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Journeys into Inner/Outer Space: reflections on the methodological challenges of negotiating insider/outsider status in international educational research

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ABSTRACT This article highlights key theoretical and methodological issues and implications of being an insider/outsider when undertaking qualitative research in international educational settings. It first addresses discourses of 'self' and 'other', noting that identity and belonging emerge from fluid engagement between researchers and participants. It considers the benefits and challenges of being an insider or outsider and questions the traditional insider/outsider dichotomy. The role of 'critical reflexivity' in helping researchers conscientiously negotiate through 'the space between' is examined. The discussion is illustrated with examples from the authors' research focusing on the opportunities, challenges and tensions experienced as insiders/outsiders. They argue that engaging in critical reflexivity is important for working towards ethical and credible research as it enables the researcher to consider and make transparent how their positionality impacts on the entire research process.

Introduction

The positioning of the researcher as an 'insider' or 'outsider' in relation to the research process and participants in a research study is a fundamental issue in qualitative social research. During every research journey, the production of ethical and credible research is dependent on researchers ensuring that they reflect on, and are transparent about, the methodological issues and challenges they face, which includes how their positionality and background might shape the generation and interpretation of data (Court & Abbas, 2013, p. 480). In addition, the influence of modern philosophical paradigms, such as postmodernism, post-structuralism and postcolonialism, means that traditional dichotomies, such as insider/outsider and self/other (defined by characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, language and professional status), are being challenged as researchers recognise the limitations of these dichotomies in considering both their own role and that of their

participants. These movements have led to the transformation of the qualitative researcher from 'unreflective holder of power and knowledge to reflective participant in the co-construction of knowledge together with research subjects' (Court & Abbas, 2013, p. 486). The qualitative researcher is not, therefore, a 'miner', digging facts out of the ground to produce authoritative and objective research outputs, but rather a '"traveler", meeting people and experiencing different landscapes on his or her research journeys' (Court & Abbas, 2013, p. 486).

The message from qualitative researchers across disciplines is that understanding the dichotomies posed by the insider/outsider debate is useful not so much in helping them decide whether or not they agree with the insider/outsider conceptual framework, but in enabling them to become aware of the implications of being in either or both positions and how this impacts on the research process and on the production of ethical and credible research.

In this article we reflect on the theoretical and methodological considerations and implications of the insider/outsider debate for qualitative research in international educational settings, based on a collection of our own research experiences. Given that issues of identity and belonging are central to this debate, we first address discourses of 'self/other' and 'insider/outsider', noting that identity and belonging emerge not from static conceptual categories, but from fluid engagement between researchers and participants. We consider the benefits and challenges of being an insider or outsider, and discuss examples where qualitative researchers mindfully negotiate their roles and positions throughout the research process in order to co-construct knowledge with participants (Hammersley, 1993; Labaree, 2002). We develop further Dwyer and Buckle's (2009) notion of 'the space between' insider and outsider positions in qualitative research, and examine the role of 'critical reflexivity' (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000), which, we argue, is important for working towards ethical and credible research as it enables the researcher to consider and make transparent how their positionality impacts on the entire research process.

The Dichotomies: self and other in relation to qualitative research

The process underlying qualitative research involves a set of social interactions between the researcher and participants as well as between these parties and the broader context in which the research takes place (Gu et al, 2010). The tensions between a researcher's agency and the norms, processes and forces that govern research structures give rise to the notion of the Cultural Other (CO): us and them, and the interaction between both (Sanderson, 2004). During the research process, the researcher is also in constant dialogue with the demands of the research subject matter and the research process itself, and with the social and academic norms within the research context. The CO, embodied in research by researchers and participants, is seen as a threat and a challenge to familiar norms and contexts, thus causing fear of the unknown and reluctance to engage with Otherness. The discourse of us and them, therefore, creates barriers and defines boundaries and territories within which the research process takes place, thus creating spaces figuratively owned by, and familiar to, us or them. In other words, research defines boundaries between the researchers and the researched, drawing lines and creating polarities and dichotomies of insider (us and what we know about the CO) and outsider (them and what we ignore about the CO).

As a result of the divide between the researcher and the researched, the methodologies used when adopting an insider/outsider approach are based on the assumption that certain individuals belong to fixed groups, 'otherising' them and treating them as outsiders. However, this approach is fundamentally flawed because it does not take into account the multiple identities individuals have that enables them to move fluidly between groups (McNess et al, 2012). It also ignores individuals' agency in relation to the structures they interact with. To account for agency and multiple identities, a different shared understanding of research needs to be established, and the methodologies that inherently define research boundaries need to change.

A post-structuralist approach, for example, helps us view the researcher–participant dichotomy in a more complex and multifaceted way. Their roles are not seen as clear-cut, fixed and at opposite ends of the spectrum, but rather as overlapping, multidimensional and blended together, depending on a variety of factors, including social, cultural and spatial contexts. From the post-structuralist perspective, researchers and participants recognise that there is a level of

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'instability' in their relationship (Filmer et al, 1998), and their interactions can be deconstructed to better understand the underlying realities and reformulate assumptions to produce valid outcomes.

The Benefits and Challenges of Being an Insider/Outsider

Initial arguments about the advantages and/or disadvantages of being on one side or the other of the 'us' and 'them' divide placed researchers strictly as insiders or outsiders (Merton, 1972; Surra & Ridley, 1991; Christensen & Dahl, 1997). These polarised positions would render researchers, respectively, as either objective and credible or subjective, biased, and generating questionable research outcomes.

Insider researchers, those who by virtue of status or role are members of the groups or communities researched, are likely to benefit from easy access to participants and data (Merriam et al, 2001; Labaree, 2002; Kusow, 2003; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). The potential reduction of culture shock and the sharing of a context, background or set of values may allow qualitative researchers to have access to information that might not be accessible to outsiders (Hellawell, 2006). Those researchers on the inside are presumed to have a better cultural interpretation and understanding (Kusow, 2003), discover hidden meanings and, as a result, discover greater clarity of purpose in the research (Labaree, 2002). However, being an insider does not guarantee the authenticity of what is discovered. In addition, an insider researcher may have 'a near obsession with seeking an unseen "reality" in virtually every corner' Labaree (2002, p. 102) that can lead to accusations of not knowing and/or of interpreting incorrectly what they ought to know.

Some of the benefits for the outsider researcher, who is new to the research context, include the apparent objectivity that being detached provides, and the ability to stand back and draw out independent conclusions or find meanings not evident to the insider (Merriam et al, 2001). Being too close was traditionally believed to taint such objectivity (Hellawell, 2006). On the minus side, outsiders may be accused of lacking understanding and of detachment. These may play an adverse role in the research process because contextual references to what is being researched may escape the researcher's observation. There is also the question of whether an outsider can remain as such, given that qualitative research requires a level of intimacy between the researcher and the participants that does not allow for true outsiderness (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

Successful research activity requires a high level of rapport and trust between researchers and the researched. Such trust and other ethical research processes are more likely to increase its credibility. Accounts from researchers show that shared cultural background or knowledge does not guarantee that the insider researcher will be trusted or accepted (Merriam et al, 2001; Sherif, 2001; Labaree, 2002). Culture has innumerable 'tones' (ethnicity, colour, age, gender, social class, customs, beliefs, etc.), and it is very likely that researchers and participants will often find themselves in non-shared cultural spaces. This affects how the research develops and how the two relate to each other. For example, in communities in which action research takes place by researchers who are normally insiders to those communities, participants might not accept the new insiders due to their changing roles from members of the community to researchers of that community (Braithwaite et al, 2007).

Researchers may also get caught in a power conflict as a result of perceived difference of status between the research players. Both inside knowledge and observations from outside are vulnerable to perceptions of how knowledge is being represented and interpreted (Mullings, 1999; Labaree, 2002). At worst, participants may feel threatened, exploited and misrepresented. The researcher is required to meet a set of expectations from the participants (Labaree, 2002), themselves and others (Braithwaite et al, 2007). Researchers are accountable for their representation of knowledge and realities as outcomes of the research process and, in their role as insiders and/or outsiders, they are equally at risk of being accused of portraying inaccurate representations.

An added level of complexity for researchers arises from the identity conflicts brought about by having either an insider or an outsider position (or both) in the research process. The researcher has a dual or even triple identity as 'self' (both as an individual and as a researcher) and 'societal' (as part of the research community). The different positions lead to what Ybema et al (2009, p. 301) call 'identity formation', seen as the development of a 'negotiated outcome' between the researcher's

internal aspirations and value systems, external prescriptions, and the 'labelling' that may have arisen from the interplay of these preconceptions.

It is clear that the insider/outsider dichotomy presents many theoretical and methodological challenges to researchers engaging in qualitative research that are difficult to resolve when approached from a polarised perspective. However, other perspectives (e.g. post-structuralist, postmodernist or postcolonial) that allow for agency and context blur the boundaries between insider and outsider, and consider qualitative researchers as 'multiple insiders and outsiders' (Labaree, 2002, p. 102). As Hammersley (1993, p. 485) states, 'In general, the chances of findings being valid can be enhanced by a judicious combination of involvement and estrangement.' Stepping from inside to outside will help 'gain a new understanding of the inside' (Labaree, 2002, p. 110), as does its corollary in stepping from outside to inside. By being both insiders and outsiders, qualitative researchers operate in a fluid space somewhere between the two.

The Space Between

Identity negotiation and (trans)formation, as described above, is a phenomenon common to qualitative researchers because, as Dwyer and Buckle (2009, p. 61) point out, they 'cannot retreat to a distant "researcher" role. Just as our personhood affects the analysis, so, too, the analysis affects our personhood. Within this circle of impact is the space between.' There is a fluidity and amorphousness to 'the space between' that is somewhat governed by the qualitative methodology an insider/outsider researcher chooses. Ethnographic and action research, for example, force the researcher to be both a researcher and a participant *at the same time* (Sherif, 2001; Braithwaite et al, 2007). However, other methodologies that fall within the interpretive paradigm are comparatively less contingent on creating trusting relationships with participants, and may occupy a less complex insider/outsider space than ethnographic and action research studies.

Hellawell (2006) suggests that qualitative researchers can explore, methodologically, their own degree of insiderness or outsiderness by thinking of 'the space between' as containing many linked continuums of values, social mores, cultural tones and other contextual elements that have proven difficult to reconcile from a structuralist approach. Many of the cultural and contextual aspects of the 'space between' are what link these continuums together and allow the researcher to negotiate many aspects of the research process as governed by their chosen methodology. Attending to these continuums can help the researcher reflect on and account for methodological issues that arise from context, multiple identities and culture.

Merriam et al describe three of these linked continuums as positionality, power and representation. 'Positionality is thus determined by where one stands in relation to "the other". More importantly, these positions can shift' (Merriam et al, 2001, p. 411), based on cultural factors that make up the positionality sub-continuums, such as race, religion, gender, language, family ties, education, marital status and age. According to Kusow (2003), acknowledging these positionality factors can help the identities of insiders and outsiders to be seen in relation to the many defining characteristics of researchers and participants as well as the research context. Thus, the researcher must become aware not only of the cultural norms of their participants, but also of their own norms, biases, prejudices, positions, fears and self-imposed barriers in regard to these factors (Sanderson, 2004).

Positionality becomes closely intertwined with power continuums as local cultural norms affect the negotiation of rapport between a researcher and his/her participants, particularly in local political, economic, social and historical discourses (Merriam et al, 2001). The balance of power between the researcher and participants is also linked to how the participants are represented by the researcher. By acknowledging that they may be inside and/or outside, researchers can manipulate these sub-continuums to establish common empathy. This way, the research outcomes are more likely to be negotiated achievements in which both the researcher and the researched are authentically represented.

Researchers can account for positionality, power and representation issues in insider/outsider circumstances by recognising that 'the constant shifting of boundaries between people becomes an important part of the research process' Sherif (2001, p. 435). These elements introduce the necessity of continual critical reflexivity regarding the researcher's decisions and how they affect changes on

relevant continuums in that study's 'space between'. Stepping in and out, or inhabiting the space between, allows engagement with otherness and creates 'a necessity to dis-engage with one's own identity and self-reflect on its construction' Sanderson (2004, p. 15).

Insider/Outsider Research Dilemmas and the Role of Critical Reflexivity

The role of reflexivity as an approach for ensuring methodological rigour is widely recognised, yet understandings about what reflexivity is and how it should be undertaken in practice remain ambiguous (Van Heugten, 2004). In addition, how and why reflexivity ought to be used during the research process, particularly within international studies whereby researchers often operate in transnational contexts, still requires some theorisation and debate (Subedi, 2006; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

The literature on reflexivity highlights the need for qualitative researchers to be open, accountable and ethical in the research process in two key ways: (1) in terms of the researcher acknowledging how they have conducted and been involved in the research and produced knowledge (Hellawell, 2006; Subedi, 2006; Sultana, 2007); and (2) in terms of the researcher being upfront about their own identities, backgrounds and epistemological perspectives (Subedi, 2006).

Reflexivity in qualitative research is essential in terms of adding methodological rigour (Nilan, 2002). It enables the researcher to demonstrate accountability and transparency during the research process, especially in how they have interpreted the information gathered, given that information is always interpreted through the researcher's positionality (Mullings, 1999). By acknowledging one's biases and perspectives through the use of bracketing, the researcher might reduce some of the concerns associated with insider/outsider membership (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). In addition, reflexive accounts add credibility to the research as the readers can see where the researcher is coming from and understand why certain methodological decisions and knowledge claims are made.

Reflexivity is also important in ensuring that the research process is as ethical and participatory as possible, and in ensuring that good trusting relationships are built between the researcher and their participants (Sultana, 2007). Subedi (2006, p. 589) highlights that by 'being open about our identities and experiences, we move towards developing ethical relationships in fieldwork'. She also acknowledges that the researcher should reflect on how they respond to the complex nature of ethical dilemmas during fieldwork as this may affect their relationships with participants.

Van Heugten (2004) stresses that the researcher must not only acknowledge how their beliefs, values and personal interests influence the selection of research methodology and the production of knowledge, but should also challenge these continuously, particularly as these change as a result of interactions with their participants and the broader structures and contexts within which they operate. Alvesson and Sköldberg define this as critical reflexivity which involves 'interpreting one's own interpretations, looking at one's own perspectives from other perspectives, and turning a self-critical eye onto one's own authority as interpreter and author' (2000, p. vii).

Sultana (2007, p. 376) highlights the need to also reflect on and *critically* examine 'power relations and politics', particularly in international research where differences and inequalities are wide. In order to engage in rigorous critical reflexivity as opposed to mere navel-gazing and introspection, the researcher must not only be self-aware, but needs to actively engage in 'deliberate self-scrutiny' Hellawell (2006, p. 483). This must occur throughout the entire research process rather than being added on at the end (Sultana, 2007). This kind of critical reflexivity aids in creating and maintaining dynamic interactions between self, participants and data that inform 'decisions, actions and interpretations at all stages of research' (Etherington, 2006, p. 81).

Critical reflexivity is therefore not merely a technique, it is, rather, a 'philosophy-driven practice' that qualitative researchers need to engage with (Cunliffe, 2004, p. 408). Critical reflexivity approaches reality from a unique ontological point of view which questions the identities of researchers and how they transform their relationship with participants, and the ethicality of their actions. Therefore, as critically reflexive researchers, 'we become more aware of, and skilled in, constituting and maintaining our realities and identities' (Cunliffe, 2004, p. 410). In this sense, critical reflexivity may also lead researchers to make changes to their attitudes and future actions.

In thinking about the usefulness of critical reflexivity and the insider/outsider debate, the discussion above suggests that to fairly and accurately represent the researched community the crucial element is not whether the researcher is an insider or an outsider. What matters, on the one hand, is being able to 'be open, authentic, honest, deeply interested in the experience of one's research participants, and committed to accurately and adequately representing their experience' (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 59). On the other hand, the real value of critical reflexivity is its transformational capacity. There is no real value in simply reflecting on what is going on; researchers need to be aware of the limitations of their own reflexivity (Clayton, 2013). The journey to becoming a critically reflexive researcher takes practice and requires a shift from just 'thinking about things' to pushing the researcher outside their comfort zone and developing critical self-awareness and skills that allow for the development of changed perspectives that will impact future practice (Shaw, 2013).

Reflections on Insider/Outsider Experiences in International Educational Research

The discussion above reveals important theoretical and methodological issues regarding the insider/outsider debate. The most important of these is recognising that qualitative researchers are never fully insiders or outsiders, but instead constantly shift their position and identity, which requires them to engage in critical reflexivity throughout the research process in order to produce ethical and credible research. In the following sections, we illustrate this through four examples of our research experiences as both insiders and outsiders (writing in the first person), drawing on many of the themes raised previously.

Insider/Outsider Experience 1: sliding around the space between

The first research example refers to a qualitative case study on education reforms that included participants from two very unequal levels of the education system in Mauritius: primary school teachers and program directors at the Ministry of Education. As an American white woman, I knew that many of my participants would automatically consider me an outsider to their culture and context. However, some fairly unique experiences in my personal history also made me an insider. These include being an exchange student in Mauritius as a teenager, during which time I lived with a Creole family for one year and learned Mauritian Creole and French fluently. Eventually I married a Mauritian, and we now live in Mauritius. I taught and conducted research on teaching in Mauritius twice prior to the study (and prior to my marriage).

These experiences provided me with an extensive insider's cultural awareness of Mauritius. However, I was concurrently a foreign researcher – an outsider at first glance, and able to view the research from estranged perspectives (Labaree, 2002). As a returning researcher with extensive insider and outsider understanding, I knew from the outset that I could capitalise on my concurrent inside-outsider status methodologically, but how? I began by asking myself a few questions while designing my study and discussing them with peers and professors. These included:

- How do I ethically negotiate power in a 'participatory' study?
- What Mauritian (or American) characteristics should I accentuate with different participants?
- What aspects of my cross-cultural knowledge will help me present myself in a non-threatening way?
- What are my biases/prejudices/fears and how are these affecting my interpretation of building rapport?

I wanted my study to be highly participatory so that I could authentically interpret the data, but I knew that building rapport with government officials would not be similar to building rapport with teachers. Accordingly, I made conscious choices about the degree to which I would portray myself as an insider or outsider based on my insider understanding of Mauritian social hierarchies. For example, I knew that if I spoke English with the government officials they would interpret it as a sign that I was well educated and professional, whereas if I spoke Creole at first, they would think the opposite. Only after I succeeded in gaining their trust as a professional researcher would I be able to discuss my personal qualifications for doing research in Mauritius, including proving to them that I speak Creole. In contrast, I knew that I had to build rapport with teachers by being as

'local' as possible: speaking only Creole, wearing inconspicuous clothing, and talking about my personal and family history. Only after I had succeeded in gaining the teachers' trust as someone like them would I be able to discuss my research agenda.

Consciously considering these situations and addressing them in my research proposal illustrates that I would intentionally manipulate the boundaries of insider/outsider spaces by sliding around the power, positionality and representation sub-continuums described by Merriam et al (2001). These early reflexive considerations were invaluable in building rapport during the first part of my fieldwork. However, as I proceeded with my research I ran into insider/outsider issues that I had not foreseen. I noticed that I felt uncomfortable in meetings wherein I simultaneously interacted with teachers and ministry officials. I felt that the teachers would notice that my persona changed when speaking to their superiors and that they would judge me somehow for it. I also knew that I had to be seen as a social scientist by the ministry employees or they would never take me seriously. I began to feel tugs on my conscience about this. Was I being insincere and/or hypocritical? Was I maintaining rapport by intentionally switching personas, or disrupting it? Was I losing my identity by trying to live up to others' expectations?

Engaging in a process of critical reflexivity enabled me to openly reflect on these deeper questions about my own identity. I discussed my feelings and concerns with close friends, family and colleagues, and in my research journal for many months. As I looked for answers to my questions in the literature and during discussions with colleagues I began to understand what switching personas meant for me as an insider-outsider, and what I thought my participants expected from me. For example, I now understand that I was using my agency to manipulate the amorphous nature of insider/outsider spaces, thus creating my own boundaries to the research. I did this by intentionally sliding along the various sub-continuums in the space between. Given that I was unaware of the theories underlying the continuums (Merriam et al, 2001) and identity formation (Ybema et al, 2009) prior to my reflexive musings (having not engaged with this literature prior to my fieldwork), it made me feel unethical.

What I also came to realise through engaging in critical reflexivity was that I have many roles in life, and each role is played by a particular persona. For example, I am a mother and a wife. These two roles are highly intertwined, but being a genuine wife does not preclude me from being a genuine mother, though my interactions with my children and my husband are necessarily different. It is similar with my insider and outsider roles as a professional researcher in Mauritius. These roles are highly intertwined, but being a genuine participant-observer with teachers did not preclude me from concurrently being a professional social scientist with others.

In answering those deep questions about my identity outlined above, I came to understand that I was not losing my identity, or being insincere and hypocritical by sliding around the insider/outsider sub-continuums to switch personas. Instead, I was expanding and honing my identity as a researcher by using critical reflexivity to become aware of how I methodologically manipulated the sub-continuums within the space between my insider and outsider roles. It also gave me the opportunity to view my participants as more complex than just the unchanging 'other' and to account for their identity changes during analysis and write-up. This awareness had far-reaching implications for me because it allowed me to (re)define my own identities and research boundaries in methodologically sound ways, instead of having others define them for me as the research progressed.

Insider/Outsider Experience 2:
researching the development of intercultural communicative competence

Language teaching at the Open University strongly promotes the students' development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC). A central academic team, of which I am a member, has developed the languages curriculum with this in mind. However, it is the tutors, or associate lecturers (ALs), who interact with students, mark their assignments and give them direct feedback. ALs are qualified language lecturers of different nationalities and with diverse cultural experiences, including colleagues born in Europe, Asia and Latin America. They are responsible for 'delivering' the intercultural philosophy within which the courses have been designed. We are carrying out some qualitative research to find out about ALs' intercultural values, beliefs and

attitudes, and how they might impact their teaching, and as a result the students' development of ICC.

My relationship with the ALs places me as an insider according to the traditional dichotomy. As a result, I should be able to capitalise on the assumed benefits of this status by virtue of us sharing background knowledge and experience (Mullings, 1999; Merriam et al, 2001) and an open relationship in terms of equality to promote affinity that would develop a sense of rapport (Labaree, 2002). We also share a common teaching purpose (Hellawell, 2006), and overall homogeneity to foster 'a sense of community that can enhance trust and openness throughout the research process' (Merriam et al, 2001, p. 407). I therefore assumed I had a lot in common with the ALs and that this should help me in my role as researcher. Establishing rapport would not be difficult and our relationship as equals would facilitate the process.

As I interviewed ALs I felt I needed to represent myself in my researcher role to gain credibility. However, I became worried that, given my previous assumptions, such representation might create a power divide I really wanted to avoid. I didn't want ALs' responses to be influenced by the fact that I was a member of the team that had developed the approach we were investigating. As Dwyer and Buckle explain in situations like this, it is not just the data but also the analysis that can be affected:

> This might result in an interview that is shaped and guided by the researcher's experience and not the participants. Furthermore, its undue influence might affect the analysis, leading to an emphasis on shared factors between the researcher and the participants and a de-emphasis on factors that are discrepant, or vice versa. (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 58)

The power balance altered when the interview discussion related to the ALs' tutorial experience. My limited knowledge of their classroom context positioned me as an 'outsider', and the ALs subtly highlighted through their responses that they were language practitioners like me and therefore were able to question aspects of the research. The following brief exchange from one of the interview transcripts illustrates this point:

> Interviewer: You said in the survey that you thought the teaching of culture was essential but separate to language teaching, can you expand on that?

> AL: Well, one of the problems I had with that survey is that I would be answering slightly differently if I was answering it as someone teaching a foreign language than I would if I was teaching academic English to people who might be UK born … The survey didn't take those factors into consideration.

It became clear to me that I had to be able to negotiate my status as researcher and at the same time ensure ALs felt they were able to engage in the research process on 'equal' terms. I entirely agree with Kusow's view that 'research status is something that participants continuously negotiate and locally determine' (2003, p. 597). As Merriam et al state, 'power is something to not only be aware of, but to negotiate in the research process' (2001, p. 413). I realised that my initial assumptions were being challenged and I regularly had to question my methodology and deconstruct my interactions with the ALs along the research process. I achieved this through critical reflexivity, which, as Clayton (2013) says, facilitates an understanding of the limitations of our own initial reflections and assumptions.

Through the process of critical reflexivity I have become very aware of my continuous fluctuation between being insider, outsider or both through the confirmation or negation of my original assumptions regarding tacit common understandings. I originally believed we shared the philosophy behind the teaching of ICC. I discovered this was not always the case. This discovery allowed me to gradually become a 'partial insider' as I learnt more about ALs' practices. In a way, during their teaching they had to do what I was doing: observe, put themselves in the students' cultural shoes and also play the insider/outsider role. This mutual understanding of our sometimes separate and sometimes common position in the teaching or research dialogue facilitated the smooth flow of the research process.

As Kusow states, when quoting Holstein and Gubrium (1995), 'the degree of "outsiderness" or "insiderness" emerges through a process that links the researcher and the participants in a collaborative process of meaning-making' (2003, p. 598). My critical reflexivity has allowed for the

co-creation of knowledge with the AL colleagues who participated in the project, and this should lead to the transformational practices critical reflexivity promotes.

Insider/Outsider Experience 3:
reflections from research on the internationalisation of higher education

The third research example refers to a qualitative, largely inductive research project that was carried out at a higher education institution (HEI) in the UK (Al-Youssef, 2010). The aim was to explore meanings of internationalisation as understood by members of the institution at management level who were involved in developing an internationalisation strategy at the time, and who were from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Findings show that the term *internationalisation* is quantified as it is seen in relation to numbers of international staff, students and partnerships. Elements of the strategy focus on increasing those numbers as a way to presumably create an international ethos on campus. This view of internationalisation seems to reflect an understanding of HEIs as 'structures' that contain those numerable items, rather than seeing them as a meeting point for 'individuals' from diverse backgrounds. The findings are characterised by a discourse of 'us' and 'them', drawing lines and boundaries between what is 'international' and what is 'British'.

It was clear from the data that the dichotomy was present in the participants' views. International students as one group, in particular, were seen as Cultural Others with language, educational and social needs and personal characteristics that meant that the institution should respond in certain ways, creating challenges for the institution (Sanderson, 2004). The presence of international students as a group of distinct 'Others' on the university campus was seen by participants as an indicator of internationalisation. The data do not reflect any deeper engagement with international students than providing a service for them. A dialogue with those Cultural Others was clearly lacking.

For me as a researcher, the participants' views, especially regarding those international 'Others', were to some degree contradictory. While the views emphasised the need to provide support to international students to help them adapt to British university life, participants also emphasised the importance of mutual learning that takes place in the shared space on campus between them the outsiders and us the insiders, thus emphasising the dichotomy and reinforcing a divide on the university campus between nationality groups. It was not clear in the data, taken as a whole, however, how such a shared learning environment could be effective when those involved are adopting a position inside or outside it.

The above views of international students and internationalisation presented me, the researcher – also labelled 'international' – with an opportunity to confront these views and reflect on my own identity in relation to the research topic in question. I seemed to float in a space between being an outsider (which was the result of my national identity in a UK context) and being an insider as a member of the research community (reflecting my academic identity). This divide in identity and belonging required constant critical reflexivity, especially self-observation and inner dialogue, in order for me to understand my position, and for my professional as well as personal growth (Archer, 2007). Thus, exploring the research topic became an exploration of my own identity, and the presence of 'self' and 'other' was manifested not only in my relationship with the participants, but also more prominently within myself as a researcher as I was constantly constructing my identity through my interactions with participants (Ybema et al, 2009) and through an inner dialogue between my 'self' as a member of the British academic community, and my 'self' labelled as international Other.

The divide between 'us' and 'them', therefore, was twofold. On the one hand, the dichotomy was most evident in the views of international students as others who, in most participants' views, were expected to make a huge effort to adapt to 'our' British way of life and to how things were done over 'here'. Those others were seen to be under immense financial pressure to perform academically, sacrificing 'their' far closer (than British) family life to come halfway across the world to study. On the other hand, my exposure to the above dichotomy led to the surfacing of multiple voices reflecting a dichotomy within myself. The surfacing of such multiplicity of selves was a revelation that kept unfolding as the research process progressed.

The questions raised as a result of the above-mentioned divide were related to the meanings that were being created for terms like 'internationalisation' or 'international' within a specific 'national' context. It was becoming clearer to me as a researcher that a term such as 'international' created around me a bubble of imprisoning concepts that separated me from those 'outside'; I was categorised and put into a box with others with similar nationality labels. It was, however, interesting to see how, during my interactions with the participants and the research topic, I was in several boxes at the same time, and that moving from one space to another was a consequence of the constantly changing context, time and actors around me. My critical reflections on these interactions and the labels led me to realise that the labelling and categorisations also involved an element of 'choice' on my part that was fed by my own understanding of boundaries and groups and my past experiences. In other words, in many of these interactions, I made the subconscious decision to be either an insider or an outsider.

The way confining terms such as 'international' or 'internationalisation' were beginning to unfold had an influence on my interpretations not only of the terms themselves but also of how they were being used by HEIs, particularly the university where the research was conducted. This was not the first time the terms were under scrutiny. Evidence from the literature suggests that the terms have been defined and used in different ways, and even rejected, by researchers and scholars (Stier, 2002). Critical reflexivity helped me as a researcher to unpack several meanings of such terms, but more importantly, it enabled me to gain a form of self-knowledge and mindfulness that equipped me with the ability to be comfortable in my position in the space between.

Insider/Outsider Experience 4: reflections on research
exploring the European dimension in education at three European Schools

The final research example involved a comparative multiple-case study to explore how the European dimension in education was being incorporated at three of the intergovernmental European Schools. These schools cater for children whose parents work for institutions and agencies of the European Union and for other multilingual, mobile families. Children are educated in the 'language section' that corresponds with their mother tongue, with native-speaker teachers. One of the aims of these schools is to 'Europeanise without denationalising' (Schuman, cited in Delors, n.d., p. 14). Therefore, I also wanted to find out how the European dimension in education was potentially influencing students' sense of national and European identity and their socialisation and interaction patterns with one another (given that students came from a range of different European cultural and linguistic backgrounds). I used a qualitative research approach, drawing on ethnographic methods that included semi-structured interviews with head teachers, teachers and students; focus groups with students; participant observation; and documentary analysis.

There are 14 European Schools located in seven European Union countries. The schools I selected for the study were located in England, Belgium and Spain. This decision was partly based on Bereday's (1964) suggestion that comparative researchers should have knowledge of the language and culture of the countries under study and should have spent a significant period of time resident in those countries in order to avoid or at least to be aware of one's own cultural biases as far as possible. Since I am a British-born-and-raised English speaker, had studied French and Spanish, and had spent time living in England, Belgium and Spain, I felt that I had developed a sufficient level of intercultural competence (Byram, 1997) that would enable me to undertake research in these particular locations, particularly in terms of establishing rapport and trust with the participants and interpreting the data gathered from different (national and European) perspectives.

Despite these competences, I embarked upon my research with the view that I was largely an outsider. I had no direct experience of the European School system and had little knowledge of it, given that very little research had been carried out on this unique education system. I endeavoured to learn as much as possible about the schools and about my particular research topic from the insiders who were teaching and studying there. I had concerns about how the various aspects of my outsider status might affect the research. My outsider status became even more evident when I was asked by a participant if I had been educated in or had worked in a European School. When my answer was negative, I was questioned as to why I was interested in conducting research on the European Schools, given that I had no experience of them. Many participants were intrigued by

this and wondered how I had come to learn about the European Schools, which were not very well known outside the system. I informed them that I had read about them in my research on the European dimension in education and that I had friends who had attended a European School.

I often wondered how both teachers and students perceived this and other aspects of my identity, and in turn how they would treat me (i.e. to what extent there would be a level of respect and mutual understanding and how this would affect the research). I thought of myself even more as an outsider as I was a doctoral student of comparative and international education who was not a qualified teacher and had little experience of teaching in schools. How would I therefore relate to these teachers and establish rapport? Interestingly, our conversations did not revolve around local pedagogical matters but more around the wider European, international and global dimensions of education. The knowledge I had gained on these matters, having completed two master's degrees in this subject area, proved useful as the teachers and I discovered we had common interests. My academic background and the fact that I was a doctoral student at Oxford University also afforded me a level of respect and recognition that I was a serious researcher with a genuine interest in understanding my research topic. The insecurity I had felt on this matter because of my own initial perceived outsider status started to fade as we discovered shared interests, views and perceptions, enabling me to slide more towards the insider status of the insider/outsider continuum.

Our conversations were therefore an important part of getting to know one another and establishing rapport and trust. I tried to be as open and honest as possible about my research intentions without giving so much away that it would jeopardise the generation of authentic data. It was important that participants' conversations reveal their understandings and perceptions of the research topic without prior reflection or influence from my own input. However, this became increasingly difficult as my research presence over time inevitably did have some impact – for example, it drew further attention to the idea of the European dimension in teachers' minds. Conducting interviews early on in the research process was one approach I used to draw out teachers' original views. I maintained a friendly, approachable and talkative persona to help the participants feel comfortable with me. This helped the participants to open up and share their knowledge and experiences with me, facilitating the co-creation of knowledge and greater authenticity of the data that were gathered and interpreted.

As my research progressed, I came to realise that there were many insider elements to my membership status as I had much in common with my research participants. For example, we all saw ourselves as having post-national identities that encompassed European, international and intercultural elements of citizenship and belonging; we shared experiences of having lived in more than one (mostly European) country, a passion for encountering and interacting with different people and speaking in different languages, a shared idealism in the objectives of the EU for peace and learning to live together, an interest in European politics, and a left-wing and open-minded mentality. As my insider status became more recognised, I began to face new challenges, different from those I had encountered initially when I was more of an outsider. One of these included maintaining distance in order to be an 'objective researcher', especially at the school where I had conducted my pilot study, since there was much more familiarity at this stage between myself and the participants.

I found that it was essential and indeed very helpful to engage in critical reflexivity during all stages of the research as it enabled me to work through some of the tensions, confusions and insecurities experienced as part of the shifting insider/outsider journeys and to make sense of them and their influence on the entire research process (Sultana, 2007, p. 377). In some ways, it seemed inappropriate and irrelevant to think in terms of who is classed as 'us' (insiders) and 'them' (outsiders), as the boundaries of people's identities were blurred and constantly changing. Critical reflexivity also enabled me to work towards a deeper understanding and awareness of my own identity/positionality and how this interacts with the identity/positionality of my participants. I realised that critical reflexivity also impacted positively on the co-construction of knowledge and helped me to continually plan and re-evaluate methodological and ethical research processes as the research progressed.

Conclusion

We have reviewed some of the key theoretical and methodological challenges and issues involved in negotiating insider/outsider status when engaged in qualitative research in international educational settings. By presenting a collection of reflections from our own research experiences, we support and extend the notion that qualitative researchers are not either/or insiders/outsiders. Instead they continuously negotiate their multiple identities and aspects of the research process by moving fluidly within 'the space between' (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009), which contains several linked social, cultural and other continuums and contextual elements (de Andrade, 2000; Sherif, 2001). These include the ways that cultural positioning and representation influence the balance of power and rapport between participants and the researcher, both initially and over time. Researchers' manipulation of their positionalities in relation to contextual factors also impacts on their sense of identity, their relationship with the Cultural Other, the entire research process, and the production of knowledge.

Our examples reinforce the methodological benefits of rigorous and continuous critical reflexivity as this enables researchers to frame and problematise the impact of their subjectivities on the research environment. It also transforms the researcher by allowing them to dynamically critique and challenge their own values, be outside their comfort zone when inhabiting 'the space between', actively deconstruct preconceived assumptions, and develop new research theories and practices for the future. The values that critical reflexivity promotes allow for the co-creation of knowledge among researchers and the researched, and they are therefore more likely to generate strong, authentic and credible research outcomes.

Qualitative researchers, particularly those in the field of international education, can learn much from the historical and contemporary debates on insider/outsider dilemmas. As we have argued, an understanding of the theoretical, conceptual and methodological opportunities and dilemmas of insider/outsider positions can enable qualitative researchers to better prepare for and tackle the challenges of producing reliable and ethical research findings. Critical reflexivity is an integral part of this process as it enables researchers to be constantly aware of their position in 'the space between'. Such awareness enables researchers to make informed decisions with regard to research methodology, data and research outcomes.

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