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## INSIDER RESEARCHERS: CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

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**ABSTRACT:** A researcher plays an important role in the success of the topic being researched. Being an insider researcher could help the researcher to have more understanding about their research and the phenomena being studied. However, previous research revealed inconsistent results. Some argue that becoming an insider researcher could lead to a loss of objectivity and bias, while others found that it has potential to balance the ways issues being researched. The objective of this qualitative case study is to explore the potential and challenges of being an insider researcher. Ten excellent teachers were selected using purposive sampling and they were interviewed face to face. The findings revealed some advantages to the insider researcher in understanding the issues being studied as she has the common knowledge of the life, problems and challenges they face as excellent teachers. Moreover, the researcher also managed to reduce “red tape” in getting contact with the participants. The findings from this study enriched the literature on being an insider in educational research from the perspectives of excellent teachers.

**KEY WORDS:** Excellent Teacher, Insider researcher, Outsider researcher.

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### INTRODUCTION

Research plays a vital role in addressing problems and issues for continual improvement (Creswell, 2014). Through systematic research (Best & Kahn, 1999) we develop results that lead to the answers to certain questions and deeper understanding to the problems. In order to answer and solve the problems, the researcher should find and choose suitable method to seek the information. The decision to either employ qualitative ~~and~~ or quantitative methods relies on the suitability and the researcher’s abilities on the issues being investigated.

Besides the issues of suitability and ability of a researcher in carrying out research, the issue of a researcher’s role is also being discussed. This is due to the fact that sometimes a researcher needs to carry out a research on topics which are related to him/her or on topics related to a group he/she is associated with. In other instances, the researcher may have to carry out a research on things which are new to him/her in which he/she despite having no experience or knowledge regarding the topic (Unluer, 2012).

There are two trends of study in the first half and second half of the century which saw two different ways of doing research. The first is which Mercer (2007) described as trend of research which involved a researcher doing research or study outside of their topic, interest or background such as the study about other races or culture. The second trend of research involves a researcher doing a research about a topic which he/she is familiar with and is already exposed to such as a research about the his culture or ethnic background (Hockey, 1993). The two types of research thus create the distinction of the word insider or outsider (Merton, 1972) where insider researcher could be defined as someone who shares a particular characteristic such as

gender, ethnicity or culture, whereas the outsider researcher could be defined as someone who does not share the same characteristics mentioned above (Mercer, 2007).

On the other hand, Adler & Adler, (1994) stated that the insider researcher is one of the members to the group being studied, whereas, the outsider researcher is the people who studied issues that do not belong to them (Breen, 2007). From that, it could be said that the insider would be more familiar to the group to be studied in contrast with the outsider researcher. Merton (1972) stresses that the element of an insider and outsider researcher should not shadow other factors as the concept and the definition are still very vague. For them, both insider and outsider research have their own advantages and disadvantages. In addition, besides ethnic groups and culture, there are many other important factors that would guarantee the success of research.

### **ADVANTAGES AND CHALLENGES OF INSIDER RESEARCHER**

It is argued that, insider researchers always have a passion about the topic they been working on. This means that they would commit themselves into the research despite all the obstacles. According to McClintock, et. Al, (2003) a research should give various positive impacts to the researchers in terms of values and self development. Therefore, if a researcher chooses a topic which he/she is familiar with, he/she would benefit more from it.

There are two doctrines related to the issue of insider and outsider researchers. The first one is promoted by Simmel (1950) who argues that a researcher can only be objective if he is an outsider. Simmel (1950) believes that it is difficult for a researcher to be natural unless he is an outsider. This view is opposed by outsider doctrine which argues that if an outsider takes up a research which is not related to him in topic area, culture, group and status, he will not be able to understand the issue he is working on and therefore, will find it difficult to justify his study findings (Merton, 1972). Merton's argument is corroborated by Conant (1968) who claims that it is highly unlikely that whites can fully understand the plight of blacks community simply because they do not belong to the community. Wilson (1974) concludes that the view is correct as "whites are basically incapable of grasping black realities" (p. 324).

Based on the opposing views discussed above, both views cannot be disregard because both offer reasonable explanation and justification despite one view reducing the importance of a researcher's objectivity. Bonner and Tolhurst (2002) believe that being an insider researcher gives three advantages to the research. First, an insider will be able to better understand an issue; second, he will not disrupt the flow of social interaction; and finally, he will be able to extract true data from the participants as he can relate well to them. In addition, a researcher's familiarity with the cultural and political structure of an organisation will help him to save time in trying to understand the issue he is studying as he already has some knowledge regarding the issue (Smyth & Holian, 2008).

However, there is an issue of the possibilities of an insider to reveal too much sensitive information in his research because of he knows the issue well (Smyth & Holian, 2008). This is because, insider researchers usually have easy access to information that sometimes they overlook the confidentiality and sensitivity of the information.

In addition, insiders may be blindsided by some issues in their research as they do not consider certain issues as important as how outsiders would see them. They might not be as alert and as sensitive to the information or issue compared to those who are outside the organisation.

To summarise, both doctrines have their own advantages and disadvantages. The most important thing is that both insider and outsider researchers must follow closely all the research ethics when carrying out their research and ensure that the objectives of their research are achieved without bias.

## **STATEMENT OF PROBLEMS**

The issues of insider and outsider researchers are related to the role that they play during their study. Common dilemma faced by researchers when doing research includes barriers to getting information about the issue. DeVerteuil, (2004) believes that an insider would gain more advantages if he or she is well informed about the topic and he or she would get more information from the participants in the research. With many barriers that can possibly hinder the success of research, (Shaffir, 1999), the insider researcher would have more advantages to understand the topic if he or she has the same background or shares common values or experiences with the participants.

In contrast, there are also some debates on the objectivity of the study carried out by an insider researcher such as the question of "prejudice" and "truth" in their research (Simmel, 1950) and potential of bias (DeLyser, 2001; Hewitt-Taylor, 2002). It could be argued that the insider researcher may be influenced by his similar background to the participants and as a result, it would influence the interpretations of data in his study. Besides that, some argue that the researcher might be biased in his report (Schulz, 1971) as he might be heavily influenced by his past experiences regarding the topic as compared to an outsider researcher who has no prior background information about the topic, making him more objective when reporting about the things the participants said during the research.

However, many researchers including (Conant, 1968; DeVerteuil, 2004; Oakley, 1981) believe that an insider researcher would have an advantage if the study is about culture and way of life of certain community because he will understand the participants more and the interview process would be smoother when the participants and the researcher are of the same gender or share common values or experiences (Oakley, 1981). According to Oakley (1981), women interviewing other women enjoy a greater rapport, as a result of their shared experiences.

The view was supported by (Drever, 1995) who said that in order for a research to be successful, the researcher must be aware of the fact that any information the participants would give him depends on what the participants think about the researcher and what they think the research is (Drever, 1995). This means that the researcher himself is an important factor in deciding about how much information he would get from the participants.

Despite the clash of views between these two groups, Merlon (1972) argues that these two groups must not be separated. He believes it is not easy to put a researcher to the insider or outsider group. He argues that two individuals from the same gender do not necessarily share the same opinion on an issue. Similarly, just because a person belongs to an ethnic group or organization, it is not mandatory that he has the same views as other individuals in the same group (Merlon, 1972). Thus, the challenges of being a researcher do not solely depend on whether he or she is an insider or an outsider.

## **RESEARCH OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY**

This study investigates how Malaysia teachers perceive of their roles and responsibilities after being appointed as an excellent teacher. Ten excellent teachers were involved in this study and data were collected through face to face interviews. The researcher in this study is a participant observer, who is both as a researcher and a member of the group of teacher. This study also intends to explore the advantages and disadvantages of being an insider researcher.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Understanding**

In this study, the researcher brings her previous experience of working as a secondary school teacher for 9 years and her background knowledge of the excellent teacher scheme. Being an insider researcher, the researcher found that she could have in depth understanding of the issues related to excellent teachers' roles, responsibilities and their daily lives as voiced by the participants during the interviews. The experience of working with several GCs previously helped the researcher to understand the changes all the participants went through after they become excellent teachers.

### **Rapport**

In most of the interviews conducted during this study, the participants 'appeared to be at ease' with the researcher after she introduced herself to them. This was because many of the participants had heard about the researcher's previous school and background. It helped to create a good rapport between the researcher and the participants as they might have felt that they were talking to a friend's friend. Knowing that the researcher used to work as a teacher, the participants in this study were very open with the researcher about many issues being asked. They were not hesitant to talk about issues which were not asked by the researcher as many of them appeared to feel that the researcher could help to make their voice heard by other teachers, and the school administration.

### **Openness**

The researcher's experience in the teaching field has influenced some of the participants to be more open when answering questions during the interview, thus helping the researcher in understanding the issues being studied. According to McClintock, et. al (2003) research should be able to affect the researcher in a positive way. This study helped the researcher to be aware of the importance of self and professional development. All the data and report from the participants have helped the researcher to motivate herself to be an excellent individual.

### **Provoke**

However, some challenges also arise during this study. For instance, the participants assumed that the researcher already knows what they know and experience as excellent teacher. Thus, the interviews with the participants did not reveal enough information. To get the participants to provide more information, the researcher had to provoke them and ask questions which required detailed answers from them.

In addition, as participants are aware that the researcher is also a teacher, they tend to assume that the researcher knows and understands all the aspects of their job descriptions and the problems they face. Therefore, in the interview sessions, participants would have the tendency to say things like, "I'm sure you are aware that we...", indicating that they assume the researcher would be able to fully understand the issues they are talking about.

### **Consent**

The researcher received all the advantages of being an insider researcher not only during the interview session but from the technical aspects of the research such finding the participants, dealing with schools and making appointments, as well as getting consent from school administration and the participants. When the

researcher introduced herself, the officer in charge was quite supportive and gave full cooperation for the researcher to be conducted.

From the findings, it could be concluded that through this study, the researcher gained more advantages as an insider researcher not only during the interview session but from the technical aspects such as easy access to schools, participants selection and appointments, and permission from schools. -

## DISCUSSION

Merton (1972) stresses that the element of an insider and outsider researcher should not shadow other factors as the concept and the definition are still very vague. For him, both insider and outsider researchs have their own advantages and disadvantages. In addition, besides ethnic groups and culture, there are many other important factors that would guarantee the success of research. His suggestion is also supported by Bonner and Tolhurst (2002) who believe that an insider researcher would benefit the researcher as it could lead to a better understanding of the issues being studied.

As the researcher has influenced some of the participants to be more participating, McClintock, et. al (2003) stresses that research should be able to affect the researcher in a positive way. This study helped the researcher to be aware of the importance of self and professional development. All the data and reports from the participants have helped the researcher to motivate herself to be an excellent individual. Most of the time, it is not the researcher, insider or outsider, who determines the outcomes of a research but the focus and the approach are equally important (Mercer, 2007).

Moreover, being insider researcher also means that the researcher and the participants, understand the local values and speak the same language, thus enabling a deeper understanding the issues, At the same time, it helps make things easy for the researcher to carry out his research as his status enables him to have an advantage to a few aspects of the research such as having easy access to schools, getting permission to conduct the research and to interview the participants (Hermann, 1989).

However, even though the credits of being insider researcher go to the researcher, some disadvantages of adopting this method also arise during this study.

A credible researcher should be concerned and be aware of a few things in this field. The possibility of bias on data collection and analysis, due to relationship and relation to the organization would impact some aspects of the research. Thus, in this situation, the ability of the researcher is required in order to achieve the objectives and solve the problems (Smyth & Holian, 2008).

In summary, an insider or outsider researcher be able to be objective in reporting the information in the study. A researcher should always use the advantage he has as an insider or outsider researcher to gain as deep an understanding as possible of the topic of his study.

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