

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Insider or outsider, who decides? An auto-ethnographic analysis of the continuum and ethics of insiderness within a professional PhD

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Abstract: An insider researcher is closely connected to the research subject so needs to be aware of the possible assumed cultural understandings that would be more apparent to an outsider researcher. However, there are multiple levels of insiderness and participant perceptions are critical to the co-creation of researcher position. Through an auto-ethnographic discussion of a PhD (Professional) research project, it is clear that participants manipulate researcher insiderness to create zones of comfort from which to discuss sensitive issues. A PhD (Professional) looks to carry out research which can be applied to practical problems within the student's work environment. Researching within a workplace where some colleagues do not consent to being a participant but have an influence over the thought processes involved with the research leads to a conclusion that the insider continuum may apply to all researchers. The observations in this article were made in a research journal the researcher kept during data collection during for their PhD (Professional) in Education. This research was focused on the factors affecting teacher well-being. While insider research has been discussed extensively in the literature, it assumes the position of power to be in the hands of the researcher. This article reports on the different levels an insider researcher can assume during a PhD (Professional) research project which is not only depended on the position a researcher supposes but also how the participants perceive the researcher as a co-construction of insider positioning. The manipulations that participants undertake during and after interviews is analysed to show how this co-construction is created. These manipulations are important to both the participant and researcher, and is significant because the power exerted by participants is often ignored in current literature. Ignoring the participants use of power dehumanises them and is an injustice to those we are indebted to for our data.

Keywords: insider research, teacher wellbeing, qualitative research, auto ethnographic

1 Introduction

Insider research is conducted by researchers who have an understanding of and connection with the field researched [1]. However, much of the literature tends toward the insiderness as seen from the point of view of the researcher [2-4]. This discussion aims to move the focus toward the viewpoint of the participant and how they can control the positioning of the researcher on the insider continuum using my own research as an example. An autoethnographic discussion of different levels of insiderness during interviews in qualitative research data collectin and how this is directed by the participants of these interviews to create an environment of comfort for them in which to be able to consider sensitive issues will be offered. This article will add to the study of insider research by clearly analysing exactly how specific participants have sought to influence an insider, who is someone they know and so have more opportunity for this kind of manipulation, which is under researched currently. Foucault (1977: 153) [5] stated; 'Nothing in man – not even his body – is sufficiently stable to serve as a basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men' and so reflection on how participants view the position of the researcher is important to provide deeper understanding of the research process and the data it produces.

Mercer (2007) [6] suggests that the insider/outsider positions are not a dichotomy but a continuum which I recognise, as for my PhD (professional) in Education I conducted interviews with people who I was working with, had been colleagues with, and teachers I did not know at all. As these interviews progressed, I became aware that my participants were exerting power over me as a researcher as much as I was over them. This article aims to discuss a number of different

insider positions held by one researcher and how this may have been influenced by manipulations by the participants to create a position from which to discuss possibly sensitive issues.

I conducted my PhD as a part-time qualification while working full-time in secondary education. As I became more engaged in the research I began to feel that my 'insider' status changing which eventually led me to consider the concept of insiderness. Therefore, I aim to analyse the definition of insiderness and then use examples from my own data to illustrate how participants seek to influence this.

1.1 What is an insider?

A researcher who is deeply involved on a day-to-day basis with the field they are evaluating can be defined as an insider, whereas a researcher who comes in from outside the field to conduct research and so does not have a personal connection with the group being studied could be defined as an outsider [7].

Being an insider researcher can come with key advantages including additional insider knowledge which adds richness, honesty and depth to the data gathering [8]. However, there are drawbacks associated with insider research including that life happens around the research and the management of this is not widely written about [9]. There is a risk of overlooking ingrained cultural assumptions or prejudices as an insider researcher but there are benefits of insider fluidity which can give a richer understanding of the issues being studied and supplies a number of positions from which the researcher can critique their own assumptions [10, 11].

Researcher positionality was something I was aware of throughout my PhD as I was a teacher conducting research about education and teachers. During the interview process I became aware of multiple levels of insider positionality which meant that my understanding of what each individual was communicating was different. Equally, their perceptions of me and my position within various roles connected to education varied greatly. Drake and Heath (2011: 22) [12] suggest that 'people in institutions must be personally desirous of knowing or achieving something that only the institution or others in it can provide, and there must be knowledge exchange.' Participants voiced the opinion that the research could be influential for their wellbeing and some had taken time to discuss what they would say to me with peers which demonstrates that they were willing to take part in order to help achieve something that they felt outsiders do not have a deep understanding of. There were also only two participants who were current colleagues but they had a deeper understanding of my roles so could feel confident that all opinions were confidential within the confines of anonymity.

The number of different inside positions may have influenced the kind of data produced in the analysis of interviews but I also propose that participants manipulated my positionality to create a comfortable zone for discussion by developing a relationship between interviewer and interviewee.

2 Results and analysis: Different levels of insider research

2.1 Materials and methods

The following analysis is based on research carried out by McQuade (2024) [13]. During data collection for that PhD (Professional) project, some participants appeared to be trying to exert power over the researcher. This was documented in the research journal, and from that, the following analysis is offered.

Mercer (2007) [6], Chavez (2008) [14] and Hellowell (2006) [15] suggest that the insider/outsider positions are not a dichotomy but a continuum that is flexible depending on time, location and purpose. This is also true of the participant, whose perspectives are also important for the creation of researcher position. For this article, 4 participants were selected out of 17 which took part in the original research [13]. The original sample were self-selecting after being sent a generic approach through the 'enquiries' email of secondary schools with connections to the Lincolnshire Teaching Schools Alliance. These were selected for ease of access. The selection criteria meant that they were all secondary school teachers in Lincolnshire. The 4 discussed here made a significant impression in the researchers research journals. They are a 50/50 mix of men and women and all had some kind of managerial responsibility as well as being teachers. They all come from different schools.

When preparing to gather my data, my reading suggested that the participants are a passive part of the process. Authors such as Creswell (2007) [16] and Cohen et al (2018) [17] outline the power relations that a researcher should be aware of in interviews and propose that researchers hold much power over the participant. To assist with the management of this I followed the advice of Maharaj (2016) [18] and kept a research journal throughout the interview gathering stage which helped me analyse what my participants were saying around the interview as well as within it. It allowed me to make notes of the conversations and circumstances before and after the recorded interview. Consequently, keeping a research journal also helped me process some of the unforeseen challenges which developed during my research period and fortuitously became a tool for safeguarding my wellbeing as a researcher as well as a research technique. My insider position was a joint construct between the researcher and the participant which is unique for each participant. Four examples from my research illustrate how this fluidity can be co-created.

3 Results

3.1 Example 1

The individual in this example did not know me at all. Their school was distant to mine and was not engaged with the Research School Network I was involved with so my reputation did not proceed me in this case. It quickly transpired that they had agreed to the interview because they thought I was an ex-student of the school. I offered them the opportunity to withdraw and the following conversation took place:

Paul – So are you a teacher then?

Researcher – I am, yes.

Paul – Right.

Researcher – Yeah, I'm a Geography teacher.

Paul – I'm a Geography teacher.

Researcher – Yay! I'm also Research and Development Co-ordinator for Teaching and Learning at [similar type of school to Paul's].

Paul – Right. And also you're doing a PhD?

Researcher – Yes.

Paul – Oh, I'm happy to help then.'

This short exchange offered a number of situations from which Paul could decide his position in relation to me and my research. Firstly, and possibly most importantly, the shared subject specialism meant a joint understanding of the kind of people we both are. The next stage would have been to ask which side of Geography, physical or human, the person is particularly interested in to gauge their epistemological stance. Paul does not do that which suggests that the knowledge of a shared subject is enough to help him feel comfortable. Secondly, he was an Assistant Head with an interest in my area of leadership which helped him understand what level of speech I would have an in-depth knowledge of. Thirdly, coming from a similar kind of school meant that we had a shared understanding of this style of education and the traditional tensions between different types of schools in the county could be put aside. This was all established in a very short space of time but he made the decision that these shared experiences were enough for him to be 'happy to help'. It important to note that he asked the question which started this process of rapport building and he made the final decision as to whether this positioning was enough to offer him a comfortable place from which to conduct the interview.

3.2 Example 2

At the other end of the continuum, some of the participants were people who I had met through teaching, but they had become long terms friends. In one case, as an insider I knew far more than the participant was willing or able to verbalise during the interview. I had consciously chosen to leave the choice of interview location to the interviewee as I felt this would enable them to choose places of comfort. However, in this interview it may have restricted how much the participant felt they could share at the time. An extract from my interview with 'Karen' illustrates the depth of knowledge which I was trying to draw out for the transcript:

Researcher – You've been through a lot recently. Are you the kind of person you're talking about where the job probably has saved you?

The interviewee's response to this told a lot more to me as a friend than it said to me as a researcher:

***Karen** – Probably. I feel like that in the last few months. The low point I suppose was, you were there, you saw it first hand, when I had that course work to do and everything else was going on around it and I couldn't even do that. That pressure was there and I couldn't even get that done. But now that's out the way, actually going into school is where, and actually even before that, when I was having issues before that and Mum and everything, I could go into school and just be [Karen]. Just do what I do. Kids respect me, unlike some others, and, you know, they are the older kids in particular, care about me and they, do you know what I mean? And it felt like I was actually there and everything was going well. Even the staff around me, all my friends, 'Hi [Karen], how are you' genuinely interested rather than, well I didn't even get that from some people.*

This posed some serious ethical issues as an insider researcher. I knew what she was referring to and she knew that I would know because I had been there and I did see it. However, this interview was conducted at a location where Karen was very comfortable but not necessarily free to speak her mind. At various points she would give me non-verbal indications as to what she was referring to but I felt that this meant that I could not develop this line of enquiry within the interview or the analysis as it was not said specifically. It could be argued that the imbalance of power between a participant and insider researcher is evident here because it was my decision how far I could take the topic but her trust in me as a friend meant that she could control what was said while also knowing that I would understand. This example highlights the importance of insider researchers using emotional intelligence to be fully aware of the insinuations interviewees may make when speaking but also why certain aspects are not made explicit.

3.3 Example 3

This example illustrates how participants can use the insider status of the researcher to continue adding points even after the interviews have finished and how the interviewees consider their influence before the interview takes place.

Firstly, after I stopped recording for this interview the participant said more that I would have liked on record and she gave permission for it to be logged in the research journal. Then, just as we were leaving she received an email from a work colleague and she stopped me to say it might be something to do with the interview because she and the colleague had been considering what was important to get across in relation to my research topic. I had the opportunity to discuss this with her at a later date and she said they had made a list because they felt it was important for their voices to be heard and, again, I logged this in the research journal. Although, there is some consideration in the literature that participants exert power and that they consider being involved in the interviews to be empowering [10], Taylor (2011) [19] observes that the field of insider research involving friends is under theorised and could have an impact on the processes of perception and interpretation by the researcher. Subsequently, Brewis (2014) [20] supports this by noting that while some features, such as the ethical implications of researching friends, is well discussed across disciplines but other aspects, such as the implications of convenience sampling, are under developed.

3.4 Example 4

The final example is fraught with ethical issues. However, it was the participant himself who decided that it was important for him to be included in the research. Not so much to make sure his voice was heard in relation to the research topic, but that his voice would continue to be heard when he could no longer voice it himself. This interviewee became ill after agreeing to the interview. He wanted to continue with being a participant and as an insider, I could check repeatedly that he was happy to continue his participation as his illness progressed. I was uncomfortable at various stages of this participant's involvement for a number of reasons but I used research around participants who are ill to guide my decision making [9, 21]. Two particularly important aspects gave me pause to consider the ethical implications.

Shortly after agreeing to take part in an interview, the participant (Daniel) was admitted into hospital for an initial stay of six weeks. I visited him regularly and after around four weeks he brought up the possibility of conducting the interview. At this stage I used my power as the researcher to suggest that this might not be the best time for him as we had both commented on how having very little to do in hospital was affecting his memory. While I was aware that he would have gained benefits from having a purposeful activity, it did not feel ethical to do this while he was not at his best. He was then released for a period before being readmitted for a major operation and we conducted the interview in this hiatus as he was feeling more himself

again and positive about his treatment outcomes. However, I was aware of his feelings towards work in relation to his illness and I used that insider knowledge during the interview:

Researcher – *Over the six weeks since you went into hospital you've said a lot one way or the other, what are your views on your situation now?*

Daniel – *What in terms of work?*

Researcher – *You did at one point, quite early on after being admitted, quite strongly say you blamed work for it. Is that how you feel now?*

Daniel – *Yeah. The only factor when you look at all the different bits and pieces, the only risk factor I have is stress.*

While I used my insider knowledge to exert power in the conversation, Daniel chose how strongly he expressed his feeling in the formal context of an interview. He then went further when we were discussing issues related to the power of senior leadership in schools:

Daniel – *I think in my school the SLT [Senior Leadership Team] have no overall coordination so each of them have their own little world that they exist in and nobody's reigning them in to make sure the teachers can actually achieve the job in the time available.*

Researcher – *So I know you went to see the head, you said you went to see the head. Did he give any response to all this?*

Daniel – *Not really. I think he felt a bit brow beaten. After I let all this out. He ended up agreeing with a lot of what was said. . . It's not going to change. . . Well that was the day I got ill in the night.*

Researcher – *That was the same day? I mean obviously we know now, and there's an awful lot we know and we're not saying out loud kind of thing, but we know that was probably kind of building before you had a physical reaction to it. So you got ill in the night on Wednesday but that wasn't the night that you decided to do something about being ill?*

Daniel – *No coz I didn't realise what it was. On the Wednesday night, I had fallen asleep I think and then I just woken up around midnight, one in the morning with severe pain, I thought it was a kidney stone at the time.*

Researcher – *And you took ibuprofen and went back to bed and went into work the next day?*

Daniel – *Yeah. So I went in on Thursday.*

Researcher – *But then you went in on the Friday as well?*

Daniel – *Yeah. And they're both 5 period days.*

This extract, again, tells the insider researcher more than is being said. Both the participant and I had been directed to research on the timing of illness presentation so the discussion in the interview on the meeting with the head on the day Daniel's illness first presented itself was meaningful to us. Secondly, the comments relating to going into work while ill due to teaching every period those days has meaning to a fellow teacher. This indicates that Daniel was conditioned into presenteeism, where workers feel it is a professional expectation to attend, even if ill [22]. Also, he would have had very little opportunity for a break, even to go to the toilet during these days but it is less inconvenient to go into work than to set cover work if absent.

As an insider researcher, most of my participants had access to me after the interview. In the case of Daniel, this meant that I continued to follow the progression of his illness. While the operation went well, it brought to light the underlying cause of his symptoms and over time it became clear that the illness would be terminal. His views on the relationship of work to his illness softened and, eventually, he considered his illness to be 'one of those things'. I asked if he still wanted his interview to be included and he consented again saying that he wanted his story to be told, even if his views had changed slightly now. This is a very powerful responsibility for a researcher and one I had no idea would transpire when I conducted my reading into researching with known participants.

4 Discussion: Manipulation of insiderness

Researcher positionality was something I was acutely aware of throughout this study as I was a teacher conducting research about teachers which I initially thought only gave me a different perspective on the issues compared to an outsider researcher. However, during the interview process I became aware of multiple levels of insider positionality which meant that my understanding of each individual's perspective was different. Equally, their perceptions of me and

my position within various roles connected to education varied greatly. On reflection, participants were able to balance the possible negative views of me being in the middle leadership structure with the positive implications of what they felt this research could achieve. Again, the power of the researcher within this relationship took precedence when considering the implications of my being within the management structure. However, it is possible that my leadership role further encouraged informants to speak because it gave them another route to raise concerns directly with management without having to take on some of the usual risks of leader/member exchanges within an organisation. The guise of research could give participants a safe sphere within which to speak out.

As mentioned previously, there is a suggestion throughout the literature on insider research that the participants are passive in the process because a researcher has to be mindful of their power over their participants [16]. There are differences between individuals in professional settings in terms of power and status within the organisation but ultimately most behave as what Foucault (1979:138) [23] calls 'docile subjects' and become conditioned to behave and even to think in ways that are in the interests of the prevailing paradigms of their work settings. From an insider position, how a participant views the research and researcher should be considered as to how this may affect their responses. Drake and Heath (2011) [12] observe that we often have multiple positions but the way we interact with others and within systems is dependent on how others see us and this view is different for every individual we interact with. Participants, particularly those who are used to certain positions of power, are not passive parts of the process.

This phenomenon could be observed in my research through small examples of insiderness manipulations by the participants. Certain phrases such as: 'well, you're a teacher, you know' were used by interviewees to establish commonalities. Individuals would use 'looks' to convey meaning which could not be transcribed through the recording but I could understand as a fellow teacher. Also, participants would declare their expectations of the impact of my research. For example, one participant told me that I should send my findings to the DfE. I felt it was important to manage these expectation in order to uphold the ethics of the study.

It was only through reflection in the research journal after each interview that I realised these comments and actions highlighted ways in which I, as a researcher, was being manipulated by the participants.

After further analysis of the comments of participants, I feel that this subtle manipulation could be due to teachers being familiar with having 'bold speech' or parrhesia [24] and so do not have as much fear of speaking out, particularly with a colleague, as may be assumed in other research contexts. Most interview participants were equal to me professionally in one way or another – some were middle leaders in charge of departments as I had been, others had stepped down from that style of middle leadership which they could recognise in me through my move to research and development instead of Head of Faculty. Others were senior to me in school leadership but were also involved in the Research School Network or were Geography specialists. The most junior was just starting on the PhD (Professional) route so we had a kinship through this. The most wary participant was, in fact, the most senior. This mirrors the observations by Ball (2005) [25] on interviewing people in power such as senior civil servants and MPs, so when the Head Teacher requested the questions in writing, it reflected Ball's experience and I was able to adapt to this with a solid literature base. Even in this case, the reason the leader had volunteered for the research is because I had worked at their school many years before them, therefore they had already created our connection in order to provide themselves with a position of comfort.

I found these manipulations uncomfortable at times. Participants sometimes assumed levels of understanding I did not necessarily have due to working in different schools. Even the school I had recently left at the time of data collection had changed senior leadership which was resulting in a completely different ethos and I had to ask for a lot of additional clarification because the participants still saw me as someone more inside than I felt. Some put what I felt was unrealistic pressure on me to 'send it to the DfE' (Jessica) and sometimes I did not see this manipulation at the time, even with research journal reflections, and it only became apparent to me when I was transcribing or analysing the interviews.

Possible reasons why participants acted in this way have already been suggested: They wish to create rapport with the researcher; they search to create a position of comfort to be able to talk about sensitive subjects or they seek a feeling of solidarity with the interviewer as a fellow teacher. This last possibility is important to recognise about insider research where much may be communicated without words due to a shared understanding of work culture. This is both a drawback of insider research as understanding could be ignored as they are assumed knowledge whereas an outsider would need clarification, but also a strength because deeper discussions can

be developed faster when basic understandings are shared [26, 27]. There are also other reasons for participants to exert control over an insider researcher's positioning. They may use it to help get a point across, examples of this include the repeated use of the phrase 'you know, you're a teacher'. It may be to assume authority over the topic matter, as was the case with one participant, Jack, who stated: 'This is the key and this is what you're going to write about'. As with all participants in this research, this interviewee was accustomed to being listened to in their work environment but it is also an indication of the strength of feeling behind what they said next. A final possibility for this behaviour is a wish to protect professional status and so they used their power as a participant to choose what to say on record to the interviewer, even when both knew there was more which could be said. There is a responsibility on the researcher, especially an insider, to respect the autonomy of a participant and this could be seen as a drawback but there are ways to adapt to this which means that advantages can be recognised as well.

5 Limitations: Overcoming the drawbacks and recognising the advantages

As a result of occupying a number of positions on the insider-outsider continuum, I recognised that it is how others see the researcher that creates the positioning [28] as, in the case of a school I had recently left, where I was seen as more of an insider by participants than I felt. The interviewees recognised that the internal politics had changed but worked on the assumption that I would understand their new ways of working. As well as being aware of this phenomenon, I used field notes to enable critical reflection to organise my conceptual reasoning before, during and after each interview.

Wegener (2014) [11] exemplifies how researcher awareness of their positioning has an effect on both the researcher and participant. She identifies that insider and outsider positions are not definitive but sensitising concepts which are negotiated between researcher, participants and readers. She suggests that there are boundary crossing acts within insider researcher which bridge senses of belonging and professionalism both in terms of the workplace being researched and that of being a researcher. This highlights both possible drawbacks as boundary crossing can be seen as a negative in terms of overstepping but also a positive in that it acts as a bridge between the different selves a participant sees in the insider researcher. Webster-Deakin (2021) [29] observes that this fluidity in researcher positionality requires responsiveness and agility in the researcher. She suggests that this fluidity enables exchange in power and position which prompts analysis of how the researcher's knowledge is validated. However, when viewed by outsider researchers, this fluidity potentially presents a problem in terms of validity [8]. Onwuegbuzie and Johnson (2006) [30] suggest that the term 'validity' is not appropriate for qualitative research and should be replaced by the term 'legitimation' to ensure that the methods used are appropriate for the study.

Another criticism of insider research is that the researcher is too close to the subject matter which could result in cultural assumptions being overlooked or understandings being assumed because they are shared by the researcher and participant whereas those not so close with the subject matter may not pick up on these interpretations [9]. To overcome this possible drawback, Hellowell (2006) [15] states that the data analysis process should aim to make the familiar strange. This can be achieved through the coding process which deconstructs each interview into themes which highlight issues encountered by all participants. Patton (2015) [31] suggests qualitative studies are individually distinctive and so the analytical approach for each will be unique. As a response to this, I chose to synthesise coding processes outlined by Ely (1991) [32], Coffey and Atkinson (1996) [33], Braun and Clarke (2006) [34] and Saldana (2016) [35].

The process of making the familiar strange challenges cultural understanding by changing the context of the data but also helps to aid legitimation by reducing emotional connections an insider researcher will feel towards the data. As previously outlined, I also kept a research journal to help me contextualise the content of each interview. Although I chose not to use much of my research journal in my thesis write up, it was very useful to help me position my own thoughts and feelings when approaching different interviews. As well as being aware of additional knowledge that might lead to certain aspects of the data being overlooked, being an insider researcher involves negotiating relationships with many different people. It is impossible to remove yourself from the emotional lives of the friends, colleagues and family you may be working with. As a result of this, I propose that it is critically important acknowledge these links as far as possible while also protecting the ethics of participant and researcher wellbeing. It is important to understand that the data is just a snap shot in time [36] and I went back to a number of participants who I knew had

had a change of circumstance which has altered their views and asked again if they were happy to have their previous views included in the research. All agreed to continue with their original transcripts with one stating that this was how she felt at the time so she stands by her past self. For the participant who was ill, his views on how much the job was responsible for his condition altered significantly over time, mainly due to how his school treated him once he received the terminal diagnosis, but his interview was a snap shot which becomes part of a legacy and offered the participant some control over a very uncontrollable situation.

6 The ethics of insider research

Different levels of insiderness, as perceived by the researcher and the participant, come with different additional responsibilities and Drake and Heath (2011: 55) [12] suggest that there are added complications to the situational ethics of an insider researcher such as myself. They outline an example when a head teacher researched the views of pupils which lead to teachers feeling 'betrayed by the powerful head teacher speaking behind their backs about their pupils work'.

My ethical position is that wellbeing of the participants should be considered above all else both professionally and within the research. As previously highlighted, my leadership role in education is not a traditional middle leader position. There could have been concerns among participants that I may report their views back to middle leader meetings within the county or to senior leaders. However, as I was the only Research and Development Co-ordinator, the opportunities for that were limited. Many of the participants were aware of me through my Research Schools Network role in which I promote the ethics of research and so my professional reputation is one of valuing the importance of autonomy and care for participants. This meant that participants felt comfortable trusting my integrity as a researcher.

There were other ethical issues which arose with the participants. Denscombe (1998) [10] observes that the simple action of asking people for their opinions can improve wellbeing as it gives them a sense of importance and empowerment. This was noted in my research journal of the interviews, so further discussion was undertaken to manage the expectations of the participants in relation to the possible wider impact this research could realistically have.

When designing my study, BERA (2011) [37] guidelines were observed and sections applicable to this study were followed. To avoid negative impact on participants, consent was gained at the start of the survey and when interview dates were arranged. The consent form for the interviews was based on the guidance given by Krueger and Casey (2014) [38] explaining the aims of the study, why the participants have been approached, the benefits and possible risks of participation. However, as an insider researcher it was possible to gain verbal consent repeatedly throughout the process which also included when the life experiences of the participants changed. Since the participants may discuss sensitive issues during the interview, the consent form highlighted possible avenues of support including in school union reps and the teacher support network. However, as the life experiences of participants developed over time, I felt it my responsibility to update support networks both for the individuals and myself. How life changes for participants who were everyday contacts would impact on me both personally and a researcher was not a field which is well represented in the literature. As I had limited reading on this matter before undertaking my data collection flexibility and adaptability were things I had to develop as the research progressed. This not only reflects the emotional intelligence needed to negotiate the insider continuum for and with the participants but also the duty to self as an insider researcher.

Drever (2003) [39] and Lichtman (2006) [40] have advised that participants should be given as much anonymity as possible and so I gave pseudonyms using a random name generator when individual responses were included in analysis. It is also made clear to participants that they may be recognisable in the thesis to those who know them well. However, the random name generator lead to an unforeseen awkwardness as one of my participants was given the pseudonym 'Karen'. During the course of writing up the findings, my ten year old daughter started to use the name Karen as a derogatory term. The easiest thing would have been to change the pseudonym but I had regular contact with the participant so I related the issue to her. When I told her about the name and the unfortunate usage of it in modern slang, she told me that she felt honoured to be 'Karen' as it meant something important to her personally so was happy to take the allocated pseudonym. This kind of interaction between participant and researcher is important for both and the personal connections are valuable on a human level as well as for the rapport between the two.

Finally, when considering the duty of care to myself as a teacher/researcher I chose to outline my research to the head teachers I was working for throughout the study which reduced their anxiety towards me. An example of this was one head teacher who was concerned that my

research might cause negative wellbeing in her school by stirring up discontent. After discussing this with her, she was satisfied that I was not going to be a negative influence and was very supportive of my work.

While all reasonable measures were taken to ensure the ethics of the study the option of withdrawing was always advertised to participants if they felt uncomfortable at any stage, as outlined by Cohen et al (2018) [17].

6.1 Managing ethical responsibilities

An insider researcher has a connection with the field being investigated and so claims of impartiality are difficult. To adapt for this, it is possible to pick a theoretical framework which does not claim neutrality. I used critical theory as it does not claim ideological or political distance but acknowledges that any kind of social structure is value laden and these underpinnings require close study and analysis [41, 42].

It is important for the researcher to position themselves within the study both in terms of being able to communicate this to a reader but also to help consider the perceptions of the participants. In my pilot, a younger teacher who I was mentoring said that he felt it was weird talking to me as a researcher because it felt like he was talking to a different person, so he forgot that it was his mentor he was talking to. This creates additional possible risk for the participant and the ethics of this are important for the researcher to consider. A participant evaluates the identity of the researcher throughout the interview to help inform how comfortable they are to answer in various ways. A researcher persona can help reduce or reposition the power relations to enable a participant to voice their personal truths comfortably and this can affect the validity and richness of insider research. However, a researcher should also take responsibility for this persona and so after my pilot I decided not to interview people I was currently professionally close to.

Another way the insider researcher can mitigate for their positioning is to reposition power relations which can be done, in part, by offering participants control over interview location and time [43]. I tried to interview people in places where they felt most comfortable. This resulted in three interviews taking place in a two different Wetherspoons pubs, participant's homes, their classrooms and in two cases with participants who were close friends and family, in my own home. This seems counterintuitive but it allowed us to conduct interviews without my children interrupting and it meant that the participants could speak freely without the fear of their family members listening in.

The positioning of an insider researcher is an important ethical consideration but while much of the literature looks at this issue from the point of view of the power a researcher holds over their participants [43–45], this discussion has also considered how participants also have a place in the power relations negotiated to make sure their voices are heard and to create for themselves a position of comfort to enable a productive experience for both.

7 Conclusion

The positioning of an insider researcher is an important consideration but while much of the literature looks at this important issue from the point of view of the power a researcher holds over their participants [43–45], this discussion has considered the participants place in the power relations negotiated to make sure their voices are heard and to create for themselves a position of comfort to enable a productive experience for both.

The findings from this review are that, particularly for insider researchers, participants can exert power over the researcher. This is done through personal and professional links with the researcher but also through shared understanding of language used in the insider setting. This is something insider researchers need to be aware of as each participant seeks to manipulate the positioning of the researcher to create a position of comfort for the participant and/or enable their voice to be heard to the full extent. An awareness of this phenomenon is important for qualitative analysis to ensure trustworthy representation of the participants views.

There is one final aspect of insider researcher that has not been addressed so far. I found that there were people I wanted to interview for the research as I felt their stories would have added valuable insight but, while they were interested in the research and discussed it with me, they did not want to engage with the data collection. These discussions, and others, help a researcher solidify their understandings from their various starting points and lead to the development of new knowledges. However, in the field of social sciences and especially education, which everyone has experienced as a child in different ways, all come value laden and to honour the integrity of

the research we should consider how we can come to recognise the insider/outsider continuum within ourselves and our varying contexts, and use it to produce the next ethical, rich, deep knowledges to come.

8 Afterword

Evidently, I have not been able, nor wanted, to include all the ways my life and the lives of those who kindly contributed, through their consent to be interviewed, have interwoven during the course of this research. Research is a complex web in terms of academic integrity to bring enough information to the fore to enable the fullest understanding possible, whilst minimising that which by sharing could endanger the promised anonymity and so risk ethical research. As with life, we always bring, and show publically, only parts of ourselves when interacting with others in research and so it has been impossible to explicitly communicate everything that might have bearing. Akin to every other choice in our writing and, in fact, our interactions more generally, discernment is necessary and judgement always entails more than can and should be expressed.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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