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Challenges in accessing fieldwork in rural Himalayas: An emerging researcher's experiences

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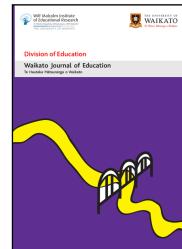
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Challenges in accessing fieldwork in the rural Himalayas: An emerging researcher's experiences

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Abstract

This article is the reflection of an emerging researcher who has experienced different nudges from the beginning of accessing the research field to the final stage of collating data in rural Nepal. My experiences and reflections may provide provocations to researchers to consider before they undertake field research. Areas that researchers should be aware of before entering the field include strategies of approaching the resources, socio-cultural and language diversities, topography and travel complication. The article offers those considering field research in remote areas, such as rural Nepal, an opportunity for rethinking a case study research approach, choosing appropriate methodological tools, sampling strategies and accessing resources.

Keywords

Case study, field research, access, expectation, support

Introduction

As many research advisors have noted, (Blaikie, 2010; De Vaus & de Vaus, 2001), entering the field is an important phase in any research design and can be challenging for a researcher. As such, I look forward to this project as both an exciting and challenging stage of the entire research, supported by



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(pp. 67–77)

the three other named authors. Darling (2014) stated that entering the field can be a daunting and bewildering experience where researchers may have to adjust and compromise with many assumptions and expectations. I noted that entry into fieldwork is often an early and harsh test of the research design and ethical demeanour that doctoral students have been theoretically trained to practice. This article discusses experiences in entering the research field in a country ravaged by a natural disaster. That was Nepal following the April 2015 earthquake, which occurred immediately after my enrolment into the PhD programme.

I am an emergent researcher and a Nepali. The other authors are my doctoral supervisors who offered formative advice on both the research project itself and the writing of this article. However, the experiences described and the insights gained, belonged to me. In order to retain a sense of immediacy of those experiences, my voice will be heard throughout this account.

Planning and setting out

With the assistance of three supervisors, I prepared a research design for investigating in-service teachers' ICT practice in rural primary schools in Nepal. The confirmation of my candidature and the gaining of approval from the Ethics Committee brought high enthusiasm and motivation to travel from Christchurch, New Zealand to the real ground of the research.

Padgett (2017) suggests that in qualitative research a researcher must have the sensitivity of an eagle's eyes, flexibility and immediate decision-making capability, to carry out the research plan. During my planning stage, the 25th April 2015 earthquake and another major aftershock in the following week, impacted on the initial design. The research proposal was initially designed to explore how in-service primary teachers in rural primary schools integrate ICT into their teaching plans and delivery, and why they chose to use ICT in their teaching. The 2015 earthquakes generated additional issues to be investigated, and the impact of the disaster on the use of ICT became a further research objective. The impact of the earthquake became a determining factor in selecting three schools in different rural areas of Nepal: one of the schools was selected from a highly affected zone, the second from a less affected region and the third from a relatively unaffected area.

Although most researchers enter the site of research with well-planned research strategies, Yin (1994) suggested that case study researchers need to be prepared to consider new partnerships and document findings as they occur. Similarly, Hurrel (2005) stated that the data collection process needs to go beyond an initially structured routine. When I arrived at the sites of my research, I began to really understand the advice of Yin (1994) about establishing new relationships as I had to deal with schools other than those I had initially targeted. One of the reasons for changing the strategy was that the schools I had initially selected were all around the same region that was highly affected by the disaster. It was clear that it would be potentially hazardous to rely on this risk-zone where it would be difficult to find functioning schools with ICT. In this situation, Mukeredzi's (2012) experience in a Zimbabwean conflict area became helpful to understand the environment and helped me become prepared to make choices 'on the go'. Mukeredzi's decision to involve the teachers from this area in his research held serious risks for him and his participants. He reported how he needed to travel across rural villages for interviews and how he and his participants had to climb tall trees to access a mobile network. The problems he encountered forced him to work within a limited timeframe and to rely on limited information. I, therefore, decided to explore and build new relationships to help me find reliable and accessible schools in different regions of Nepal.

In the course of travelling to the research field I faced several hurdles. This article discusses the various challenges I faced in rural Nepal while collecting data in the field, particularly the difficulties in gaining access to the Government and non-governmental organisations, organisations' behaviour towards me, cultural and language differences, the geographical structure of the land, transportation, climate, weather and communication. Even before dealing with the complexities of the field research, I had to face a financial challenge due to the earthquake itself and the following blockade by India, both of which had a direct impact on my family. As well as the psychological impacts of the disaster, the crises of food, fuel and other essential needs (Dougan, 2015 May 4; retrieved 2017 September 6)

brought unanticipated difficulty for my family in Nepal. My father-in-law's house was destroyed, my wife and children lived in a tent in a public place for months and I lost access to funding. Thus, the crisis in Nepal deeply affected the very start of my research journey. Fortunately, my college and the student development centre at the university provided some basic financial support for the year 2016. The welfare support from the university made the research task more achievable.

Entering the field: Access to government, organisations, local authorities and schools

Opollo, Opollo, Gray and Spies (2014) pointed out that many researchers ignore the gaining of access as a part of research when they report their research, although it is one of the most significant aspects of a project. They emphasised that initial access to the various information sources, organisations or informants takes quite considerable time and that it is useful for other researchers, as well as for readers of the research to know the strategy the researcher used to get access. Brahler (2012) suggested that it is easier to get access than to maintain access and manage relationships, although she agreed that there is no particular strategy for obtaining access and it rather depends on the research context, topic, country, participants and researcher's personality and adaptability. However, as Fjellström and Guttormsen (2016) pointed out, access is not fully under the control of the investigator. In their research project in China, they found it challenging to follow up on their gatekeepers' invitations to several events and find candidates for interviews.

In this study, it was difficult for me to find easy access to schools due to the lack of an educational research council in the Ministry of Education. Therefore, I attempted to explore the research field directly myself through various channels like the Department of Education (DoE), District Education Office (DEO), other local authorities, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and personal relations. In most of the cases, I verbally communicated with the officials, although sometimes their offices required a written letter about the purpose of the research. The District Education Offices were initially visited, the purpose of the project was verbally explained and I requested the officers I spoke to, to provide me with information to help my selection process. However, the DEOs lacked sufficient information about what the non-governmental organisations were doing in the schools even though the NGO had a memorandum of understanding with the Department of Education. Therefore, I had to visit the NGO office to get sufficient information about the schools it supported in order to approach schools and to recruit participants from them.

My initial plan for data collection was simply to visit the selected schools directly without any obstacles. However, it was not easy to approach the schools without any contact details like a mobile number or a landline telephone or email. Mobile communication is the most accessible medium for reaching people in Nepal where over 90% of the total population use cellular phones, and where the internet and landline phones are either unavailable or not a regular means of communication (Ktm2day, 2015 February 20; retrieved 2017 September 1). The next task was to find contact details of the headteachers or teachers. Almost all the public schools in Nepal lack school websites and they do not have alternative email addresses like Gmail, Hotmail or Yahoo that would allow me to communicate with them. However, a few private schools have a website that allows easy communication for internet surfers. A lack of useful means of communication in the community schools was one of the barriers to access the schools. The very real digital divide between community schools and private schools (Acharya, 2015) means that any researchers would face numerous difficulties similar to mine in accessing rural schools. This situation compelled me to travel directly to the DEOs, NGOs and local schools in different districts to find the right sample schools. Besides these initial challenges, there were other unexpected challenges, such as cultural and language differences, field trips that involved going beyond the information provided by Google maps, awkward transportation, and unfavourable climate and weather. Even though I am a Nepali, I was challenged by these problems in travelling through rural Nepal and in approaching appropriate authorities.

Modes of Approach

Like many other emerging researchers, I entered the field with a research design I had developed with my supervisors while still in the university. I found that the reality in the research field was not what I expected while preparing my research proposal. I knew I would have to find and work with a gatekeeper or bridge to get permission to contact schools, but the task was more difficult than I had expected. I found myself in a situation similar to Riaz's (2013) experience during her PhD fieldwork. Like Riaz, I too found that when the predetermined gatekeeper was unhelpful, I needed to find alternative ways to find and access schools.

In the week following my arrival in Nepal, the journey to my selected districts started with preparing a backpack containing basic items like my laptop, voice recorder, camera, camera stand, chargers and so on. I made my way to the first and nearest school in a village in Lalitpur district, with plans of how to introduce the project to the headteacher and other teachers, how to schedule for interviews with the participant teachers and how to start class observations. Living nearby to the school would make it easier to travel to the school every day and I hoped it would be possible to manage to live with local families, with the help of teachers in the village.

When I reached the school, I introduced myself to the deputy headteacher in the absence of a headteacher and explained the purpose of my visit. The deputy headteacher replied that he did not know anything about ICT practice in his school although he had been teaching there for six years. The school had been selected from the website of the funding organisation, which works with the Department of Education under the Ministry of Education. Realising, as Hurrel (2005) and Yin (1994) had suggested, the need to be prepared to establish new relationships, after returning from this first school, I cancelled another pre-planned trip to a school in another district. I realised I had to strategically modify my plan to directly go to schools in remote villages, and I decided that seeking relatives around the communities would be a better way of approaching schools. To some extent, this strategy helped me to find out the reality of ICT use in the primary schools of another targeted district, and I changed my previous plan of visiting the second targeted school after communicating with relatives and their colleagues.

I was still looking for a better way of reaching the right schools. It seemed that the only option was to either visit a ministry body or a funding organisation. I emailed the Government and other organisation offices before visiting them to obtain school contact information. I followed the example of Riaz (2013) by emailing with detailed information about my research project, and I also tried to reach them through office telephones. The phone communication did not work. All the emails were declined. What had seemed to be the best option turned out to be ineffective. Thus, the first month of my data collection period passed by in despair. Okumus, Altinay and Roper (2007) noted that no matter how well the researcher is prepared, there will be "several associated variables with gaining access which are out of the researcher's control" (pg.14). It became a real challenge in rural Nepal. Ultimately after a month of consistent struggle to find sample schools, I sought the help of a renowned social worker in Nepal who I had met once before. He sent a strong email that helped me reach one of the non-governmental organisations which had been working with the Department of Education to transform teaching to involve e-learning.

Attitudes towards research

A further struggle I experienced was with the attitude of the gatekeepers I encountered. Johl and Renganathan (2009) explained that a gatekeeper might be a person or an organisation, and I needed to deal with both. I kept in my mind that, as Brown (2009) emphasised, a researcher should be "polite, humble, respectful, punctual, patient, good looking and non-judgemental" (pg.216). On the other hand, I reflected that a researcher may well expect general help from others like conversation, suggestions, advice, encouragement and support on the research journey. I found that I was looking for this kind of support to move my research project forward. However, I began to think it was futile to hope for support and co-operation within a context where there was little internal history of research and where

there was not a culture of valuing academic research. When I visited various government offices and other organisations, very few officials seemed to see value in my research plan for Nepal. Most of the officials refused to even provide time for a short conversation; instead, they would say things like they had a meeting at that time on that day. Some said that this is good, but they would have to get permission from a higher level. The most disappointing comment I received indicated that they wanted nothing to do with the research.

Although there were notable exceptions, particularly with the schools that finally became part of my project, I had similar experiences in many schools in the course of contacting them to gain access. I reflected that this aligned with accounts I came across in my readings, such as the experience of Laurila (1997) who found opposition from gatekeepers when there was a perceived conflict of interest, and that of Hasselberg (2015) who experienced frustration when she was initially unable to find the right means to express her point of view, share her concerns and get peer support to access her research field in a deportation centre in the UK. Considering Laurila's experience, I wondered if the gatekeepers and I had different interests which prevented them from providing me with access to the teachers.

When I obtained contact details of a number of schools from an NGO supporting community schools, I was able to contact headteachers directly on their mobile phones. After listening to a brief description of my research plan, most of the headteachers wanted to know if I represented an NGO of some kind. They did not seem to understand the position of an independent researcher who was not part of a donor organisation. I then became aware that Nepal still lacked a culture of research and academic reflection. It turned out, however, that there was a possibility of working with the funding organisation itself. An NGO helped me identify sample schools, provided school contacts, and did not interfere in my research process, although in the beginning, I had worried that they might.

I entered the field being aware that respect was one of the first principles for a researcher to observe. Brown (2009) discussed respect in terms of researchers being professional and understanding that they need to observe an off-duty code which required them to forget whoever they usually are in their organisation or profession. However, ways of respecting others may vary from one community to another especially if there is a cultural difference. Thus, culturally dissimilar ways of showing respect are one of the challenges for novice researchers and entering the field is an initiative that puts heavy stress on cultural awareness. Although I am a Nepali, there are many cultural differences in my country. In my research project, I faced difficulty in communication in the far-western region of Nepal because of the different local dialects of the national language. Although the teachers would speak a standard variety with me, it was difficult for me to understand their normal communication with the students, local people and colleagues.

I also faced challenges from the culture of the bureaucracy. For example, when I visited an education organisation's office to request access to schools, the office receptionist said that the officer in charge was very busy and I would need to book his time. I acknowledged it was right to schedule a time, but officials in Nepal rarely reply to emails, and certainly had not replied to any of mine. The office receptionist gave me repeated excuses, saying that she had informed him. When I asked to visit the office myself and see him, she said she had no power to say anything and that I could see him when he replied to my email. I wondered if this was a communication problem between the receptionist and her boss or an intentional refusal of my request. I recalled that Widding (2012), from his experience in a Swedish context, suggested that the researcher needs to take a rational decision to get access in one of two ways – by consensus or by invoking a conflict. I reflected that perhaps there was now a need to show power, which I had never wanted to do. Therefore, I requested one of the senior social workers in the country to write an email to the director of the organisation, an action that immediately worked for me. Although I did not anticipate it, the director of the organisation replied to my email immediately after receiving an email from the senior social worker. That opened my door to the research field. I reflected afterwards that hierarchical status is very well established in the bureaucratic culture in Nepal. The higher post officials may neglect ordinary people but they immediately open the door of their office to someone who comes with the backing of an even higher authority.

Fear of disclosing information

My textbooks told me that all the researchers should abide by the principles of human ethics, but generally, this is only evident in practice where there is an established tradition of academic research. When undertaking a doctorate, a researcher needs to get ethical approval from the university committee to conduct the research which involves an explanation of the research procedure and of what the researcher is going to do with the information gathered. However, in some contexts, it may be less effective to show the information sheet to proposed participants or even to explain the research activities to them in detail. I found that was the case in Nepal, where there is no educational research council and the research culture is underdeveloped. As Bista (2004) points out, the education sector in Nepal lacks broad and in-depth studies on persistent problems. When educated people have a good understanding of research and its benefits, they are likely to support the researcher or at least to encourage the research. It does not mean the academics and supporters in Nepal are not good, but that the research culture in institutions is yet to be developed. I found that from questions which arose as I approached the participants. For instance, even after reading the participants information sheet that the university had approved and giving a full verbal explanation to the headteachers, they would ask questions such as, 'what do you want from us', 'do we have to get permission from DEO', 'do you think this is risky in our job', 'can I ask the teachers if they are happy to participate' and 'what will you do after taking information from us'? Following their questions, I reassured them that their anonymity would be fully maintained although the information they gave me would appear in my thesis and might also be used in other writing.

Even the participant teachers were scared of speaking the truth in the beginning days although they gradually became more confident. In this situation, I reflected on the importance of Brahler (2012) and Laurila's (1997) emphasis on the need for maintaining a relationship with the participants and getting their trust. Although I frequently explained to teachers that their information was confidential, they would initially hesitate to talk about the realities of their context and practices. They would say things like, 'it's not allowed to say NGOs funding for the lab was used for other purposes.' 'I can't say his name but [D2] never takes students in the lab.' 'If I say [T1] finished two-day training in four hours, asked us to sign our attendance for two days and distributed the allowance, he will finish me from my job.' Here, the ethical principles had to be re-explained, emphasising that their names and schools are not going to be published in any publications. I found that it was a challenge for the researcher to adapt well into the local community and get sufficient real information from the participants. To win the heart and trust of participants is perhaps a bigger challenge than any other issues. Okumus et al. (2007) stressed that the researcher's personality and skills, as well as the organisational mechanisms, influence how access will be gained and maintained. Laurila (1997) suggested that getting involved in different cultural and social events with the participants can ease the relationship with the participants throughout the data collection. I tried to do that whenever I stayed in a rural community.

Compensation for support

When I had been visiting the office of one of the organisations repeatedly, one of the junior staff members shared his own bitter feeling with me, saying that officials only help when they receive something in return. I became aware that many officials and some schools expected me to either pay them for supporting my research or give them some other benefit. The situation could be very costly for an independent researcher like me if there was always a demand for money in order to access the sample schools. I recalled that Fjellström and Guttormsen (2016) defined 'access' not just as a physical approach or as a tacit relationship with participants or communication with different organisations, but rather as an activity within a cultural context, a socio-cultural phenomenon.

Although some of the schools I approached initially looked for some form of benefit for themselves, hoping I was representing an INGO or NGO, the headteachers of the schools that became part of my study supported me in every way they could during my stay. However, I had to give up one

of the schools because of their expectation of a financial benefit. Although it was not the only reason for leaving the school after being there a week, I was worried by their demand that I should make a contribution to their school, and although I succeeded in explaining that I was not working for an NGO and was not in a position to make payments, the confusion in expectations indirectly influenced our relationship and the process of trying to gather data. I recalled that Johl and Renganathan (2009) suggested that a researcher should have someone from the community both for support in establishing a relationship with participants and to tactfully deal with headteachers and other teachers. Brown (2009) discussed the importance of researchers avoiding negative words. I found that saying 'no' to participants' requests led to a lack of support from them during the data collection. I reflected that this process of convincing participants who were used to receiving benefits from NGOs was a very complicated one. Although dealing with the administration was complicated, the rural village people I met were always supportive, pleasant, kind, accommodating, responsive and sharing. The teachers who finally became participants fully supported me throughout the research activities in their schools.

Cultural differences and language barriers

Although it is a small country, Nepal has a broad range of socio-cultural, linguistic, religious and topographic diversities. Out of the total land area 147,181 square kilometres, the Himalaya region occupies 23%, the Hilly region 60% and the Terai, or plains, region 17%. When we see the distribution of population as reported in 2011, the Terai constitutes 50.27%, the Hills 43% and the Himalaya 6.73% of the total population (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2011; published 2012 November). The Central Bureau of Statistics census report stated that about 80% of the total population live in rural areas whereas only 20% reside in cities. (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2011). The report of the diversity of languages and ethnic communities may seem very strange to the rest of the world who might see Nepal as a small homogenous country. The census reported 125 ethnic communities and 123 languages spoken as a mother tongue. Nepali, which is the national language and is spoken as the mother tongue by 44.6% of the total population, also has various dialects in different regions. For me, it was one of the challenges of communicating with local people in the far-western region of Nepal where there are at least three dialects in the same district. When the teachers would speak with me, they would use an official variety of Nepali, but when they spoke with colleagues or in the classroom they would use a local dialect and it was difficult for me to completely follow the conversations. It also increased the difficulty in my effort to fit into local communities because the local people found it difficult to speak in an official variety of Nepali language; mostly they are not highly educated and had not gone to high schools where the formal variety was learned. Sometimes I had to guess what they were saying and find ways to reply that would make sense. Our struggles to understand each other became a way of learning the local dialect and that, in turn, helped me in adapting to the culture of the village.

Generally, in the villages in Nepal, everybody knows everyone else in their area. When they see someone strange, they want to get a simple introduction to that person. This is highly gender specific, as males are likely to have a conversation but the females avoid speaking with a stranger. I found that overall, people would communicate with strangers when the strangers initiated the exchange. However, I was cautious about smiling at the females if they did not already know me as I was aware it might be culturally offensive. In this context, I recalled several researchers' experiences (Brown, 2009; Darling, 2014; Okumus et al., 2007; Riaz, 2013; Widding, 2012) that suggested the need to exercise flexibility and reflexivity while entering the research field. For example, Subedi (2006) completed high school in Nepal and studied higher education in the USA but also experienced the need to re-negotiate the basis of the interaction between researcher and participants when entering the field in Nepal. As I gradually learned their culture, I started to enjoy the days with the local people. However, it was a huge challenge to learn participants' culture and work with research activities simultaneously.

From a religious point of view, most of the community people believe in nature although they have faith in Hinduism and Buddhism. In the villages, people do not routinely go to the temples for

prayer, as temples are rare. They believe in work and duty as their god. They are liberal, faithful, sincere, honest, dutiful and cooperative. I regarded it as a major challenge for me as well as other researchers to learn the local culture at the very early stage of working in the field. I recalled Hennink, Hutter and Bailey's (2011) suggestion that researchers should situate themselves within the local framework in order to be familiar with the culture, rather than merely searching for universal principles or meaning.

Field trips beyond the Google maps

I found that Google maps were the only way to locate the areas for my research as this was my first visit to these particular rural regions. Nepal is a developing country in the field of technology and there has been a rapid increase in the use of mobile data to access online information and social networking sites. People update their locations on Google maps, which is helpful in finding different places in the country. However, the geographical structure of the country is very diversified in nature which makes Nepal especially complex to navigate. The global positioning system (GPS) is at a very preliminary stage in Nepal although satellite views estimate the distance and position of different locations. When someone is travelling to various remote villages, Google maps provides limited information but is better than having nothing in hand to plan the journey.

When I used Google maps to make a tentative travel plan to reach the research field, it located the destination inaccurately in the mountains although it worked more reliably in the Terai regions. For instance, my very first trip to a targeted village school in one of the neighbouring districts of Kathmandu was planned by using Google maps. It took about three hours of local travel to the bottom of the hills, and then one and half hours of walking up to the school on the top of the hills. The irregular transportation service on the rough windy road forced me to walk up and down to the bottom of the hills through dense forest. When I lost the rough walking track in the forest, I dragged my body, sliding down and hanging on to tree branches. There would have been no help if something bad happened in the National Park. However, I reached the bottom of the hills where there was a bus stop, with a lot of bruises and scratches on my arms, face and legs.

Google maps were useless when I travelled to one of the mountainous districts in the far-western region for data collection. However, one of my university classmates from that district communicated with his relatives and then with some of the people he knew well in the area. At the same time, the headteacher and one of his teachers of the sample school frequently communicated with me on the way which helped me find their village. It took about 36 hours from Kathmandu to reach the destination on a bus. I reflected that it was an even more complicated physical access than that described by Fjellström and Guttormsen (2016) in their somewhat similar Scandinavian fieldwork experience where they needed to access the research site over high hills rising over 3000 meters to reach villages on the very steep slopes. The topography complicates the location of any place found on the satellite view of Google maps. For example, when I found the sample school and arranged a living place in the village, Google maps showed a 15-minute walk down the hill, but the real on-foot journey took 30 minutes to the school and it took about one hour to walk back to the residence uphill. Similar differences arise in most of the hilly and mountainous regions of Nepal.

Other hurdles

The most feasible means of travelling to rural areas in Nepal is the bus. Most of the roads in hilly and mountainous regions are rough and narrow. Reports of road accidents are common in daily newspapers. The climate is very different in the Terai, whereas it is moderate in the hills and very cold in the mountains. Weather changes depend on climate and season. However, winter and monsoon are more extreme than spring and autumn in Nepal. In this situation, Aryal (2016), a researcher for Save the Children, suggested that researchers should reconsider the plan in terms of weather every time they travel to a research field in the hilly and mountain regions. Most of the travel routes to hills and

mountains go through the Terai which is very chaotic for any traveller. The only highway that runs from east to west through the Terai connects several district roads in the hills and mountains in the North. When I had to travel for the first time to one of the mountainous districts to the North-west from Kathmandu, the capital city, it took me about 36 hours of continuous journey to reach the destination by bus.

I approached a school from such a remote district for two reasons firstly, the region had been relatively unaffected by the 2015 earthquake and secondly, there was an absence of research in mountainous and isolated rural areas (Sæbø & Thapa, 2012). On this long journey, I experienced irregular stops, pickups and drop-offs of local passengers along the highway. Despite regulations and ticket booking counters at headquarters of districts or regions, it is common for many people to travel without advance bookings and just pay onboard, negotiating the fare with the conductors. Sometimes, the buses stop wherever they like and delay travel. A further challenge of travelling in the mountains comes when there is a monsoon when the heavy rain causes landslides and floods that may detain the travellers somewhere along the road. Sometimes travellers run the risk of accidents due to such disasters.

Another major issue is the lack of electricity in rural villages and the unreliable supply of power (Sæbø & Thapa, 2012). Though Nepal is the second richest country in water resource in the world, most of the rural people live in the dark due to a lack of electricity. However, some people have small solar panels just to provide light in the night and these are quite expensive. It is also a major problem in the villages to adopt modern technologies in the schools for teaching and learning purposes. In some schools in remote villages in the mountains, schools have been supported with high watt solar panels to run computer labs. One of the schools in my project in the mountains had a 3.0KW solar power to run their computer lab. I learned there were 43 primary schools in that mountainous district that had solar or alternative energy to run digital devices for teaching and learning. I recruited of those one for my project. In an environment where there is a lack of the internet and unreliable phone service, I found that accessing the research field and further maintaining the access was a complicated job for me as a researcher, irrespective of the original research plan.

My experience as an illustration of the context of my research project

Looking back I am aware that the difficulties I experienced in entering the field, serve as an illustration of the nature of the context in which my project took place. The complexities in the field came from local administrative structures and practices, from the challenging geography and diversity of cultures, from the lack of communication resources in rural areas and from the impact of the earthquake. The obstacles I had to overcome to enter the field proved to be typical of the challenges that faced rural schools in their attempts to implement ICT in their teaching (Rana, 2018). I found very significant gaps between policy aspirations and administrative provisions. I also found that the earthquakes destroyed so many of the still limited resources that had been developed. I found teachers who had strong goodwill towards their students and budding hopes for the ways technology could improve their teaching, were frustrated by the lack of supportive administrative infrastructures.

Overcoming the obstacles to entering the field was a challenge at the very start of my research, and I hope this account may be useful to other researchers who set out to work in countries like Nepal that are difficult to access and operate in different ways than most of the western world. Perhaps they, like me, may find the obstacles both exasperating and enlightening in the ways they signal what may be ahead in the field.

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