Reflective Note

Reflection on Researching Teachers' Professional Integrity: Being in the Setting of Ethnography

Rupa Munakarmi*
Kathmandu University School of Education, Lalitpur, Nepal

Abstract

This short article is a reflective product of my experiences and learning while engaging in six month longethnographic fieldwork with teachers from semi urban and rural community schools in Kavre district, Nepal. As an ethnographic researcher, I am still in contact with my research participants in doing peer review and reflection of the listening, seeing and being within the topic. Specifically, this note reflects my positionality and challenges of interviewing, observing and presenting the initial findings. Moreover, this reflective note highlights ethnography as both a process and a product that evolves during the study time itself.

Keywords: Integrity; Fieldwork; Teachers; Methodology; Ethnography

Ethnography: A Way of Understanding Reality

I commencedmy PhD journey at the onset of the year2016 with an emerging and challenging issues of school teachers' integrity in Nepal. Myself being a teacher for more than 15 years in community and institutional schools, and my awkward situation of seeing the difference inpreaching and practising school policy in the teaching profession, I was very interested in conducting a research on teachers' integrity. Thus, I selected "Paradoxes of School teachers in practising integrity: An ethnographic study of public schools of Nepal"as the topic of my inquiry. I had a very clear idea of what I was looking for; however, I faced severalproblems in getting what I was actually looking forat least for the first few weeks.

Methodology in qualitative research is a dynamic and emerging process. I have adopted ethnographic methodology for my PhD research as the agenda was an emerging phenomenon of the school culture. I had clear expectation in my mind that adopting this methodwould enable me to immerse myself into a social setting, thereby I couldgenerate in-depth understanding of the social actions about my research topic. This method would

---

also provide me with an opportunity to explore empirical insights into the social practices which arenormally 'hidden' from public gaze (Reeves, Peller, Goldman, & Kitto, 2013, p. 1365), following what Van Maanen (2011) calls the "I-witnessing" ideal – meaning its intense reliance on personalised seeing, hearing, experiencing on a topic like integrity in specific social settings (p. 156). This methodology helps to understand the point of view from inside the group (Fetterman, 2010) by observing the participants and participate with them in their natural setting, andin my case, in theday to day business of teachers within the school premises.

It has long been accredited that the researcher must adapt a data collection method to both the sensitivity of the research topic and the vulnerability of research subjects (Hobbs, 2002). Although many social and cultural phenomena can be considered "sensitive" in general terms, my research is a sensitive issue, as the professional integrity of teachers is characterised by a mixture of loyalty, caution and honesty in contemporary and cultural context of school as a social institution. So, my research issue demands ethnography as my research methodology as this approach is suitable to exploring sensitive issues because such work can provide rich, detailed depiction about the unknown or the little known cultural phenomenon.Moreover, I believe,this is the only methodology that allows researchers to observe why and how people do something in "real life" contexts, not on what they say and what they do, ethnographic participant observation can supply detailed, authentic information unattainable by any other research method (Gans, 1999).

Getting Into the Field

The first thing/step in doing ethnography wasto drive myself into a setting. Subsequently, I had purposefully selected two community schools inKavre district in terms of their performance and location(semi urban and rural)with the consultation of district education officials and local teachers (whom I had known beforehand). The focus of research was to gather ethnographic information on the understanding and practices of teachers' integrity and then to dig out the paradoxes they werefacing.

I entered the site with the agenda of interacting with school actors about their understanding on teachers' integrity. Based on the research questions, the key themes that emerged out of the data were categorised as (i) understanding and practices of teachers' integrity; (ii) how do they practise what they understand; (iii) paradoxes of it; and, (iv) traditionally built-up values and norms for/against integrity.

I went to a school as a researcher and shared my purpose of visit. The school administrator and teachers welcomed me heartily as I was a known face to most of them (being a teacher in the same district for more than 15 years). Actually, the selection of the setting was not like getting a baked cake of your choice, I have listed out five community schools and have spent almost a week in each school to see if I am selecting the right site. Only by the end of second month of my research journey, I could finalise two

community secondary level schools. These two schools were quite different from each other in terms of learning achievement and location – semi urban school had comparatively better student achievement level in the district (known as one of the model school of the district), whereas rural school was falling behind against the district average in student achievement. The semi urban school was scoring 100% in SEE examination with higher number of attendees while the rural school has scored null result from last two years. Here, while selecting these two schools, my social network among teachers helped me to finalise the schools. Social network here refers to the few teachers to whom I knew since my college life, their availability in those particular school made my interaction with other teachers unproblematic. I agree with Fatterman (2010) that an introduction by a member is researchers' best ticket to get in the community. For the participant selection, I selected among those teachers serving in their respective positions for at least five years so that they would have adequate knowledge and opinions of the ongoing practices.

In other piloted schools, I found teacher hesitating to talk on the sensitive issues, taking me as an outsider and a spy (part of ten lies stated by Fine, 1993), and feltlike beingignored and isolated. So through this selection process, I realised why a qualitative researcher needs to select the research site purposefully where they are welcome, familiar and also likely to get in-depth, rich and thick information on the topic. And being an ethnographic researcher, I needed to get engaged with the participants in depth so I chose the schools where I felt welcomed and friendly. After my field work, I felt that my prolonged engagement with my participants enhanced the inner reality. As discussed above, there were much anticipated and unanticipated difficulties in finalising the research sites. Nevertheless, my experiences of and engagement in the field selection process turned out to be very good for my ethnographic fieldwork.

Ethnographer: Good Listening, Good Seeing and Good Being

When I started my fieldwork, I felt welcomed and was told to get any kind of support that I needed from the school and teachers. But still, something was stopping me to start my interaction though I was fully observing the day-to-day activities of the teachers. After a week time, I felt that I was not being able to interact and interview teachers aboutmy research issue and the guiding themes were also not working (that were prepared beforehand). It made me feel that I entered my research site without having proper and adequate prior preparation or I can say now that the actual field demanded something more. Teachers were friendly and were willing to help, but I was not being able to ask them any precise questions about their professional integrity. I tried to interview but still I felt that the essence of my research was not being unfolded. It seemed as getting the cosmetic thing but not the actual organicdata. Then, I recalled what one of my professors had told me while defending my research proposal, he had asked me how I would interact with my participants on this sensitive issue.

At that moment I decided to return from the site and went to meet my supervisor where I stated my field position with problems. With his suggestion, I soon realised that I was yet to remain fully open with my participants and not to be bound only around the research questions. With the trouble, I was facing in the first one week, I thought that 'being in trouble at some point is better than building rapport in observing and interviewing (Childers, 2011). This helped me not only to know more about participant and the context but also offered a chance to know more as an ethnographic researcher through my supervisor talk. Slowly, my involvement in supporting teachers in taking classes and supporting the teachers in conducting extra-curricular activities (ECA) helped me build rapport not only with school administrator but also with teachers and students/parents. This further enabled me to get inner information and felt easy to get rich and thick data on the issue of integrity. I then felt 'being there' in the actual sense.

However, while interviewing, I apprehend that when I ask their time and get ready to interview with a recorder and a notebook, they become conscious and I felt like they talk as if I was interviewing as an evaluator or a supervisor from the government. The way they spoke change drastically when I interacted with them informally in the canteen or walking back home without recorder and a note book. This showed that participants shared staying in the theoretical stand when I had a formal interview and express themselves fully when we talk as a friend in an informal setting. Few teachers openly started to share their opinions, frustrations and experiences as a colleague not as a researcher. Some of them became so close to me that they were sharing their grievances and biases of the school management and administration while making decisions on various teachers within the same school policy. The only challenge for me was to remember all the small things they shared at that time as I neither was using recorder nor noting it down. But still, I was a good listener, and was trying to have good mind to remember those shared information. And the first thing that I do after having informal interaction is to point down all the points that I gathered from the talk so that I do not forget it later. Being an involved researcher, I experienced that the gestures and activities that the participants do while sharing their experience made me easy to retain information.

Here, I disagree with what Fine (1993) has stated as ten lies of ethnography, as asked the researcher to consider being a 1) kind ethnographer, 2) friendly ethnographer and 3) the honest ethnographer. After the completion of first two weeks, I started getting in-depth information being kind and friendly to them. For instance, after a month of field work also, I was not being able to interact with one of the experienced male teachers, but as I supported him in his class and paid a bus fare (NPR 10) on the way, he comfortably interacted with me sharing his experiences and current circumstances. I neither consider supporting in class as being a kind ethnographer, a undercover agent nor paying the fare as giving bribe, it was only the way of showing the belongingness.

Furthermore, during my first three months of fieldwork, I carried out interview and observation together. And after that as my research issue demands more observation than interview to look into the cultural settings and natural interactions among participants, I sometime used to sit and observe teachers activity as an outsider. Seeing me like that, one of the teachers even asked me if I was not getting support from them to talk on, and he even comforted me to ask freely and they are happy to share. Being a researcher, I feel nice to have such connection with my participants and their concern on my study. However, I cannot consider all the teachers as helpful. One incident sticks out in my mind as being illustrative. It was entrance exam day and SMC called an urgent meeting to all the teachers. The headteacher asked me to join it while the SMC member suggested me to cover the entrance exam and other classes as the teachers will be in meeting. It was clear that he did not want me to be in the meeting as it was about the appointment of new headteacher.

Likewise, I have employed the naturalistic observational technique which allowed me to observe and document both teaching and social activities of teachers as the flow of working way naturally. However, the fieldwork with this methodology was much more complex and ethically challenging to me than what I had originally anticipated. In the first few weeks of my field work, I had learned that sensitive research like mine could pose special ethical problems (Sieber & Stanley, 1988). When I interviewed the teachers and asked about teachers' integrity, all expressed big things, and the thing that hindered me much and was a bit challenging was to diagnose, whether they were doing to prove their sayings in my presence only or they were acting like that. This caused disturbing feelings of awkwardness and uneasiness for both the parties.

Challenges and Ethical Concerns

The information that I got regarding their understanding on teachers' integrity was somehow in practice level, too. However, in most of the cases, it shows drastic difference in preaching and practicing. They were telling something to me about the professional duties of the teacher in the classroom, however, they were not doing that in the class. But, when I asked the participant about that, few cases seemed not be accepted when presented as it is before others though the circumstance demand the same thing that they were doing. When my participants were familiar with me, they started to share openly and sometime they felt like they should not share those internal things, than in few incidents. They even have asked me not to include it in my thesis. Here, I found it as a challenge being a researcher and wonder how to respond in such cases. I know this is a research ethic of bracketing in and out as a qualitative researcher. Similarly, there come some incidents which I observed and some cases were so sensitive that I was afraid to illustrate them with the respect to do no harm principle. Or, I can say that I do not harm by bringing the issue in written form but not bringing the person and their identity.

Hence, from the prolonged engagement in the field, I came to know that the understanding and practices of professional integrity differs because of highly politicised and unstable environment. When there arises bias of HT towards teachers while dealing the day-to-day cases, then one gets the difference in credibility and trustworthiness. So the challenge here is, how to understand and how to perceive it. If I do not include, it challenges the trustworthiness of the research; if I do, I lose my personal credibility with my participants.

Furthermore, regarding the research, I discerned that in Nepal, research culture and research use in reformulation is limited, participants still believe 'research for research sake' and researchers as spy and that they are there for their selfishness only. This type of understanding on research work does not give true understanding which makes me difficult in meaning making. So, I was soon made to realise that there is a need of increasing research culture and research credibility. For instance, CERID has done 35 formative research on school sector, however these research reports are not used by the Ministry of Education while doing policy reform and plan formulation. Misconception and myth among the teaching cadres regarding research leads to complaining culture.

There were different aspects of ethical issues. I took fieldwork as engrossment. For me, being out there wasn't as difficult as returning because it only took few weeks for me to be there. However, I still feel the research site and the teachers as my own so returning from being there to "the return" from the site seems a challenge. This was more difficult than fieldwork itself.

By making my study overt, I was able to fulfil ethical obligations as a researcher but still face difficulties to speak my participants' minds in a written form which further creates problems in meaning making. Some issues were observed in such a way thatit seems Okay in that context, but it is being difficult for me to portray it. Words seem inadequate to justify it. However, I responded to such ethical dilemmas by adjusting the level of involvement, participating in practising culture as an insider and observing it as an outsider. Through this fieldwork, I suggest that the ethics of participant observation should be addressed in relation to the sensitivity of the research topic, the defencelessness of the researched individuals, and the flexibility of the participants. I was disappointed in some cases while observing teachers who do differently than what they had said to me in advance on a particular issue.

Conclusion

My experience of doing the ethnographic fieldwork showed that one should be prepared for a wide range of difficulties in the field, and that a significant number of researchers may face difficulties that they have never anticipated, and which no academic examination will have tested their ability to cope with. The regular interaction with the supervisor and professors helps one to come out of the problems and confusion to some extent. For me, I

have studied literature and different books on ethnography and made myself ready for the extended fieldwork. However, I had to face different difficulties in the actual field. The prior knowledge on the methodology is better but still a researcher needs to work according to the social and cultural context of the research site.

In perception after the fact, my journey of this fieldwork not only bring me closer to the world of community school teachers, but also offered me an admirable opportunity for reflexive research practice. On the one hand, my involvement in this research activities helped me understand my participants' subjective experiences though facing ups and down during the field work; on the other hand, it helped me to enhance the information by adding personal and emotional intensity towards my work.

For me, I entered my research field taking ethnographic methodology as the product, but with the span of time, I realised that it is a process and contextual in each site, which differs according to the context, circumstances and the research issue. Ethnography for me cannot remain as a study of culture only, when it is practiced and contextualised, I came to know that ethnography cannot be practiced only as a product. It is an alternative process of exploring new phenomenon in a diverse natural setting. I tried to make a balance between the product and the process during my research. Thus, I conclude based on my learning and experience that ethnography is both a process and a product which evolves during the study time itself.

References

Childers, S. M. (2011). Getting in trouble: Feminist post critical policy ethnography in anurban school. *Qualitative Inquiry, 17*(4), 345-354.

Fetterman, D. M. (2010). *Ethnography: Step-by-step* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Fine, G. A. (1994). Ten lies of ethnography: Moral dilemmas in field research. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 22*(3), 267-294

Gans, H. J. (1999). Participant observation in the era of "ethnography". *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 28*, 540-548.

Hobbs, D. (2002). Ethnography and the study of deviance. In P. Atkinson, A. Coffey, S. Delamont, J. Lofland, & L. Lofland (Eds.), *Handbook of ethnography* (pp. 204- 219). London, England: Sage.

Reeves, S., Peller, J., Goldman, J., & Kitto, S. (2013). Ethnography in qualitative educational research: AMEE Guide No. 80. *Medical Teacher, 35*(8), e1365-e1379. doi: https://doi.org/10.3109/0142159X.2013.804977

Tedlock, B. (2000). Ethnography and ethnographic representation. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 455–486). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Van Maanen, J. (2011). *Tales of the field: On writing ethnography* (2nd ed.). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.