

Accommodating Perceptions, Searching for Authenticity and Decolonising Methodology: The Case of the Australia / Papua New Guinea Secondary School Students' Project

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Introduction

This paper discusses the development process of a research methodology accommodating the exploration of recipients' perceptions of a foreign educational project. The search for authenticity in methodology remains an issue for qualitative inquiry which has its origins in a constructivist epistemology. Theoretically positioned within the postcolonial framework, the search for authenticity in methodology presented a challenge for the researcher. Specifically, this paper will focus on the research problem, issues relating to evaluation of aid programs, decolonising methodology and the search for authenticity. The concluding section presents the experiences of the current research project. It concludes with some implications for conducting educational research in a postcolonial context.

The Research Problem: A Short Description

A substantial component of foreign educational aid from developed countries is expended on education and training in donor countries (Altbach, 1985; Muller, 1999). However, the relevance and appropriateness of foreign educational projects to the local needs and priorities of postcolonial states is inconclusive (Luteru, 1991). Evaluation of aid programs, therefore, is considered as a necessary prerequisite to understanding the outcomes (Kelly, 1996) of official aid assistance.

Papua New Guinea (PNG) remains the recipient of a substantial amount of Australian foreign aid, a reflection of their historical relationship. Since PNG gained political independence in 1975, Australia has provided an estimated total of over 11 billion dollars in aid (Simons, 1997, p. 102). Education and training are major components of the Australian aid program. In 1996 – 1997, there were over one thousand scholarships for

PNG students in Australian educational institutions, 460 were for tertiary students and 550 were for secondary school students.

The inception of the Australian / Papua New Guinea Secondary School Students' Project (SSSP) was an initiative of both governments. The project had two main aims. The first was to increase the number of secondary school graduates eligible for post secondary education in PNG, and the second was to prepare a group which would be good managerial and technical trainees (AIDAB, 1990; AIDAB, 1995). An associated aim of the project was the promotion of cultural links between the countries. The selection of Australian secondary schools was based on their provision of full boarding facilities. Consequently, non-government (private) schools in the Northern Territory, Queensland and Northern New South Wales were involved in the project. An AusAID review in 1995 recommended that the project be phased out by 2000 (AIDAB, 1995). However, at the end of 1997, the project was extended for another five years (Hayes, 1998).

The official review of the SSSP (AIDAB, 1995) identified that the recipients were very conscientious and approximately 82% obtained university places. Recipients benefited from the Australian experiences personally and socially. Australian schools valued the students because they worked hard academically, were friendly and willing contributors to sporting and cultural events (AIDAB, 1995). However, the review team acknowledged the social and cultural concerns evident on return of recipients in PNG, but regarded these issues as a matter of perception.

The purpose of this study was to explore the outcomes of the SSSP from the perspectives of the recipients. Specifically, the study investigated the academic, social and cultural experiences of Australian elite private secondary education and its benefits for recipients on return to PNG. The study process revealed and exposed a range of complex issues associated with educational assistance through the subjective experiences of the recipients. This was a shift away from many project evaluations conducted using a quantitative research design often employed by foreign financial agencies. The next section provides a background of some practices of program evaluation.

Issues of Research and Evaluation of Foreign Aid Programs

The implementation of foreign aid projects is a complex process. This complexity is compounded by several determinants of a project cycle. Hallak (1990) depicted several issues which contribute to undesirable outcomes of foreign aid. First, while any technical assistance incurs expenses for recipient countries (Altbach, 1985), adequate local expertise may also be unavailable. Often this results in costly time wastage, and contributes to a lack of co-ordination between the donor and recipient countries. Second, when planning is inadequate, the management of projects is difficult, and results are likely to be compromised. Preliminary planning needs to consider an assessment of the long-term affordability and its compatibility with local resources, structures and priorities of recipient countries. When frustrations and failures are experienced in this relationship, the structures embedded within bilateral relationships take precedence (Hallak, 1990). Third, the recipient educational system is often fragmented by foreign aid projects, a result of aid agencies working in isolation. Inevitably, there is duplication of effort, resulting in waste in human and material resources. Sufficient time and synchronization stages are vital if inefficiency and failure to attain project objectives are to be avoided.

There are two major reasons for undertaking evaluation in the official aid program (Kelly, 1996). First, evaluation allows for political accountability as it reveals whether aid achieves its objectives. Second, it serves a management function, which is dependent upon the location of the evaluative processes and its ability to provide timely and relevant information for decision-making and management of aid program (Kelly, 1996). This purpose is often served through program monitoring. Both functions of evaluation are key components of any program planning cycle; a cycle consisting of complex processes.

Research and evaluation of educational assistance cannot be freed from political factors since educational priorities are determined by the changing nature of societies concerned. Moreover, other factors also contribute to this complex area of concern:

...What satisfies an aid administrator...may not satisfy the recipient; or if both parties are satisfied, their programs may still have unfortunate consequences for particular social groups. Many factors make evaluation by the donor country extremely difficult: what is viewed as accountability on the domestic front can appear as interference abroad. Multilateral organisations similarly find evaluation politically demanding (Cleverley & Jones, 1976, p. 38).

Indeed, educational needs are determined by the local developmental priorities and infrastructures. Luteru and Teasedale (1993) argued that educational projects need to be carefully evaluated on the possible impact on the social, political, economic and environmental fabric of respective societies. However, with these processes left to donors, aid programs may be open to manipulation (Dorney, 1998). Hallak (1990) depicted the important factors which determine educational priorities in recipient countries.

Priorities in education are dependent on complex and volatile factors...such as certain societal goals...The impacts on environment, family and home backgrounds, and in a more extended way, social and cultural factors...are sometimes not adequately taken into consideration by donors. Educational policy and strategy must be solidly anchored in local traditions and values, reoriented in promising new directions, on the basis of successful experiments, if disruption and social turmoil are to be avoided (Hallak, 1990, p. 2-3).

In the context of educational assistance programs, the issue of evaluation by contracted consultants has invited debate and controversy. This is compounded by the domination of expatriates from donor countries working on projects in developing countries. These consultants spend brief periods in a country before submitting their reports on pre-conceived ideas on a complex system which needs time, patience and ongoing discussions (Watson, 1994; Crossley & Vulliamy, 1996). Often these consultants do not appreciate the social and cultural context of the developing countries (Thaman, 1993). Analysis of any education system or sub-system involves time, patience, ongoing negotiation and interpretation based on both external perspectives and internal understanding of the situation (Watson, 1994, p. 94).

Despite a growing appreciation of the complexities of development, and problems of measurement and review across cultures, research and evaluation of aid programs have remained locked with the field of logical positivism (Kelly, 1996). This is particularly evident in the work of many of the major international development agencies (Crossley & Vulliamy, 1996). Kelly (1996) argues that the positivist framework tends to encourage a divergence between research and reality, dangerously capable of informing inaccurate and inappropriate policy and program development. Questions of suitability and effectiveness of evaluative designs to the culture or other processes under review are simply not explored. Reliability and validity of these research paradigms are questionable (Kelly, 1996).

The place of program evaluation has secured an important position within the recent review of the Australian aid program. Simons (1997) emphasized that program evaluation needs to focus consistently on outcomes of past and present programs. Equally important, the impact of externally funded programs must be explored from the perspectives of the recipients. Aid programs deserve regular assessment by critical processes, taking into account people working at the grassroots level.

Kelly (1996) concluded that evaluation of development aid requires sophisticated and multi-faceted understanding. Such a position requires new possibilities and creates spaces for both philosophical and methodological approaches to evaluation. Some features of these involve the inclusion of beneficiary perspectives, and the acknowledgement of differing paradigms. This presented a methodological challenge for a study into a foreign funded project for postcolonial education such as the SSSP.

Postcolonial (decolonising) Methodology

The recognition of cultural values and ideology in the legitimation of educational knowledge and research paradigms is a challenge in comparative education. This recognition involves critiques of positivist approaches and their appropriateness in evaluating educational aid across varied economic, political, social and cultural landscapes. The problematic role of international development and educational assistance (Crossley & Vulliamy, 1996) and its implications of dependency (Tikly, 1999) have reinforced the search for appropriate research methodology.

Postcolonial ways of knowing evolve from a critique of modernist views of understanding the world. Postcolonial perspectives reject modernist assumptions of pushing the Eurocentric orientations (Hickling-Hudson, 1998) in explaining and applying its philosophies in postcolonial times. They aim at re-describing and re-interpreting developments and events related to colonisation and its aftermath (*cf* Gandhi, 1998; Said, 1978; Spivak, 1985). Therefore, postcolonial perspectives signify an epistemological shift (Tikly, 1999, p. 605) in the way colonial discourses are interpreted and narrativised.

The concept of 'representation' becomes a key feature of postcolonial research. Indeed, representation of subjects was generated through discursive practices of the colonial era. However, postcolonial ways of knowing attempt to understand and reconstruct that knowledge constructed through colonial discourse, and to provide the ontological beliefs underpinning research from that viewpoint. A constructivist rather than a reflective or intentional approach is preferred within such orientation. The constructivist approach does not deny the existence of the material world. Rather, the conceptual representations based on cultural systems (including language and other representation) provide meaning (Hall, 1997, p. 25) to the world of social actors.

Constructivism or 'making of meaning' is positioned as opposite to an objective or positivist stance; with its belief that objective truth with its objective methods of inquiry can reveal true knowledge which is the traditional epistemology of Western science as promoted through the period of Enlightenment (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). Constructivism posits instead that 'knowledge and reality is contingent upon human practices constructed through interaction between human beings and their world' (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). A postcolonial perspective aims at redressing the colonial process of knowledge generation and its implications of imperialism and hegemony.

Through a constructivist viewpoint, 'meaning, truth, or reality' cannot be simply objective nor can they be purely subjective. Knowledge and truth are constructed or created in the mind, not discovered (Schwandt, 1994, p. 125). However, it is in the interpretation of their interaction with the world and other human beings that meaning is created. It is only through interaction that the reality of the 'other', perceptions, feelings and attitudes, and their interpretation of their meaning (Crotty, 1998) can be understood. As its influences for ethnography require, the aim is to 'get inside' the way each group of people see the world.

Postcolonial research places responsibility on researchers who can provide an insider's or indigenous perspective. This Indigenist research (research about indigenous issues by indigenous people) process may challenge and unsettle beliefs, values and knowledge of these indigenous researchers themselves (Smith, 1999). Indigenous groups are gradually acknowledging the significance of their traditional ways of seeing the world. The content of this indigenous knowledge and wisdom provides meaning with

unique features that define the group's identity (Teasedale, 1995, p. 200). Such a position may contradict discursive practices of colonial discourse in which the coloniser held knowledge and thus power over the colonised subjects. A distinctive characteristic of the 'indigenous researcher' is that they have to live with the consequences of their research, a feature an 'outsider' may easily avoid (Smith, 1999). Walker (2001) defined the central characteristic of 'Indigenist' research as including interconnectedness, focus on process and relationships, inclusion of spiritual experience, and expanded definitions of empirical data.

Indigenous epistemologies are characterised by interconnectedness and interrelatedness between people, knowledge and the natural world (Walker, 2001, p. 9). Indigenous research reiterates the connections between human beings, including the researcher and the researched (*cf* Smith, 1999). Within this relationship, the concept of reciprocity is integral. The research process and the generated knowledge leave the responsibility on the researcher to utilise this information in useful ways to support group aspirations and values. Indigenist research focuses on a paradigm that is a creative ever-changing process rather than absolute truth. This practice goes beyond objective measurements, but honours the primacy of direct experience, interconnectedness, relationships, holism and cultural values.

A central characteristic of Indigenist research which may defy Western epistemology concerns the 'expanded definition of empirical data'. While Western research paradigms focus on what can be known or observable, indigenous epistemology may include experiences of visions and dreams as empirical data. This illustrates the interconnectedness and holistic experiences, illustrating an epistemology which is inherently spiritual.

The place of the 'native' or indigenous intellectual is as essential as it is problematic (Walker, 2001). Most postcolonial scholars move across the boundaries of the indigenous and the metropole. Their spaces in the academy of the western world are also problematic (*cf* Walker, 2001). To acknowledge traditional systems of knowledge involves a dynamic process which reflects searching for cultural continuity (Teasedale, 1995, p. 203) in the midst of professional and personal change and transformations. In very fundamental way, indigenous researchers remain members of the society with

close relationships with families and other agencies (Smith, 1999, p. 72). In short, an insider's passion and perspective are a matter of cultural identity.

Postcolonial research may have its foundations located within critical social research orientations. Yet, to assume that a postcolonial methodological concern can empower and emancipate research participants is premature. The postcolonial perspective employed in this study aims at exploring, revealing and exposing the contradictions and ambiguities embedded within colonial relationships. This study, then, intends to contribute to understanding the complexities of such relationships if practices of the colonial past are to be disrupted, dismantled and resisted.

To refuse to acknowledge the existence of other ontologies and epistemologies assumes that there is only one 'reality', and in this case, the Western reality. Such a methodological approach reinforces the discursive practices of the colonial past. Finally, postcolonial theory, while universally applicable, has to focus on specificities. This postcolonial perspective specifically focuses on the Papua New Guinea context shaped and influenced by legacies of colonialism.

The Search for Authenticity

Regardless of disciplines and approaches employed, validity and reliability are vital elements in social research. Validity ensures that data collected is accurate and represents reality. Reliability refers to the repeatability and replication (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993) of a given study by researchers other than the original researcher, and whether independent researchers can discover the same phenomenon in comparable situations (Schwandt, 1997, p. 137). However, these concepts remain a contested area in qualitative research. Indeed, validity is a complex question in qualitative research. It is unrealistic to expect a unitary meaning for validity in qualitative designs. Attempts to do so distort the distinguishing features of qualitative research which contribute something special to the human sciences. This includes rigidity, dogmatism, and stifling of creativity (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). It should be evident then that a position drawing on qualitative design resonates with the distinctive characteristics of decolonising (indigenist) methodology. It is a matter of credibility and authenticity.

Unique situations cannot be reconstructed precisely, even the exact replication of research methods may fail to produce identical results. Qualitative research occurs in natural settings and often is undertaken to record processes of change,

so replication is only approximated, never achieved...because human behaviour is never static, no study is replicated exactly, regardless of the methods and designs used (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p. 332).

Indeed, it is difficult to maintain reliability and validity in qualitative study like this. The perspectives of the recipients captured in this study may not necessarily be the same given another time and place. Guba and Lincoln (1989) replace internal and external validity with the terms trustworthiness and authenticity (*cf* Schwandt, 1997). Authenticity is then advanced since it is better aligned with the constructivist epistemology.

Criteria for authenticity (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) are appropriate for judging qualitative research originating within a constructivist epistemology. This process incorporates a postmodernist perspective in social science, placing strong emphasis on the perspectives of different stakeholders within program evaluation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Accommodating different perspectives challenges the notion that any one group can hold the whole truth about a situation (Kelly, 1996, p. 226).

The five categories of authenticity include fairness, ontological, educative, catalytic and tactical authenticity. Specifically, *fairness* refers to the extent to which the participants' different constructions and underlying values are solicited and represented in a balanced, even-handed way by the researcher. *Ontological authenticity* concerns the way in which participants' own constructions are enhanced or made more informed through their participation in the research. *Educative authenticity* refers to how participants develop understanding and appreciation of others. *Catalytic authenticity* refers to how the research process stimulates and facilitates the participants' behaviour. Finally, *tactical authenticity* refers to the extent to which participants are empowered to act (Schwandt, 1997, p. 7).

Fairness, in the context of authenticity, resonates with the defining characteristics of decolonising methodology. The concept of representation is an important factor in presenting 'reality' based on the meaning constructed by the participants. Decolonising methodologies help to disrupt and dismantle colonial practices which believe to 'represent the other', while simultaneously uses information (knowledge) to retain hegemony (power). In this study of the SSSP, an emancipatory intent was not possible since there is no evidence for claiming that social injustice had been done. It is possible,

however, that the data collection process may inspire SSSP recipients to accept their social, cultural and educational reality as it is and, in return, lead them to think about their future in a more informed way. Research conducted by insider or indigenist researcher focuses on the process, offering participants a voice in speaking about issues normally silenced.

The SSSP Experience

The role of the researcher is significant in all research processes. One characteristic of the qualitative researcher is an understanding of research as an interactive process shaped by personal history, biography, gender, social class, race and ethnicity and research subjects (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 4). This goes beyond simply understanding, and moves towards empathy (Nueman, 2000). Often the human and passionate element of social research has been lost in orthodox research (Janesick, 1998, p. 51). A passion for people, communication and understanding is a feature of qualitative research that can enhance educational practice and human activity.

The researcher is of Papua New Guinea origin. Being a product of the PNG education system, and presently a resident of Australia, she is able to bring to the research understanding, insight and passion found mainly in 'insider' research. A critical issue which relates to insider researcher is the need for constant reflexivity, critical thinking in the research processes, the researcher's relationships and the quality and richness of data and analysis. In this study, the experiences of the researcher position her to empathise with the research participants. The ability to empathise created a relationship of trust through which location of the recipients in PNG became possible.

An attempt to trace the SSSP returnees into PNG was difficult due to the lack of primary data with the National Department of Education. Although, it became possible to obtain this information from the Office of Higher Education, these records only provided information of students who were awarded national scholarships, not privately sponsored returnees. Within the universities, some SSSP graduates had enrolled in degree programs after the completion of adult matriculation with the University of PNG, thus enrolling as non-school leavers. Personnel networking with these returnees became the main avenue to locate many of the research participants. A total of 133 recipients participated in this study through semi – structured in-depth interviews, focus

groups, and a qualitative survey. Locating participants was my first challenge. I started changing my schedule and constantly worked on developing networks and forming relationships. These changes involved much critical thinking and constant negotiation.

The realities of insider research became more evident. For instance, I interviewed an academic (expatriate) at one of the Universities. As soon as he (Head of Department) realized I was conducting a study into the outcomes of the SSSP, he quickly advised me to *'forget conducting a tracer study. It is too difficult to do in a country like PNG. Go find an easier topic and get your PhD'*.

Such a reaction was both humiliating and offensive. Gaining a PhD was secondary to my curiosity, interest and a personal desire to understand issues underpinning colonial relationship in postcolonial times. As a PNG educator, I had the personal experiences of educational dilemmas, the contradictions between educational aims and practices. My passion for the study included some responsibility for the secondary students and how their future life chances were being affected as a consequence of their participation in the SSSP. From an Indigenist methodological viewpoint, my involvement grew out of a sense of responsibility and reciprocity.

The objective of this study was to explore the outcomes of the SSSP through the subjective experiences of the recipients. Consequently, the research process provided the opportunity to investigate issues which could be overlooked by positivist research designs (*cf* AIDAB, 1995). These issues were clearly demonstrated through a postcolonial perspective, incorporating concepts of cultural identity, ethnicity, ambivalence and hegemony in a postcolonial society.

The operations of the SSSP involved the displacement of teenage Papua New Guineans into the Australian cultural context. The dominant western cultural norms in Australia demanded specific changes in sojourners' personality and behaviour. On return to PNG, the Australian cultural norms had been accommodated as appropriate and normal. Yet, the exhibition of these attracted much negative reaction from some quarters of the PNG society. Research participants confirmed this.

One thing was the style of dressing and speaking English. After three years in Australia, we did change in this way. But because it was different, they joked about it, particularly the Australian accent (Recipient in Focus Group).

PNG is a 'colonial patchwork ethnic mosaic (Premdas, 1989). Ethnic groupings have distinct traditional and cultural values systems and practices, thus one cannot assume uniformity of value systems and practices. Some of these differences in traditional and cultural systems include the inheritance of land, value of bride price, and extended family relationships. Modern PNG society is indeed a hybrid of various ethnic, traditional systems and the modern or western. From the viewpoint of postcolonial theory, an educated Papua New Guinean is a hybrid of traditional and western socialization. Such being the case, hybridity and cultural difference are not a new phenomenon in PNG society.

Promotion of cultural exchange was an associated aim of the SSSP (AIDAB, 1990; 1995). This research findings revealed that the recipients' perceptions of cultural identities did change on return from Australian private schools. Some manifestations of this change included the assimilated Australian accent, choices of food and leisure activities, and standard and styles of personal grooming. However, these manifestations of acculturation invited resistance from the certain quarters of the PNG society as clearly articulated by a recipient.

There is an attitude problem in PNG towards the AusAID students...I was warned by a former AusAID student her experiences here. She warned me not to act as an AusAID student. I guess our cultural experiences of Australia made us different from the PNG lifestyle, in the kind of clothes you wear, the way you talk, your food preference and even your leisure activities. Australia allowed you to be what you want to be. PNG does not allow for that. You must be like everybody else or you are different and will not easily mix with others (Interviewed Recipient).

From a postcolonial perspective, this demonstrates resistance to colonial artifacts. Indeed, there is evident of cultural hybridity in the recipients on return home. After three years of emulating and assimilating the Australian variant of the western lifestyle, the display of western cultural norms on return to PNG became natural enough for the recipients. This assimilation of the western cultural norms was both a survival strategy as well as a natural process (Recipient # 6). Unfortunately, the constructed Australian identity clashed with the PNG and Melanesian cultural values.

PNG parents desired an elite Australian education. However, the context of the PNG society is not flexible enough to accommodate the cultural and social aspects of Australian education. This study demonstrated a resistance to difference, particularly

colonial manifestations, highlighting the ambivalence within a postcolonial society. The 'attitude problem' against the AusAID students reflects an ambivalent colonial relationship between Australia and PNG. To blame the returnees for their acquired 'Australianism' illustrates a case of 'blaming the victim'.

In Australia, they accuse you of being too quiet. You return to PNG and they accuse you of being too loud. You get knock in Australia because you are a foreigner. You get knocked down in PNG because you act and may speak differently. Where do you go? (Interviewed Recipient).

The above assertion provides a clear illustration of resistance to difference in both Papua New Guinea and Australia. This study demonstrated that public resistance in PNG did not only evolve as a consequence of 'miss – opportunities'. On the contrary, the public criticisms of recipients in the national papers were by politicians and demonstrated through the 'negative attitude' of national university academics (Interviewed Recipients). The contradictory feature of this practice is that national academics, politicians and others who comment negatively about the Australian acculturation of the SSSP recipients continue to enjoy the benefits of westernization and modernization. From a postcolonial perspective, this invites suggestions of internal colonialism and hegemony.

An important issue here is the notion of dominant cultural and societal norms (what I boldly classify as cultural politics) can empower or restrict aspirations of the SSSP recipients. Cultural identity is defined by the dominant culture leaving very little alternative for the difference. It can be concluded that the deep ambivalence within the cultural and societal context are vital in determining the success and expectations of recipients of any foreign funded educational programs.

Summary

This study has demonstrated that other methodologies can be employed to explore and reveal outcomes of foreign aid to education. A postcolonial perspective has the potential to illicit complex issues of educational assistance, education for development and cultural politics in a postcolonial state. By accommodating a decolonising methodology, a new wave of possibilities emerges to authentically evaluate outcomes of educational assistance for a postcolonial society.

Cultural issues concerning the subjective experiences of once colonized subjects cannot be underestimated in the context of evaluation of foreign aid projects. Manifestations of cultural issues; identity, ethnicity, resistance to difference illustrate the constant struggles within postcolonial societies. From a postcolonial viewpoint, such issues characterize the deep ambivalence and contradictions influencing education and development. Educational assistance needs to consider these cultural and contextual issues if achievement of aid objectives is desired.

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