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Navigating researcher positionality in comparative and international education research: Perspectives from emerging researchers

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Articulating one's positionality as a researcher is crucial to social research. This is particularly important in comparative and international education research where context, culture and notions of power underpin much of the work. However, researcher positionality has multiple meanings, making it challenging for emerging researchers to navigate its muddied, cluttered and unfamiliar terrain. In this article, seven emerging researchers examine their own researcher positionality within the context of their postgraduate research. Through a series of short vignettes, they draw attention to the different conceptualisations of researcher positionality and uncover the challenges and dilemmas.

Keywords: researcher positionality' emerging researchers; insider and outsider research; comparative and international education

INTRODUCTION

Researcher positionality is central to social research. This is particularly true in the field of comparative and international education (CIE), where context, culture and notions of power make the subtle interplay between the researcher and participants of critical importance. Reflexivity about one's positionality matters, but the conceptualisation of researcher positionality is not straightforward or fixed. Therefore, Finlay (2002) encourages researchers to explore their positionality and multiple statuses through 'confessional accounts' (p. 224). A confessional account here refers to an examination of one's personal and often unconscious reaction where notions of power and privilege have the potential to profoundly influence knowledge construction and dissemination within the research process.

This article argues for the complexities of researcher positionality to have greater visibility within CIE research. As a group of seven postgraduate scholars at varying stages of our Masters and PhD journeys in CIE, we bring a unique perspective to positionality as we grapple with notions of power, privilege, representation, voice and context. We begin by examining

researcher positionality and considering the particular complexities of researcher positionality in CIE research. We then consider different conceptualisations of researcher positionality before sharing our reflexive accounts. Through this work, we aim to offer a nuanced and responsive insight into researcher positionality.

RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY?

Understandings of and approaches to researcher positionality hinge on a researcher's onto-epistemological position. Researcher positionality is dealt with, for example, in different ways in positivist, critical realist, post-structural and post-foundational research. Holmes (2020) describes the different ontological and epistemological assumptions as an 'individual's world view and the position they adopt about a research task and its social and political context' (p. 1). A researcher's world view is shaped by many factors, such as the researcher's life history, religious affiliations, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, political views, geographical positioning, status and social class. In other words, researcher positionality is underpinned by our identities as researchers, and this shapes 'how we see and understand what and whom we encounter in our research, and how research participants see and understand us' (Lee et al., 2018, p. 120).

The onto-epistemological assumptions a researcher adopts influences every aspect of the research design and process, including how researchers analyse and interpret data (Rowe, 2014). Reflexivity offers researchers a confessional account to provoke self-analysis of conscious and unconscious responses, perspectives and reactions experienced throughout the research process. The disclosure of 'self' invites researchers to critically examine their own subjectivities and consider their impact on data collection and analysis (Finlay, 2002). Locating oneself in the research requires researchers to be sensitive to their own social, political and cultural context and consider how their worldview shapes, informs and influences every phase and stage of the research process (Cobb & Franken, 2017).

RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY IN THE FIELD OF COMPARATIVE AND INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

Several scholars (e.g., Lee et al., 2018; McNess et al., 2015; Milligan, 2016) have considered researcher positionality's significance in the CIE field. One important factor encouraging a focus on positionality is researcher-participant partnerships, which has brought greater awareness to collaborative and inclusive approaches to comparative research methodologies. The heightened emphasis on researcher-participant collaboration has led to more nuanced and reflexive ways of understanding the research-participant relationship (McNess et al., 2015). For example, transnational scholarship requires researchers to examine the movement of educational policies, ideas, practices and people across national boundaries and the notions of power in research relationships (Lee et al., 2018; McNess et al., 2015). The nuanced area of such scholarship raises important questions about how researchers interrogate unequal power relations in cross-cultural research and research that investigates marginalised groups (Lee et al., 2018; Milligan, 2016). McNess et al. (2015) argue that greater attention needs to be given to the power that researchers embody through their various statuses and the implications of power relationships in how knowledge is constructed and disseminated. Therefore, researcher positionality needs to be revisited and reimagined to better capture the subtleties and nuances of representative meaning-making within CIE studies.

Researchers have also challenged an insider-outsider dichotomy (Kipnis et al., 2021; McNess et al., 2015; Milligan, 2016). Research has highlighted the dynamics and complexities of such duality, arguing that researchers seldom operate as either 'insiders' or 'outsiders' and, instead, frequently occupy multiple cultural memberships, affiliations, systems and lived experiences (Kipnis et al., 2021; Merriam et al., 2001). For this reason, researchers tend to lie within, between, or outside these demarcated 'insider/outsider' boundaries (Kipnis et al., 2021; McNess et al., 2015; Milligan, 2016). Examining positionality about gender, class, culture and race has also revealed the unequal power dynamics within groups and how these dynamics influence how knowledge is constructed and represented (Merriam et al., 2001). Adding to the complex power dynamics, researchers can often experience varying and dynamic degrees of outsideness, insideness and marginality in one research location as they navigate dimensions of their cultural positionality (Kipnis et al., 2021). To avoid the polarisation effects of the insider and outsider dichotomy, researchers have drawn attention to their multiple insider-outsider positionalities and argued for a more nuanced conceptualisation of the insider-outsider divide (Kipnis et al., 2021; Merriam et al., 2001).

When examining positionality, Savin-Baden and Major (2013) suggest researchers tend to conceptualise their positionalities in three different ways: 1) the research topic under investigation, 2) the research participants, and 3) the research process and/or context (p. 2). The conceptualisations have particular relevance and significance for CIE research because they challenge researchers to consider their positioning in relation to the research context, topic and process as well as the participants.

For this article, each author offers a short vignette to showcase their positionality journey and how they have situated themselves relative to 1) research participants, 2) research context, 3) the research process, and 4) the research topic under investigation. While we acknowledge that researchers locate themselves across all of these areas, we have each chosen one area to highlight in our confessional accounts. Methodologically, we interacted at least once a month between August 2021 and May 2022 on Zoom to consider how we located our positionalities in these areas. Through these interactions, we wrote our accounts, commented on each other's narratives, asked questions and challenged perceptions to provide each other with a new and destabilising lens. For scholars of CIE, this collaborative process offered an insightful window into the challenges emerging researchers face as they navigate issues of power, representation, legitimacy and voice in a way that seeks to offer a more 'inclusive, collaborative, participatory, reflexive and nuanced' (McNess et al., 2015, p. 295) engagement in the research and writing process.

This next section begins by examining the positionality of the research participants. Vignettes from Chin, Macam and Suwarningsih examine their confessional accounts as they navigate issues of voice, power and representation. Levy's vignette draws attention to the importance of research context and the complexities of the insider-outsider dichotomy. Beckwith's vignette examines researcher positionality concerning the research process, demonstrating how a more participatory research process can challenge notions of power and representation, especially when researching children's lived experiences. Finally, this article considers researcher positionality in relation to the topic. The vignettes of Saxena and Gulati highlight how researchers need to be aware of their ontological positioning and how such positioning shapes the research design and process.

THE RESEARCHER IN RELATION TO THE PARTICIPANTS

Locating oneself in relation to the participants is one way that researcher positionality can be conceptualised (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Participants offer in-depth understandings, insights, perspectives and lived experiences of educational phenomena. Locating oneself in relation to the participants requires researchers to not only engage in their own exploration of 'self' but also consider the identities that their research participants have constructed about them (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Bringing a reflexive lens to this work enables researchers to consider how social, political, cultural and economic contexts shape how participants construct these multiple and often overlapping identities. As scholars in the field of CIE, our work frequently reaches across two groups: 1) the global and the local; and 2) the elite, 'non-elite', and marginalised communities. The variances across groups require researchers to bring reflexive foresight to the way their researcher identity may be constructed by each participant and the implication of such identity construction on data collection and analysis.

In the following vignettes, Chin wrestles with these tensions as she questions how people with disabilities may view and interpret her – an able-bodied researcher. Macam considers how her positionality allows her to 'study up' and investigate and critique the work of the global elite. Suwarningsih's vignette also engages in this deep, reflexive work as she considers how her changing professional identity – from working in a United Nations agency to an emerging researcher – is constructed by her participants. These vignettes reinforce the 'inbetweenness' these researchers have experienced as they grapple with questions of representation from being both 'within' and 'on the outside' of their participants' social, demographic and religious communities.

Who should speak? An outsider's dilemma of speaking for people with disabilities

Mellisa Chin

My doctoral research critically examines education policies in Malaysia, focusing on those that relate to disability and inclusion. In this section, I reflect on my positionality as an able-bodied researcher in undertaking this research. My reflection will centre on one of the areas of positionality outlined by Savin-Baden and Major (2013): the way I locate myself in relation to the participants. In particular, I explore some of the tensions and dilemmas I encountered during the data analysis stage as an outsider researcher who lacks membership experiences and knowledge of the participants' community – that is, people with disabilities.

I locate my study within a critical paradigm to examine elements of bias and power inscribed in policy discourse. Given my ontological and epistemological orientation, one of my research aims is to foreground the educational inequalities perpetuated in policy texts. However, I have never individually experienced disability, and throughout this research endeavour, I often have moments where my privilege and ableism confront me. This has raised questions and tensions in how I analyse and interpret data about disability issues. For example, while my research works to provide critical explanations of the workings of invisible structures and power influencing inclusive education policy development in Malaysia, I can never truly understand what education marginalisation and oppression look and feel like as a non-disabled outsider (Castrodale, 2017). In turn, the absence of the necessary insider knowledge makes it more challenging to offer counter-narratives that challenge how people with disabilities are often pathologised, labelled, and treated through biomedical understandings of disability in inclusive education policies (Kitchin, 2000). Because of this, my research may unintentionally (re)produce marginalisation, exclusion and discrimination as I identify, construct and address

issues of disability-related education policy discourses from an able-bodied perspective (Barnes, 2012; Goodley, 2013).

Alongside the possibility of (re)producing ableist assumptions, a further source of tension in navigating data analysis within the complex terrain of critical disability studies is that the act of speaking for others can be problematic and unethical (Alcoff, 2009). Alcoff (2009) argues that the practice of speaking on behalf of less privileged individuals has contributed, in many cases, to deepening or maintaining the oppression of the group spoken for. As such, I recognise that I may also display a form of symbolic oppression as an outsider researcher in the critical examination of inclusive education policy discourses. In other words, the participants could be creating a false representation of people with disabilities' needs, goals, circumstances and, thus, their identity throughout my analysis. Acknowledging that it may not be possible for me to speak for others causes me to raise another question that Alcoff (2009) encourages researchers to ask themselves: 'if I don't speak for those less privileged than myself, am I abandoning my political responsibility to speak out against oppression, a responsibility incurred by the very fact of my privilege?' (p. 119). To negotiate this dilemma of being an outsider, I fall back on the words of Spivak (1990), who argues that 'Who should speak?' is less crucial than 'Who will listen?' (p. 59). Within this standpoint, I pose two questions: 'will policymakers listen to what has been analysed and found?' and, importantly, 'will the practice of representing and speaking for others through my research enable the empowerment of people with disabilities?'. Engaging in a deep reflexive work in these questions helps ensure that: 1) my findings are widely disseminated through publications and conferences; and 2) my analytical perspective, if possible, is of those who suffer most from dominance and inequality. I hope that such actions serve as a way to somewhat resolve the disconcerting tensions around conducting research from an outsider's perspective.

Studying Up: The power I have in critiquing the powerful

Alea Ann F. Macam

I had always dreamed of being part of international non-governmental organisations supporting the Philippine Department of Education. It was in 2017 when fate was on my side, and a donor funding organisation hired me to work on a project to improve teacher professionalism. However, I soon realised that my dream work was not as perfect as it seemed, and there were concrete reasons to question the power this project had to influence major educational reforms in my country. Like waking up from a 'dream', I found myself in an identity shift – from a development practitioner to an emerging researcher critiquing the work of an organisation I had previously worked for. This section examines my positionality as an emerging researcher in my deliberate move to 'study up' (Laura, 2018, p. 13) or, in other words, to investigate and critique the works of a powerful organisation. Throughout this section, I consider my positionality in relation to my research participants – the global elite.

I approached my study with several positionalities in relation to my research participants. First, I carry my identity as a Filipino whose professional experiences revolved around working within a powerful international organisation led by international colleagues. Reflecting on my experiences working with them, my scepticism towards what they do within the organisation motivated me to pursue my doctoral study. This made me a researcher who pushed for a critical stance, allowing me to navigate a position of being 'an outsider' to examine hidden assumptions about this organisation. Second, being a Filipino native whose focus of inquiry centres on critiquing a foreign organisation's work influenced my researcher identity. I approached my research fully immersed in the local culture, traditions and ways of thinking, making it easy for

me to justify the international organisation's marginalisation of Filipinos. Ironically, this locates me as 'an outsider' in terms of critiquing a foreign, international organisation. Third, as a doctoral student, critiquing a powerful organisation challenges me to navigate towards my 'unspoken sensitivities' (Wisniewski, 2000, p. 8), again placing me as 'an outsider' in my experiences of studying global elites. As I finished my initial document analysis, I realised that pursuing my research would involve discomfort associated with potentially uncovering hidden assumptions about the organisation. Such uncovering might impact my professional career and cause personal distress due to exposing unpleasant findings concerning influence and power.

Reflecting on my three positionalities as a researcher, I realise that, while they are helpful to acknowledge, I must learn how to navigate through them, so they do not become an obstacle in 'studying up' (Laura, 2018; Priyadharshini, 2003). I heed the call to turn my gaze onto the powerful and frame my research to explore power because the quality of all our lives may be affected by the influence these organisations have on educational structures (Laura, 2018). With this comes the expectation to rethink positionalities, challenging the assumption that these should remain fixed and stable in my research (Priyadharshini, 2003). 'Studying up' requires that I learn to adapt to different contexts and take on different practices and identities that deviate from traditional research (Priyadharshini, 2003). In the end, the challenge of critiquing a powerful organisation includes unravelling its coherent and stable identity (Priyadharshini, 2003).

Being in-between: The complexities of my positionality

Dwi Purwestri Sri Suwarningsih

Before undertaking my doctoral studies, I worked as an Early Childhood Development (ECD) officer for one of the United Nations agencies in Kupang, Indonesia. In this role, I was responsible for planning, implementing and monitoring a pilot ECD teacher mentoring programme. Soon after the programme ended, I decided to pursue a doctoral degree to examine how mentors and teachers, key government officials and development agencies had experienced the ECD teacher mentoring programme. My identity has, therefore, shifted from being a practitioner tasked with leading the teacher mentoring programme to a researcher investigating the experiences of those involved in the mentoring programme, many of whom I used to lead. This section explores assumptions, tensions and dilemmas I may encounter during the data collection and analysis phases of my research as I navigate the complexities of moving within and between this insider-outsider continuum.

As a researcher, I have power and privilege that comes from my socioeconomic status, education, and ethnic and cultural background (Muhammad et al., 2015). I describe my identity as a Javanese-Muslim, holder of Javanese culture and living on Java Island, the most developed island in Indonesia. My cultural identity positions me as 'an outsider' toward my participants, who are primarily Timorese-Christians, holders of Timorese culture and living on Timor Island. However, I am also 'an insider' because my previous role as a practitioner enabled me to work alongside the participants and share their experiences; researchers can have multiple positionalities, making it difficult to be 'fully inside' or 'fully outside'.

In some cases, an insider is assumed to have easier access to the research participants, can ask more meaningful questions and produce a more truthful description when compared to an outsider (Holmes, 2020). As my positionality illustrates, these assumptions of insider/outsider are too simple. Other factors frame the insider/outsider debate, such as power and representation (Merriam et al., 2001, p. 411). As the leader of the mentoring programme, I held a position of

power. This may create tension because potential participants might feel obliged to participate in my research. I also question whether the research participants will tell me the 'truth' during interviews or whether the power I held in my previous role will colour their responses so that they say what they think I want to hear. Also, even if teachers and mentors agree to provide truthful answers, I may struggle to represent the 'truth' in the findings because my own involvement in the programme may cloud my objectivity when analysing research data (Merriam et al., 2001, p. 414). My research participants' voices will explore not only the benefits but also the challenges during the implementation of the mentoring programme in Kupang. The participants' perspectives would either strengthen or reveal unpleasant 'truths' that might not be discussed during the implementation and evaluation phase of the project. Merriam et al. (2001) suggest the answer to the questions: Will they tell me the truth? Will they be honest with me? is 'probably not' because there is 'no single truth or reality independent of the knower' (p. 414).

As I reflect on my multiple identities from practitioner to researcher, I recognise that my positionality can be simultaneously insider and outsider. Holmes (2020) argues that insider or outsider as opposites may be an artificial construct. I realise my positionality is neither fully 'inside' nor 'outside'. I am somewhere in-between.

LOCATING THE RESEARCHER IN RELATION TO THE CONTEXT:

Context is critical to CIE scholarship (Crossley & Watson, 2003; McNess et al., 2015). While most CIE scholars agree that context matters, more recent scholarship highlights the 'problem of context', with CIE scholarship sometimes perpetuating outdated colonial constructions of context that reflect static and artificial cultural and social values, meanings and norms (Spratt & Coxon, 2020). Researcher positionality offers a way to question and challenge assumptions about context and, in particular, a way for researchers to locate themselves in relation to the research contexts. Savin-Baden and Major (2013) suggest that locating oneself with regard to the context is another way to conceptualise researcher positionality.

Research contexts are fluid and dynamic sites of social inquiry which have the potential to strongly influence the research process (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). CIE research frequently locates itself within multiple and overlapping contexts for educational research. Institutions, such as schools, ECE centres, universities and Ministries of Education, are located within local villages, communities, towns and cities, each with its plurality of social, cultural, political and religious milieus. These contexts play a powerful role in shaping how research is designed, conducted and analysed (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Contexts can subtly and subconsciously shape researchers' experiences of the phenomenon under investigation, influencing how researchers interpret, analyse and disseminate research findings. Bringing a reflexive lens to how researchers locate themselves within the research context is important at all stages of the research journey. In the following vignette, Levy examines his positionality in relation to the research context and questions the false dichotomy that an insider-outsider duality creates.

Resisting assumptions when navigating the false dichotomy of insider-outsider positionality

Ben Levy

The aspect of positionality that I explore is navigating the tensions, privileges and challenges of being both an insider and outsider researcher and the assumptions within the context of my research on higher education internationalisation in the Pacific region. I am a non-indigenous,

active practitioner in the field of higher education internationalisation who engages in research outside of my own cultural and geographic contexts. This requires constant reflexivity to navigate spaces and tensions that others and myself see, whether they are assumed or real. Additionally, I must be deliberate in the relationality of my positionality as an ethical, cultural, values-based, power and nuanced space (Fasavalu & Reynolds, 2019). This will be especially prudent as I begin a PhD in Education at the University of Waikato.

I have lived, worked and researched in contexts that were less familiar and not of my cultural heritage (Guatemala, Aotearoa New Zealand, Costa Rica, Argentina, Australia and more), and have strengthened my adaptability skills as I navigated these spaces in sensitive, respective and ethical ways. Since my first engagements with the Pacific region, I have retained a strong appreciation and curiosity, which is why I have chosen this regional context for my research focus. I will constantly critique my knowledges and practices, explore the tensions of privilege, context, culture and my overall positionality within this relational research space.

My positionality as non-Pacific and non-indigenous is likely to offer the most challenges. With 20+ years working in higher education internationalisation, I am keenly aware of my inclination to lean on the most familiar, which has been within a Western, settler-colonial framework. I aim to follow the approach outlined by Jackson (2019) in creating balanced, non-colonising relationships. As Jackson states, 'such transformations must confront implacability of a power unjustly taken' (p. 149–150), including confronting my positions of power and perspectives on this research topic. My understanding of the exploitative extraction of indigenous knowledges and the importance of diligent reflexivity and relationality throughout that process will continue to inform my engagement with a participatory and culturally situated research design and methodologies.

Therefore, while I have some experiences that can support and strengthen my ability to be reflexive, reflective, relational and intentional in my research positionality, tensions remain that need to be continually addressed. These include a constant recognition and acknowledgement of my biases so as to not inappropriately guide the research process, results or presentation (Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2014). Researcher positionality is not a constant but is ever-shifting and evolving as it interacts and relates to the individuals, communities and institutions in which it engages. Fasavalu and Reynolds (2019) discuss the value of this relational approach as opportunities for sites of learning where 'relational obligations and expectations [are] opportunities for researchers to seek agency, particularly over their development and research contribution' (p. 12). I will seek counsel, consent and collaboration with the research stakeholders during each phase of the research journey and as an opportunity for my learning and development as we collectively aim to engage in a thoughtful and impactful research project. For example, when speaking to higher education leaders within the Pacific, I need to be clear that, although I have worked in the space of higher education internationalisation for an extensive period, my role in the research process is not that of an expert, but to look to them as experts in their institutional internationalisation processes. As someone not from the Pacific region and less familiar with the various cultures and contexts, I will also need to determine the advantages and disadvantages of partnering with sense-makers throughout the research process to add validity to my work and support the data collection, analysis and presentation.

While struggling to navigate one's insider-outsider positionality, I have come to better understand myself as a researcher in diverse contexts, with a positionality that is far from static. A false dichotomy and a real duality exist in this intersectionality of insider-outsider positionalities. It is unrealistic to consider that someone can neatly be either an insider or an outsider because our personal and professional identities are multi-layered and intersectional

(Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2014). I will continue to resist the assumptions of my positionality within the construct of 'insider-outsider', actively learn through built relationality and present my research positionality in a reflexive manner that is ever-evolving and shifting.

LOCATING THE RESEARCHER IN RELATION TO THE PROCESS

Locating oneself in relation to the research process is another important aspect of researcher positionality. Research designs can empower or disempower participants (Milligan, 2016), and researchers can construct meaning throughout every stage and phase of the research process (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). How researchers locate themselves within this research process will determine to what extent knowledge construction truly represents participants' knowledge, understandings and experiences. This form of reflexivity requires researchers to examine their positioning in the initial design phase and to bring a reflexive eye to their own bias, subjectivities, assumptions and power relations. Engaging in this important reflexive work can help researchers to consider research designs that facilitate authentic meaning-making, co-construction of knowledge and participant agency. For example, in CIE, participatory research designs have been strongly advocated (McNess et al., 2015; Milligan, 2016). Such designs enable participants to exercise agency within the research process by inviting participants to co-construct research findings. Likewise, such reflexive work can challenge researchers to examine their 'in-the-moment' research decisions which, unchecked and unexamined, can profoundly shape how researchers interact with the research process.

In the vignette that follows, Beckwith considers the inherent tensions of researching the lived experiences of children and questions how unequal power relations between herself and her participants could lead to misrepresenting their lived experiences. Through this account, Beckwith demonstrates how a participatory research design goes some way towards challenging power relations and more effectively capturing children's lived experiences of being global citizens.

Examining the notions of power: Positionality as a new PhD student

Victoria Beckwith

In this section, I reflect on my positionality as a new PhD student and researcher who has yet to collect data. My research examines the phenomenon of global citizenship through the lived experiences of 12-year-old children. As I am still developing my research questions and design, I was initially unsure how researcher positionality was relevant to me. However, Holmes (2020) highlights the importance of novice researchers recognising their own positionality early on and questioning how it impacts their research process, understandings and interpretation of data. With this in mind, I soon learned how important it is to examine one's own positionality in relation to my anticipated 12-year-old research participants (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The questions positionality raises are: How can I, an adult, understand the lived experiences of a child? How do I locate myself, as an adult, in relation to my participants, who are 12-year-old children? How might my participants perceive me, and how might this impact what they share with me?

Throughout this section, I bring a reflexive lens to these questions by examining notions of power (Greene & Hogan, 2005) from my and the participants' perspectives. In doing so, I consider how I might disrupt complex power relations by selecting a research method and process that enables me to understand the lived experiences of my participants better.

Power refers to social and legal status and institutional position (Greene & Hogan, 2005). The power balance between adults and children is unbalanced, leaving children vulnerable to adults' subjectivity, authority, persuasion and consent to access personal information (Greene & Hogan, 2005; Murray & Nash, 2017). As an adult and a PhD student employed in higher education and the context of this research, I hold a more powerful and knowledgeable position than children in the formative stages of their formal education. How children conceptualise me is important. While some children may perceive this difference in academic achievement as threatening or intimidating, others may not be aware of or even care about my academic qualifications. As a researcher, children may see me as an authority figure. Some children may trust my opinion, and others may feel concerned or fear what may happen if they provide an 'incorrect' answer (Lane et al., 2019). The interplay of these power dynamics shapes what children share with me during interviews and how I analyse and interpret my data. Children are the experts in their own lived experiences (Greene & Hogan, 2005), and I am merely the visitor (Supski & Maher, 2021). For me, as the visitor, it would be inappropriate to come into their world without questioning my assumptions and existing beliefs. How can I best understand and interpret children's lived experiences to reduce the entanglement of my assumptions and bias? For this reason, I recognised that I need to employ methods of data collection that reduce power dynamics. Ways to challenge these power dynamics are naturalistic ways of child-led data collection and including children as co-researchers involved in decision-making and identifying experiences (Lane et al., 2019; Supski & Maher, 2021).

To employ these naturalistic methods, I plan to employ photo-elicitation in my research (Murray & Nash, 2017). This method enables children to take photographs of their day-to-day experiences. I can then use these photographs in interviews to examine what children think and feel and how they make sense of their in-the-moment lived experiences. Photo-elicitation will enable children to reflect on how and why they construct and express their experiences. It will help me view the world through their eyes and better understand their lived experiences as global citizens. However, it would be presumptuous to assume that my analysis of children's lived experiences is accurate.

For this reason, I plan to invite children to co-construct the research findings with me at their final interview to ensure that my interpretations truly do represent their lived experiences and world views. Examining my positionality has challenged me to examine potential power dynamics in my research design. I have been prompted to identify participatory methods of data collection that invite participants into the co-construction of knowledge.

LOCATING THE RESEARCHER IN RELATION TO THE TOPIC:

Locating oneself in relation to the research topic is the final way researcher positionality is conceptualised (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013) and requires researchers to acknowledge their positioning with regard to the subject or issue under investigation. Personal beliefs, assumptions and values about the subject of the investigation have the potential to shape and influence how researchers analyse and interpret data. Researchers select their research topic and formulate research questions based on their experiences, interests and perspectives, privileging what will be given scholarly attention and included in the scope of their research (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The process of selecting and privileging also extends to the literature review, where the researcher includes or excludes literature to frame the study in a way that aligns with the researchers' beliefs, assumptions and values. Savin-Baden and Major (2013) maintain that researchers need to be transparent at the outset of their research by clearly articulating their stance and acknowledging how this stance shapes the "parameters for the study" (p. 71).

In the following vignettes, Saxena illustrates how she 'edgewalked' between being a cultural 'outsider' and a subject 'insider'. Throughout, Saxena highlights the delicate edgewalk she undertook as she sought to bring a more nuanced understanding of this insider-outsider duality. Similarly, Gulati critically examines her own ontological positioning, showing how her lens as a critical researcher shaped her research design, process and analysis.

Edgewalking an insider leadership world from the outside: Perspectives of a novice researcher

Tanya Saxena

My career and interest in mathematics education and curriculum in India led me to pursue a Master's in Educational Leadership to better understand curriculum leadership's role in curricula-related changes. My Master's research marked a shift from my role as an educator in India to a researcher of curriculum leadership in mathematics classrooms in New Zealand secondary schools. In this section, I examine the change in my own positionality as I transitioned from being an educator in India to a researcher of curriculum leadership within the New Zealand educational context. Through this exploration, I discuss the fluidity and complexities of my position as an outsider to the cultural and leadership context in New Zealand while also being an insider in the field of mathematics education. Through my work, I highlight how I navigated multiple positionalities, intending to offer a more nuanced understanding of this insider-outsider divide.

As an outsider to the New Zealand cultural, leadership and educational context, there were several ways that my research context was unfamiliar to me. For a start, I had to understand the New Zealand mathematics curriculum. I felt the need to gain thorough knowledge and understanding of the curriculum to enable me to communicate with participant teachers and school leaders in a way that communicated that I was 'one of them' as a 'curriculum insider'. For instance, having taught outside of the New Zealand context, it was valuable for me to understand year-long curriculum goals, learning levels/progressions and the National Certificate of Educational Assessment assessment structure to have an in-depth informed discussion around teachers' curriculum-based classroom practices. Moreover, to gain an 'insider curriculum knowledge' during the research, I intentionally and actively deepened my knowledge of the curriculum to make sense of teachers' experiences as curriculum leaders.

In India, I experienced a system where curriculum matters were handled at the state or national level rather than at the school level. Thus, the lack of conceptual and practical understanding of curriculum leadership added a layer of complexity for me. As a novice researcher, the complexities mentioned above made me a little anxious and left me with questions like: How will my participants, who are curriculum leaders, perceive me? Will I be confident enough to articulate and probe further interactions to understand subtle factors and nuances of curriculum leadership? Will curriculum leaders consider themselves superior through their leadership status, and, if so, how would this affect their response to me? Will I be able to gain trust to leverage responses on power relationships within their departments and learn more about impacting leadership practices in mathematics curriculum leadership?

While I confronted the challenge of being an outsider in curriculum and leadership within the New Zealand context, I was an insider to mathematics education. Hence, I was neither an insider nor an outsider in relation to the research; instead, I was an edgewalker who navigated through space where risks matched benefits (Reynolds, 2019). In other words, the risks of being an outsider in the New Zealand context matched the benefits of being an insider in mathematics

education. As I reflect upon this positionality edgewalk, I recognise the fluidity I have developed in edgewalking between these multiple insider/outsider identities.

Making the familiar strange: A critical researcher's perspective

Swati Gulati

I grew up in India admiring the World Bank's efforts to reduce poverty worldwide, and, as a young woman, I dreamed of working for such an international organisation. Little did I know my research would lead me on a new and unfamiliar path where I would evaluate and, later, critique the very organisation that I once idolised. My Masters dissertation commenced my journey from teacher to researcher. My research examined the ideation and development of the World Bank's *Strengthening Teaching-Learning and Results for States* (STARS) programme. This piece aims to share insights into my positionality as a novice researcher as I sought to make the familiar operations of the World Bank 'strange' by using critical theory to examine notions of power that underpinned the ideation and development of the World Bank's STARS programme.

My passion for studying the role of bilateral, multilateral and non-state agencies like the United Nations and the World Bank grew as I became exposed to diverse cultures. When I commenced my Masters degree, I engaged in courses that challenged me to question notions of power and inequality. I began to see what had previously been familiar to me from a new perspective. I had previously appreciated the World Bank as an organisation because of its support to emerging economies. However, my studies in New Zealand introduced me to the impact of neoliberalism on education and the World Bank's role as a hegemonic power. As I engaged in academia, I began to ask the question: How can I critique such a powerful and influential organisation as a novice researcher? As a researcher, I was interested in using critical theory to uncover power issues. This led me to research the World Bank's STARS programme.

To uncover the web of 'taken-for-granted meanings' (Mannay, 2016, p. 32), I adopted the concept of defamiliarisation, which states 'there is always something unfamiliar sketched behind the familiar' (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 169). The familiar is often uncritically examined as it fails to explain the correlation between 'familiarity and larger political-economic structures', (Gunderson, 2020, p. 48). I attempted to make the familiar (e.g., my previous experiences and perspectives of the World Bank) strange by looking at the World Bank's work in the STARs programme with 'fresh eyes' to allow me to critically examine the World Bank's formation, inner workings, structure and relationship with India. In making the familiar strange, my overarching objective was to 'gain deeper analytical knowledge of what everyone *knows of* but does not *know about*' (Gunderson, 2020, p. 60). Achieving this required a process of defamiliarisation where I became conscious of my biases and assumptions regarding the World Bank's mode of operation.

As I began to reflect more deeply, I asked myself: To what extent has my ontological position as a critical researcher shaped how I read and interpret documents from the World Bank? To what extent has my positionality influenced how I analyse and interpret findings?

This process of internal wondering raised the curtain in my mind, and I began to see how my positionality as a critical researcher enabled me to question and challenge an organisation that I previously considered to be unquestionable and unchallengeable. Now new questions are springing up inside me as I read and analysed documents. I wonder: What if challenges and issues presented in these reports and documents are presented to serve the World Bank's

agenda? What if the author of these reports and documents has omitted essential facts about the Indian education system to support the World Bank's position?

As I read critical literature, my beliefs and preconceived assumptions about the World Bank being a neutral and benevolent organisation continue to be revealed, challenged and reconstructed.

CONCLUSION

Researcher positionality is an integral process of social research, and even more so within the field of CIE. The fluidity, subjectivity and contextuality of positionality captured in the confessional accounts above remind us that identifying and clarifying one's positionality may not be a linear and identical process for every emerging researcher. Through Chin's experience of being a non-disabled outsider examining education policies for people with disabilities, Macam's insight into wearing multiple cloaks of positionalities in studying powerful organisations, and Suwarningsih's transitional journey from a practitioner (i.e., a United Nations officer) to an emerging researcher in embracing her 'inbetweeness', we have illustrated the nuanced complexities in locating oneself in relation to the research participants. By reflecting on Levy's struggle to navigate the insider-outsider continuum as a non-Pacific and non-indigenous person researching in the Pacific region and Beckwith's account of rupturing the adult-child power relations through a photo-elicitation method, we have revealed the intricacies of researching in relation to context and the research process. A closer look at Saxena's anecdote of her cautious attempt to 'edgewalk' as an insider and an outsider around curriculum and leadership in mathematics education in New Zealand and Gulati's engagement in the defamiliarisation process in unveiling the agenda behind the World Bank's STARS programme highlight the subtleties of personal positioning in relation to the subject or issue under investigation. While each tale narrates different aspects of positionality, they underscore the multiplicity of insider/outsider perspectives that may have far-reaching implications on knowledge construction, issues of representation and complex power dynamics ingrained in the research processes.

Given the muddled terrain of researcher positionality, our intention in this article was to bring attention to nuanced areas of tension in positionality that need to be deconstructed. We hope this article will encourage other emerging researchers to develop an honest and critical exposition of positionality during specific stages of their research projects and throughout their research careers. Equally important, it is envisaged that such reflexive praxis will enable more emerging researchers to consider collaborative forms of inquiry to develop a deeper awareness of their research participants, contexts, research processes and/or topics under investigation. An example could include conducting group discussions around diverse tensions and dilemmas of researcher positionality inherent within the research process, as exemplified in this article. This will likely facilitate collaborative endeavours to interrogate positions of power and privilege, guard against misrepresentations of knowledge, and cultivate greater sensitivities to contextual and cultural diversities, and through doing so, make us better researchers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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