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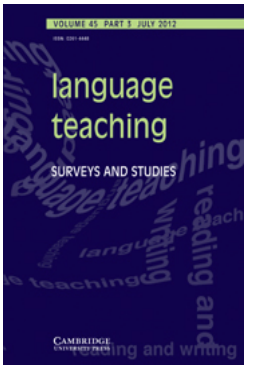

An autoethnographic exploration of my professional experiences as teacher trainer and principal at two international schools in Sri Lanka

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An autoethnographic exploration of my professional experiences as teacher trainer and principal at two international schools in Sri Lanka

My research represents an application of the method of AUTOETHNOGRAPHY to the field of teacher education. According to one definition, autoethnography is 'an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness connecting the personal to the cultural' (Ellis & Bochner 2000: 739). It is associated with the growing acceptance of the use of the self in research which is characteristic of the postmodern era (Muncey 2010: xii). One of its advantages is that it allows voices that are normally hidden to be heard, including those which are deviant in some way or differ from the official explanations given for a phenomenon (ibid.: 110). Any situation that involves human beings is complex, and the opportunities offered by autoethnography allow the researcher to engage productively with this complexity.

Autoethnography has been used in fields such as health, social work and sports science. It is traditionally associated with emotional events such as illness, bereavement and abuse. By bringing autoethnography to the field of language education, I am recognising that in our field, too, there are emotional, complex and difficult situations to which traditional forms of inquiry fail to do justice. Doing autoethnography requires huge emotional commitment. As the researcher and the subject of the research, complete honesty and a willingness to reflect deeply on sometimes painful events are essential.

My research provides two autoethnographic accounts which, read together, demonstrate my career progression from teacher trainer at an international school to principal of another, smaller, international school. The first account, which is the longer of the two (20,000 words), describes the year I spent as an in-house teacher trainer in an international school in Colombo, Sri Lanka, where most of the teachers were not formally qualified. It describes in detail the interventions I undertook and the prevailing conditions at the school, which made it difficult to work effectively. As well as events in which I was directly involved, I describe some incidents which happened to my colleagues. In addition to writing the narrative, I interviewed 13 of my colleagues to gain their perspectives on the situation in the school and on various incidents. I also observed 53 teachers, 40 of whom gave permission for their data to be used in my research.

One key theme which runs through this narrative is the conflict I witnessed between the principal and me. I explore the extent to which this stems from our differing backgrounds, his in mainstream (including public) schools and mine in EFL, mainly with the British Council. Exploring what was, for me, a traumatic period could only be done

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through a method such as autoethnography. In contrast, my appointment as a principal at a small international school in Sri Lanka was a perfect opportunity to add to my research by narrating my first few months in the job and reflecting on my more positive experiences.

The findings of my research relate both to teacher development and school culture and leadership. Firstly, it became apparent that, before any kind of teacher development programme can be put in place, it is essential that the school culture supports the programme. In my case, I expected teachers to work collegially and be interested in their own and others' development. What I did not realise at first was that the teaching staff was divided both by department and also, to some extent, 'balkanised' into groups with similar interests. The findings also threw light on the challenges involved in working with untrained teachers. Not having gone through a pre-service programme, the teachers were unused to being observed and evaluated. In particular, they did not have any experience of reflecting on their own practice, nor did they value such practices. It would be necessary, then, to train teachers in reflective practice before undertaking a series of lesson observations. Teachers in the school did not feel valued and appreciated and this, together with resistance from a principal involved in an employment dispute with his staff and determined to resist 'bottom up' innovation, meant that any attempt to improve teaching and learning in the school was doomed to failure. Autoethnography provided a means of exploring the complex issues arising from these conflicts from the 'inside'.

My research also reveals the need for sensitivity to the host country's culture. Two incidents in particular highlight this need. One happened in my first school on the occasion of a mass funeral for the child victims of an LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) terror attack. While the teachers wished to attend the funeral, which coincided with a regular training session, the British principal wished to continue with training as usual. The strength of feeling was such that teachers did not easily forget the incident. A similar incident occurred in my second school. Teachers wished to mark the death of a colleague by closing the school for the day. As principal, I deferred to the teachers, who were virtually all from the host country, and we closed. I then suffered severe criticism from a small group of parents who felt we should not 'pander' to the local culture in this way. These incidents highlight the complexity of working in a multicultural environment like an international school and the tightrope a leader has to walk between different cultures.

Autoethnography enables the researcher to get right inside a situation and know it intimately. Instead of trying to avoid bias, as in more traditional forms of research, the researcher uses their insider position reflexively to gain awareness and work to improve the situation. Almost by definition the researcher is close to other participants in the research context – colleagues, students, superiors and subordinates – which often makes it easy to gain access to others' perspectives. Having to analyse one's own actions is a wonderful learning opportunity, but it is not always easy to do. If researchers are willing to be completely open and honest about themselves and their work, it is a rewarding way of doing research.

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