observed aspects of parents’ role and cultural processes impacting upon achievement.

(Phillipson, 2008, p. ii)

This quotation from one of my supervisors caught my attention as I started writing my Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) proposal. Like her, I found myself wanting to pursue my PhD emerging from my personal experiences. I took my question about my identity as a Filipino person who grew up and was educated in Hong Kong as a route to my current project.

In this chapter, I reflect on the relationship between the personal values of researchers and their research, assuming that personal values play a key role in what researchers produce. This assumption is partly in line with suggestions that intrinsic factors, such as subject interest (Ramsden, 1994) and emotional engagement with the study (Sinclair, Barnacle, & Cuthbert, 2013), suggest links to research productivity. In recent years, the higher education sector has cultivated an ethos characterised by high research productivity both in quantity and quality. Although gaining wide acceptance, an austere commitment to such an ethos overplays the proliferation of research products: intense funding bids, high research output, and so on (see Roberts & Peters, 2008). The limited focus could understate the personal values that underpin the research practices of individuals – the researchers themselves. Underscoring the role of researchers, therefore, calls for reconsideration on researchers’ personal values in producing research.

In drawing attention to researchers’ roles, using my ethnographic project as an example, this chapter reflects on how the personal values of researchers impact on the research process in complex ways. It seeks to add to conversations on how researchers’ personal outlooks contribute to a project’s materialisation. First, I recount my personal experiences that underpinned my PhD. Then, I preview the key concepts of the phenomena in my research, segueing into a discussion of my
method choices. Last, I describe how my research may be perceived and valued by those involved in it. Through these accounts, I argue that researchers’ personal values are not only a reflexive device, but also a strong motivational force that inform research directions and sustain research efforts.

FROM EVERYDAY MUSINGS TO RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Born to Filipino parents and having received education in Chinese schools and university in Hong Kong, I grew up in multicultural social circles, where I spoke Filipino at home, Cantonese and some Mandarin at school and English with friends from other countries. While these interactions are ingrained in my daily life, I started questioning my ethnic identity as I grew up. Broadly, ethnic identity refers to the ways in which individuals and others perceive and associate themselves as part of an ethnic group (Trimble & Dickson, 2005). Research wise, I could easily relate to this definition. For instance, my brothers who were raised in the Philippines would say that I am very Chinese no matter how conversant I am in Filipino language. On the other hand, because of my Filipino background, some of my Chinese friends would not fully see me as Chinese, even though I could communicate with them in fluent Cantonese. These experiences have at times left me with a nomadic sense of belonging nowhere, despite how my parents taught me to identify myself as a Filipino. Such a conundrum, coupled with my desire to further my education, impelled me to pursue a PhD. In explaining why I choose such a path, it is vivid in my mind that Theresa Cunanan, a former colleague, once described her PhD as a research close to heart. Although our studies were not identical, her description captured what it was deeply inside me – an assumption that Hong Kong ethnic minority students in Hong Kong would question their identity, at least at some point in their life. In hindsight, I came to my research because, as Berry (2011) put it, “there is a sense of fit, a noticeable link, between the practices of ethnography and the lived experience that makes this research possible (p. 173)”. The ethnographic approach allowed me to be ‘up-close’ with my participants, a practice that strongly resonated with my own experiences described above. Broadly, my PhD project explores the forms and ways a multiethnic schooling environment in Hong Kong impacts upon the ethnic identity formation of ethnic minority students. In other words, sociocultural factors that contribute to and stabilise students’ sense of ethnic self.

UNDERSTANDING ETHNIC IDENTITY FORMATION IN A MULTIETHNIC SCHOOL

As I began turning my assumptions into a feasible research project, I explored different theoretical frameworks and concepts to account for identity formation alongside reviewing other relevant empirical studies. It is worth emphasising that my choice of theoretical constructs was neither a linear nor arbitrary process.
I chose my theories, in part, based on readings and assumptions. Such judgements are not void of researchers’ personal experiences, as Maxwell (cited in Anfara & Mertz, 2006) put it:

Research is always carried out by an individual with a life and a lifeworld … a personality, a social context, and various personal and practical challenges and conflicts, all of which affect the research, from the choice of a research question or topic, through the method used, to the reporting of the project’s outcome. (p. xxv)

The conceptualisation of research is dependent upon the implicit assumptions and beliefs of a researcher, which has to do with what one “thinks is going on with the phenomena” (Maxwell, cited in Anfara & Mertz, 2006, p. xxiv). In my own project, my previous involvement in educational research projects exposed me to some Vygotskian understandings of personal development (Vygotsky, 1978). In seeing identity formation as one aspect of personal development, I began exploring a Vygotskian framework to develop my research questions further as his theoretical account offers an understanding of personal development in relation to learning environments. However, since Vygotsky did not explicitly explore identity formation (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995), I later realised the need to consider and incorporate other constructs to further develop my questions and theoretical approach.

Ontologically, identity can be conceptualised into two broad strands of research. One suggests that identity stabilises over the course of development (e.g., Marcia, 1980; Phinney, 1989, 1990). The other strand sees identity as an unstable construct that changes over the complex processes of socialisation, such as settling in another country (e.g. Gillespie, Kadianaki, & O’Sullivan-Lago, 2012; Hermans, 2001). Due to my personal background, I was more inclined towards the latter conceptualisation, which would better describe how students construct identity in a culturally complex environment, such as multiethnic schools. Consequently, I drew upon an understanding that ethnic identity formation concerns the drawing of ethnic boundaries between oneself and cultural others (Trimble & Dickson, 2005). It means that one’s ethnic identity is not solely reliant on self-identification, but also on how an individual is perceived by others. Of interest here are the dynamics involved in the formation of students’ ethnic identity, not merely the ethnic labels they choose.

This attention to the dynamics of identity formation, led me to the potential of Dialogical Self Theory (Hermans, 2001) in accounting for the ways individuals develop cultural positioning and being positioned by others as they move across different social terrains (e.g., home and school). As I explored ethnic identity in a school context, I later drew upon a more recent Vygotskian theorisation that illustrated how individuals interact with mediational means (e.g., interactions, language, signs) and artefacts (e.g., classroom setting, curricular materials) in an
institutional environment (Vadeboncoeur, Vellos, & Goessling, 2011). Using this lens, one can assume that different elements across contextual layers contribute to identity formation, from personal to classroom, to social relations (population makeup of the school) and institutional context.

While outlining the entire framework of my research is beyond the scope of this chapter, the constructs of Hermans (2001), the personal aspects of identity formation, and Vadeboncoeur et al. (2011), the social aspects of identity formation, gave me a foundation for my fieldwork to occur. The point here is to illustrate that I have had to make conscious decisions about the theories I draw upon in my project. Although they were largely drawn from literature, they were informed by the context of my research and in part my personal encounters.

FROM THEORIES TO FIELDWORK

In deciding an approach for data collection, Hatch (2002) advised researchers to first explore their metaphysical beliefs. Generally, metaphysical beliefs represent what researchers accept as reality. The theoretical perspectives I used fall into a constructivist paradigm. Constructivists believe that reality is undeterminable, and is approximated by the worldviews of individuals. Researchers operating within this paradigm typically base their findings on the perspectives of their participants as they reveal their life experiences in naturalistic research settings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In actual sense, the “knowledge” that one could capture from such setting “is symbolically constructed and not objective” (Hatch, 1985, p. 161). My goals were not facts in the narrow sense, but accounts that represented my participants’ sense of identity, in particular the processes in school that shape it.

Ethnic identity formation, as defined in the previous section, is fluid, subsumed into a multiplex culture wherein students are socialised in a learning environment with people different from their own cultural backgrounds. Capturing such phenomena requires methods that allow observation of identity formation in a specific context through the accounts of participants. Because my identity question has always fascinated me, I often wondered how younger generations think of theirs. I found it worthwhile to have conversations with the participants and observe them in the school, which are inherently ethnographic practices. Initially, my research was supposed to include Indian, Pakistani and Nepalese students for comparison. Upon reconsidering my theoretical approach, the depth and detail needed from my data meant that I had to focus on one ethnic student group only. Choosing Filipino students as my target group was a natural step for me as I shared the same language and ethnic background with them. It was also a pragmatic move because of a notable dearth in the literature on Filipino students in Hong Kong. In brief, the fieldwork consisted of interviews with 17 Filipino students and a short video project describing their ethnic identity as a Filipino student in relation to their schooling experience in Hong Kong. To understand the institutional context of the multiethnic school I studied, I also interviewed the principal and two teachers, observed the teachers’
classes, and collected relevant institutional documents. The fieldwork took about 5 months to complete.

ENTERING THE FIELD AS VALUE POLITICS

Although research writings are sometimes presented in a depersonalised fashion, particularly in science disciplines, research is not free of value. The work of researchers is related not only to their own personal values but also to the values of those involved in the research – the participants, gatekeepers, educators or researchers who might be aware of the potential implications of the study. Underscoring the prevalence of these values is possible when one considers the influence of research:

Knowledge is directly powerful through its input into policy. Some studies are specific analyses of policy issues, and their results have a direct impact on people’s lives. Knowledge is also indirectly powerful. The stories you tell about your participants’ actions, words, and understandings of the world have the potential to change the way those people are thought about. (Dowling, 2010, p. 32)

Dowling’s insight underlines the potential of research to enact change. In educational research particularly, its implication for both policy and teaching practice has always been of public concern (Brown & Beswick, 2014; Burkhardt & Schoenfeld, 2003). Regardless of a study’s outcome, researchers can influence people around them in subtle ways, typically dealing with people’s values as they undertake research. Conducting research, however, is not always without tension. In Wolcott’s (2003) ethnography on a primary school principal in America, he recounted how a superintendent excluded him from a school meeting during his fieldwork, telling him, “We’re thinking of having you fellows start paying for information. You never help us with our problems anyway – you just study what interests you” (p. 15). While such a remark echoes tensions between researchers and stakeholders surrounding competing interests, issues such as these often provide impediments to data collection.

Researchers can often relate to these tensions when negotiating research access with gatekeepers, (e.g., system officials, principals), especially if data collection procedures are intrusive. Thus, negotiating access with gatekeepers is a delicate and value-laden task (Reeves, 2010) that needs to be “carefully managed” (Bengry-Howell & Griffin, 2012, p. 405). Gatekeepers can accept or reject research invitations or request modifications in data collection procedures. All of these would depend on the support of gatekeepers for the research.

In my project, a friend, who was about to graduate from a Hong Kong multiethnic secondary school at the time, acquainted me with her assistant principal, which eventuated in formal negotiation with the principal regarding my fieldwork. Although this social network was critical, the odds of my research request being approved would still depend on how the principal as a gatekeeper valued my study.
After a few e-mail exchanges and a formal meeting with both the assistant principal and the principal, they finally agreed to participate. The assistant principal, who eventually assisted me in my fieldwork, told me that he had never seen any research in my field that focuses on Filipino students’ identity. He said that other researchers focus mostly on Pakistani, Indian and Nepalese groups, adding that my study could be of value, providing a scholarly effort in response to calls for looking into ethnic minority students’ sociocultural background (McInerney, 2010). I was allowed to conduct the study as long as I agreed to the request of the school to limit my interviews with teachers because of their workload. Weeks later, I began my first informal observation and other research activities followed such as interviews, class observations and collecting institutional documents.

During fieldwork, my personal values often came into play as I interacted with my student participants. My presence as a Filipino researcher in the school struck some of them as curious. A familiar question was, “What are you doing here Mr Gube?” in my first days at the school. Rather than posing myself as an impassive researcher, I sometimes found myself trading stories with the students, which helped me establish rapport with them. When I invited Martin, a Form 2 (Year 8) mixed-race Filipino male student, to participate in the short video project on “What does it mean to be a Filipino student in Hong Kong?” I asked him why he was interested in my research. He replied, “I’ve been living this question.” Martin’s cryptic response was more than an indication of curiosity. Because of Martin’s personal quest for his cultural background, there seemed to be a sensible ‘fit’ between his personal interest and my project goals. Such a fit characterises the shared values of researchers and participants within a community (Banks, 1998). The trust that was built into this relationship resulting from researcher-participant shared values is, in part, often what draws individuals to participate in research (Kong, Mahoney, & Plummer, 2001). Besides the participants’ sheer interest, the activities prompted them to reflect deeply on their own identity and schooling experiences, which may have provoked thoughts on the way they think of themselves as Filipinos and everyday experience at the school. This collaborative undertaking, more broadly, allows for researchers’ life-worlds cross paths with those they work with in their research. In this sense, change begins not just when researchers’ works are published, but also the moment they interact with their participants.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This chapter is meant to be open-ended with intent to invite researchers to look inwards. The point is to find meaning in our research practice and to be aware of how we may be enacting changes in the values of people involved in our research. Indeed, research is more than answering research questions and figuring out how best to do so. In the realm of social science, it is easy to be drifted away by the tensions in research owing to the fluidity of worldviews, politics, uncertainties, and competing academic demands. This is usually when disorientation sets in or when
a familiar expression “what on earth am I doing?” strikes us. However, Law (2004, p. 10) reminded us that doing research is more than just doing it right: “What we’re dealing with here is not, of course, just method. It is not just a set of techniques. It is not just a philosophy of method, a methodology.” He continued, emphasising the outlook and role of researchers:

It is not even simply about the kinds of realities that we want to recognise or the kinds of worlds we might hope to make. It is also, and most fundamentally, about a way of being. It is about what kinds of social science we want to practise. And then, and as a part of this, it is about the kinds of people that we want to be, and about how we should live. (Law, 2004, p. 10)

Instead of narrowly focussing on the technicalities of research, Law (2004) simply, yet explicitly, directed us to what we, as researchers, desire to be.

While researchers are often concerned with the outcome of their work (whether it will be published or acclaimed by those involved in it), they are the ones who begin and enact their everyday research practices that have consequences on those they are researching (Kahn, 2011). As my reflection above shows, research begins with some form of personal agenda or value, be it an intellectual curiosity or dream of changing this world. Of course, these personal values should not consume us that compromise the rigour required in research. Instead, upon critical reflection and focus, personal values can be a powerful motivational tool that steer and sustain our research endeavour, by turning our musings into a research project and realising its potential to make changes. It may be that the next of educational research is already well in the mind of researchers that just need to be unearthed. The personal values that researchers espouse become the motivation and basis of our research projects and activities, which will then become known to our respective communities who may value or benefit from the new knowledge we may reveal. To put it optimistically: what it was in our heart yesterday is our research today and, who knows, the knowledge tomorrow.

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NOTES

1 In Hong Kong, ‘ethnic minority’ refers to non-Chinese individuals, who constitute 6.4% of the total population. The population consists of Filipino (1.9%), Indonesian (1.9%), Caucasian (0.8%), Indian (0.4%), Nepalese (0.2%), Japanese (0.2%), Thai (0.2%), Pakistani (0.2%) and other Asians (0.2%) (Census and Statistics Department, 2011).
The video project was a follow-up research activity of the ethnographic interviews. It asked the participants to create a 3-minute video clip responding to the question: What does it mean to be a Filipino student in Hong Kong?

REFERENCES


