



Research to engage voices on the ground in educational development

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses how a variety of qualitative methods could be used for investigating the engagement of the voices on the ground, where the change is expected to happen. It also reviews how qualitative research approaches involve students and teachers, the so-called “target groups” of educational development, as subjects, rather than objects. The qualitative methods are presented here for their potential in engaging the voices on the ground. Actor-centred inquiry and participatory action research consist of data collected, analysed and reported, in collaboration between researchers and the research subjects. Enabling the subjects as autonomous actors to take part in the analysis of their own learning and education provides a means to bring deeper cultural and social knowledge into the development processes. In this way research may promote ownership of educational development. Furthermore, the actors’ voices are key factors in the re-definition of global, national and local educational development targets for the EFA beyond 2015.

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1. Introduction

National education policies and international cooperation are guided by international benchmarks such as the global Education For All (EFA) targets and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). While the set goals are both quantitative and qualitative, achievements are monitored quantitatively. What is defined as evidence of change must be broadened and deepened (Little and Green, 2009; McGrath, 2010, 2013; Okkolin et al., 2010). Qualitative analysis can add to this picture and the research approaches presented in this article may be the complementary partners for mixed-methods to strengthen the role of research in educational development.

In education, as in social sciences in general, the trend is towards complementary views and multidimensional research. Existing research underlines that our knowledge of the complexity in educational development is still limited (see Amundsen and Wilson, 2012; McGrath, 2010) and contextualisation of education is needed. Conducting research can promote sensitivity and respect for the stakeholders on the ground (Crossley, 2008;

Crossley and Watson, 2011). Sensitivity in the use of research findings must also be taken into consideration (Christians, 2005; Foster et al., 2012; Preece, 2013). This article reaches beyond sensitivity to cultures and contexts by discussing how qualitative methods can be used for investigating the engagement of voices on the ground, the place where change is expected to happen. It also reviews how qualitative research approaches can involve students and teachers, the so-called “target groups” of educational development, as subjects, rather than objects, thereby enabling subjects, as autonomous actors, to take part in the analysis of their own learning and education. This approach provides a means to bring deeper cultural and social knowledge into the development process and promotes the ownership of educational development at the national and local beginnings.

The qualitative methods are presented here for their potential in engaging the voices on the ground. Actor-centred inquiry and participatory action research consist of data collected, analysed and reported, in collaboration between researchers and the research subjects. The actor-centred methods reviewed are empathy-based stories, visual methods and the voice-centred relational method. The two participatory action research types are consultation and the communicative engagement methods. They employ the collaboration of stakeholders in the whole research process to assess and analyse challenges to unravel complicated problems and strive for new solutions. These research methods aim to obtain both objective knowledge and subjective interpretations of participants’ views for promoting change to improve

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their lives and, in this case, their education and the education of others. Thus, these methodologies may challenge traditional views in planning and monitoring educational progress.

2. Characteristics of the actor-centred and participatory action research methods presented

Three types of actor-centred approaches and two types of actions research methods are presented here. Empathy-based stories are used to capture the contextually bound thinking of research participants. Visual methods, such as photo elicitations, employ empowering photographs, called photo voice, to reveal otherwise less obvious features of daily life and transcend the cultural barriers of participation. The voice-centred method is applied during the analytical stage of the research process to emphasise the roles of actors, both the participants and the researchers. Consultation, a non-adversarial process of synergic discussion is an instrument for determining goals at the local or national levels and the means to achieve them. Communicative research engagement is a process where researchers create a space for education dialogue to discuss and analyse a topic requiring a new solution. The draft strategy for improvement is brought to a broader stakeholder dialogue and to higher levels of the decision-making hierarchy. All incorporate those on the ground as stakeholders in the educational process.

2.1. Empathy-based stories

Empathy-based stories are short, imaginary writings composed by research participants as a reaction to an introductory script provided by the researcher. The method has been developed as a modification of active role-playing for the purpose of studying the subject's interpretations of situations. This form of passive role-play is used for acquiring information on the experience and ideas embedded in narratives written by individuals (Eskola, 1998; Eskola and Kihlström, 1988; Ginsburg, 1979.) Empathy-based stories are grounded in the narrative tradition, emphasising the two-way relationship of reality and the narrative (Suoranta, 1996; Bruner, 1987) and where narratives endow experience with meaning (Bruner, 1986). Research participants are viewed as competent members of their culture with knowledge, both explicit and tacit, of the rules that guide and evaluate situated actions (Ginsburg, 1979). Essentially, empathy-based stories aim at capturing the social and cultural engagement of the situation and the respondent self (Eskola, 1998).

In the study of educational development, empathy-based stories give access to socially and culturally bound individual perspectives and thereby help to focus the research on issues that are relevant to the people studied. Empathy-based stories have been applied in the analysis of female students' conceptions of success in education and the social and cultural support available to female students in Tanzania (Posti-Ahokas, 2013). The introductory scripts are based on previous research and written in collaboration with Tanzanian researchers. An example of an introductory script is presented below about a young girl passing Form 5 with high grades together with two empathy-based stories written by students to show how the stories generated data.

Introductory script:

Last year, Asha passed her O-level exams with good grades and she has now started her studies on Form 5. She is happy to have made it to Form 5 because her parents have made a great effort to find the money for her education. Asha thinks studying has now become more challenging and she is struggling to pass her

exams this year. Her goal is to proceed all the way up to university and become a lawyer.

Try to enter to Asha's situation and write a story on how she will manage!

Two examples of the empathy-based stories written by the students:

"Asha should first be confident that she can reach the place of her choice (her goal). Secondly, she should thoroughly seek her God by adhering to religious principals alongside observing discipline before her elders. Not only those, but she should also strive at all costs for accessing various books and other sources of education, while at the same time, trying to involve the like-minded colleagues whose goals are similar to those of hers. Again whenever she experiences difficulties, like in comprehending during lessons in class, she should ask her teachers or those fellow students at Form Six level. Lastly, Asha should be closely supported by her parents so as to reach her goals since parents are the pillar of life."

"On my side, I advise Asha to strive with her studies since she is lucky to have parents who take great initiatives with all their heart to ensure their child pursues her studies. If she has really opted for schooling, she will really study up to university—once you have stripped your clothes for the water, you have got to bathe in it. However she should avoid allurements at school since she is a female child—she should take note on those and God will help her."

Empathy-based stories are useful for obtaining rich, culturally contextualised data. The issues linked to educational attainment found in the empathy-based stories were coded and further organised into categories: (A) 'personal attributes and strategies' such as confidence, accessing additional information, involving like-minded colleagues, asking teachers and senior students, being courageous, avoiding allurements; and (B) 'social and cultural issues' such as peer support, parental support, abuse of female students, religion. Empathy-based stories proved to be helpful in identifying critical issues from the perspective of students.

2.2. Visual methods: photo elicitations, empowering photographs and photo voice

Visual methods use the power of photography to elicit information from past and present events to build self-esteem and to act as a tool for social change. They have been used creatively in education and social science research (Emmel and Clark, 2009; Finch, 2007; Holm, 2008; Mason and Dale, 2011). Photographs were used by Kaplan et al. (2011) to investigate the ethics of inclusion and exclusion. Photos can be used to create a neutral ground for the stimulation of discussion without leading the participants to the direction of the preconceived notions of the researcher.

Photography is often about power, who takes pictures and who is in the pictures. PhotoVoice aims to undo the power division by providing the means for people on the ground to record their community's strengths and weaknesses and enhancing dialogue with policy makers (PhotoVoice, 2009). In research this approach changes the respondents from being research objects to active research participants. In photo elicitation a photograph is inserted into a research interview (Harper, 2002). Photographs can elicit information and evoke feelings and memories that may have not emerged in the interviews without the photographs (Gold, 2004; Twine, 2006). Photographs are not analysed as primary data, but combined with the narrations of the photos.

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