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Distance learning in Cameroon

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New approaches to data collection with research participants: Distance learning in Cameroon

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Abstract

This article draws from a larger doctoral study that examines parents' and teachers' perceptions of parental involvement in early childhood learning. The Covid-19 lockdown happened on March 18, 2020, in Cameroon before data collection was completed, therefore presenting an opportunity to investigate home-school relationships during this period. The private nursery school's initiative in organising distance learning during the lockdown was unexpected, considering Cameroon is a lower-middle-income country where most families struggle to afford digital tools for online learning. Thus, I was interested in finding out perceptions of how this was achieved. New approaches for data collection were adopted using WhatsApp messaging and Zoom interviews with parents and teachers; WhatsApp messaging was especially chosen to suit participants' needs in this context. The head teacher was recruited as a teacher-researcher who elicited children's stories through conversation and drawing techniques. There were challenges in renegotiating participants' consent and setting Zoom interviews due to differences in time zones and poor network connectivity. After data collection, retrospective ethical approval was sought to include the additional information in my research. The insights gained from the study can be helpful for researchers concerning emergency response strategies in data collection, steps for gaining further ethical approval and adding knowledge on research methodology about online data collection.

Keywords

Remote data collection techniques; teacher-researcher; ethical practices in research; distance learning; Covid-19 lockdown; nursery school education.

Introduction

The article explores new approaches to data collection with research participants as the researcher investigated distance learning carried out by a private nursery school during the 2020 Covid-19 lockdown in Cameroon. It focuses on the opportunities and challenges to data collection with research



participants during the lockdown and procedures for gaining further ethical approval regarding changes in the data collection. This article draws from a larger doctoral study that examines parents' and teachers' perceptions and practices of parental involvement in early childhood learning.

After engaging with research participants face-to-face for three months (November 2019 to January 2020) to collect data for my doctoral study, I returned to New Zealand to begin the process of analysing the data. I maintained contact with research participants using WhatsApp messaging to gain in-depth information and clarify information. However, during this process, the government in Cameroon took measures to combat the spread of Covid-19, which involved the closure of all learning institutions. As a result, the private nursery school that was the research site for my project organised online learning to provide continuous learning and maintain communication with children and their families during this period. The change in delivery opened up an opportunity for me to investigate teachers', parents' and children's experiences of distance learning and the effect on home-school relationships during this period through online interviewing (Fenmachi & Edah, 2022). I felt this additional information would add extra richness to the data for my doctoral study as it provided more understandings on parental involvement in children's learning.

As I was based in New Zealand, face-to-face data collection methods were no longer an option. Thus, I continued to use WhatsApp messaging and added Zoom interviews to obtain information from parents and teachers. Most participants reported accessing the internet through their phones, and WhatsApp was an app that participants used daily. Furthermore, I was also interested in understanding children's experiences during the lockdown; thus, the head teacher was recruited as a teacher-researcher who elicited children's stories through conversation and drawing techniques; this evidence was forwarded to me by WhatsApp. In a similar study by Kahuroa et al. (2021), children's drawings were an innovative method for gaining children's views about their lockdown experiences. There were challenges in renegotiating participants' consent and setting Zoom interviews due to differences in time zones and poor network connectivity. After data collection, retrospective ethical approval was sought to include the additional information in my research.

Zoom interviews and WhatsApp messaging as a research method: Opportunities and challenges

One of the advantages of carrying out a qualitative study is the researcher's ability to make changes in the data collection process (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). The study involved four teachers, 10 parents and 10 children at a private nursery school in Douala, Cameroon, with the data gathering tools of Zoom interviews and WhatsApp messaging to understand participants' experiences during the 2020 Covid-19 lockdown.

Obtaining data using online techniques and mobile phones in qualitative research enables the process to be flexible, cost-effective and convenient for both researchers and participants (Archibald et al., 2019; Cohen et al., 2018; Pearce et al., 2014; Walker et al., 2021). Roller and Lavrakas (2015) identified 10 unique attributes of qualitative research, amongst which are the flexibility of the research design and the unique capabilities of online and mobile qualitative research. Singer et al. (2020) notes some benefits of collecting data using WhatsApp messaging, such as increased time for reflection and flexibility for discussion of ideas by participants compared to face-to-face data collection.

In my experience, the use of Zoom and WhatsApp messaging in this study offered flexibility in choice of interview times which was convenient for both the participants and the researcher. Cohen et al. (2018) adds that some online interviews may be synchronous, using instant messaging, Skype, online meetings or asynchronous through email, blogs, WeChat, WhatsApp. For this study, interviews were carried out in real-time, and participants could respond to follow-up questions at any time through WhatsApp messaging. A further advantage of using WhatsApp, which participants commented on, was that WhatsApp was user friendly, easy to connect to and share information with the researcher.

Participants also had the opportunity to reflect on the questions before sharing their responses, providing quality data for the study (Cohen et al., 2018; James, 2016; James & Busher, 2007). Like with face-to-face data collection, during Zoom interviews, both the researcher and participants had the chance to see each other and respond to bodily expressions, which was crucial in building rapport and facilitating discussion. Participants felt comfortable in their home environment (Pearce et al., 2014), and the possibility of a power imbalance between the researcher and participant was likely to be reduced (James, 2016, 2017).

Despite the benefits of the online techniques, there were some practical and ethical challenges to navigate. These included difficulties in gaining participants' consent for participating in the extension of this study and choosing online interview times. Other challenges included technology issues, challenges using Zoom features and challenges encountered working with the teacher-researcher.

Participants' consent was necessary to get a picture of the total number of participants before data collection commenced. However, delays were experienced in gaining participants' verbal consent before the extra data collection began. All four nursery school teachers and 13 parents involved in the initial doctoral study were contacted via WhatsApp. Teachers consented to participate in the study within a week and parents within three weeks. Ten parents responded and agreed to share their lockdown experiences and gave consent for their children to be involved in the study. Nevertheless, after consent the data gathering process was rapid, timely and less costly than organising face-to-face interviews, as also noted by Anninou (2019). Rich data was gained for this study within a short period and without incurring any travel expenses for both the researcher and participants.

There was difficulty choosing interview times that would suit all parties, as New Zealand and Cameroon are approximately 12 hours apart. Early in the morning New Zealand time presented challenges because of my family commitments, but the timing suited my participants. Again, putting participants' interests first was paramount in this process. Participants were more comfortable during the evenings, mainly after dinner, which was also when they had finished work. Thus, interview times were in the early mornings between 5 am and 9 am Auckland time which is 5 pm to 9 pm Cameroon (West African Time) time.

Technological problems were experienced. Cohen et al. (2018) notes that technological problems such as unstable connectivity and slow connections can occur during online interviewing. Similarly, Archibald et al. (2019) stated some disadvantages of Zoom as a data collection method. These could include difficulty in joining the session, low internet bandwidth, outdated hardware, limited webcam and microphone functionality. Poor network connectivity was experienced during Zoom sessions with both teachers and parents. In some cases, Zoom sessions were cut short because of microphone problems; thus, sometimes, we rescheduled another time. In most cases, we relied mainly on WhatsApp messaging to clarify information.

One of the "videoconference platform's best practices" (Walker et al., 2021, p. 2386) that this study could have considered was requesting participants' consent to record before the meeting. Collecting data by Zoom was a new experience, so initially, I did not ask for parents' consent to record the Zoom sessions. During the Zoom interviews, participants were uncomfortable when the request for recording was made. This was an ethical challenge that I had not earlier thought of; thus, I decided to make notes instead and carry out follow-up conversations on WhatsApp.

My relationship with the teacher who became a teacher-researcher also needed to be navigated. The role of the teacher-researcher in collating children's stories in this study was invaluable. However, it met with some challenges in terms of delay in response time and transmission of information. I relied on the teacher to gain parental consent for children's participation. A lack of direct involvement in children's interviews meant limited prolonged engagement and probing to understand children's perspectives better. In addition, the images of children's drawings forwarded through WhatsApp messaging were of average quality. Therefore, it was a process of going back and forth with the teacher-researcher to obtain clear images and this involved extra time.

Ethical considerations

Initial approval to conduct research was obtained first from the University of Waikato, Division of Education Research Ethics Committee and then from the Regional Delegation of Basic Education Littoral (Cameroon). Participants had received and signed consent forms in November 2020 before face-to-face data commenced. However, as I was investigating a different topic using online data collection tools, I had to design new questions; thus, participants' consent was necessary and navigating this stage required new ethical considerations. Therefore, for this round of data collection, which began in August 2020, participants' verbal consent was sought. Before engaging with children, the teacher-researcher sought their verbal approval to ensure they were comfortable with the process. As an extension of the study there were no issues around confidentiality and choosing participants' pseudonyms. All interviews were carried out using participants' personal phone contacts. Data was kept confidential to the head teacher, me and my supervisors and reported using pseudonyms to avoid revealing participants' true identities. Participants' information was shared securely using their personal WhatsApp accounts, and all messages were viewable and accessible only by me and the participants.

As I analysed this data, I realised some changes from my original ethics proposal; therefore, I sought retrospective approval to use the additional information obtained. It should be noted here that according to the Division of Education Ethics Committee, all researchers are required to consult with the Ethics Committee in the first instance if they wish to propose additional changes to the approved research design. Seeking retrospective approval from the Ethics Committee was an anxious process as information gathered and analysed would have to be discarded if any ethical issues were recognised. Fortunately, the Ethics Committee granted this retrospective approval to include the new questions, some altered data collection tools and participants' information about distance learning in my doctoral thesis.

The preschool teacher-researcher collated children's stories and shared this with the researcher via Zoom and WhatsApp messaging. Apart from my lack of personal involvement in this process, there was a possibility of the ethical issue of an unequal distribution of power between the teacher-researcher and participants. For instance, some parents might have consented to their children's participation in the study because the request came from their child's teacher. Thus, the presence of the preschool teacher-researcher may have influenced children's responses and parents' consent for children's participation. On the positive side, the teacher-researcher reported that her participation in this study enabled her to gain insight into family life, build closer relationships with families and children, and gain confidence in using online methods of communication.

Conclusion

In summary, flexibility in data collection and protection of participants' interests are essential in qualitative research. The flexibility offered by WhatsApp data collection methods meant participants and researchers did not have to be present simultaneously during the data collection process. Throughout the data collection period, sometimes messages were forwarded to participants, and they responded in their own time. Interviews by Zoom meant participants had time to articulate and carefully consider their responses in the comfort of their homes, thus providing rich and quality information for the study. My flexible approach as a researcher helped me navigate and explore other methods of data collection where face-to-face options were unavailable at the time. The change in data collection methods empowered me in the use of online data collection tools and provided an opportunity to gain enriching data for my doctoral research.

Further, I was invited to participate as a panellist at the 2020 EECERA Covid-19 webinar, *International Narratives about COVID-19 and Early Childhood*. My topic was "Perspectives of parents and children". Furthermore, I have been able to contribute a chapter titled "Distance learning in

Cameroon: Case study of private nursery school teachers' experiences and challenges amidst COVID-19 lockdown” in the book *Early childhood education and care in a global pandemic: How the sector responded, spoke back and generated knowledge* published by Routledge (Fenmachi, 2022).

Finally, ethics is critical in any research. Many research projects encounter unanticipated experiences that may require researchers to change data collection tools; thus, it is essential to notify the relevant authorities about these changes before continuing the research process. It was fortunate that the Division of Education Ethics Research Committee agreed to accommodate changes to data collection methods in this study.

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