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Deconstructing insider–outsider researcher positionalality

Hanin Bukamal 

Reflexivity involves the researcher’s attentiveness to cultural aspects of the research context. In this article, I deconstruct scenarios from a reflexive diary and interpret how these scenarios respond to an insider–outsider positionalality that is determined by my cultural identity, profession, gender and educational background. I examine reflexive dialogue as pertaining to several factors: the influence of my background on the research topic; the changing nature of positionalality in different cultural locations; methodological decisions that are based on my positionalality and the research context; preparation to conduct fieldwork in two distinct cultural contexts; and ways to establish rapport, approachability and cultural credibility. I conclude by acknowledging the value of reflexive practice, and by determining my ambivalent insider–outsider positionalality in different cultural locations.

Key words: reflexivity, insider–outsider, positionality, inclusive practice, comparative education

Introduction

In all interpretivist research there is an assumption that knowledge is situated in relations between people. With this assumption taking the foreground, the person doing the research takes a central role in the interpretation – in the discovery of situated knowledge (Cohen et al., 2007). In doing this, there is no pretence of dispassionate objectivity. Rather, researchers – with all their beliefs, and all their attitudes forged by background and life-history – are assumed to be an integral part of the research process. The researcher is assumed to have a *position*, and this position affects the nature of the observations and the interpretations that they make. The person of the researcher – their likes and dislikes, their backgrounds

and their pastimes, their vested interests and expectations – are acknowledged as taking a central part in the research process (Bryman, 2016). The researcher is an active, not passive, agent in acquiring knowledge of the processes, histories, events, language and biographies of the research context. Because of the importance of the nature of the relation between the researcher and research participants, the researcher's background – including class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, age, ideas, commitments and national identity – needs to be made explicit.

Positionality is the term given to this biography – a biography that pays particular attention to the context that creates the researcher's identity, an identity that will affect the way that the social world is seen and understood. Intersectionality and social standpoint theory established the foundation for the consideration of positionality in interpretivist research. The seminal work of Crenshaw (1991) on intersectionality and the coalition of racism and patriarchy illustrates how a researcher's intersectional identity creates a reflexive experience and multifaceted positionality. Hill Collins (2014), a prominent scholar in Black feminist epistemology, similarly argued for Black women's subjectivity and unique histories, stating that the combined consideration of race and gender shapes the experiences of women. Based on this thesis, researchers' transparency on their subjective experience is considered significant and enhances their credibility. Although 'positionality' is a term first used in the context of gender identity (Alcoff, 1988), it now refers in discussion about research to the much broader range of contextual factors that shape the researcher's identity and the role such factors may play in interpretative research. While the role of many of these factors (such as gender and ethnicity) have been well explored in the methodological literature, the role of national identity (as distinct from ethnicity) remains relatively unexplored.

In this article I look at this feature of positionality. I do so from the perspective of a Bahraini teacher educator researching inclusive policy and practice in the UK and Bahrain. In doing this, I examine in particular what I call an 'insider–outsider ambivalence', where the researcher is familiar with, and accepted in, two distinct cultural contexts. 'Ambivalence' is used to express the juxtaposition of my feelings for both insider and outsider positionalities, and the experiences associated with that in each country. This reflexive account is based on a cross-cultural study which compared the state of inclusion in the UK and Bahrain, and more specifically explored inclusive practices at a school and classroom level to implement inclusion policy.

Reflexivity and positionality

Hamdan (2009, pp. 378–379) defines reflexivity as:

a metaphysical analysis of the researcher's analysis of the researcher's account, one that examines the researcher's own input into the research process. It involves the researcher observing him or herself in the act of observing, researching him or herself in the act of researching.

Reflexivity comprises an awareness of how a researcher's background and experiences can largely shape all stages of the research process, including the research design and later interpretation of the findings. Researchers thus embed themselves in the process and outcomes of data collection (Hertz, 1997). Finlay (2002a) examines five forms of reflexivity: personal introspection, intersubjective reflection, mutual collaboration, social critique, and discursive deconstruction. This article will explore the insider–outsider ambivalence through reflexivity as personal introspection, through the subjective interpretation of the researcher's personal reactions to research encounters. Personal introspection is selected as opposed to the other forms, as it enables me as an educator to reflect on my interpretations of and conclusions about events, as a means to comprehend the experiences and teaching challenges of the participant teachers.

Some criticisms of reflexivity describe it as a self-indulgent and narcissistic practice, which focuses on perpetuating the voice of the researcher rather than the voice of the participants (Finlay, 2002a). Yet it remains a powerful tool for researchers to explore biases and incentives to which they are otherwise oblivious, and is considered conducive for the research process (Finlay, 2002b). Reflexivity is enacted in researchers' awareness of their position in the experience of fieldwork, and the nature of interactions with participants. It is an awareness of the researcher's voice as well as perpetuating the voice of participants (Hertz, 1997). A researcher's positionality simultaneously interacts with reflexivity, and is integral to how the data are collected and analysed.

There is a growing body of extant literature that explores the interaction between a researcher's cultural background in a research context with a different culture (Schwedler, 2006), or a similar culture (Ginorio, 2001). Some scholars (for example, Amanolahi, 2004; Brayda & Boyce, 2014; Rouhani, 2004) examine their native context after living in the West for

an extended period. While the authors initially experience an outsider positionality, familial connections in their home country grant them insider status through access to the research site and participants. Khan (2005) describes herself as a ‘third-world researcher who lives and works in the first world yet whose field of research is a third-world site’. Ghaffari (2019) narrates her experience of doing gender research in Iran and describes her positionality as that of an ‘intrinsic ambiguity’, which grants her both outsider and insider status.

Other researchers provide a reflexive dialogue pertaining to their cultural identity from a diasporic perspective when conducting research in their native country as well as their new country. Eguchi and Baig (2018) deconstruct ‘cultural re-entry’ through their respective Japanese and Indian nationalities with their emerging assimilation in American culture. The authors describe their perplexed identities in each of their original culture and new culture, as they re-enter their native country. This is also reflected by Narayan (1993) who disentangles her complex cultural identity and challenges her ‘native’ or insider status in two contexts. Özkazanç-Pan (2015) explores the contradiction of her cultural identity as a Turkish-American woman who is considered Turkish and Muslim when in the USA, and secular when conducting research in Turkey. The author is a citizen of both countries and unravels how her cultural identity is a blend of both nationalities, while each context only identifies her as being either American or Turkish.

Despite the valuable contribution of these studies, research is generally lacking where the same is explored in two countries and where the investigator is fully culturally established in, and familiar with, both contexts. In contrast to the literature mentioned earlier, I de-construct my insider and outsider perceptions of my positionality as someone who has continuously alternated between living in the West and my native country for short periods. This consequently led me to re-assimilate based on my geographical location, as well as re-negotiating my cultural identity. This is clearly articulated by Halualani (2008), who critically analyses the notion of diasporic movements, and the consequent combination and dissemination of cultural identity. My home country, Bahrain, is also a former protectorate of my current home in the UK (eGovernment, 2019). This, illustrating the potential influence of British culture on several Bahraini practices, adds to the complexity of my cultural identity.

While researcher positionality has been explored in the literature pertaining to cultural background and/or gender (for example, Ghaffari, 2019; Schwedler, 2006), other aspects of positionality require more emphasis. For instance, Amanolahi (2004) explains how his role as a university professor represents high status in the culture of Iran, which helped him gain the respect of gatekeepers and participants. The current article contributes to existing literature in the area of positionality by exploring my intersectional positionality in terms of my cultural background, gender and educational background, as well as my profession.

In this article, the reflexive dialogue enacted in my shifting positionality will therefore be of value to other researchers conducting comparative educational research. The article draws attention to the researcher's perceived and actual cultural positionality, and how it can significantly shape interactions with participants and the research process in a comparative study.

The study on which this article is based on was conducted in two primary schools in each country. In each of the four schools, the participants included one school principal, one assistant principal or SENCo, and two teachers. In this comparative case study, school principals were first interviewed to investigate national inclusive education practices in the UK and Bahrain. Second, teachers were interviewed and observed in the classroom, in order to examine teacher attitudes towards inclusion and their use of inclusive pedagogy. Lastly, all teachers in the participating schools were invited to complete a questionnaire which explored teacher attitudes towards inclusive education, and the inclusive teaching practices used.

In this article, I will thus examine my positionality as a Bahraini woman researching the use of inclusive pedagogy in the UK and Bahrain. The reflexive notes are from the research diary maintained throughout the fieldwork phase of doctoral research. The reflexive diary is focused on the nuances of the inclusive approach in the UK and Bahrain, and how practice is influenced by the socio-cultural context; but it also provides insight into my shifting positionality in each country. This article explores insider–outsider ambivalence as pertaining to (a) the influence of my background on the research topic, (b) the methodological decisions that are based on my positionality and research context, (c) ways in which I prepared to conduct fieldwork in two distinct cultural contexts, and (d) ways to establish approachability and cultural credibility.

Researcher background and methodological decisions

A researcher is considered an ‘insider’ when he or she shares particular attributes with the participants of the study. A researcher is considered an ‘outsider’ when he or she does not belong to the group to which the participants belong (Braun & Clarke, 2013). At first glance, being a Bahraini national would immediately assign me as an insider when researching Bahraini schools, while being an outsider in the UK. That is why it is crucial first to identify my background as a researcher. I am a Bahraini national, yet consider myself to be fully cognisant of Western culture, and accepted as a UK citizen when in the UK.

While I was born and brought up in Bahrain, I spent many years living in New Zealand and the UK. In between living in New Zealand and the UK, I lived in Bahrain for a number of years and was mentored by two colleagues from New Zealand in my first job at a university. The Western influence in my life is therefore extensive, which is compounded by my exposure to and interest in Western media. This is also heightened by the previous status of Bahrain as a protectorate of the UK, and the consequent influence on the political and education systems.

It is essential to note that my cognisance of Western culture relies on my subjective perception of what Western culture entails. For instance, I embody certain values which are more prominent in the West than in Bahrain. These include my interest in animal rights which motivated my vegetarian diet, as well as my attention to environmental issues which led my development of certain habits such as minimalism and recycling. These values have frequently been a source of conflict and social isolation in my home country. Paradoxically, when living in Western countries, the majority of my time is spent with people from my native background. That is mainly due to previous interactions with Western people that indicate misconceptions of Muslim and Arab culture, which I prefer to avoid.

The boundaries of my cultural identity have therefore consistently been difficult to determine and constantly evolve, as my identity is constructed in conjunction with Western and Muslim values. For instance, my interest in issues of social justice such as feminism and equality is most likely shaped by Western values, which inspired my interest and research in inclusive education, while my focus on family connectedness and respecting the elderly is elicited by the surrounding collectivist culture in Bahrain. This is consistent with the notion that ‘all culture is potentially global’ (Anderson-Levitt, 2012). This explains my initial

positionality in each country where I consider myself to be an insider, to a certain extent, in the UK and Bahrain.

My interest in inclusive education is also inspired by my career as a teacher educator at a teachers' college in Bahrain. As a teacher trainer, I am directly exposed to the challenges that pre-service and in-service teachers encounter in their careers, one of which is related to teaching a classroom of diverse learners. Part of my responsibility entails regular school visits to observe the teaching practice of my student teachers and provide the necessary support. My interest in inclusive pedagogy therefore originated from the need to support my student teachers in their pursuit of an inclusive classroom. My occupation as a teacher trainer might grant me insider status in the UK and Bahrain as I am fully informed of the challenges of the teaching profession, and I assume teachers would feel comfortable confiding in me. However, I might also be considered an outsider since a teacher trainer can be perceived as an evaluator. My positionality as a teacher educator therefore must subside as I enter schools in the UK and Bahrain. It is essential that I am not perceived by school staff as someone who is going to observe and evaluate their practice. As a researcher, my positionality must be that of an inquisitive insider, not as a coach or mentor helping to resolve teaching dilemmas with student teachers.

Mason-Bish (2018) stipulates that insider and outsider positionalities are dynamic and constantly changing depending on the context, which then determines participants' responses based on the positionality embodied by the researcher. Given this assumption, my positionality in Bahrain grants me insider status as a Bahraini/teacher educator while also assigning me outsider status as a researcher/Western-educated. In the UK, I can be considered an insider based on being a teacher educator/Western-educated and an outsider based on being a researcher/Bahraini. The intersectionality of these identities thus creates different conditions for being an insider or outsider, which largely respond to the research context.

The research context and my positionality influenced certain methodological decisions. This is consistent with Ahmed (2010), who asserts that the research context can largely determine the research methods chosen. I therefore attempted to create research methods that were considered culturally appropriate in both research contexts. When planning for the classroom observations, based on my insider professional positionality as a teacher educator, I refrained from videotaping the classroom interactions and chose only to utilise fieldnotes. Although videotaping would have been

very useful and certainly more efficient for recording fieldnotes and conducting later analysis, it would have complicated gaining access to schools and participants, and further tampered with the natural learning environment. As an insider to Bahraini culture, I believed that seeking approval from the conservative families in Bahrain to video-record their children in class would be challenging. I did not expect to face a similar issue in schools in the UK as a Western-educated insider; however, it was essential that the same methods were used consistently in both research contexts.

Another point of consideration is the selection of the participating schools. Public education in Bahrain is gender-segregated. Given my previous experience in visiting schools in Bahrain as a teacher educator insider, I knew I would certainly not feel comfortable spending my time in a boy's school with all-male staff. I realised that it might be considered inappropriate for a woman to spend all day, for several days, surrounded by male teachers and observing their work and interactions. While Hamdan (2009) predominantly explored the reflexivity of discomfort in terms of the discomfort of the participants with the research topic and the author's background as a Western-educated Arab Muslim woman, in my current example, my own discomfort as well as that of the participants determined the research method.

That cultural factor unquestionably shaped the research design and location of fieldwork, one that I might not have been aware of as a researcher with outsider status. Ahmed (2010) discusses similar cultural limitations in Bahrain for a female researcher conducting research in an all-male environment. In the UK, based on my knowledge of Western culture, I was aware that there was no such restriction. I knew that male teachers would not gaze at the floor while talking to me and that my gender would not determine the nature of our interactions and conversations, and thus would not limit participants' contribution. My insider positionality in both countries, based on my profession and gender, consequently alerted me to the appropriate research methods for each context.

The fieldwork phase began in the UK and then in Bahrain. Prior to approaching schools in the UK, I learned that in order to gain access to schools, I needed to obtain a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check. I was oblivious to this gatekeeping process, which made me aware of my outsider positionality in the UK. Schools were called and informed about the research project, and were asked to participate. After multiple rejections, one school

eventually agreed as the SENCo was research-inclined. This SENCo then introduced me to a SENCo from another school who also agreed on behalf of her school to participate. The difficulty of gaining access to schools further emphasised my outsider positionality in the UK.

Gaining access to schools in Bahrain was a different experience and highlighted my insider positionality. My status as a teacher educator in the only teachers' college in the country, and my various contacts in the Ministry of Education (MOE), granted me quick access to schools. My professional contacts notified me of two schools in particular that would be cooperative. All my school visits and observations were therefore arranged prior to my arrival in Bahrain due to my insider status. Based on the instances discussed above, insider status is not just determined by attributes shared by the researcher and participants or research context. Insider status is further defined by the researcher's knowledge of the context, and personal and/or professional experience in the specific setting, and is co-constructed by the researcher and participants. The access and selection of participants represented the onset of insider–outsider ambivalence, due to the emerging uncertainty of my position in both countries.

Preparing for fieldwork

According to Easterby-Smith and Malina (1999), insiders' background in and knowledge of a research context prepares them more efficiently and enables them to interpret events observed in the research context, whereas outsiders do not have the same ability. As an insider and teacher trainer, my prior work experience in conducting classroom observations informed me that most teachers in any research context are wary of being observed. While I sought to be treated as an insider during staff interactions and interviews, I attempted to solidify my role as an outsider and non-participant observer during classroom observations. It was essential that I did not interfere with the learning environment, in order to observe the most authentic version of classroom events. However, non-participant observer positionality was challenging to maintain, particularly in Bahrain, where teachers would regularly attempt to involve me in the lesson by asking me to comment on the students' behaviour or performance for feedback. My interpretation of this behaviour by teachers is that they considered me to be an insider. This was not replicated during my observations in UK schools, indicating teachers' consideration of me as an outsider.

In my previous experience of sitting in classrooms to observe pre-service teachers in training, children often assumed I was also a teacher and hence sought interactions with me. These interactions could include requesting feedback for their work, asking questions, and even asking for permission to do certain things. Although my role as non-participant observer was made clear, nevertheless the children in the classroom still sought interactions with me. This is also discussed by Bryman (2016), who indicates that certain situations require the involvement of the researcher, despite their adoption of a passive role. Later during the observations, students in the UK and Bahrain both sought interactions with me. Insider–outsider ambivalence was further emphasised, as my attempt to be an outsider during my observations in Bahrain was met with participants re-establishing me as an insider. The ambivalence was accentuated as I felt more at ease responding to students in Bahrain compared to the UK, despite my initial assumption of ‘insiderness’ in both contexts. This was mainly because I knew it was appropriate for a class guest to interact with learners as an insider from my previous experience in Bahrain. These guidelines were not clear to me in UK classrooms, so I refrained from interacting with the students whenever possible. This further emphasises my ‘insiderness’ in Bahrain, and ‘outsiderness’ in the UK.

Doing fieldwork in two countries that differ in language, religion and culture required some unanticipated preparatory work that responded specifically to the research context. My previous insider positionality, attained by living in another Western country, informed me of how to present myself in the UK. In the UK, it was quite acceptable to attend the school in my usual informal attire which mirrored teachers’ style. That included a pair of jeans, a jumper and a backpack. My ‘insiderness’ informed me that such attire is acceptable, if not preferred, to more formal attire.

The way I dressed completely transformed during my school visits in Bahrain. In Bahrain, having an insider positionality through my previous work notified me of the appropriate researcher dress and social demeanour. I was aware that more formal attire is necessary during school visits. Despite the warm weather, I dressed more conservatively by covering my arms with a long-sleeved shirt, tailored-fit trousers and shoes. This was still considered less conservative than the usual apparel of Bahraini school staff consisting of a head scarf and most probably an ‘abaya’. This is also reflected by Ahmed (2010) and Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman (2016), authors who dressed differently depending on the location of fieldwork. Changing my demeanour and dress emphasised an

insider positionality in both countries, and is considered a crucial consideration for comparative education researchers. It was essential that every attempt was made to blend into the school environment, which could facilitate building rapport with the participants. Blending into the research environment facilitates the fieldwork process, particularly given my aim to be unobtrusive and not to tamper with the natural classroom setting (Cohen et al., 2007). This is done in order for the observation notes to reflect actual classroom interactions. It also reflects my wish to minimise discomfort for myself and the participants, as my intention to integrate into the classroom environment arises from my assumption that it will grant myself and the participants more ease with the research process.

Prior to starting the fieldwork in Bahrain, I was feeling concerned about what I might find and the possibility that I could expose outdated inclusive practices. This trepidation was triggered by the process of applying for ethical approval from the Ministry of Education in Bahrain. My application was approved with the condition that I remove any negatively worded statements from the questionnaire which inquired about the 'barriers to inclusive education'. The ethical committee expressed the view that I cannot assume that barriers exist in the Bahraini education system, and instead I rephrased all these statements as 'facilitators of inclusive education'. I thus remained cautious about critiquing my own culture and revealing undesirable characteristics of my own country. There was a lingering fear that I might discover practices which were more aligned with exclusion than inclusion, and I expected to find a large disparity in the implementation of inclusive education policy between the two countries.

It is essential that this trepidation about the state of inclusion in Bahrain is 'bracketed', as my awareness of these assumptions could influence my interpretation of the findings (Fischer, 2009). An effective bracketing technique for this comparative study is through maintaining a reflexive diary from the onset of my doctoral journey. The diary enabled my initial assumptions continuously to be examined and compared to current deliberations emanating from the field. Another technique to balance my subjective assumptions is through data triangulation. To enhance the validity of the findings, data triangulation was performed between the quantitative and qualitative data sources (Reeves et al., 2008). This is a critical aspect of comparative educational research, particularly when the researcher is connected to the research context and is influenced by previous assumptions and experiences. This hesitation fuelled my conflicting insider–outsider positionalities in my home country. This is also mentioned by Hamdan (2009), who reports feeling like an insider and an outsider if

she is to uncover negative features of her own culture. This notion gradually shifted as the study progressed, and I gained an appreciation of how school and teaching practices are a direct representation of societal values which are unique to each cultural context. It is also part of my role as teacher educator that, if exclusionary practices have been identified in the study, appropriate recommendations are developed to help overcome these issues and work towards the implementation of inclusive education.

Hamdan (2009) stipulates that a researcher can embody the role of both an insider and an outsider within the same cultural group. While I shared a culture, religion and language with the participants in Bahrain, that did not automatically assign me an insider role. Although initial access to schools in Bahrain was achieved with relative ease, access for interviews was more challenging. Despite teachers' agreement to participate in the research project, a number of teachers demonstrated reluctance to be interviewed or audio-recorded. This could be largely due to them being unaccustomed to research practices or perhaps perceiving me as an outsider.

An outsider positionality in Bahrain further emerged, as I did not reciprocate cultural norms at the initial discussion with schools to schedule school visits. For example, there was some difficulty in determining the time of the first visit. When calling the school principal, she asked me to come in 'the morning' rather than indicating a specific time. This is a common cultural characteristic which is also acknowledged by Ahmed (2010), who suggests that Bahraini people are often only strict with time in the case of prayer, whereas for other occasions, people are more ambiguous in determining meeting times. While I was familiar with the tendency of the Bahraini people not to adhere strictly to time, this is not a characteristic I shared with my culture and I sought a specific indication from the participants. My punctuality, together with my less conservative appearance, emphasised an outsider status in my home country.

My conflicting insider–outsider positionality was also experienced in the UK. In the UK, I expected to be treated as an outsider, given my recent arrival in the country and inexperience with the education system. Therefore, upon introducing myself, I mentioned my previous experience in New Zealand to the participants to establish myself as an insider and validate my understanding of the context. In contrast, during the interviews, I reminded participants that 'I am not from here'. This was done in order to establish myself as an outsider; consequently, participants might be willing to provide more detailed answers

on the state of inclusion in the UK. While I initially strived to be an insider in both research contexts, thinking it would grant me more access to privileged information shared only with insiders, Hammersley (as cited in Hellowell, 2006) asserts that the validity of the research is not determined by an insider positionality. Participant knowledge can equally be extended to an outsider researcher, and both insider and outsider positionalities have strengths as well as weaknesses. In this instance, being an outsider can be advantageous as the researcher can gain more insight into a particular phenomenon where participants are more likely to reveal information, particularly sensitive information to an outsider (Katyal & King, 2014). Britton (2019) reports a similar advantage to ‘outsiderness’, in making participants feel more comfortable confiding in her. The effect of determining myself as an outsider in the UK is evident through the retrieved data, where details on national inclusive practices in the UK outweighed the depth on inclusive practices in Bahrain. The UK participants shared information about funding, national assessment and national curriculum, which was not reciprocated in Bahrain. That might be because participants in Bahrain perceived me as an insider and assumed my awareness of tacit knowledge pertaining to the status of inclusion in the country. It might also be that during the teacher interviews, I found myself to be more comfortable inquiring about the education system in the UK than in Bahrain. In the UK, it was expected that since I was a foreigner, the education system in the UK was largely unfamiliar to me, whereas in Bahrain, I felt ashamed when there was a gap in my knowledge of the education system, and therefore felt more hesitant about inquiring further.

My statement in the UK that ‘I am not from here’ is also consistent with ‘performed approachability’, whereby the researcher adopts the role of an ‘acceptable incompetent’ and enables the participant as the knowledge-holder (Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman, 2016). I felt more comfortable embodying the disposition of an acceptable incompetent in the UK than in Bahrain. This reified my positionality as someone keen to absorb as much information as possible.

Establishing rapport, approachability and cultural credibility

In this section, I navigate my way through the insider–outsider dichotomy in each cultural context and my reactions to the positions. The researcher–participant relationship is a central element of reflexive practice (Reeves et al., 2008). Therefore, I will explore how my different positionalities interacted and shaped my relationship with the participants, and how that potentially influenced the retrieved data. This is examined in three areas: establishing

rapport with the participants; exuding approachability as a researcher; and performing credibility.

Rapport

More time was spent in the participating schools than initially intended in order to build rapport with my participants and establish myself as an insider in both research contexts. I was fortunate enough to have been given access to the staff rooms for all the participating schools in the UK and Bahrain, which gave a unique insight into the school culture and the nature of teacher–teacher interactions as well as an opportunity to gain insider status. My experiences in the staff room in the UK and Bahrain were, however, disparate. In the UK, the staff room was an area where teachers predominantly spent their lunch break, while their desks were in their classrooms. Most of the staff sat quietly during lunch time to have their individual packed lunch, with minimal interaction with other teachers. During my time there, because the room was very quiet, it felt difficult to start a conversation with any of the teachers and gain insider status.

The staff room in Bahrain had a completely different atmosphere. In the very centre of the room there was a big coffee table which presented a variety of foods and snacks, and large flasks of tea and coffee. The staff room also included teachers' desks, where they would do the majority of their lesson planning and grading. As I sat in the staff room every day at break time, I noticed that each day a teacher was responsible for bringing her own contribution to the food table. The Bahraini staff rooms were filled with a sense of conviviality and I found it easy to talk to all the teachers in the staff room, even those who were not participating in the interviews and observations. The time spent in the staff rooms was an opportunity to build rapport with the participants, gain their trust and attain insider status. It is now obvious to me that attaining insider status in the Bahraini staff rooms was facilitated through the atmosphere, more so than in the UK staff rooms. This could be a reason for the higher response rate for the teachers' questionnaire in Bahrain compared to the UK, as I had the opportunity to talk to several teachers who were not participants in the observations in Bahrain.

An addition to this reflexive analysis is that in the several weeks of fieldwork, I conformed to Western lunch time practices by bringing my own individual packed lunch and did not offer to share it with others. This is an unusual practice by a Bahraini, who would usually prioritise sharing with others as

consistent with the generosity trait of the Bahraini people. This example therefore illustrates my ‘outsiderness’ to the Bahraini culture and the fluidity of my positionality within a single incident, and hence my insider–outsider ambivalence.

Approachability

Adu-Ampong and Adams (2020) discuss approachability within reflexive research as critical to establishing ‘insiderness’. According to Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman (2016), approachability communicates a non-threatening researcher disposition to the participants, whereby they can feel safe disclosing information and engaging in prolonged discussions without concerns about researcher judgement. During my first visit to the second school in Bahrain, one of the assistant principals introduced herself to me and said she knew my family and that we were distant cousins, which immediately established me as an insider and as approachable. Later in my interview with the assistant principal, I realised my insider status and her familiarity with my family were beneficial, as she appeared comfortable responding to the questions and provided valuable details. This assistant principal also introduced me to the participating teachers as her distant relative and asked that they take care of me, hence making me more approachable to the teachers. This gave me an insider advantage by facilitating rapport-building with participants, as well as empowering me with more confidence to move around the classrooms during observations. Moving freely during classroom observations might have allowed me to write better observation notes, as I was able to look closely at student work. On the contrary, in the UK, I felt restricted in my movement in the classrooms during observations, which may have reduced the detail and quality of the fieldnotes and emphasised my outsiderness.

Being an insider is not consistently advantageous to the researcher. Gaining insider status in Bahrain backfired when one of the participating teachers made a number of intrusive comments regarding my marital status and queries on my plans for pregnancy. This teacher suggested that I was too hard-working and that I should instead ‘spend more time with my husband’. In normal circumstances I would react in an aggravated manner, whereas because this teacher was a participant that I wanted to retain and continue observing, I agreed with her comment. This is consistent with performed approachability and specifically with ‘critical accommodation’, whereby the researcher utilises silence and self-regulation to ease the data collection process (Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman, 2016). While Mayorga-Gallo and

Hordge-Freeman (2016) applied this concept in terms of responding to comments from participants that were racially prejudiced, the same principles of critical accommodation are transferable to this incident. In this instance, being perceived as an insider was a disadvantage that might not have arisen if the teacher perceived me as an outsider, and explains my ambivalence towards insider status in Bahrain.

My insider–outsider position was also negotiated within a single interaction in Bahrain. With one school principal, establishing rapport was a challenge. During the course of the one-to-one interview, the principal was initially very guarded and hesitant to respond to the questions. It was clear that she considered me to be an outsider. This principal had only been appointed to the school two months prior to my fieldwork. During the interview, I expressed my sympathy regarding the fact that it must be very challenging for her to be appointed to an ‘excellent’ school. I then indicated that it must be difficult to measure up to the high expectations of the staff and the Ministry of Education of her performance, in order to maintain the ‘excellent’ standards in the school. In that moment, the principal became less hesitant and revealed that it was a constant struggle and that she had many sleepless nights thinking of this issue. This is another example of performed approachability (Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman, 2016), when the principal views me from an outsider to being an insider. For the remainder of the interview, she appeared more comfortable and started sharing some of the main challenges of the school, such as dealing with negative parent attitudes towards the inclusion of non-Bahraini students. Whether or not the participant’s openness was motivated by her perceived ‘insiderness’ or ‘outsiderness’ of my position, it is usually beneficial to researchers to have more open participants.

Credibility

Another essential component of ethnographic research is earning credibility with the research participants, in order for the participants to believe the research is worthy of their time (Adu-Ampong & Adams, 2020). Credibility was sought when the participants were presented with the participant information sheets and consent forms. This information was necessary for the participants to feel reassured that the research was licensed by an official authority. It was also critical that I earned more credibility in Bahrain, as the participants were unaccustomed to the research culture, by referring to my work at the teachers’ college which also funds my PhD studies. Earning credibility and insider status in Bahrain was challenging

during my first meeting with one of the school principals. After an attempt to state my years of experience in higher education, the principal minimised my experience by pointing out my youthful appearance and that I still ‘must be younger than 30 years old’. This was then followed by queries about my marital status and family situation. This interaction illustrates a characteristic of Bahraini culture where marital status and children somehow elevate a person’s social status and professionalism, as it reflects family values in the collectivist culture of Bahrain. This interaction consequently reduced my credibility and emphasised my outsidership in Bahrain. In the UK, I attempted to earn credibility by mentioning my previous experience researching schools in New Zealand. The participants, however, did not inquire further and in particular did not ask about my marital status. The pressure to appear competent in the UK was less than that in Bahrain, which further emphasises my credibility and insidership in the UK.

Adu-Ampong and Adams (2020) further discuss the concept of ‘cultural credibility’, whereby the researcher demonstrates an understanding of the culture, thus contributing to an insider position. This section will draw on two specific incidents when cultural credibility and its interaction with my positionality was negotiated in the UK and Bahrain. During the initial school visit in the UK, as I was talking to the assistant principal and explaining where I am from, I then asked her where she was from. She appeared very offended by that question and stated that she is ‘from here’. As an outsider who had only lived in the UK for one year at that point, I was at a disadvantage since I did not realise such a question was considered inappropriate. That later became clear to me when I informed my supervisor about this incident, who indicated that people who are born and raised in the country predominantly identify as British, regardless of their ethnic background. Despite my previous experience living in another Western country, that experience did not prepare me to understand the UK context and hence solidified my position as an outsider. My unawareness of the UK context and ‘outsidership’ therefore hindered my cultural credibility in this situation.

Being a Bahraini national, I was aware that generosity and hospitality are important cultural characteristics in Bahrain and it was essential that I reciprocated such sentiments. To further attain insider status and cultural credibility in Bahrain, I brought traditional Bahraini sweets to give away to the school staff to thank them for their participation. Later during a conversation with

the school administrator, telling her that this particular sweet was one of my favourites, she responded, ‘Oh so you are Bahraini?’ I was in complete shock as I have never been asked that in my own country. I then responded, ‘Of course I am Bahraini, isn’t that obvious from my appearance and accent?’ This reaction of overstating my connection to Bahraini culture was a spontaneous response to her statement. Generally, only Bahraini nationals are able to master the local accent, and Bahrainis share similar physical characteristics. Bahrain is also a very small country, and hence family names are easily recognised as local, which explains my astonishment at her question. Thoughts about this interaction then lingered and I wondered who else from the participating schools in Bahrain was not aware that I am a Bahraini national and how that has influenced their contribution to the research. It might be that my less than conservative appearance influenced that assumption about my background. Despite my attempt at establishing my insider status, I was established as an outsider by this statement from the school administrator.

In a different encounter with the school principal in Bahrain, she recognised the store I bought the sweets from and said, ‘This is in Riffa’, an area she is from, so I said, ‘Yes, I grew up near Riffa so I am used to the area’, thus establishing myself as an insider. Other teachers approached me to thank me for the sweets, even those who were not participants in the interview/observation portion of the study, but were requested to complete the questionnaire. Now that the teachers in this large school were familiar with me, it might have encouraged them to complete the questionnaire, which would otherwise not have been a priority. My action of bringing sweets might have unintentionally resulted in a higher response rate to the teacher questionnaires in Bahrain than in the UK. This example demonstrates how my positionality is constantly evolving depending on interactions with different participants. Despite having personally perceived my insiderness, my positionality was still challenged by some of the participants, thus deepening the feelings of ambivalence. Being a Bahraini national and an insider enabled me to acknowledge an important cultural custom, which I was not able to recognise as an outsider in the UK and did not gain a similar advantage in UK schools.

Conclusion

In this cross-cultural study, I negotiated my shifting insider–outsider positions in each country. The account illustrated in this article was that of a subjective positionality. Hertz (1997) supposes that researching one’s

own culture exposes researchers to being ‘blinded by the familiar’, while researching a different culture potentially exposes a researcher to being ‘culture blind’. As I looked back on the subtle indications of culture in the UK and Bahrain, I found it difficult to identify my own culture. While I initially believed myself to be an insider in the UK, I have come to the realisation through this reflexive exercise that my awareness and experience in Western culture does not necessarily make me an insider. The same applies to Bahrain; while being in schools constituted some familiarity due to my profession, my outsidership was inescapable. This explains why Hamdan (2009) refers to this process as ‘reflexivity of discomfort’. In my case, the discomfort pertains to myself as a researcher and to my participants’ discomfort in the fieldwork process.

There was still great value to the reflexive experience. It was a journey of self-discovery, in which aspects of my positionality, to which I was not previously attentive, were revealed. It was an opportunity to acknowledge my values and prejudices. Reflexivity allowed me to gain insight into my own behaviour in the interviews and observations, and how that might have influenced the findings consequently. It made me aware of my position in all stages of the research. Reflexivity gave me a recurring reminder to think objectively, despite this being unattainable. Reflexivity empowered me with the introspection necessary to perpetuate the nuances in participant contributions, particularly in this comparative context.

The benefits of ‘insiderness’ have been highlighted throughout this reflexive dialogue. These include gaining access to gatekeepers and participants, as well as reducing the discomfort of the researcher and participants. It is also vital to acknowledge the drawbacks of ‘insiderness’, which include reduced explanations from the participants and potential blurring of professional boundaries during interactions. It is also evident that researchers are able to utilise either ‘insiderness’ or ‘outsiderness’ to further their research interest. While I initially explored the ambivalent insider–outsider positionality, it became clear that in many interactions I was simultaneously an insider and an outsider. Due to exposure to globalisation and diaspora, any researcher can experience insider–outsider ambivalence, despite never having explored outside their original context. Hertz (1997) suggests it is essential that the fluidity between insider and outsider positions is acknowledged. It is not *either* insider *or* outsider; they truly exist on a continuum, or, as suggested by Humphrey (2007), we should activate the hyphen in insider–outsider. ‘Insiderness’ and ‘outsiderness’ were

constantly shifting, even within the same interaction. It goes beyond nationality, upbringing and influence. It has then become evident that researchers' positionality is inherently multi-dimensional and has at least three main possibilities, which are: the researcher's perceived positionality, the researcher's perceived positionality by the research participants, and the researcher's actual positionality.

Insider–outsider positioning in the field of comparative education is predominantly explored in one country to analyse a particular education system. This article therefore offered a unique perspective of the positionality of a single researcher when conducting research in two countries. The reflexive analysis is a further contribution to ongoing dialogue in qualitative research exploring reflexivity, and can serve as a guide to other scholars embarking upon cross-cultural research. The article illustrated the importance of reflexivity for research in comparative education, as it allows researchers to be aware of their biases and assumptions throughout the research process. The reflexive exercises, in addition to data triangulation and bracketing, are the main methodological insights for researcher positionality in comparative education research. Through the incidents discussed in this article, it is evident that performed approachability and specifically critical accommodation are essential attributes for researchers conducting qualitative research in a comparative context, as they reduce the researcher's influence on the data collected, as well as permitting access to participant perspectives through in-depth consideration. It is vital for cross-cultural educational researchers not only to pay attention to insider–outsider positioning, but also to acknowledge different facets of positionality, such as cultural, professional, socio-economic and linguistic. Positionalities are not dichotomous, as a researcher can embody an insider professionally while being an outsider culturally. Another important aspect to consider is whether that positionality is subjective and perceived by the researcher, and how it compares to the participants' perception of the researcher's positionality. While a researcher might have the illusion of being an insider, that sentiment might not be shared by participants. Contemplating researcher insider–outsider positioning is an essential investigator attribute, as it can enhance rapport with the participants and lead to more thorough findings.

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