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Insider-outsider-inbetweener? Researcher positioning, participative methods and cross-cultural educational research

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Insider-outsider-inbetweener? Researcher positioning, participative methods and cross-cultural educational research

This article reflects on the use of participative techniques with final year secondary school students in one rural community in Western Kenya as an enabling tool for an outsider to both gain insider perspectives and develop a more insider role in that community by privileging and legitimating participant-driven data. Conclusions put forward the concept of the ‘inbetweener’ researcher, neither entirely inside or outside, and consider how using such methods allowed the formulation of authentic participative knowledge (co-) construction and construction of meaningful relationships in the field.

Keywords: insider-outsider; participative methods; cross-cultural research

Introduction

Insider and outsider positionings have long been theorised in the social sciences with their definitions differing over time and across disciplines. Steeped in the history of both anthropology and sociology, these perspectives are integral to the debates regarding what valid research is deemed to be. In the field of international and comparative education, a number of authors have recently sought to reconsider insiderness and outsiderness and argued against their fixed dichotomous entities (Arthur 2010; Katyal and King 2011; McNess, Arthur, and Crossley 2013). Arthur (2010) argues that a researcher’s identity can shift dependent on the situation; the status of a researcher as an insider or outsider responding to the social, political and cultural values of a given context or moment. While this recent attention has highlighted theoretical developments in thinking about insider-outsider perspectives, less focus has been paid to the methodological processes that contribute to such shifting positionings while conducting cross-cultural research. This article seeks to address this by reflecting on the researcher experience during one such qualitative study.

The study involved four months' fieldwork in one rural community and two of its secondary schools in Western Kenya. It sought to explore local perceptions of quality education through critical analysis of the perspectives and insights of a range of stakeholders across parents, teachers, management committee members and students (Milligan, 2014a). The rationale for the research had come from many years' experience as a volunteer, and more recently trustee, of a British NGO which works to improve the quality of secondary education in rural Kisii. In this time, I have visited more than seventy secondary schools in the Kisii region and I have close working relationships with many principals. Significantly, I also have developed strong friendships with many people both in Kisii town and the village where I conducted my case study. However, I speak very little Ekegusii, the local, and for many of the community's inhabitants' only, language. I was also the only white person living in the area and I was often the only woman in male company. Therefore, while I represented many of the stereotypical outsider traits on entering the field I also was in a rare position of having intimate knowledge and experience of, and relationships in, the community.

During the four months in the rural community, I took detailed fieldwork notes through which I reflected on the research process. On reading them back on return to the UK, I recognised that my positioning and, significantly, how others viewed me was a frequent concern that I returned to time and again. This has led me to reflect on my positioning and consider how I represented a number of different identities and what processes contributed to these. The shifting identities were often characterised by different situations as Arthur (2010) has suggested. For example, I could be said to have been more of an insider in the school staff room than in the local market place. In the former, English was the primary language and I was mainly treated as a colleague, albeit often a

‘strange’ one whose experiences of living in the UK were often drawn out and discussed in detail. In the latter, I was always the *mzungu* (European), although towards the end of the four months, I was also known as the *mwalimu* (teacher) and associated with the family with whom I stayed. This already points to the multiple identities I took on and the fact that these were not static and changed over time. However, in this article, I put forward that as much as being situational, the shifting positioning was also reflective of a conscious effort in research design for me not to remain an outsider. This was particularly in relation to the students whom I expected, from my experience working in schools, to be most in awe of the outsider and with whom building meaningful relationships would be most difficult.

In the light of this and as the main focus of this article, I reflect on the participative methods used with young people in their final year of secondary school and how using such techniques contributed to my own changing positioning in the field. I first consider the use of such techniques to garner a degree of an authoritative insider perspective on their educational lives, both in and out of school, and the ability to enter spaces that as both an adult and an outsider I would not have otherwise been able to access. The article then turns to a discussion of how this research process enabled some shift in many students’ perceptions of myself and my positioning. In the latter parts of the article, I reflect on the contribution of participative methods for shifting such positioning and building relationships of trust. Conclusions put forward the development of the concept of the ‘inbetweener’ researcher. This is in support of McNess, Arthur and Crossley (2013) among others who have suggested that the traditional dichotomies of insider and outsider are largely redundant in contemporary international and comparative educational research.

The research project

The research project was based in one rural community in the Kisii region of Western Kenya and two of its secondary schools. Owmana and Eskuru Secondary Schools are primarily day schools with all students coming from the Inka village community (pseudonyms given throughout). They have relatively small student bodies with less than fifty students in each class group. The village, although rural, is not remote and is connected to Kisii town by two main roads (for more detail about the research context and its rurality, please see Milligan, 2014b). Its relative rurality is important since it offers the context for which I entered and the extent to which I was seen as an outsider. For the young people at the secondary schools I worked, seeing wazungu may not have been uncommon in the local town where some small NGOs are based. However, interacting on a daily basis was not something that most had done (when I and other British volunteers worked in the community, it had been in other local schools).

I designed the research project from the understanding that those who are most closely involved in educational practice, together with the students for whose benefit the policies are developed, are often left out of debate about what counts as a quality education. I used a range of participative methods as I deemed appropriate for the different participant groups. This research approach drew on the assessment of Kendall (2007, 706) of current definitions of quality schooling:

Educational quality is only shallowly intersecting with communities', parents', children's, and teachers' daily educational experiences and desires ... educational quality, as defined by various local and non-local actors, could be strengthened by good participatory approaches.

Including the young people who as the students, were the 'consumers' of educational policy and the direct beneficiaries of education in practice, was an integral part of the

research design. It has been widely argued that children tend to be constructed as objects of research rather than active participants (Cox et al. 2008; Thomson 2008). Karlsson (2001) has further highlighted that this is often precipitated by the fact that student participation in school-based research is relatively limited. I chose to include students because they can bring unique and specific insights...

...about their everyday lives at home and school and their view and hopes for their futures – which can easily slip below the horizons of older inquirers. The omission of these perspectives can easily lead to researchers making interpretations and representations that are very short-sighted and which miss the point.

(Thomson, 2008, 1)

However, with my experience with the NGO, students can be reluctant to share their views or lack confidence to feel that they may be able to say anything that might be useful for me. This was backed up throughout the fieldwork process as students often asked me questions such as ‘is this the sort of thing you want me to say’, ‘can I take a photo of...’ and ‘I’m just writing about my normal life, are you sure that is good enough’.

It is important to note that although I describe the methods as participative, I did not take a wholly participatory approach in my research and make no claims that my research could have similar outcomes to those hoped for in such studies. A fully participatory approach would have involved participation of the students throughout the research process. This would include in the development of the research questions and data collection tools and full participation in the analysis and identification of key themes of the research. Wang (1999) also highlights the importance of the emancipatory aspects of participatory research in which participants can become empowered through the process of designing, collection and analysing data. Rather, I understand the methods I used to be participative because they involved some shift in power dynamics by allowing students to guide the data collection, through their choices in the data they

collected and the form of the interview which followed. I conducted twenty diary and photo-linked interviews with Form IV students, aged between 17 and 22. The photo-linked technique I used drew on the data collection method of 'photovoice' which has been used predominantly in participatory community research to address issues of injustice, inequality and exploitation (Wang 1999). In this methodology, participants are encouraged to take photos and share these and interpretations in focus group discussions. The choice of using diaries was based on a similar rationale.

Put simply, these techniques offer a combination of participant data collection and unstructured interviewing. At each case study school, I worked together with the class teacher to identify ten Form IV students of mixed gender and ability who were given either disposable cameras or diaries for one week to chart what they deemed to be important to their education. Those with cameras received a sheet on which they could record why they took each photo. I showed them how they worked since most had not used a camera before (and none had even seen a disposable version). In each diary, I asked students to reflect on what they are doing and how they are feeling. All were given limited instructions to remind them to focus on what was important to them in their education and a letter explaining the purpose of the research and ethical issues including right of withdrawal and the voluntary nature of taking part. This was particularly significant considering that their mock national exams were pending and partaking would impact on their time for revision. All students chose to participate and many clearly enjoyed the process, as I will return to later. After a week, I collected the cameras and diaries before developing the photos. These or the diary text were used as the basis for a narrative interview with each student which was designed to be a

‘participative activity to generate knowledge, a two-way learning process, where the subjectivities of the research participants influence data collection and the process of “making meaning”’ (Shah 2004, 552).

Power, privilege and positioning in the field

The notions of insider and outsider have recently been given attention by a number of authors in the field of international and comparative education (Arthur 2010; Katyal and King 2011; McNess, Arthur, and Crossley 2013). These authors argue for the importance of revisiting insiderness and outsidersness and their relevance for those conducting cross-cultural educational research in the light of evolving and increasingly complex ways of working in the field. McNess, Arthur and Crossley (2013, 3-4) situate this renewed interest in insider-outsider perspectives with:

A call for a more complex understanding of the relationship between the researcher and the researched and the ways in which all involved might situate themselves as ‘insiders’ or ‘outsiders’ – or both...[there is] the need for an updating and re-envisioning of the way in which we conceptualise being an insider or an outsider in the research process. This should not only include a better understanding of the way in which more traditional boundaries, such as nationality, language, ethnicity, culture, gender and age, interact, but also a recognition and understanding of various ontological, epistemological and disciplinary boundaries that might be encountered and the way in which these might impact on the generation of new knowledge.

A significant aspect of this new thinking about insider-outsider positionings is the further development of the notion that in conducting research we are neither entirely one identity nor another; neither fully inside nor outside. Rather, it is argued that researchers take on different positionings dependent on the situation that we may be in, the people we are interacting with and familiarity of the linguistic and socio-cultural norms. Katyal and King (2011) reflect on their positioning in conducting research in Hong Kong and conclude that although they are ‘outsiders’ by way of cultural and

racial difference, they inhabited an insider identity on a professional level in the educational institutions they researched. This suggests the need for a reconsideration of what is meant by the separate notions of insider and outsider. Furthermore, this literature highlights how there are multiple cultural, socio-economic, linguistic and power dimensions which contribute to shifting positionings while conducting cross-cultural research.

Hellawell (2006) and Thomson and Gunter (2010) have reflected on insider and outsider identities in educational research in the UK context. Hellawell (2006) argues that being an insider or outsider relates to individual changing lives, experiences and the knowledge of a particular context and leads researchers to have different gradients of outsidership or insidership; neither completely on the outside looking in or on the inside taking part. He continues to put forward the argument that there are ‘subtly varying shades of “insiderism” and “outsiderism”...[and] it can sometimes become quickly apparent that the same researcher can slide along more than one insider-outsider continuum, and in both directions, during the research process’ (Hellawell, 2006, 486). Thomson and Gunter (2010) consider the ways in which they were ‘inside-outside-upside down’ during a research project in a secondary school in Northern England where young people become active researchers. They use Bauman’s notion of ‘liquid identities’ to show that the boundaries both between insider and outsider and other identities were often messy and difficult to define. The concept of ‘liquid identities’ which are neither fixed or defined and the insider-outsider continuum are useful for challenging the binary definitions which may be inappropriate in the increasingly complex research environment which McNess, Arthur and Crossley (2013) outline in the quote above. However, it also gives

the impression of fluid identities, constantly moving and sliding around, and over which the researcher has little control suggesting that the researcher has no ability to actively shift their own positioning.

Much of this insider-outsider literature has tended to focus on how researchers view *themselves* in the research process. Rather, insiderness and outsidership can be seen as a balancing act between the positioning that the researcher actively takes and the ways in which their role is defined by how *others* involved in the project, research participants and further afield, view the researcher. In my research journal, I often reflected on the discrepancies between the image I had of myself and how others in the community viewed me:

Maybe I have been idealising my position as an insider because there are a small number of people who see me as ***** rather than simply the mzungu. For the vast majority I'm simply from the land of plenty who they hope can sweep in and make changes they want personally and at the school...my knowledge is seen as superior, the outsider who can change their world

(Research journal, 23rd May 2011)

This quote from my research journal highlights the importance of power and privilege in how participants view a researcher coming from outside the community and more specifically from the UK. I came with a certain degree of cultural, linguistic and economic capital; whether real or perceived. This points to the importance of considering alternative perceptions of an individual's 'status set' and the potential pitfalls of the illusions of being an insider. Merton (1972) first challenged the belief that an insider researcher must mean someone who is a member of a particular ethnic or social group and put forward that we all have multiple identities which take precedence at different times. His notion of 'status sets' is a useful tool for considering the different identities that I held which contributed to my insider-outsider positioning in the field.

These statuses included being white, an adult, a young adult, a woman, a teacher, an unmarried woman and an English speaker. What is significant here is firstly that these status sets reflect our multiple and shifting identities – to be both white and a woman bring their own statuses and these will be different to that of a white woman. Furthermore, by considering status rather than the ‘shades’ of positioning of Hellowell (2006), it highlights the considerable power implications that accompany the statuses that the researcher embodies. This suggests the importance of a researcher reflecting on their different statuses as a part of the research process.

How power relations relate to the insider-outsider debate is highlighted by McNess, Arthur and Crossley (2013) who acknowledge that it is an area that needs greater attention. This particularly relates to how relationships of power between researchers and participants influence the way in which knowledge is constructed and what becomes ‘known’. A key part of the argument is that there is a need for researchers to both consider the ways in which participants view them in the field and how active choices in research design and positioning can contribute shifting relationships. Here, the literature related to participatory approaches which seek to challenge and even out power relations in the field can offer some important insights. One of the main aims in this methodological approach seeks is to dissolve boundaries between the ‘researcher’ and the ‘researched’; put differently, this could be the boundaries between the ‘insider’ and the ‘outsider’. As outlined in the previous section, in this project, I have drawn on the participatory literature which promotes the use of photos and other visual media to include children and young people in the research process (Karlsson 2001; Sharples et al. 2003; Mizen 2005). These authors have argued that it is important to consider the positioning of the researcher from the point of view of participants and the potential

benefits of shifting researcher positioning to enable more authentic research. Here, the argument is that by prioritising participant-driven data, rather than relying on researcher assumptions in research design and data collection, the outcomes will be both more realistic and trustworthy. The promotion of the use of participatory approaches is based on their potential to challenge the power relations between researcher and researched, engage the younger and more shy research participant, give children ‘a voice’ and construct new forms of knowledge (Packard 2008).

The literature related to participatory methods and researcher positioning suggests that it is important to consider how participants, and the wider community, view the researcher in the field and the different elements which influence both power relations between researcher and participants and the researcher’s positioning. It is argued that active choices in research design have the potential to influence positioning in the field. In the following sections, I consider the active role that I took as a researcher to develop stronger relationships with the young people in the research (and their teachers and parents) and allow for more meaningful knowledge (co)-construction.

Phase 1: ‘insider’ perspectives

Giving cameras and diaries to students provided access to insider views of everyday learning spaces and events. This allowed me to enter spaces both within and outside of the school environment which I would not have otherwise been able to as an outsider in terms of my position as a researcher, an adult, a non-speaker of the local language and a woman. Through their pictures and diary text, students provided intimate insight into their home lives and the out-of-school challenges which students perceived to be important in their education. All students took photos outside of the school environment

but which represented the continuation of their learning. For example, one girl, Damaris took twelve photos of different aspects of her home life. These home pictures and the subsequent interviews contributed significantly to one of the key findings that home life challenges make it difficult for students to participate in out-of-school learning. This included revising for exams which involved spending hours each evening with their exercise books and sometimes, textbooks, to look over topics that they anticipated coming up in the Kenyan Secondary Certificate Examinations (KCSE) that were due three-five months after the fieldwork took place.

One exemplary challenge to emerge from the student-driven data is the amount of time that students spend working, either on schoolwork or household chores. As students were approaching their final exams, all were waking up before 4.30am to revise and many were staying up until after midnight. Kennedy recorded in his diary that he woke at 3.00am on Monday when he feels ‘cold and tired’ to revise before his one hour walk to school which makes him feel scared because of the darkness. The following day, he wakes late at 5.30am and worries that he will be punished for arriving late at school. In the evenings, he reports that he must help with household chores before going to bed because he is very tired. One evening he made the following observation which again highlights his everyday fears:

It was a nice day/night because the moon was very bright. This allowed me to be moving around the compound. I was not fearing anything. Any cases of thefts never took place because of bright moon.

(Kennedy, Eskuru Secondary School)

The amount of time that students feel they should revise is made more challenging by the lack of lighting in homesteads to allow students to revise outside of school hours. Damaris, Alfred and Dorothy all took photos of their kerosene lamps by which they revised at night. One of two photos taken by Alfred of his lamp next to his evening

revision materials is shown in photo one.

Photo 1: Taken by Alfred, Omwana Secondary School



Alfred revealed in the subsequent interview that he finds it particularly difficult to read by lamplight because he is longsighted but does not have glasses. This is a finding that may have been revealed through other data collection methods. However, this may have been based on outsider assumptions and probing questions that he may have sore eyes from working in such little light. These are just two examples of many which reveal entirely insider-driven photos and texts from spaces and times that it would not have been usual for me as a curious outsider to have otherwise entered.

In comparable research with students in urban schools in South Africa, Karlsson (2001, 24) reflected on giving students cameras to gain insights into their lives ‘beyond the space-time confines of the timetable and geo-space of the school’ where she interacted with them. Similarly, here, through the diaries and photos, students offered access to new insider spaces within the school context. Damaris took a photo of the girls’ toilets during break time; Peter captured the event of boys moving into the newly constructed

dormitory. Both of these are spaces within the school that are not easily accessible as both an adult and female. Evelyn's photo of two boys fighting during quiet study time in lunch break was indicative for her of the wider issue of ill-discipline among students in her Form IV class. When this photo was taken, it is likely that I was sat in the staffroom some fifty metres away, oblivious that such behaviour was happening despite the fact that Evelyn shared that this was a common occurrence in lunch hour. This is a space where the insiders are the Form IV students. This event would not have happened if I, or another adult had been present, in the room. Having myself as an outsider present in the classroom would have likely led to an unauthentic portrayal of student behaviour.

Photo 2: Taken by Evelyn, Omwana Secondary School



These are just a few photos and diary excerpts which illustrate the insider data that students provided through using these participative techniques. However, it is each

student's narrative based on all their photos or diary entries which create a powerful representation of students' everyday educational lives. These thus offers personal insights at different points in their day which suggest how challenging their lives are and the many interlinking pressures that impact on their educational engagement, well-being and achievement. The data collected by the young people was, thus, significant in itself for the insights that it offered in spaces that an outsider could not enter. However, it also gained greater context through the narrative interviews which followed.

Phase 2: knowledge co-construction

The follow-up interviews took place in a private office on the school grounds during holidays when most Form IV students were in school revising before their mock examinations. The interviews took between 30 and 45 minutes. I positioned the chairs so that we sat next to each other and looked through their photos or diaries next to each other so that they would feel less like they were in a formal interview situation. By allowing the text and photos to form the basis of the narrative interviews, this created an environment where students appeared to be relatively comfortable and most spoke at length by the end of the interview about the data that they had produced.

At first, most of the students appeared nervous and waited for me to ask a question, often replying with short replies which required me to follow-up with probing questions. This tended to shift during the interview with some taking control of the

interview by the end, taking each photo and explaining it without waiting for a prompt from me. This can be seen in the following extracts from an interview with Damaris:

Photo 1:

This is the first photo which you took. It is of the school fence, I think. Why did you take a photo of the fence?

Damaris: I took it because it is not fenced well and this makes students to escape rather than be learning.

Why are they escaping?

To go off and do their own business.

What do you mean by that?

They are going to discos, videos, markets, whatever they do.

How does it affect you?

This makes the students not motivated.

Photo 7:

This is a photo of my mother giving advice to her children. There is my brother and sister who are sitting there. They are also eating dinner which I had prepared.

Do you often prepare dinner?

Yes, I help my mother. It is not too much...etching water and washing the utensils that have been used in the afternoon. My mother is a farmer and she works all the way through the afternoon so she does not have time to come and do all the chores. I have to go there and see even if they have prepared a meal which we are going to eat. This makes me to be late to come in and do my studies.

(Damaris, Omwana Secondary School)

In the first, she was hesitant, awaiting questions leading me to take the first photo and lead the conversation. By the fifth photo that we were discussing, she was visibly more relaxed, taking each photo and explaining why she had taken it in detail and without being asked. Significantly, she also shifts from talking about 'students and their challenges' more generally to her own experiences and views suggesting that she felt more comfortable to share these with me.

It is also important to note that the photo about which Damaris spoke so animatedly was one of the ‘insider photos’ discussed in the previous section. It seemed that discussions of the photos in spaces that I was not able to enter as a relative outsider were particularly significant for shifting power relations and my own positioning. These were examples where we were then discussing events and places that I did not know about and I could see that my lack of knowledge here shifted how the young people felt with me. They showed surprise if I seemed to not know something:

Photo 23:

Dorothy: I took this photo while I was digging, doing some work maybe at a time when I am supposed to read.

Does this happen often?

(Laughing) Of course, it happens a lot. This time is worse though because we have examinations and I was supposed to read but my Mum told me to dig first before I could come and read.

(Dorothy, Omwana Secondary School)

Across these examples and the interviews more widely, I did feel that the, otherwise, uneven power relations were, to some degree, thus evened out. This allowed for some collaboration and knowledge co-construction, heralded as one of the strengths of using photo and diary-linked interviewing (Wang, 1999; Packard, 2008). However, this also supports Packard (2008) who has highlighted that there is a tendency among those who promote the photo-linked interviewing to assume that power relations can be fully balanced out and I would not wish to argue that this was the case in my research. Students continued to call me ‘Miss’ and some were reticent to speak at length in the interview. Through interviews with teachers and parents, it also became clear that some

students had omitted important information about themselves even when prompted. This was particularly in relation to more private issues such as their relationships or parental income. Students clearly did not feel at ease to share such information with me, whether as an outsider, a woman, an adult, a teacher-figure or a combination of all of these factors.

Therefore, in the process of interviewing my positioning shifted dependent on the young person with whom I was sharing the interview. With some, I became more of a conspirator, the sole adult in the school setting to have been shown into their personal spaces. With others, I remained very much an outsider with whom they were reluctant to share personal details and who shared brief or generalised points in interviews. However, for the majority, the process of the interview and with it, the validation of their opinions, viewpoints and insights provided a more balance context for data collection and arguably the construction of more valid 'knowledge'.

Phase 3: shifting researcher positioning

The use of participative techniques was only with the students at each school. However, on reflection, I can see how my positioning changed both within the school and the wider community and would argue that by including the young people in this more participatory way contribute to this. With the students that had been co-researchers and some of the wider student community, I was no longer either 'mwalimu' or 'mzungu'. By placing import on the students' data, I had contributed to a shift in how students saw me as someone that was interested in what they thought and their lives.

My changing positioning was not only in relation to how the students saw me. It also had some influence on the students' parents and teachers and subsequent data collection with these groups. I conducted interviews with parents of twelve of the students involved in the photo and diary linked research. These interviews took place during vacation time in students' homes. Many showed me in person the images they had captured in their photos or what they had been explaining in their diaries. Dorothy, for example, wanted to show me the family land where she had been working when she had wanted to revise. Damaris, similarly, introduced me to her mother as 'the one who was advising my siblings', reminding me of the photo that she had taken. This allowed me to enter, in some way, spaces that would otherwise have remained hidden. It also enabled a more insider perspective as a basis for the interview with parents; some were actively surprised by how much I seemed to know about the community, the school and their child in particular. This enabled the parent interviews, despite taking place with a translator and when I had only recently met them, to be more relaxed and less like a complete outsider turning up at their home to question them which arguably meant that they shared more with me.

When I wrote in my research journal that I was seen as the 'knowledgeable outsider', I presumed that this was related to my previous experience of working in secondary schools in the Kisii region. However, on reflection, and through follow-up discussions with teachers at Eskuru school, I see that much of this 'knowledge' was based on the insights that students had given me by trusting me and allowing me into their spaces. Two years after the fieldwork took place, I returned to the schools to deliver a report based on the research project. After reading it, the Eskuru principal spoke about my identity which I reflected on in my research journal:

Returning to the schools has been just as emotional as I thought it would be. The overwhelming emotion that I have felt is pride – in one moment in particular. After Mr John (the Eskuru principal) had read the report, he shook my hand and said thank you. I said there was nothing to thank me for and he shook his head saying ‘no, I want to say thank you for all the work you did here to find out everything about our school. These students really trusted you. This report shows you really have known.

(Research Journal, 5th September, 2013)

Looking back on what Mr John said to me, it particularly struck me that he highlighted both trust and knowledge. While Mr John may not make the explicit link between the two, I would argue that the use of participative methods with the students allowed me to develop both trust and in turn more authentic knowledge construction within the interviews. However, significantly this also had the positive effect of enabling me to build more meaningful relationships both in the school and wider community.

Conclusions

This article has shown one way in which a cross-cultural researcher actively negotiated their position in the field. This article has shown that the active choices made in research design and data collection can affect the way in which a researcher is viewed. This suggests the potential for the consideration of the new term - the ‘inbetweeners’ - in cross-cultural research. This supports Hellowell (2006), Arthur (2010) and Thomson and Gunter (2010) who have argued against the fixed and dichotomous notions of insiderness and outsidersness in conducting educational research. However, the active term of ‘inbetweeners’ recognises that the researcher can take active attempts to place themselves in between. This is in contrast to the concepts of liquid identities (Thomson and Gunter, 2010) or an insider-outsider continuum (Hellowell, 2006; Arthur, 2010) which suggest a distinct lack of agency from the researcher themselves. This is in recognition of the fact that on entering the field, much of my identity in this cross-

cultural ethnographic research was given to me by the wider community who saw me as the ‘mzungu’. The active attempts made to move from being an outsider to an ‘inbetweener’ had significant implications for being able to develop relationships build on trust and comradery, both with the students engaged in the participative research process and the school and surrounding community more widely. This is not to argue that I was perceived differently by all members of the community; rather that for those actively involved in the research process, there was some change in their perception of me. By gaining personal insights from students, alongside being able to build on my own previous experience of working in the Inka community and secondary schools across the Kisii region, I became a ‘knowledgeable outsider’ and subsequently an ‘inbetweener’.

McNess, Arthur and Crossley (2013, 8) have highlighted how the blurring of insider-outsider positionings can bring new insights to comparative research and to ‘to act as a counter-balance to the current trend for the comparison of large, cross-national datasets which allow little reference to local, contextual understandings’. This article has sought to highlight the great potential for the use of participative methods both to enable new insights and mutual understandings of the educational realities of one particular context. In a study that sought to understand local perspectives of quality secondary education, it was important to find ways to enable the participants to share what they thought rather than what they thought I wanted to hear. By building relationships based on trust and respect of different views, the data collected suggests more authentic portrayals of the perceptions of those in the Inka community. This is just one way in which the revisiting of insider-outsider perspectives can offer new and important understandings to the field of international and comparative education.

End notes

1. All names for the village, schools and individuals have been given pseudonyms.
2. Participants have given consent for all data included in this article, including the photographs, to be used for research dissemination.

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