

A REFLECTION ON QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: A FIJI EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

This paper presents the author's reflection on his research experience in learning about the effectiveness of the management of a vocational education and training programme implemented in the context of a traditional society. The initial theoretical orientation emerged from the available international literature. However, it was found that the approaches used and recommended for use were inadequate and that it was necessary to include additional culture-sensitive strategies for gaining access into the research setting before proceeding into the researching process itself. The paper recommends the adoption of culturally-appropriate and relevant practices to complement the available western approaches to research.

Introduction

The origin of this paper is in the research study that I did for a doctorate degree in 1995. The context for the study was the developing country of Fiji. The study evaluated the effectiveness of the management of the vocational education and training programme (VETP) in selected secondary schools. The VETP is a two-year programme and offers four courses: automotive engineering; carpentry and joinery; tailoring, food and catering; and secretarial studies. It is designed for early school leavers who have completed form four (year ten) secondary school education and are in the age range of fifteen to twenty years (Fiji 1993).

The theoretical orientation for the study was drawn from the international change literature that has emerged in recent decades (Fullan 1991). A largely qualitative case-study approach was adopted. This was because it offered the most appropriate methods for an in-depth study which was sensitive to context. Further, it facilitated the understanding of the VETP management process from the perspective of the research informants.

The traditional approaches to conducting the qualitative study in educational settings being discussed in this paper, surfaced within these theoretical and methodological domains. In particular, this paper highlights two of these approaches - 'sevusevu' and 'talanoa' - which featured predominantly in the study. This paper begins with a brief overview of the study. Then, it goes on to discuss these approaches.

A Brief Overview of the Study

Rationale

A number of innovations in education, designed to address the problems perceived to be caused by the transfer of western models to the Pacific, were introduced in post-independent Fiji. Major innovations in education included the establishment of the Curriculum Development Unit, the localisation of public examinations and the introduction of vocational education programmes to secondary schools. As such innovations became widely established, it has become increasingly necessary to examine their relevance and effectiveness in a systematic way.

A second motivation for the study stemmed from the realisation that much of the international literature on educational change and research methodology was western-oriented. It was hoped that the study would complement these bodies of literature by adding increased sensitivity to the dilemmas of the international transfer of educational policy and practice from the perspective of a developing country.

I was also encouraged to undertake this study as a result of my personal interest in vocational education and training. It is directly relevant to my work as a lecturer in Educational Management and Curriculum Studies at the University of the South Pacific.

Context

As already mentioned, the context of the study was the developing country of Fiji. It is a home to many races and a rich variety of cultures. However, the population of approximately 800,000 predominantly

comprises indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians, who constitute about 50.7 per cent and 43.5 per cent respectively (Fiji 1996). About 39 per cent of Fiji's population is urbanised and relatively multiracial in composition. The rural areas and small islands, on the other hand, are settled mainly by the indigenous Fijian people. Generally, they live in close knit communities. In these communities there is considerable respect for traditions. This has implications for the manner in which a researcher may seek entry into and obtain qualitative data from the community.

To a large extent, the formal education system introduced by the Christian missionaries and subsequently by the colonial government in the early nineteenth century, destroyed traditional educational patterns. In particular, it shifted the emphasis of education away from vocational-type education to academic studies (Sharma 1995a; 1995b) and from traditional approaches of gathering information to western styles of investigation. In the post-independence era, the education system continued to be centralised, academically-oriented and highly dependent on western models (Thaman 1993). This applies equally to the contemporary research approaches in the educational settings in Fiji and other small countries in the Pacific.

Theoretical Orientation

While the theoretical framework of the study is not the focus of this paper, it is important to point out that it facilitated the use of the traditional approaches under discussion. Therefore, a brief discussion of this framework is necessary. As already indicated, the theoretical understanding of the educational change process that emerged in international literature in the recent decades underpins the approach taken in the study. Fullan's work (1991), which characterises this and draws upon the work of other key researchers, identifies three phases in the change process: initiation; implementation; and institutionalisation. This body of international change literature sees a planned educational change as a process rather than an event (Bolam 1975; Huberman and Miles 1984; Louis and Miles 1990; Fullan 1991; Wallace and McMahon 1994). As such, the change process goes on for a period of time during which an innovation is redefined and modified before it is fully adopted

by those individuals, schools or systems that initiate it. It involves individuals, structures and practices within and outside any educational organisation and at various levels in the educational system.

This process-oriented stance therefore led to the adoption of appropriate Fijian traditional approaches in the research design in addition to the conventional ones discussed later in this paper. These approaches uncovered qualitative data from the research context and assisted in understanding VETP from the viewpoints of those who were involved in it.

Methodological Orientation

Understanding the VETP in this way finds support in the phenomenological and qualitative research literature. Such perspectives are concerned with understanding educational issues from the insider's point of view and with the thorough observation and examination of different actors, structures and processes (Schwartz and Jacobs 1979; Burgess 1984; Bogdan and Biklen 1992). These methodological and theoretical orientations also lead to the discovery and rediscovery of an individual's and a group's perceptions and interpretations of their social reality, and an understanding of how the participants relate them to behaviour and to decision-making in their daily lives. Further, it has the potential to provide a detailed description of the actual process.

As already stated, a largely qualitative case-study approach was adopted for the study because it offered the most appropriate methods for in-depth study sensitive to context. In particular, participant-observation, in-depth interviewing and documentary analysis were employed for collecting data in two case-study schools in which VETP is being implemented. This methodological focus was also considered important because, as Watson (1994) and Torres and Schugurensky (1994) suggest, vocational education is truly concerned with the socio-economic and cultural contexts in which an educational system operates.

Consistent with the rationale of the qualitative research paradigm, this study took a largely flexible approach to research design. This flexibility

allowed the research design and the research itself to "unfold, cascade, roll and emerge" (Lincoln and Guba 1985: 210). In this way, the details of the research design evolved as a 'living entity' that took shape throughout the research process. The pre-fieldwork, fieldwork and post-fieldwork phases of the research design were interrelated and overlapped substantially.

For initial structure and guidance, I entered the fieldwork with a set of tentative research questions and a basic framework of analysis. It was during the fieldwork that a number of significant issues emerged and these needed to be addressed. Therefore, prior knowledge of context and the relevant literature, and the issues that emerged in the early part of the fieldwork facilitated discovering "what is significant, what makes sense to count and what is important to observe" (Wilcox 1982: 459). To facilitate this mode of inquiry I undertook a period of six months' fieldwork as a temporary member of staff in the two case-study schools. The apparent benefits of this extensive period of immersion not only enabled me to refine the "research questions that mirrored concerns" (Vulliamy et al. 1990: 54) of those being studied, but also to construct a fairly detailed portrayal of how the VETP was managed in each case study school.

This rigorous investigation of the management of the VETP in its "life-context" (Yin 1984: 23) warranted the establishment of a trusting relationship at the research settings and a sensitivity to social situations and realities. This is especially relevant in school communities and situations that are characterised by "greater intimacy" and "closer interpersonal relationships" (Velayutham 1995: 5).

In this regard, it became necessary to observe a traditional Fijian protocol for entry into research settings and use a traditional approach to gather data. These traditional approaches are elaborated in the following sections of this paper. The use of such traditional approaches to conducting qualitative educational research has not received much attention in the relevant international literature.

Gaining Access: A Traditional Fijian Approach

Despite my acquaintance with the majority of the research subjects, I was conscious of the fact that "entry negotiation requires time, patience and sensitivity to the rhythms and norms of a group" (Marshall and Rossman 1989: 65). Thus, proper protocol procedures were observed. First, the permission to carry out the research was obtained from the Permanent Secretary of Education. Then, the case study schools were approached. With the assistance of an indigenous Fijian colleague, a 'sevusevu' was presented to the school principal at each selected centre. Ravuvu (1983: 120) explains 'sevusevu' as "ceremonial offering of 'yaqona' by the host to the guest, or the guest to his host and done in respect of recognition and acceptance of one another". 'Yaqona', according to him is, "*piper methysticum* - a plant the roots of which are prepared and used by Fijians as a social and ceremonial drink" (1983: 121). The presentation was made to seek permission to enter the school and to solicit support from the principal in enabling the teachers, the members of the school management committee and students to participate and be involved in the research. According to Nabobo (1996)

the acceptance of the 'sevusevu' by the host from the visitor also means that at least for the duration of his/her stay, the visitor is granted temporary resident status. In other words, the visitor is welcomed and is a part of the unit. The ceremony symbolises trust in the visitor. In return some sort of reciprocal behaviour is expected by the visitor to the host (Personal Interview).

This customary way of seeking accessibility was not only accepted with appreciation, but it also set a 'scene of intimacy' for the research. I was accepted as a member of the school community. During the ceremony the principal welcomed me formally, introduced me to his staff and explained the purpose of my visit.

In this kind of qualitative research, ethical considerations are inseparable from the research process itself. It was, therefore, necessary to adopt a set of ethical procedures. This was done by adopting the 'informed consent' approach, which Diener and Crandall (cited in Cohen and Manion 1994: 350) explain as "the procedures in which individuals choose whether to participate in an investigation after being informed of facts that would be likely to influence their decisions".

The members of the case-study schools and other schools visited also benefited from my presence in their schools. I contributed to the staff development and fund-raising programmes of the schools. Some teachers who were part-time students of the University of the South Pacific discussed their assignments and study programmes with me. As a temporary member of staff, I shared the teaching loads of some teachers. This co-operative gesture on my part, the respect that was established through 'sevusevu' and a clearly thought-out set of ethical procedures, helped me create a trusting relationship with the research informants and motivated them to participate freely in the research study.

Gathering Data: A Traditional Fijian Way

In the light of the underlying philosophical position already mentioned, participant observation became an essential strategy for collecting data. Emphasising the significance of this method, Borg and Gall (1989: 391) explain that the participant observer, "by virtue of being actively involved in the situation being observed, often gains insights and develops interpersonal relationships that are virtually impossible to achieve through any other method".

In the study, participant observation was undertaken in two phases. The first phase largely involved observing what was really happening at the school level. As the study was progressively focused, the insights gained from this personal experience contributed to improving the research design. The second phase was a part of the formal data-gathering exercise. This involved attending meetings, classroom and workshop sessions, and other school-related activities. The findings obtained by this method were also useful to confirm, contradict or

The proceedings of the entire session were audio-taped. Only the relevant sections were transcribed and analysed. Some information in the data which did not fit into any of the categories mentioned above were classified under a heading marked 'general' or as Vulliamy and Webb (1992) would say 'rag-bag' category for subsequent use.

Talanoa was a very useful way to collect qualitative data. It facilitated collective reflection by teachers, parents and other members of the community. This they would not have done individually. It also allowed me the appropriate flexibility to explore unanticipated issues as they arose in the discussions. Moreover, this was a good way of obtaining insights into what was to be pursued in individual interviews. Further, such sessions uncovered a lot of useful information on the VETP and about the people involved in it. This information may not have been obtained by any other method. For example, the criticism that the programme was 'too formal' and the suggestion that in-servicing of principals was needed, came from a VETP teacher during a talanoa session. Of even more significance was the students' feedback, such as "... teachers from the secondary schools do not care about us ... and some of them even tell students that only 'failures' and 'good for nothing students' do VETP" (Field Notes 1993: 173).

The talanoa strategy also had its limitations, however. Sometimes it was difficult to control talanoa sessions because some people insisted on dominating discussions. Moreover, recording and analysing data were difficult and time-consuming. However, its strengths in providing qualitative data outweighed these limitations.

Conclusion

Two conclusions seem warranted. First, the Fiji study adds weight to the argument that the qualitative research approach has considerable scope for developing countries. There is, however, a tendency for a large body of literature on education in developing countries to be concerned with discussion of policies and systems, rather than with a systematic investigation of the realities and processes of schooling (Crossley and Vulliamy 1984). The use of the qualitative research approach in

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augment data gathered by interviews and documents.

An interview in this study involved the compilation of discrete 'conversation pieces' in a meaningful way. As such, it was a two-way process in which I, as the researcher, and the research informants brought our preconceptions to the discussion. This affected what we said to, and heard from each other. However, our viewpoints were later confirmed or transformed in the course of the conversation. This approach was the natural way to proceed because many important research informants were my former colleagues in the various education-related positions I had held. Moreover, this approach made it possible for me to gauge if the informants understood the issues that were raised and how and why we responded in the manner we did.

Talanoa

Despite this in-depth fieldwork and rapport with the research informants, at times I felt that they were not discussing issues and problems of the VETP openly. Generally they responded to the issues raised, but it was obviously not possible to raise all relevant issues. Sometimes I wondered if I was really understanding the VETP from the perspectives of the research informants. This led me to organise unstructured and informal group discussion sessions, known in Fiji as 'talanoa'. Capell (1991: 214) describes 'talanoa' as: "to chat; to tell stories; to relate something; to chat to someone; to chat together; to chat together about; a story, account, legend". The talanoa sessions, it is emphasised, brought me into the world of all those who were involved in the VETP. These sessions for teachers and parents were organised after school hours so that a large number of them could take part. To facilitate these sessions, 'yaqona' or 'kava' was mixed in a 'tanoa', a large wooden basin, and served to the people present at five-to ten-minute intervals. People sat around the tanoa, drank yaqona and talked freely on a number of issues. The use of yaqona in the talanoa session gives the session a transcendental atmosphere. The people in the session are not only communicating with themselves but also with the supernatural. The communication takes place through both verbalising and silences (Nabobo 1996).

Figure 2: A Talanoa Session



Artwork of Josefa Uluinaceva (with kind permission)

Source:

Veramu, J. (1994) *The Boy and the Old Crab Catcher*.
Fiji: Fiji Adult and Community Education Think Tank.
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education is argued on the grounds that it facilitates the participation of policy makers, practitioners, all those who are affected by a policy or programme and the researcher in the research enterprise. The significance of this mode of research is also reinforced by the fact that traditions and cultures play an important role in the interpretation of "meanings".

The second conclusion stems from the first one. It argues that while the relevant international literature provides a useful guide to designing qualitative research studies, its relevance for developing countries, such as Fiji, is limited by the fact that most research in this field has to date been based on western models, literature and experiences. The Fiji study, from which this paper emerged, has shown that traditional and cultural approaches have considerable relevance for conducting qualitative research in a developing country. These traditional and cultural dimensions have not received the attention they deserve in the international literature relating to qualitative research methodology. The research findings reported in this paper, it is hoped, will complement the relevance of this body of international literature in addressing culture-sensitive issues.

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Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Dr Michael Crossley, Senior Lecturer in the Centre for International Studies in Education at the University of Bristol for advising and assisting me in the research study from which the paper emerged, and my colleagues, Dr T. Velayutham, Ms. Unaisi Babobo and Dr A. Kedrayate at the University of the South Pacific, for their valuable comments.