

CHAPTER 3

PROCESS, PRACTICE AND EMOTION: RESEARCHING POLICY AND SPACE WITHIN A CROSS-CULTURAL FRAMEWORK

INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on the context and methodological framework for the research which forms the basis for this book and the experience of carrying it out. It includes a discussion of the processes and ideas which led to its conceptualization as a distinctive project and the approaches adopted and the particular difficulties and issues which emerged. It endorses a view of social research as placing 'the researcher as positively present in empirical study' (Coffey 1999). This *presence* relates to the feelings, reflections and responses of the researcher to the unfolding research landscape as well as to her personal and professional history and its influence on the choice of research question, tools and analytical procedures. As Coffey remarks:

Emotion is a real research experience and our intellectual autobiography is constructed and reconstructed through social research (Coffey, 1999, p. 11).

There is also a concern to recognize the '... potential of conventional research activity for reproducing, and even creating, disablement and oppression' (Moore, *et al.*, 1998, p. 36), and of the possibility that my research could have similar discriminatory effects; it does not follow that a piece of research is non-discriminatory because it breaks with particular conventions, such as an assumed objectivity.

My choice of research area has been influenced by my own educational and personal history such as my experience as a learner and as a teacher during many years. Others are harder to establish. To what extent has my experience as a non-disabled person living in a society which has routinely excluded disabled people, hidden them from view and represented them in ways which are patronizing and demeaning, been absorbed into the way I conceptualized the research? It would be difficult to measure the impact of the interaction between personal history and the wider social context in terms of the development of research questions and practices; but as Skeggs argues '... our social location, our situatedness in the world will influence how we speak, see, hear and know'. (Skeggs, 1994, p. 77).

BACKGROUND TO THE ENQUIRY

Much of the policy making which has a direct or indirect impact on education refers to domains outside what is formally thought of as 'education', such as the design of buildings (e.g. Building Bulletin 91, DfEE, 1999a), town planning or government financial directives and budgetary decisions made at central and local government level. Financial interests have played an important role in debates which have taken place concerning the future of the staff and students of Freeland School. Frequently budgetary considerations and discourses relating to the 'efficient and effective use of resources' have taken centre stage, forcing issues relating to education or social justice onto the sidelines. All these processes have a sustained impact in terms of the power relations, the availability of opportunities and the marginalisation of some groups in society. At the centre of these issues is a concern with the social construction of differences between individuals and groups through practices relating to attitudes, the allocation of resources and categorization, partitioning and segregation in relation to particular groups and particular sites.

In 1993 I began to carry out research into education policy responses to disability in France. This has been an on-going project and has involved ethnographic work in some schools and institutions in or near Paris. In 1997 I began to investigate policy making concerning disabled children and their education in an English city. In both national contexts, which are discussed in Chapters Five to Eight, I have investigated the historical background to the emergence of special education and tried to make connections with current issues and practices.

The present study is situated within an ethnographic framework in which I have adopted practices which are intended to open up opportunities for different kinds of knowledge and diverse perspectives to emerge which would inform the on-going development of research questions and practices. Although I wanted to 'discover' issues and formulate questions as the research progressed, rather than determining what was important before starting the fieldwork, I started out with a broad focus on teachers' work lives and their perceptions about how policy is made. This broad focus was to change quite early on in the research process.

My research practices were formed in different ways as my enquiry changed in shape and focus as unexpected issues and questions surfaced. In the early stages of my fieldwork I began to interview teachers using a semi-structured schedule which asked them questions about policy making. But Potts has emphasized the complexity and the importance of 'understanding the relationship between events and experience and people's personal accounts'. She argues that:

... part of interviewing an individual or a group of people will be this exploration of the meanings assigned by the interviewees themselves to the events and feelings they describe. (Potts, 1992, p. 335)

The semi-structured interview schedules did not allow opportunities or space for such an exploration. Recognizing that this had implications both in terms of establishing a relationship of equality and mutual respect and in terms of fulfilling

the goals of my enquiry, I was able to develop an alternative approach in which the interview became a shared project within which either interlocutor could introduce new topics, challenge what the other said, seek clarification, speak or remain silent. This opened up new opportunities and perspectives which, in turn, led to a shift in my research focus. It also involved re-negotiating my relationship with those I talked and listened to (rather than 'interviewed') and sharing responsibility more equitably. Here is an extract from my research diary:

17 April 1997

... I interviewed PG today using the schedule. We talked for nearly two hours, and we still didn't get through the schedule. It got quite tense. I felt I was chivvying her along, when in fact a lot of what she was saying was interesting and relevant. The schedule doesn't allow for anything really unexpected to crop up. PG started talking about her involvement with conductive education which – it became clear – has become an important issue surrounding the proposed closure of Freelands for parents and teachers. She was very insistent about pursuing this theme and then I could see why. In the end, I stopped using the schedule and PG took over!

Like Peters (1995), I '... quickly found that people were much more interested and articulate in talking about particular situations and their emotional responses to them' (Peters, 1995, p. 64). I also observed that out of these responses emerged historically and experientially situated knowledge which opened up new issues or provided alternative perspectives on questions. It was particularly interesting, for example, to listen to the historical accounts of teachers' own experiences, and the connections which they made between their own personal and professional lives and wider social contexts. Here is an extract from a discussion with G.B., a teacher at a special school, in which he weaves a story from his own autobiography and the educational values, structures and policies of the time, starting in the early 1960s when many disabled children were excluded from the education system in England and attended special residential institutions:

My Dad was a quarryman, my granddad was a quarryman and I should have been a quarryman, but I passed the 11+ and went to grammar school. I intended going in for veterinary work – working with animals – and I only got two A levels so to save messing about – I was 18 and my mates were earning money – I decided to go to teacher training college instead, rather than stay on another year. This was 1961. So three years in training college and on my final teaching practice I was working with a small group of kids that were supposedly educationally subnormal and my tutor at the time suggested that I might be better in special education, and perhaps he was right because I wanted to be a vet and this is the same kind of work really ...

So having got one job during the three months between college and September in a normal school somewhere in Lancashire – about ten days before I was to start I was offered another one in a residential special school. They were all educationally subnormal children and they were educationally subnormal because they had never been to school ...

It was handy for me because I got home two weekends in three. It was

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