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Overcoming data collection challenges and establishing trustworthiness:
The need for flexibility and responsiveness in research

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Overcoming data collection challenges and establishing trustworthiness: The need for flexibility and responsiveness in research

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Abstract

An increasingly multicultural Aotearoa early childhood education (ECE) landscape forms the context for my doctoral study in progress. My research explores the culturally embedded and negotiated environmental identities of a growing number of migrant Indian teachers. This article documents my experiences of confronting and navigating the unexpected while planning and conducting the data collection for my research. The primary challenges were access to participants as well as participant dropouts. I discuss how I mitigated these challenges by employing an alternate sampling method as well as accounting for participant attrition and trustworthiness of data. The modification strategies highlight flexibility and responsiveness as critical research tools. This article has implications for early career researchers intending to plan or begin their research in the light of any future disruptions, such as the current Covid-19 climate.

Keywords

Research challenges; access to participants; participant dropout; flexibility; trustworthiness.

Introduction

My doctoral research in progress explores the culturally embedded and negotiated environmental identities of migrant Indian teachers in an increasingly multicultural Aotearoa early childhood education (ECE) context. For the purpose of my research, I conducted in-depth interviews with Indian teachers and their centre managers/head teachers, observed the early learning centre contexts in order to familiarise myself with participants' places of work, and collected learning or pedagogical documentation prepared by the Indian teachers. In this article, I begin with a brief introduction to the themes of flexibility and responsiveness as tools to overcome research challenges, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. These themes are then illustrated through a description of two challenges and the mitigation strategies employed. I conclude with the resulting reflections and recommendations as an



emerging researcher. This discussion has implications for early career researchers, especially those intending to plan or begin their research in the current unpredictable Covid-19 climate and similar future disruptions.

Studies have found evidence that Covid-19 and the resulting lockdowns have had a negative impact on academic research, including data collection, writing and analysis (Byrom, 2020; Campbell, 2021). These compounding challenges of conducting doctoral research amidst the Covid-19 pandemic included access to participants as well as the closure of data collection sites at the time (Campbell, 2021). In response to these challenges, many doctoral researchers either had to suspend data collection immediately or had to alter their methodology (Lambrechts & Smith, 2020). These conditions and challenges highlight the need for researcher flexibility and responsiveness as critical tools in research approach, process and methodology (Ballamingie & Johnson, 2011; Billo & Hiemstra, 2012).

In light of this evidence, the article discusses unforeseen circumstances that I encountered during the data collection phase of my research and how I mitigated the challenges. In the process of mitigating the challenges and finding alternate solutions, I had to adapt. As a researcher, I had to become more flexible and responsive in my approach and methodology to cope with the uncertain and unforeseen circumstances. These adaptability processes are described by way of two challenging conditions in the research process: access to participants and establishing trustworthiness.

The challenge: Access to participants

The challenge to access participants in my research was largely a result of the sudden onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. The resulting lockdown in the country significantly affected my research process, especially as I was about to begin data collection at the time. In February 2020, I was in discussion with the manager of an early learning service provider who had given the go-ahead to invite and include numerous Indian teacher participants from the organisation in my research. The sudden lockdown resulted in a mutual decision to postpone the data collection until early learning services reopened.

In addition, the New Zealand Government's Covid-19 response framework (New Zealand Government, 2021) led to the establishment of new routines and protocols for all early learning services. Hence, I was required to be cognisant of the adjustment period that teachers might need to adapt to these changes. A significant amount of time elapsed since the initial contact with the early learning service manager, which meant I needed to start afresh and reorient the manager about my research and the request for access to Indian teacher participants.

When the Covid-19 restrictions were eased, I contacted the manager once again. As we resumed talks, I encountered another hurdle. Restructuring within the early learning organisation resulted in the teachers becoming preoccupied with adjustments to the new organisational structure, leaving them with additional responsibilities and no time to spare for participation in my research. Therefore, even after accounting for the lockdown duration and allowing for a readjustment period for early learning services, I still could not get access to any participants five months after I approached the first prospective organisation. The challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic and organisational restructuring led to the suspension of data collection for the better part of 2020.

The mitigation: Alternate participant recruitment strategy

The Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown altered the course of my research. The sudden closure of early learning services limited the opportunity to identify prospective participants let alone begin data collection with them. The situation was not within my control for the next several months in terms of searching for and access to participants as well as early learning services.

In order to mitigate this challenge, I conducted an online search for centres in Hamilton to locate Indian teachers among their staff. I approached some centre managers and received a mixed response. A few early learning centres responded positively, which allowed me to set up a couple of interviews within the next few months. However, this organisational or top-down approach, where I had approached the manager or director of an organisation, did not yield results with most centres. This was understandable, since they were faced with mammoth challenges and additional workload as a result of the pandemic. Consequently, I decided to use the snowball method of recruiting participants (Mutch, 2013) and began with the one Indian teacher I was acquainted with professionally. I used what Campbell (2021) terms “referrals: those who were referred via professional, personal or academic relationships but where the individual was not already directly known” (p. 573) to the researcher. I contacted some Indian teachers that I knew of through my work as a relieving teacher in early learning centres. This approach helped me gain access to a few more participants and I was able to begin my data collection towards the end of 2020, and eventually extend this stage of my research up to mid-2021.

The challenge: Participant dropout and trustworthiness

Another unforeseen development in the data collection process was the participants dropping out before they reviewed their interview transcripts. The process of involving participants to modify or review their interview transcripts, also termed member checking, allows qualitative researchers to establish the validity or trustworthiness of their study (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In two such cases, the participants had left the centre between the time the interviews were conducted and the transcripts sent back for review. Since they had only shared their official contact details in the consent form, there was no alternative way of contacting them. Ethically, I am still able to use the data for my research, as I had already obtained their informed consent prior to commencing data collection. Nonetheless, not getting participants’ reviews on their interview transcripts presented a challenge for me, considering the impact this might have on the trustworthiness of the data (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mutch, 2013).

The mitigation: Accounting for trustworthiness

As I did not receive responses from the two participants in this case, I enquired about forwarding email addresses or contact numbers for these participants without success. For my research, this participant dropout presented a challenge as it could negatively affect the trustworthiness of my research in terms of inclusion and use of data obtained. In this regard, I made the decision to include the interview transcript in my analysis but remained mindful of how this would affect the credibility of my research. Thus, the interview data from all other participants was used as a reference for these particular transcripts, while the two interviews were used more for the purpose of supplementing and triangulating (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mutch, 2013) the comprehensive set of interview data I had obtained from other participants and methods.

Reflections

As an emerging researcher, I now have an enhanced ability to make adjustments in the research process by being flexible and responsive. In addition, I can now share these experiences and lessons with other emerging researchers who may have faced or are likely to face similar challenges in their research journeys.

What are my reflections on my experiences? Firstly, I should not have relied completely on just one method and source at a time for identifying and obtaining prospective participants. Although I did

have a back-up plan in place, I should have implemented the planned alternate participant recruitment methods of approaching early learning services and snowballing concurrently.

Secondly, as described in this article, I came to the realisation that a personal/face to face approach might work better than a broader impersonal, indirect top-down approach. My attempts to secure participants through a hierarchical official channel did not seem to yield results throughout the process. However, when I used the snowball method of recruitment (a provision I made in the original ethics application) and approached individual Indian teacher prospective participants personally through mutual contacts, I was able to build an instant connection and secure their consent immediately. If I had used this approach simultaneously from the beginning, I might have secured more participants in a shorter time period in spite of the Covid-19 circumstances.

Thirdly, in the case of participant dropouts, as a researcher, I should have anticipated these and made suitable contingency plans. As an early career researcher, I took it for granted that any participant who chose to leave the study would inform me of their decision, an assumption I should have avoided. In hindsight, the one strategy that might have helped would have been to request personal or forwarding email addresses/contact numbers/postal addresses along with official contact details in the consent forms from participants if they were willing. One might also state the reason for making the request and explain to the participants that this information would enable sharing of their transcripts and the research summary in case of unforeseen changes in participants' place of work or relocation to another city during the course of the research. In addition, it would be advisable to add a provision on the subject of participant review of interview transcripts in the consent form. A reasonable time limit might be provided to the participants to state that if no review is received from them by a stipulated date, the researcher will take that as a consent to use the transcript data. With reference to participant dropout, it is also crucial to note that staff turnover within ECE is high, especially in for-profit centres (Neuwelt-Kearns & Ritchie, 2020). Therefore, the likelihood of participant dropout is also high in any research with early childhood teachers. Researchers studying this particular cohort need to be cognizant of this fact and have a contingency plan in place.

Recommendations

In this article, I have highlighted some challenges one might face in the course of their research journey, particularly the data collection phase. My research experience, the challenges I faced as well as their mitigation has enabled me to arrive at certain inferences that advocate the need for flexibility and responsiveness as essential research tools. These inferences are presented here in the form of recommendations for early career researchers like myself:

- Prepare for alternate sampling methods right from the start and implement them simultaneously if needed.
- Recruit more participants than the minimum required number in order to counter low participant recruitment and participant dropout.
- Be prepared for participant dropout and plan accordingly by including certain provisions in the consent forms: alternate means of communication/contact details for participants as well as time-bound and conditional participant transcripts review.
- Anticipate data collection challenges as far as possible early on such that alternate strategies can be included in the ethics application in order to avoid revision of ethics and loss of time.
- Include the process as part of the research write-up/thesis in order to discuss how the challenges affected the research process and outcomes, such as trustworthiness in this case.

In conclusion, my research experience so far has taught me valuable lessons in anticipating and planning for possible challenges and scenarios in the research process. The mitigation process has highlighted the vital need for researcher flexibility and responsiveness in the research process. This

article has shed light on these unanticipated challenges in an attempt to benefit and better prepare early career researchers embarking on their research journeys in the uncertain near future.

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