METHODOLOGICAL DILEMMA IN STUDYING EDUCATIONAL CASES OF ETHNIC MINORITY CHILDREN IN BOTSWANA: A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH FIELDWORK EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses mainly the fieldwork methodological experiences in which I defend the application of a qualitative approach to a multi-sited case study on school retention in the basic education of the ethnic minority in Botswana. The case study was multi-sited because it covered three remote primary schools and a junior secondary school that were linked in the North West District Council. These schools served four ethnic minority groups, namely Basarwa, BaHerero, BaYei and BaMbukushu. Key participants in the study were children who withdrew from the school system, those in school and parents. Teachers, boarding staff, Remote Area Development Programme staff were also included. The research was grounded on methodological theories of constructivism and operated within the interpretive-hermeneutic paradigm. A qualitative research approach was employed to accommodate ethno-phenomenological techniques. Key research methods consisted of documentary review and analysis, participant observations and in-depth individual and focus group interviews that also involved personal narratives and life histories. These methods culminated into very interesting methodological dilemma for which this paper explores.

KEY WORDS: qualitative research, constructivism, interpretive-hermeneutic paradigm, ethnographic techniques, enthno-linguistic minorities

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the qualitative research methodological experiences following my fieldwork on studying problems of school retention in the basic education for the ethnic minorities in Botswana. The study was grounded on the methodological theories of constructivism and operated within the interpretive-hermeneutic paradigm. Key research methods consisted of documentary review and analysis, participant observations and in-depth individual and focus group interviews that also involved personal narratives and life histories. These methods enabled me to investigate phenomena in detail within participants’ own contexts. Studies have argued for the attention to the question of context (Crossley & Watson, 2003; Cho & Trent, 2006; Belousov et al, 2007) and on-site field research (Fife, 1997). As I shall demonstrate later, these methods were found to be context specific, culturally sensitive, and appropriate in studying of human relationships on-site, a phenomenon advocated for in qualitative research (Fife, 1997; Stephens, 2007). For ethical reasons, names of participants used in this discussion are pseudonymous.

CONTEXT OF FIELDWORK CONSTITUENCY

The study was carried out in the North West District Council in Botswana. The geographical location, ethnolinguistic and socio-economic were three critical features that underpin the tensions and harmonies that influence behaviour and perceptions of people in the constituency. The purpose of my study was to identify factors that contribute to early withdrawal from schools in the rural ethnic minority in the basic education in Botswana. I adopted a multi-sited case study strategy (Yin, 1989) where I covered Qangwa and Xaixai Remote Area Dweller (RAD) villages including their schools and the surrounding settlements. Nxaunxau Primary School and Sekgoma Junior Secondary School were also visited because they admit children from Qangwa and Xaixai remote
settlements. This is how the case study is multi-sited. Qangwa, Xaixai and Naxaunxau areas are rurally remote and totally isolated from the commercial and administrative centres. The terrain to these places is hard to traverse. Roads were rough gravel and sandy. There was no telecommunication system. Radio signals were not accessible. The places are inhabited by ethnic minorities whose knowledge base is still confined only to the world of their culture including the physical features of their localism.

The cases in this study were mainly out of school children between 7 and 21 years old. For triangulation purposes, the study included school children, parents, teachers, and education officers who support remote schools. The study involved 170 participants, ranging from young children in and out of school, parents through to public officers. In terms of the numbers of interview sessions, the distribution of participation was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of cases</th>
<th>No of Individual Interview sessions</th>
<th>No of Focus Group Interview sessions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PS Early School Leavers</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS Children In School</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JSS Early School Leavers</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JSS Students in School</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents and PTA members</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Officers</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RADP Staff</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary School Boarding Staff</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Boarding Staff</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Education Secretary (PES)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chief Community Development Officer (CDO)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total No of Sessions</strong></td>
<td><strong>59</strong></td>
<td><strong>17</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This table shows that the study covered fifty-nine individual interview sessions and seventeen focus group sessions. The spread of the groups of participants per location and types of interviews settings is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of Cases</th>
<th>No of Cases per location (see to the map) and types of Interview setting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Qangwa PS and its settlements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS Early school leavers</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children in PS</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JSS Early school leavers</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children in JSS</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents &amp; PTA</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This sample size and its distribution was seen to be adequate and served as a reasonably acceptable for a detailed qualitative study. This was more so because during field work participants kept raising the same issues, which suggested that data was saturated. However, in practice, the data that I collected yielded rich and detailed information.

Children and parents were identified and selected through opportunistic and convenience sampling methods (Patton, 2002; Ritchie et al, 2004). These methods allowed me to involve any one who was accessible in the research constituency, thus ‘taking advantage of the unforeseen opportunities as they arise during the course of the fieldwork’ (Ritchie et al, 2004: 81). However, caution was observed in balancing children in terms of gender, age, and their last class at school. A cluster sampling (Gall et al, 1996) approach was used to select teachers and education officers. This enabled the study to include any of those who could be reached because it was not possible to find all officers or teachers at one specific place and time.

**METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK**

My case study has been approached from a constructivist standpoint. Constructivism is a ‘theory of knowledge which stresses the active process involved in building knowledge rather than assuming that knowledge is a set of unchanging proposition which merely need to be understood and memorised’ (Somekh & Lewin, 2005:344). Knowledge is therefore relative to those who construct it. It is also argued that the social world is a complex world of lived experiences which can only be understood from the point of view of those who live it (Schwandt, 1994:118). Guba and Lincoln (1994:113) thus point out that constructivism is about ‘understanding and reconstruction of the constructions that people initially hold, aiming toward consensus but still open to new interpretations as information and sophistication improve’. Constructivism is, therefore, a frame of reasoning that believes that meaning, inventions and understanding emerge from the constructions of the human mind (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Bassey, 1996).

Drawing on constructivist conceptions of knowledge, interpretive-hermeneutic paradigm is an epistemological as well as a methodological stance in which social science claims that the social world is best understood from the perspectives of people as they participate, construct, interpret and make meaning of their own views, experiences, beliefs and perspectives (Gadamer, 1975; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Snape & Spencer, 2003). Constructivists believe that the knowledge, truth and reality that people hold are socially constructed through the use and interpretation of language, consciousness and shared meaning (Habermas, 1972; Schwandt, 2000). The interactive text in communication between and among people (Habermas, 1972) is the determining factor from this perspective. Person-to-person relationships create complex processes of social interaction where history, language and action fashion meaning. Gadamer (1975) emphasised the importance of peoples own standpoints, or situatedness, such as time, place, culture, gender and ethnicity. This he calls the fusion of horizons. These horizons play a significant role in knowledge construction.

My approach to this study is also phenomenological, that is, it is influenced by my belief, and as have be argued, that the lived experiences, culture, values and beliefs of research participants ought to be recognised and respected (Smyth & Hattam, 2001; Broadhurst et al, 2005; Stephens, 2007). I am very sympathetic and empathetic to rural ethnic minority children who do not complete basic education. I believe that their problems can be better understood from their lived experiences and the experiences of their parents who neither had access to formal schooling nor opportunities to access literacy programmes.
In view of my value of both phenomenological (lived experiences) and ethnographic (cultural context) positioning in this study, it suffices to suggest that I applied an ethnophenomenological approach to my fieldwork. This approach was used as a personal principle that encouraged me, as echoed by Gall et al. (1996), to engage with the study not only intellectually but also morally and emotionally. It guided my conduct in the in-depth interview sessions so that I treated my research participants as important partners in the project.

ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODS

The key methods that I used are observation, in-depth interviews and personal narratives and life histories methods and focus groups.

Field Observations: Direct observation offered me an opportunity for rigorous investigation of factors contributing to low retention in schools. According to Yin (1989), informal observations of such aspects as the condition of buildings can serve as an indicator of informants’ perceptions and feelings about their organisations. He also argues that observation is so valuable that a researcher may use photographs which ‘will help to convey important case characteristics to outside observers’ (Yin, 1989:92). Influenced by this view, I used photography to collect data about some features at the school level such as teaching conditions, boarding facilities and life style of family hood in the communities. As Angrosino and Perez (2000) argue, the use of technological equipment can make it easier to record, analyse and interpret events, situations and behaviour with some degree of particularity. Bogdan and Biklen (1998:138) also point out that ‘images are more telling than words’. I therefore used photography to get some images of children’s life experiences in their locations. Photographs thus augmented my observation capacity and the images helped me to create what Bogdan and Biklen call ‘cultural inventories’ or what Vulliamy (1990:93) and Hurdley (2007: 360) call ‘an aide-memoire’ which guided my writing of descriptive accounts of field work.

Apparently photographing attracted the interest of most of the participants in the settlements including those in schools. After each snapshot of participants I showed them their images on the digital camera. They were interested in their images and often asked me to produce and send them their photos. My snapshots also covered physical features that were reflective of cultural materials of the environment, the purpose of which was to use these images when I interpret, develop and strengthen what Hurdley (2007:360) refers to as ‘multivocality of final text’ of my research report. I avoided making snapshots on aspects that I considered ethically inappropriate, such children poorly dressed or naked in hostels.

In-depth interviews: Qualitative interviews were the core activities in my fieldwork. It is argued that through in-depth interviews, personal histories and experiences can be more fully explained and understood, different perspectives can also be heard (Ritchie et al, 2004). In-depth interviews coupled with personal narratives of individual participants and focus groups were and in many ways my main data collection techniques for this study. The locations of the participants served as useful centres for interview sessions. These locations enabled me to reduce the constraint of mobilising participants to one place, which would have been difficult because households in settlement are far apart. I was also cautious that one common location might, as Ritchie et al (2004:59) argue, reduce ‘attractiveness and accessibility’ for both children and parents.

On average, each interview session lasted for 30-50 minutes. This time enabled participants to relate their life histories about education and schooling. For ethical reasons the under 16 years old were interviewed in the presence of their parents.

For better management of data, all interviews with children, parents, primary school teachers and boarding staff in primary schools were audio-tape-recorded in vernacular or the language of the participants namely Sesarwa, Seherero and Setswana, and there after translated and transcribed into English. For ethical reasons and following special request from the participants, interaction with secondary school teachers and public officers were not tape-recorded. Instead I dependent on creating my field notes as the iterative discussion progressed. Despite the fact that they used their expressive language guardedly, they talked freely more on the constraints and limitation on their part as service providers to the children of remote areas.

Personal narratives and life histories methods: I was convinced that personal narratives would best help me to understand perceptions and lived experiences of school leavers. Cortazzi and Jin (2006) argue that personal narratives may show
how participants whose voice is never heard or noticed identify themselves. In view of this context, personal narrative and life histories techniques were central to my approach to in-depth interviews with early school leavers and their parents. However, narrative inquiry can be used either to explore the formal aspects of a text such as facets of the story, its nature, structure and quality as would be applied in linguistics and other fields related to discourses of stories, or to focus on the content of the text (Lieblich et al, 1998). While I used both formal aspect and content of the texts, I concentrated more on the contents and perhaps the meaning of the stories because my objective was to investigate the behaviours and decisions influencing early school withdrawals, a real practical problem facing schools and the education sector in Botswana.

During interviews, children and parents were allowed ample time to story their experiences about schooling, expectations and wishes relating to life, schooling and education, and to explain how and why they withdrew. This narrative research approach was considered essential for its strength to allow the voices of the early school leavers to be heard and their decisions and choices to be understood on the basis of their lived experiences. Coming from the constructivist perspective that knowledge is socially constructed (Habermas, 1972; Gadamer, 1975; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Schwandt, 2000; Snape & Spencer, 2003; Stephens, 2007), the personal narrative methods allowed me to listen to participants voices, enabled me to encourage them to elaborate on their descriptions and to gain in-depth knowledge about problems of early school leaving.

**Focus groups:** These methods allowed face-to-face interaction with some parents in the settlements, children in schools (potential early school leavers), teachers, boarding staff and public officers in district administration. The focus group methods provided an opportunity to generate exploratory questions about the early school leaving. The choice of focus group strategy recognised that interaction based on existing groups could encourage participants to be free and at ease during the discussion (Moore, 2000). The children in schools, teachers, boarding staff, parents in settlements and public officers were already in their groups and it was easier to locate and work with them in their localities. Interaction with children took place in their classrooms and interviews with boarding staff and teachers took place in school staffrooms. Discussion with parents took place where they would be found gathered. Public officers meetings were held in the offices of the heads of departments in the district headquarters.

**METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES**

This study was not only interesting but also served as learning experience with many emerging qualitative methodological challenges. The four main challenges that emerged in this study were related to flexibility in planning; entry, access and rapport; quality of data; and ethical issues.

**Flexibility in Planning:** The practice of flexibility in planning during fieldwork in qualitative research has been emphasised in earlier studies (Crossley & Bennett, 1997:240). The initial planned research area was Nxaunxau PS and Sekgoma JSS. These are both boarding schools. From the documentary review and analysis of educational statistics at the Ministry of Education and Skills Development (MoE&SD) and district levels, I discovered that the catchment area of Sekgoma JSS include Qangwa, Xaixai, Makakung, Habu, Sankoyo, Tsau and Nokaneng primary schools and the settlements surrounding their feeder communities. Upon review of school statistics at Sekgoma JSS I found that most children who withdraw from school were those who came from Qangwa and Xaixai schools. I further discovered that Qangwa and Xaixai feeder settlements include Qube 30 kilometres from Qangwa or 25 kilometres from Xaixai; Baate 7 kilometres from Qangwa; Magopa 15 kilometres from Qangwa; Xhoosha 16 kilometres from Qangwa; and Dobe 20 kilometres from Qangwa. I also found out that some children from Qube, Baate, Magopa and Dobe settlements were taken to Nxaunxau PS where there was a boarding facility. Some of the children from these settlements had run away from Nxaunxau boarding and were back to their parents in the settlements. I therefore re-organised and increased my case study sites or expanded my fieldwork constituency.

The use of pre-designed data collection schedules, observation and interview guide as argued by Bogdan and Biklen (1998), Patton (2002) and Johnson and Turner (2003) were very useful but I found out that it was important for me to use these in a flexible way, perhaps in an unstructured approach. I had to use them only at the end of each interview to check my focus on the aim and objectives of my study.
In summary, my fieldwork adopted a flexible and developmental approach guided by daily planning. The research question, use of pre-designed data collection schedules, observation and interview guide as argued by Bogdan and Biklen (1998), Patton (2002) and Johnson and Turner (2003), despite being used in a flexible manner, were still very useful. They helped me to ensure control of the interviews and focus on the aim and objectives of my study.

Entry, Access and Rapport: My case study was granted written permission by the Botswana Government through the MoE&SD as is the standard requirement and practice. Through its decentralised structure, MoE&SD introduced me to the schools and district offices. Education officers and school heads did the same to connect me to their local communities. This process did not guarantee easy entry to the fieldwork sites. I spent two and a half months in research sites. During the first week, I mapped out the households, community social activities, establishing rapport with both elders and youths at the household and general community level.

Gaining entry to and negotiating access with the participants, particularly parents and children in settlements was a haunting task. First, the anxiety of knowing more about me was very high in the settlements. They did not want to speak to me. They used Sesarwa languages that I did not understand. For example the participants (especially male elders) in the settlements often made comments such as ‘Tell us where you come from’. ‘Who has sent you to us?’ ‘What ethnicity are you?’ ‘Why did you come to us?’ ‘What is going to happen after your visit?’; ‘What will you do if we talk to you?’; ‘People like you often come and go for ever’. ‘We want to hear our voices in the radio to make sure that government has also heard what we said’. These questions made me feel emotionally vulnerable and personally guilty of betrayal of trust because as much as I wished to help my participants I could not guarantee returning to them to address their needs.

Interaction with parents was the most interesting challenge. They were, at some stages, becoming emotional as they narrated their experiences and life histories in schools. They occasionally put me on the spot to express my view. For example they would make comments and ask me questions such as, ‘…we Basarwa, when our children go to school with black children and when Basarwa do well, they are left behind while the children of Batswana progress easily. We are unhappy, there is discrimination. We are all Batswana in Botswana, some live better, others not. How would you explain this?’ (Ms Rutiwe, a parent at Qube settlement)

‘We believe all Batswana receive the same education whether one is a Mosarwa or a black person, but Basarwa are not in the jobs. Why?’ (Mr Gwate a parent at Baate settlement)

‘In boarding schools Basarwa children are supplied with clothes and bedding. When they close schools these materials are taken by hostel staff and children go to their parents without clothes and bedding. Is this not humiliation and discrimination?’ (Ms Mooki a parent in Qangwa village)

‘We want to see our children becoming drivers, police officers, teachers, soldiers, and nurses just like Batswana we see here. When will this happen? Tell me.’ (Mr Wabobedi a parent in Qangwa in village)

Secondly, I visited a household in one settlement with three elderly people (apparently a couple and a visitor) and a boy of about nine years old who had withdrawn from school. As I talked to them in Setswana, they talked amongst themselves in Sesarwa. While I was busy introducing my self and my mission to the elderly people, the boy disappeared. The parent later told me that the boy was not around. I realised that the three people were not ready to participate in the interview and I left. Two days later, I met the other person who was a visitor there. He told me that when I was still
talking to the couple, the father advised his son in Sesarwa (mother tongue) to go and hide in the bush.

Thirdly, the young children who withdrew from primary school did not want to come close to me. It appeared they were so much afraid of being taken back to school that they thought my mission was to force them back into a classroom. The first three children (a boy and two girls) that I met in the settlements who withdrew from primary school refused to talk to me. Their parents were also not willing to assist me. One boy of about 12 years old rode on a donkey and ran away from home. From that experience, I made sure that in my self introduction I emphasised the fact that I was not in the settlements to get children back to school but rather to work with the community so that ‘we’ (parents, children and my research team) understand the reason why children withdraw before they complete basic education. Only a few children would talk to me and would narrate negative experiences about schooling.

Fourthly, I found out that during home visits in the settlements, only men were supposed to speak to me directly. This cultural setting became evident during focus group interviews. Women spoke to men and then men passed over the information to me. Where vernacular was predominant, I often received stories from a second source. Perhaps the information had to be careful screened before it was passed over to me. I had to respect this cultural procedure and also talk to women through their spouses.

From these experiences, I realised that people in those settlements were very suspicious of my work, sceptical to talk to me and saw me as a stranger with a hidden agenda. I realised that I was in a ‘problematic research setting’ (Belousov, et al, 2007:170) where the minority had lost trust from government employees and researchers who come and go, who do not help them out of the socio-economic hardships.

To try to overcome the four problems of entry, access and rapport, and to win the hearts and trust of both parents and children, I employed a collaborative strategy. First I involved key personalities in the community. I maintained regular consultation with school heads and village elders. Secondly, I engaged four research assistants from among the Basarwa Form 5 holders (a boy and a girl in Qangwa and a boy and a girl in Xaixai settlements). The importance of collaboration in research between researchers and the locals has been emphasised by Crossley and Bennett (1997) and Crossley and Watson (2003), and has effectively been demonstrated by Crossley and Bennett (1997) and Crossley et al (2005) in developing countries at macro scale of educational and project implementation. Influenced by this argument for collaboration in research and applying the researchers’ experiences, I therefore worked closely with key personalities in my research constituency on a micro scale of my context. It was through my relationship with community leaders that I was able to recruit competent research assistants. These assistants helped me, first with the mapping out of routes to the settlement and identification of households both in villages and settlements that have children who have withdrawn from either primary or secondary schools. Secondly they played yet a major role in the interpretation of Sesarwa and Seherero languages and translating to Setswana. Thirdly they helped me by interviewing mothers and younger children who were not comfortable with me.

As argued in qualitative research approach that the relationship between the researcher and participant ought to be non-hierarchical (Dickson-Swift, et al 2007), this collaborative approach reduced the power distance between me and my participants, as well encouraging sense of partnership and local ownership (Crossley & Bennett, 1997). As a result of this approach, the mere appearance of local people as part of my research team made my participants, most of whom were Basarwa, to be very proud of their people. As a result they developed trust, interest and confidence in my work and therefore participated voluntarily and more enthusiastically in the discussions. My working through village leaders and with research assistants came out to be a highly valued collaborative approach by all the communities in my research constituency. The approach allowed the interaction atmosphere to remain active, open, natural, cordial, free and relaxed, because participants saw themselves as part of the research project through the participation of their own children.

The Quality of Data: To increase trustworthiness of my data I decided to capture and use audio data. One interesting audit trial strategy was to re-play the recorded voices with the participants and where necessary allowed them to add or correct their recorded transcripts. All
participants enjoyed to listen to their recorded voices so much that after each re-play, they gained more confidence in themselves, became more enthused and asked to add more ideas and stories. As the message of this approach spread in the settlements, more parents and children came forward on their own to volunteer their participation. In these ways, I was able to ensure the strength and robustness of my fieldwork, and can safely defend the credibility and quality of my qualitative approach.

However, after gaining trust and confidence in me, parents expressed a wish that their names be mentioned in the tapes. Each time they talked, they started by mentioning their names and location. When a tape was being re-played, they were kin to hear who they are. They were eager to maintain their identity and own up their personal narratives. I realised that the use of pseudonyms was an approach working against their wish.

Secondly, Vulliamy (1990) argued for photographs to be used as aide-memoirs. Photographs were taken and used as part of the fieldwork strategy to obtain visual data. Participants responded differently to this data collection strategy. After each snapshot, the digital camera was played back so that participants could view the images taken. This strategy was also enjoyed by most of the participants. However on seeing their personal images they requested me to send them the photos.

From this experience, I can safely conclude that audio and visual data are powerful tools in qualitative fieldwork. These are very interesting and user friendly to participants. However, the questions of ownership of these data in research still need to be addressed by researchers, because participants wanted to have their images while some prefer to own up their recorded voices.

_Ethical issues:_ Getting written consent of parents was an immediate ethical dilemma. First most of the parents were illiterate, that is, unable to read or write. Secondly, when I negotiated a written consent with those who were literate, they became very insecure to endorse their consent and opted not to commit themselves to such an agreement. But ordinarily they agreed to participate voluntarily. I realised that negotiating written consent in communities with the majority of illiterate people was more of a mockery approach and therefore insincere, insensitive and unethical. I discussed my frustration with teachers and villages elders (headmen). These key figures in the communities advised me against the consent form but rather to go ahead with them if they agreed to participate. I therefore adopted the verbal consent approach, and it worked very well.

The second ethical challenge emerged from the use of audio and visual data. Some government officers requested not to be tape-recorded, but agreed to be photographed. Many were merely interested in seeing their images and those of the features that I photographed. I realised that during interview discussions they remained cautious and guarded in their comments not to be understood to have been releasing sensitive information. Some secondary school teachers requested not to be tape-recorded nor photographed. Despite these requests, all groups of participants voluntarily participated in the interview. As the interviews developed the reasons for the special requests began to unfold. For example, teachers narrated experiences where they were concerned with their job security. In their personal narratives they made comments such as

‘When they [children] go to STD 7, they fail and our supervisors become very furious and blame us. If we stay longer in this school, I fear for our future in the teaching profession. A person can face dismissal or get no promotion. We want people to help us. It’s really painful to teach in this area.’ (Ms Obakeng, a teacher at Xaixai PS)

‘Our education officers (supervisors) do not see these problems. Some of us will be dismissed from the job soon.’ (Mr Kgakala, a teacher at Xaixai PS)

‘Teachers found their professional career in this school very unpleasant. Some of us were once reprimanded for being outspoken and threatening to boycott classes protesting against the conditions in hostels and

...
the critical water situation.’ (Mr Ruwalebone a member of the Sekgoma JSS)

According to these personal narratives, teachers felt they were working in frustrating and professionally threatening environment because of the accusation they received from their supervisors for the schools’ poor performance in national examinations. It also emerged that political and centralized administrative decisions constraint the responsibilities of RADP officers and teachers to deliver services as well as to improve conditions in hostels. For example, the junior secondary school was forced to double intake while facilities were not increased and improved. Such decisions resulted in congestion in hostels. Budgetary allocations remained insufficient to meet needs of the schools. Hostels were managed by unqualified staff. On the other hand officers mentioned constraints which may seem to portray them as underperforming. For example, although expressing administrative defensiveness, RADP officers said,

‘Our office is understaffed, so we usually send drivers alone with lists of children to be collected and schools to be sent, to go and transport children. The other reason of sending drivers alone is due to insufficient budgetary allocation we suffer. We are unable to send out officers because we cannot afford to pay them subsistence allowances for the nights and days they spend in remote areas. Sending drivers alone is another way of saving costs. Our office is supposed to feed children on the way, but as we have mentioned, due to limited funds, drivers do not take any food provision for children to eat during travelling.’ (Ms Moitha, an RADP Staff member)

‘We do our best to provide services and meet the needs of RADs, but as we have already said, our major concern is insufficient budgetary allocation. We do not have enough funds; therefore we are not able to provide services on time or to the best of our wish. There is always a problem of shortage, we are unable to visit schools and settlements regularly as expected, and we end up using drivers to do things that ought to be done by professionals. We are quite aware that parents in the settlements do not understand their role in the education of their children and as such do not support government initiatives, but we are financially constrained to come up with development projects that could bring them on board.’ (Ms Juma, an RADP Staff member)

Such were challenging comments and these participants needed protection against the information they volunteered. I assured them of confidentiality and anonymity. As such participants volunteered their comments and narratives voices on the understanding that the research report would be through indirect attribution and use of pseudonyms.

One most frustrating thing about this case study is the question of the ethical dilemma where I found myself emotionally concerned and once again becoming personally guilty of betrayal of trust by listening to accusation and counter accusation between and among the participants and provide no solution. In some cases emotions went high and the tension was difficult for one to bear. Officers accused other officers. For example one participant said,

‘Another problem is that children are collected by the drivers alone. Our drivers
are semi-literate to be given children alone. They are rough and careless in language. Some of them do not talk nicely to teachers. How can they be expected to treat children with respect?' (Ms Figwa, a teacher at Nxaunxau boarding PS)

Some participants were at some point becoming apologetic and regretting having given out information they considered sensitive to me such as,

‘Food is sometimes in short supply. It is more worrisome when there is no food in hostels, and children walk around asking for food from teachers. It is something we know but we are afraid to talk about to visitors like you.’ (Ms Magwa, a teacher at Nxaunxau boarding PS)

‘I am embarrassed by the conditions under which these children live at the hostels. I do not think these children are given the necessary care. I am not reporting anyone, but I often see children and the small ones in particular looking dirty, walking barefooted, some looking really orphaned; you wonder if there is any soap for washing. I wonder how these care takers work; they start work in the morning and knock off in the afternoon; what about children? Who is with these small children at night?’ (Ms Morwadi a member of Nxaunxau boarding PS PTA committee)

Basarwa parents and their children accused teachers and public officers and in some cases making allegations of human abuse such as:

‘Children run away from boarding regularly and travel home. The recent case concerns two girls (a girl with a younger sister) who ran away and arrived this week. The children took two days, slept in the bush/forest, an area infested with wild animals. The elder one alleged that a male teacher was sexually abusing her and she refused. She said that since then, she was hated by this teacher and was always receiving corporal punishment. This story is sad and heart braking. The police, teachers and RADP officers were in this village this week tracing these children. They found them but the children refused to go back to school; instead they went to their parents in the settlement.’ (Ms Dinonyane, a parent in Qangwa village)

Some teachers and some public officers also accused parents for negligence and alcoholism. There are also some NGOs which are working in the settlements. Some NGOs have activities and projects that conflict with government policies and strategies and school programmes. The activities and projects attracted children out of the school systems. Ultimately I found myself working hard in a highly volatile and sensitive situation to protect all parties against such accusations, whilst still asking them to talk about their experiences about schooling.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that cases of ethnic minority are sensitive but context specific topic for which qualitative research paradigm is suitable. This fieldwork was not only an interesting experience but also a challenge. The dogma of rigidity of methodological approach is contestable, giving an urge on issues of flexibility, entry and access, quality of data and ethical consideration. As I
became more aware of the sensitivity of studying issues that affect minority groups, particularly realising that some participants were equally sensitive and suspicious to strangers and people they thought represented the powers of the dominant groups. I also realise the importance of emphasis on context and uniqueness. I found myself in a state of emotional vulnerability, struggling with sympathy and empathy to manage accusations and counter accusations, trying to protect children and parents against the criticism of the teachers - and equally aware of the need to protect the teachers against any negative views of children and parents. I also became aware of the need to protect teachers and public officers from government possible censure. I tried to use this awareness to make sure that I made useful judgement, about what was relevant, and as much as possible tried to avoid unnecessary detail. I was also careful to reduce power distance between me and research participants as well to avoid imposing my own values on them. The issue of pseudonyms in audio data was challenged because participants wanted their identity heard and known. Participants’ genuine expectation of a solution to their problem from my research work was yet another predicament hence I suffered consciousness of betrayal of trust over the information volunteered by the researched. The major lesson is that a qualitative methodological approach is by and large influenced by the context, and therefore flexibility is an important recipe for a successful study.

REFERENCES


