

Researching Education in Multicultural London

Abstract This chapter outlines features of educational, urban and critical ethnography, arts-based educational research (ABER), as well as critical race methodology (CRM) and critical pedagogy that influenced my research on the teaching and learning of Britishness. These methodological approaches value participant voice and empowerment, and encourage social justice and social change. The empirical data presented in this book was collected from two separate research studies involving two educational settings and mixed methods: (i) a questionnaire survey of trainee teachers of Art in an Educational Studies department at a London university who reflected upon the Fundamental British Values teaching requirement, and (ii) an ethnographic arts-based educational research in a London school with Art teachers and two GCSE classes who explored Britishness.

Keywords Educational research • Critical research • Research methodology • Research tools • Participant voice

RESEARCHING BRITISHNESS AND FUNDAMENTAL BRITISH VALUES (FBV)

By describing and supporting critical pedagogical approaches to exploring identities, this book aims to understand the pedagogies involved in teaching and learning about Britishness and Fundamental British Values (FBV).

Emphasis on student voice, respectful and caring dialogue, and collaborative communication is shown as the vision chosen by trainee teachers and teachers required to teach Britishness, leading to meaningful and engaged individual and collective critical reflections regarding students' stories of Britishness. The empirical data in this book was collected from two separate research studies involving two educational settings and mixed methods. Chapter 4 reports on a questionnaire survey of trainee teachers of Art in an Educational Studies department at a London university regarding FBV (2016–2017). Chapters 5, 6 and 7 detail ethnographic arts-based educational research in a London school with Art teachers and two GCSE classes who explored Britishness (2007–2008). Knowing teachers often “embrace the political as a positive means to develop critical consciousness” (Yokley 1999: 24), I present the ways (trainee) teachers negotiate political demands about Britishness and FBV teaching.

Trainee Teachers on FBV

Recent research conducted in 2016–2017 with a cohort of Art trainee teachers enrolled on a one-year Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) course at a London university is outlined in Chap. 4. The empirical data collected towards the end of the first semester of the course, and again before they commenced their second teaching placement, concerns 25 trainee teachers of ages ranging from early twenties to late thirties. I had informed the trainee teachers about the purposes of collecting the data and publishing the findings and analysis. I sought their consent, as well as that of their PGCE tutor. Some gave me their email addresses on their questionnaires so I could contact them for further information if needed. There were 19 female and 6 male respondents, mostly of White British ethnicity. I have used pseudonyms but have provided information about age, gender, nationality, ethnicity and religion exactly as they stipulated.

Teaching and Learning Britishness

Britishness teaching in schools is now a requirement (Department for Education 2014), but once was merely a proposal (BBC News 2007). This book describes two classes of London students from diverse backgrounds and their teachers, in 2007–2008, exploring constructs of Britishness and practising *pedagogies of identity*. The field work was

conducted with Art teachers who *chose* to bring Britishness into the classroom. Situated in a traditionally White working-class community in London, the school caters for students from the ages of 11 to 19, where approximately 40% of students are classed as non-White. Many students are multilingual: 19% 11–16, 24% post 16. Traditionally, the students did not embark into further or higher education, but now half the students in the sixth form were progressing to university.¹ There were 34 students in total (aged 14–15), 16 students in one class and 18 students in the other class.

INTEGRATING ARTS-BASED RESEARCH WITH CRITICAL URBAN EDUCATIONAL ETHNOGRAPHIES

Ethnographers often seek to (re)present the social worlds of those frequently ignored and marginalised in academia, media and political debates (Goodall 2000). Following Clifford (1986) and Edgeworth (2014), I recognise data is partial and contextual, thus maintaining awareness of the implications of power and positionality is imperative when doing research with young people. Important to an ethical stance is the underlying principle that “to listen to counterstories within the educational system can be an important pedagogical practice for teachers and students as well as an important methodological practice for educational researchers” (Bernal 2002: 116). Avoidance of harm, while doing good, is paramount (Mitchell 2011) in educational research.

Critical Urban Educational Ethnography

Educational ethnography, important in researching social justice and cultural diversity through listening to students’ stories (Gregory 2005), is well suited to researching multicultural British identities. An ethnographic approach also suits teacher research (Denscombe 2008), enabling educational ethnographers to “describe, interpret, analyse and represent the lived experiences of schools, classrooms and workplaces” (O’Toole and Beckett 2013: 48). Empirical data from small-scale ‘real world’ settings (Hammersley 1994) is valuable when conducting educational ethnography. Though problematic to define schools as *natural* settings, and often impossible for most to gain long-term familiarity with the setting (Wolcott 2002), the rich descriptive account using a contextualised and holistic approach based on familiarity with setting

can be “flexible and adaptive” and “idiosyncratic and individualistic”, permitting a researcher to select appropriate ethnographic techniques appropriate (Wolcott 2002: 33). At the ethnographic heart lies exploration of social/cultural context and participant experience (Hitchcock and Hughes 1995; Atkinson et al. 2007). Ethnography can elucidate meaningful moments in the lives of school students; urban educational ethnographies can (re)present school students’ fluid identities in urban contexts.

Grounded in the works of critical pedagogues like Freire, Giroux and Shor (Brown and Dobrin 2012), critical ethnography understands teaching must “engage students...in the dialogic work of understanding their social location and developing cultural action appropriate to that location” (Brooke and Hogg 2012: 116). Critical ethnographic research questions how knowledge is received in a society where prevailing social relations and dominant social structures oppress certain social groups because of class, gender and racial differences, or through imperial, national or colonial oppression (Harvey 1990; Bhavnani et al. 2014). Moving beyond description and analysis, critical research galvanises “change, contradictions, struggle, and practice in order to counter dominant interests and advance the well-being of the world’s majority” (Bhavnani et al. 2014: 176). Emancipatory educational research similarly tackles social injustice, powerlessness and oppression through political means to help disadvantaged communities (Babbie 2012; McColl et al. 2013). Others mobilise through transformative activist research reflecting upon “self, place and community” (Guajardo et al. 2008: 3).

Arts-Based Educational Research, Critical Pedagogy and Critical Race Methodology

To research pedagogies of Britishness and elevate student voice, an integrative approach that combines features of critical urban educational ethnography with principles of arts-based educational research (ABER) and critical pedagogy (CP), as well as critical race methodology (CRM), can be a useful way for working with young people on identity exploration. In the last thirty years, researchers have developed visual data collection and analysis to understand social experience (Mitchell 2011) through poetry, prose, drama, painting, photography, multimedia, sculpture and performing arts (Barone and Eisner 2006; Chilton and Leavy 2014; Kara 2015). Arts-based projects are useful in “honouring, eliciting

and expressing cultural ways of knowing” and “exploring sensitive topics” (Kara 2015: 24). Examining race and racism, alongside intersections with religion, class and gender, CRM exposes oppressions and challenges dominant ideologies by providing social justice approaches for researchers (Solórzano and Yosso 2002). Ethnography shares phenomenological similarities with art; both emphasise creative and complex social realities, reflexive observation and positionality (Denscombe 2008). ABER harmonises well with critical pedagogy, as both elevate critical questioning. The “resistive capabilities of the arts” can permit contestation of dominant ideologies and social norms (Chilton and Leavy 2014: 403). ABER pursues “novel, ethical and noncoercive ways” to encourage “hopeful dialogue” and “critical consciousness”, leading to “social change” (Chilton and Leavy 2014: 407). Thus ABER, like critical pedagogy, leads on issues of social justice, equity and ethics.

THE ARTWORK, INTERVIEWS AND QUESTIONNAIRES

Ethnographers do not tend to only employ one research method, and to the surprise of some traditionalists might incorporate questionnaires as an additional research tool (Wolcott 1997). My mixed methods approach provides scope for a ‘complete understanding’: questionnaire survey of the two Art classes, as well as the trainee Art teachers, allows for a ‘general understanding’ of Britishness, while semi-structured interviews with Art students and teachers provide ‘detailed understanding’ (Creswell and Clark 2011) of Britishness and the experiences of teaching and learning Britishness. The students, individually and collectively, explored Britishness, producing artwork which would eventually be submitted as GCSE coursework. I was motivated by the potential for visual methods to enable collaborative, reflexive and ethically considerate interdisciplinary research (Pink 2003, 2004), particularly recommended when studying communities (Back 2009).

Giving the participants creative spaces, and respecting their voices of experience on identity issues, developed their confidence to be open and honest. Teachers used critical pedagogy strategies, such as promotion of individual reflection, student voice, dialogue and collaboration, to elicit powerful and personal artwork. Some experiences are better presented through the visual (Pink 2004); planning and producing artwork proved to be an excellent medium for young people to begin to explore and discuss their identities. Painting and drawing have long been used in “encountering

and expressing oneself” (Pink 2004: 7). The social justice approach of educulturalism through art and narrative can nurture “balanced, creative, informed, and open-minded citizens, who are able to fully participate in democratic society” (Lea and Sims 2008: 15).

The act of young people creating artwork privileged moments of student autonomy and empowerment. This project gave voices to young people to become “the producers and not just the objects or the consumers of research” (Mitchell 2011: 16), acquiring knowledge about “the self in society” through the construction of personal artwork (Yokley 1999: 23). Analysing young people’s artwork by making assumptions about their identities would not be in the spirit of social justice and social change. To rigidly impose my personal interpretations on the artwork was never my intention. There is no single meaning of an image that can be argued, but multiple meanings, interpretations and readings (Hall 1997). Therefore, I decided to use the artwork alongside questionnaire and interview data to inform the research in multiple ways: as a crucial process for young people and their teachers to interrogate Britishness creatively, and as visual stimulus to include in the paired interviews with the students.

Directly asking about Britishness may yield limited data due to the inhibitions and self-consciousness of research participants; other times, participants may bring up issues of Britishness and Englishness themselves even when not asked (Fenton 2007; Garner 2012). Through paired interviews, I sought to empower the students to shape the interview together (Heyl 2001); with the Art teachers, I conducted individual interviews. Semi-structured interviews permitted flexibility, minimising potential research bias as questions emerged organically. Not controlling topics resulted in dismantling of traditional power relations between interviewer and interviewee (Lankshear and Knobel 2004); “listening carefully and respectfully”, I let research participants “‘name’ the world in their own terms” (Heyl 2001: 375). I was a *privileged listener* (Siegel 1988: 30). They “understood, trusted and respected my motives in doing the study” speaking with honesty and openness (Tuettemann 2003: 18). The students and teachers were comfortable to the extent that when the allocated time slot was over, they still wanted to talk.

Educational researchers develop amicable relations to initially gain access, but later to maintain rapport with diverse participants: “Good ethnographic practice, data collection and analyses rely upon genuine empathy, trust and participation” (Coffey 1999: 47). In the interviews with the students, their voices dominated, which was a “productive”

strategy; they would often enthusiastically and probingly “prompt one another” (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 112) and raise matters pertinent to them (Lankshear and Knobel 2004). In pairs, students were more “forthcoming”, finding the interview “less threatening” (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 111). I found myself sometimes becoming a peripheral listener, protecting the integrity of the data by asking minimal questions. Respectful listening, awareness of my role as a researcher in co-constructing the interview with the researched and understanding “that dialogue is discovery and only partial knowledge will ever be attained” (Heyl 2001: 370) guided my interviewing.

The Art trainee teachers completed the first questionnaire (December 2016) about their thoughts and experiences of FBV, and then a second questionnaire (January 2017) developing their ideas after structured and reflective small group and whole class discussions with their peers (which I facilitated and observed) where they critically examined FBV policy. The trainees also learned about research I had previously conducted on Britishness with Art classes in a London school (detailed in Chaps. 5–7). Two classes of GCSE Art students completed questionnaires at the beginning and end of the Art project on Britishness (2007–2008). The questionnaires provided biographical information about gender, family, religion, place of birth, as well as insight into their artwork. I did not provide closed categories on the questionnaires, as I wanted participants to have the opportunity to self-define.

NOTE

1. GCSE results in 1992 were 7% (5 A*-C), but had vastly improved to 72% (5 A*-C) in 2005.

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