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ABSTRACT

The process of focus-finding in qualitative research is ongoing and dynamic, involves researcher choices and decisions (rather than pure discovery), and is a process of social construction in which the researcher interacts with the research setting. Focus-finding is discussed in the context of a qualitative research study of the integration of adolescents with severe handicaps within a regular, urban high school. The use of QUALOG (a computer software system) in the management of qualitative data is also described. (JW)

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FINDING A FOCUS: DOES IT HAVE TO BE FIRST?

by

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ABSTRACT

The author presents an analysis of focus-finding in a qualitative study of integration of severely handicapped students within a regular, public high school. Focus-finding is discussed as a process of social construction, as on-going and dynamic, and as an integral part of the analysis process. The author documents the focus-finding process using QUALOG, a system of computer programs designed to assist the researcher in the mechanical tasks of managing qualitative data and describes QUALOG's thinker-friendly support.

FINDING A FOCUS: DOES IT HAVE TO BE FIRST?

INTRODUCTION

Before I conducted my first qualitative research study, I intellectually understood about the first phase of the research process, about being open and flexible to allow the focus of the study to emerge from early observations. I had read Bogdan and Biklen (1982), Emerson (1983), Geer (1964), Glaser and Strauss (1967), and Johnson (1975); I was ready to heed their suggestions to carefully enter the research site with no preconceived hypotheses so to learn from the field what was important to study. Unconsciously, I hoped a glow from the East would rest on a particular series of behaviors or events during my early participant-observations in the field, so I could say, "Aha! I've discovered THE FOCUS." Only then would I be able to continue the study.

Well, I waited for the glow, the light, the sign. As you might expect, I waited too long and in vain.

In this paper, I will discuss the actual process of focus-finding in qualitative research, what really happens in lieu of the glow from the East. I will present this process within the context of a school integration study I conducted a year ago, October, 1984 through February, 1985.

Three notions are central to the paper: first, focus-finding necessarily involves researcher choices and decisions, not pure discovery; it is a process of social construction as the researcher interacts with the research setting. Second, finding a focus is on-going and dynamic. The researcher continually chooses, expands, modifies, and develops a focus as he or she thinks carefully about the data. And third, focus-finding does not precede analysis, but is an essential and integral part of the analysis process.

The final section of the paper will specify how QUALOG (Shelly & Sibert, 1985), a thinker-friendly system of computer programs designed to assist researchers in the mechanical tasks of managing qualitative data, can be helpful in the focus-finding process.

THE STUDY

A year ago I conducted a qualitative, pilot study of the integration of adolescents with severe handicaps within a regular, urban high school. Originally, I was interested in the meanings of integration for handicapped and nonhandicapped students at the high school. I was also curious about the relationships between these two groups of students as well. I selected Fairbanks High School as the research site because it is one of the few high schools in the East that houses a class for teenagers with severe disabilities in a regular, public school setting.

I gained entry to Fairbanks and spent four months as a participant-observer in the school. Since I was interested in the interactions and relationships between handicapped and nonhandicapped students, I began observing in the school cafeteria as that was the only scheduled time when the two groups of students shared a space and activity; later, I observed in classrooms, hallways, the library, and the school entryway. I conducted in-depth interviews with students hoping to understand their perspectives of the integration experience. I broadened the range of interview subjects to include the school principal, regular teachers, and special education teachers as well. I made detailed, descriptive fieldnotes and interview transcriptions, including extensive observer comments and researcher memos.

Gradually, because of what I learned in the field and how I interpreted it, I significantly redirected and expanded the study's focus not once, but two times. From an original focus on student perspectives and relationships, the focus evolved to also include others' understandings of integration. Finally, the study became a case study of integration within a whole school culture and context.

THE FOCUS-FINDING PROCESS

Focus-Finding as Social Construction

Focus-finding is not a matter of the researcher searching for and discovering THE FOCUS of a study. THE FOCUS does not exist as a separate entity; instead, there are many potential foci in every study. As the researcher enters the field and begins to gather data, it is the interaction of the researcher and the setting that gives meaning to a particular phenomenon. In this way, focus-finding is a process of social construction for it is a product of field data and the field worker's ideas about the data (Geer, 1964). The focus emerges because the researcher gives it importance and meaning.

Focus-finding involves field data, of course, since a focus must emerge from and be central to what happens in the field. But, the researcher and what the researcher brings to the setting also play a part in the process. The researcher's personal attributes, such as sex, age, and social class, plus biases, experience, formal and informal learning influence research decisions and directions, such as those involved in focus-finding. Data that include written comments and memos describing researcher reactions, reflections, and interpretations of the field data must also be considered in the focus-finding process. As the researcher interacts with the data, it is essential that he or she explicitly describe how interpretations and decisions concerning the field data are made (Emerson, 1983).

For example, during my first day at Fairbanks High School, it became apparent to me that all the students with severe disabilities, those who were being integrated in this particular program, use no spoken language and have minimal communication skills. An observer comment that first day describes two perceived problems:

> O.C. October 9, 1984
>
> Problem! None of the kids in the special class have even minimal communication skills! How can I learn their views? I knew they were very handicapped, but I did not consider that they would not be able to communicate with me in some way. Maybe it's a subtle cultural bias about who belongs in school, because I assumed that those in school would have some communication skills.

My reaction to this discovery bemoans my inability to know the handicapped students' own views of integration; it was the students' meanings of integration that I hoped to learn about and understand. Should I purposefully focus more closely on these students to create a different way of learning their views?

At that point, I decided not to concentrate primarily on the students with handicaps for two reasons. I felt that a micro-ethnographic approach, studying only the students with disabilities in great detail, would certainly limit my understanding of the larger high schoo integration experience. In addition, I discovered that observing only these students was tedious for me; I found I had difficulty maintaining attention because of the handicapped students' inactivity and because of the distractions of everyday life in an urban high school. Therefore, I shifted my attention to observations of the severely handicapped and nonhandicapped students together and used interviews with the nonhandicapped students to understand their perceptions of the integration at Fairbanks.

The above observer comment also hints at possible biases concerning students with severe disabilities of which I was not even aware. Indeed, the problem was not that the handicapped students did not have perspectives, but that they could not communicate their views as I had expected. I would have to be especially careful to be aware of my assumptions concerning these students so to see them as they are, not as I hoped they would be.

In addition, previously unacknowledged feelings toward inner-city nonhandicapped teenagers also surfaced that first day. My most recent experiences with older adolescents had been in rural and semi-suburban schools and with college freshmen. My past work in the inner-city was with elementary students. As a result, my knowledge of inner-city high schools was primarily intellectual. During my observation in the cafeteria that first day, two separate major, serious fist fights occurred within ten minutes of each other, 15 yards from where I sat with some of the students with handicaps and their aide. Note my observer comments:

> O.C. October 9, 1984
>
> I was kind of frightened! I kept wondering if there wasn't someone in charge, and if that person would be able to separate these two large, strong boys and the hysterical crowd cheering them on. Would this become a free-for-all?

And later, after the second fight:

> What was happening here? Was this usual? I'm not used to physical violence and felt extremely uncomfortable until the situation was settled.

A memo at the end of the day further describes my reactions:

> Fight Memo 9 October 1984
>
> Have I been away from high schools too long? Was I expecting "middle class" behaviors? These were kids, and still I was afraid. One fight was between two Whites, and the other was between two Blacks, so it obviously wasn't a matter of racial tension. It was just rough, city teenagers. Was I the only really uncomfortable, scared person in the cafeteria? I wonder what it's like to go to school here? How am I going to hang around Fairbanks if I'm unsure much of the time? I'm sure I'll get used to the kids here, but right now their violence scares me.
>
> I'll have to be very careful when finding students to interview so I don't just pick the "safest" kids, for my own comfort.

I had decided to spend time with the nonhandicapped students, in observations and interviews, and at the same time, I was uncomfortable with them in unstructured, large group situations early in the study. Documenting my reactions to the students helped me become conscious of my own feelings and how they changed during the course of the study. I did choose to begin student interviews with students suggested by teachers, but then as I became more comfortable at Fairbanks, I sought a wide variety of students to talk with, including several very tough and angry teenagers.

Another researcher in this same field setting, choosing to concentrate on different school participants or other kinds of activities, would have carried out a very different study of integration. However, the focus of this study depended on this researcher interacting with the setting and then constructing a direction and focus that made sense to her.

Focus-Finding as On-going and Dynamic

Changes Due to Unanticipated Problems in Data Collection

Geer (1964) suggests that research concepts and strategies change during the research process, especially during the initial experiences in the field, and that the changes affect subsequent field work. My experiences support this thesis. I wanted to learn the handicpped students' perspectives on integration, but they were unable to share them with me. So, I centered on the interactions and relationships between the handicapped and nonhandicapped students. But soon I realized there were very few interactions and no relationships between these two groups of students. Consider the following fieldnote excerpts:

> Observation October 9, 1984 Cafeteria
>
> While the handicapped kids, their aide, and

> I were seated at the usual lunch table, a young looking boy came to the table and set his lunch tray down; his head was turned away from the table while he talked to another boy. Then he looked around at our table, picked up his tray, and sat down at the next table. He was not rude, but he clearly did not want to sit with the kids with handicaps.

And later, at the end of lunch:

> No one paid much attention to us as we left the cafeteria; no one stared, but neither did anyone smile or say "hi".
>
> Observation October 11, 1984 Cafeteria
>
> I walked with Valerie slowly back to the classroom from the cafeteria. The halls were very busy, loud, and crowded with kids rushing, getting things from lockers lining the walls. In front of the lockers about 15 boys kind of lined up and made semi-rude remarks to some girls who passed and jabbed at some of the guys. When Valerie and I walked past, students walking toward us stopped laughing and looked down or to the side, and the boys along the lockers turned away from us.
>
> Observation October 18, 1984 Cafeteria
>
> The handicapped students were seated together, as always, eating lunch with their aides, while the nonhandicapped students were finishing study hall in the cafeteria. The whistle/bell for the end of class sounded and all the other students got their things together and headed toward the door. The handicapped students did not look up at the loud groups of students passing by. Some of the nonhandicapped students looked over at the handicapped students and then immediately looked away or back to their friends.

I discovered there were practically no interactions between the two groups of teenagers. Accordingly, I enlarged my focus to try to learn why there were no interactions between the handicapped and nonhandicapped students. What was contributing to this absence of interactions and relationships? I interviewed the school principal, special education teacher, regular teachers, and more students to understand a broader perspective on the presence of the students with severe handicaps at Fairbanks High School.

I found that each of these school participants had separate and divergent meanings for integration. The principal was satisfied with the mere physical presence of these students in the high school; he was not interested in programmatic or social integration. The special education teacher chose to emphasize community integration for her students, not in-school integration:

> Interview November 9, 1984 Special Teacher
>
> I: What do you think is the most important feature of your new program with the handicapped kids ?
>
> TCH: Oh, without question, it's our curriculum in the community. It would be much easier having them (her students) here in the classroom all day. But with kids like these kids, you just have to get them out of the classroom and into what is their life, into the community. Their program is in the community.

The regular education teachers had little to do with the special class and felt that integration of the students with severe handicaps was not their responsibility. And the nondisabled students, the typical adolescents, carefully avoided the students with handicaps. For example, I asked some of the nonhandicapped students what they thought of the students with severe disabilities:

> Interview January 10, 1985 Journalism Class
>
> I: What do you guys think about having the handicapped students at Fairbanks?
>
> F: I think most of the kids are afraid. I think they're afraid to interact with 'em 'cause its like they have a disease and they're going to

> give it or something. And also I think they're afraid to be seen with 'em or talk to 'em 'cause they think their friends are going to see and say, "Look, he's talking to a retard. My God, he's talking to a retard!."

Through the broadened focus I began to understand these different perspectives. I had developed a way of looking at the separate meanings of integration, but there were still unanswered questions. What were the larger issues that might explain the relationships among these varying meanings of integration? I needed to enlarge the focus even further, to look at these perspectives in yet a different way. I looked to the data for clues and possible themes.

Changes Due to Patterns Emerging From the Data

I discovered patterns emerging from the field data that seemed relevant and important; these concerned an ethos of control at the school and a clearly definable student culture. What relationship did these patterns have with integration at Fairbanks? Once again I expanded [illegible] focus to reach a higher, more inclusive level of understanding.

Hints that social control is a primary concern at Fairbanks were present from the beginning of the study, but I did not make special note of them until the coding process defined a strong pattern. Note this series of selected field observations:

> Observation October 9, 1984 Hallway
>
> As I walked down the hall to the cafeteria, I saw a man wearing a gun in a holster on the right side of his belt! He is a big man, tall and broad; his belly hangs over his belt.

It turned out that this is police Officer Hayes; he spends all day, every school day, at Fairbanks.

> Observation October 11, 1984 Entryway, Cafeteria
>
> Of the six front doors to the school, five are locked. Many of the classrooms are locked as well. The doors to the cafeteria are locked; so are the doors to the gym and the auditorium. The library has a buzzer system to monitor students leaving the room.

The following excerpt also illustrates the importance of limited movement and access for students at Fairbanks:

> Interview November 1, 1984 Principal
>
> I: Tell me what is important at Fairbanks?
>
> PRN: I'll tell you what's important, it's firm limits. We have to be tough when it comes to rules and discipline. We had a problem with kids roaming the halls and causing havoc. So now we have monitors walking the halls, a sweep system, and a holding room.

Control emerged as a central issue and a dominant ethos at the high school. I realized I must understand the integration of the handicapped students within the ethos of control, not separate from it. In a school setting where controlling students takes precedence over educating or respecting them, the acceptance of severely handicapped students is destined to be characterized by all school participants' perceptions of control.

The student culture, too, began to take on importance as I discovered patterns of student preference for group self-segregation. The following comment relates to observations in the school cafeteria:

> O.C. October 27, 1984
>
> It's almost as though there are assigned seats at the tables, based on race and ethnicity, with subgroups of sex and age. The older black boys sit by the windows or across th room against the wall. Groups of black girls sit near them. The younger black kids sit on the periphery of the older black students. Further down the room, the white kids sit together, some males and females

> at the same table. Then there are tables of students speaking Spanish and single tables of Native Americans and Asians. And the special education kids sit together also, usually according to their class assignment.

Even the principal acknowledged the accepted group segregation:

> Interview November 1, 1984 Principal
>
> I: Well, could you tell me about the kids who go to school here?
>
> PRN: What do you mean?
>
> I: Oh, what are they like?
>
> PRN: We have quite a mix of kids here, but there isn't much mixing. It seems we have more Blacks than we do, because they are our athletes. The white kids seem pretty apathetic. Many of these kids have problems. A lot of them are on welfare or they're on probation for drug problems. And we have some who go on to college too. But, as I said, there isn't much mixing.

The norm for group segregation at Fairbanks makes the rejection of the students with handicaps by the nonhandicapped students acceptable. However, for most of the students, it is race, ethnicity, sex, or age which define group identities; for the students with severe handicaps, it is their mental retardation.

Focus-Finding as Part of Analysis

In qualitative research, data analysis is not a circumscribed stage which always follows data collection. Indeed, the qualitative researcher uses analysis throughout the research to make sense of what is happening in the field and to direct further data collection (cf. Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). Focus-finding, one of the qualitative researcher's early tasks, is an integral part of the analysis process because it requires the researcher to study, think about, and organize the data to develop a direction and framework for the study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The moment the researcher enters the field and begins to collect data, the analysis process begins as well.

Certainly, the focus-finding process presented in this integration study did not precede analysis. To understand the meaning of integration at Fairbanks, I continually interacted with the setting to develop a meaningful, data-based focus. The focus grew from student perceptions and interactions, to a broadened version which included perspectives of all those in the high school, and then again evolved into a full case study of integration within a school context and culture. I was able to use the focus-finding process to understand integration at Fairbanks at a higher, more abstract level of thinking.

QUALOG

I could have gone through the focus-finding process in this integration study without using QUALOG (Shelly & Sibert, 1985); the researcher's thinking, analyzing, choosing, developing, and deciding are always crucial, with or without computer assistance. Conrad and Reinharz (1984) suggest that "The numerous advantages of using computers for qualitative sociological work can be summarized in terms of time, tedium, and rigor." (p.9), and those are precisely the ways in which QUALOG was helpful to me.

The mechanical tasks of sorting and organizing a large amount of coded material took less time and trouble because of

QUALOG's organizing capabilities and quick retrieval system. For instance, using QUALOG I coded my observer comments and labeled my memos according to the type of personal reaction or interpretation found therein. Then, at any time I could use QUALOG to call up "UNCERTAINTIES" or "DILEMMAS" or whatever the coding category. I could then look for patterns very quickly and efficiently, without leafing through hundreds of pages of fieldnotes. Specifically, I could examine my documented personal reactions to the handicapped and nonhandicapped students early in the study and could note how they did or did not influence the developing focus of the study.

QUALOG's mechanical capabilities afforded me time for thorough analysis throughout the focus-finding process. For example, early in the study, I called up the data I had coded "HANDICAPPED/NONHANDICAPPED INTERACTIONS: POSITIVE" and saw that there were no coded fieldnote sections that indicated positive interactions between the handicapped and nonhandicapped students. This quick retrieval system enabled me to think about redirecting the focus of the study to include a broader perspective of integration. Later in the research, it was not at all cumbersome to look at all the instances in the data where "CONTROL" was the coding category; I was able to think about and recognize a pattern emerging from isolated pieces of data which led me to a broader understanding of the integration at the high school.

Simply, QUALOG was helpful with the mechanical tasks necessary to managing qualitative data. And it definitely was thinker-friendly; it efficiently and thoroughly supplied the researcher-thinker with sorted, organized information for crucial reflection and decision making. To be sure, it is the researcher who does the thinking; QUALOG only supports the researcher in these most important conceptual tasks.

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