Negotiating the British Educational Research Association (BERA) Guidelines whilst Researching in India.

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Introduction

This paper seeks to discuss how the British Educational Research Guidelines (BERA) 2011 were interrogated and actively interpreted to facilitate how ethical processes were negotiated during a doctoral research study in a case site in urban India. Two ethical dilemmas and their resolutions from the field are provided to offer the reader an insight into how interpretations of the guidelines during a negotiated process helped to solve the dilemmas in a culturally sensitive manner. This active interpretation of the BERA guidelines can be utilised in all educational research.

The Research Study

The overarching aim of the study is two-fold: to develop a rich, contextual understanding of children's play and learning in an early childhood education setting within a marginalised community in urban India and to problematise the application of dominant minority world discourses to the lives of young children living in majority world contexts. It seeks to speak to studies of children and childhood in the majority world and critiques of the notions of a 'normal' child or childhood (Corsaro, 1997; Woodhead, 1999; Kellet, 2005; Viruru, 2005; Montgomery, 2009, Gupta, 2011; Greene, 2013; Alderson, 2015).

Methodology

The case study method was employed due to the researcher's existing relationship with the school, which gave access to an otherwise inaccessible community. It offered the flexibility to redesign the methodology in the field (Yin, 1993) depending on the needs of the community whilst also allowing for the generation of fuzzy generalisations (Bassey,1999). Due to its

location within an interpretivist paradigm, this research study does not seek universal truths (Albon and Mukherji, 2010).

Data collection consisted of two research trips per year, over two years, to build a living picture (Clark and Moss, 2011) of one hundred and twenty children's lives in the school. The methods employed include the Mosaic Approach (Clark and Moss, 2011), informal interviews, and ethnographic methods. The children in the study are aged between three and eight years.

Endeavouring to empower the school management as equal partners (Bevan, et al, 2015), and to respect the school's relationship with parents and local communities, a negotiated process was employed. The negotiated research process (Grout, 2004; Bevan, Gutwill, Petrich, and Wilkinson, 2015) was chosen as an appropriate method to undertake in this research study because of the dialogical and relational nature of education as a discipline and the empowerment of the participants as equal partners (Bevan, Gutwill, Petrich and Wilkinson, 2015). Decisions about methodologies and ethical processes were subject to negotiation (Yin, 1993). It allowed for a space to dialogue and for the researcher to utilise reflective practice to make professionally considered and responsive judgements.

The Case Site:

The case site is a not-for-profit, English speaking school in urban India managed by a Non-Government Organisation (NGO). The school targets what it terms 'underprivileged' children between three and fifteen years of age. Most registered children are Hindu and live in ten official slum settlements surrounding the school. The dominant caste in the school is Dalit. Membership of this lowest caste within the Hindu system bestows marginalised status – derogatively referred to within India as 'untouchable'. Although their presence permeates life in the local city, by virtue of their caste, Dalit members are considered to live on the fringes of society and thus considered hard to reach.

Dalit caste members had no opportunity to access education until the 2010 (Right to Education Act, 2009). Thus, most parents in the school are illiterate and untrusting of the education system. Many children presenting at the school have no official documentation or

knowledge of their birth date. Many have been subject to systemic and physical violence due to their caste making them suspicious of anyone outside their caste, especially those holding positions of privilege or power[1].

Ethically Considered and Responsive Research in Education:

Educators are used to making situated judgements or 'phronesis' which occur when there is a conflict between responsibility and accountability (Pitman, 2012). Phronesis is described by Pitman as "practical judgement embedded in a moral purpose and the achievement of the good" (2012, p133). Skanfors also describes a researcher's 'Ethical Radar' (Skanfors, 2009) which employs reflexive and responsive judgement between what is situationally ethical with what is officially ethical. It is argued here that an educational researcher could use that ethical radar in the same way as phronesis to interpret the BERA guidelines while in the field. The employment of an ethical radar or phronesis throughout the research process allows for a careful balancing of an ethic of care (Noddings, 2013) with an ethic of justice (Mortari and Harcourt, 2012) which results in considered and responsive judgements. It allows the researcher to interpret guidelines, negotiate with local partners, and apply them critically in a situated manner, using professional, context driven judgements.

Some considerations from the field

For this study the BERA – Ethical Guidelines for Research (2011) as well as Maynooth University policies were employed. Two ethical dilemmas that occurred when researching in the field and the solutions will be presented below. An insight into the active interpretation

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[1] History of violence against the Dalit caste and the reasons for it are outside of the scope of this paper. Provided here is a link to a brief overview: "Landless Dalits are at the bottom of the age-old social hierarchy, making them vulnerable to discrimination and attacks by upper-caste Hindus, including recent ones by hard-line *'gau rakshak'* vigilantes who have lynched them on suspicion of eating beef or transporting cows, which they regard as sacred." https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-women-books/indias-unequal-land-ownership-at-root-of-caste-violence-dalit-writer-idUSKBN1AK1GI

of the BERA guidelines during the process of negotiation with the participants in the field is offered:

Dilemma One

The school considered itself the sole gate-keeper and as such did not think parental consent was necessary for the researcher. Its reasons were as follows: (1) Due to high political tensions there was already unrest in children's community[2] (2) the presence of a white, European researcher in the school may attract unwanted attention or extortions of money. (3) Most of the pre-school children in the research project have no prior relationship with the school, thus the school is in a tentative position with new parents (often minors themselves) and did not want to alarm them with official forms. (4) Reflecting local practice, the school has traditionally been the gatekeeper to children and their data.

Interpreting the BERA Guidelines

Although the guidelines say informed consent should be obtained prior to the research process getting underway, it also states that the researcher should aim to avoid deception *unless* the research design requires it, or the researcher's welfare is put in jeopardy (BERA, 2011, p6). The school made the case that tentative relationships formed with new parents allowed vulnerable young children continued access to education, healthcare, and food and that disrupting that process with official paperwork could cause the parents to withdraw their children causing them harm. It also argued that due to political tensions the welfare of all participants would be put in jeopardy if it were to disseminate the consent forms alerting local politicians to the presence of a white, European researcher. Using an ethical radar to

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[2] Political tensions in this instance refers to the increasing tensions in India between the nationalist party in power, BJP (with a history of extremist Hindu beliefs and policies) and other liberal parties, which has further agitated centuries long unrest between Dalit caste members and Brahmin caste members. This phenomenon is known as 'casteism'. It has caused outbreaks of violence and unrest (as recently as New Year's Eve 2017 in Mumbai and Pune). There have also been many instances of local politicians looking to extort money from NGO's and businesses for their own gain, especially if these NGO's are seen to be supported by European or American money i.e.; INGOs.

interpret the BERA guidelines in this instance led the researcher to consider the risks to the welfare of the children, the school, and herself outweighed the risks of not having consent prior to entering the field.

The 1992 iteration of BERA cited in Mortari and Harcourt (2012) suggested that when interviewing children under 16 years "permission should be obtained from the school, and if they so suggest, the parents" (2012, p237). This would suggest that (at least historically) the school were considered the gatekeepers of children. The school argued that in line with local culture and practice it was the gatekeeper, thus when interpreted with an ethical radar the researcher, using reflexive and situational judgements, agreed that the school could be considered the gatekeeper (in line with local custom) in this instance.

Dilemma Two

A decision was taken prior to the Maynooth University ethics process, to anonymise the data as per BERA guidelines (2011) but during the pilot trip the school expressed dissatisfaction. Its rationale was three-fold: (1) As co-researchers and equal partners it wanted recognition for doing half the work. (2) Children and parents who have no official, documented identity (at least 10% of the data set had no recorded birth dates) should be offered the choice of anonymity or recognition in any official document. (3) The school wished to promote the potential of the children in this (often invisible) community.

Interpreting the BERA Guidelines

The guidelines state that although anonymising participants' data is the norm, their right to be identified must be recognised; participants, guardians or "responsible others" can waive the right to anonymity (BERA, 2011, p7). Through the utilisation of the negotiated process it became apparent that the school was resolute in its desire to be named in the research study. The guidelines also state that "in some contexts it will be the expectation of participants to be so identified" (ibid p7). However, there is a note of caution that age or vulnerability may cause comprehension constraints. In such cases, it states that researchers must work

collaboratively and gain the approval of 'responsible others' (ibid p6-7). There is room in this guideline to interpret the school as a 'responsible other'.

After lengthy consideration of the school's argument about children and parents' right to their identity in conjunction with a reflection on the UN Guidelines on the Convention on the rights of the Child 1989 (particularly articles relating to the 'Preservation of Identity', 'The Child's right to an Opinion', 'Children of Minorities or Indigenous People', and 'Other forms of Exploitation') the researcher made a reflective, culturally situated judgment to agree to offer all participants the choice to make an informed decision (in consultation with the school and teachers) be identified or to remain anonymous. This resulted in a resubmission for ethical approval from the Maynooth University Ethics Committee, which was granted.

In Conclusion

The argument is made that the BERA guidelines could be actively interpreted by educational researchers (along with a negotiated approach with local stakeholders) to make considered and responsive ethical judgements in the field. It is through this process of careful interpretation considerate of local, situated knowledge that opens the possibility of a space that facilitates and respects other forms of knowledge and ethical values offering further opportunities for educational research.

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