

Crossing the Barbed Gate

Experiences of Accessing the Research Participants for their Informed Consents through the Gatekeepers in an Indian School

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Abstract

Gaining access to the research sites, participants and their informed consents is not always an easy process. It involves negotiations and compromises with the gatekeepers. Hence, researchers spend considerable amount of time since inability in negotiation and access, results into unsuccessful research. Yet, researchers, particularly engaged in qualitative research, often neglect this process and face dilemmas due to the ethical obligations. When university ethics committees demand voluntary participation of the participants, power relations between the gatekeepers and the participants underpin the co-production of the research data. Therefore, researchers must continually reflect upon the decision-making processes, around the routes of access, that might influence the research data collected. In this paper, how the access, re-access and informed consents of the participants were gained in a school for a qualitative study in India has been reflected, and this includes addressing the ethical underpinnings involved therein. As such, these experiences were gained as a beginning researcher and it is hoped that sharing these will benefit other beginners conducting their qualitative studies, particularly in India.

INTRODUCTION

Gaining access to the research sites, participants and their informed consents is not always easy. It is “not simply a matter of banging on a door

and getting it to open” (Feldman et al. in Feldman et al. 2003, p. ix). Rather it is “sometimes an easy process and sometimes fraught with difficulty” (Susan et al. 2006, p. 74). Moreover,

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it is not just one time dealing, but a continuous relationship-building process, as it involves multiple entries to the research sites and accessing the participants, by means of negotiations and compromises with the gatekeepers (Burgess 1993, Feldman et al. in Feldman et al. 2003). Hence, researchers spend considerable time in rapport-building, because inability in it, results into unsuccessful research (Johl and Renganathan 2010). However, researchers particularly engaged in qualitative research often neglect this process as well as encounter dilemmas due to ethical obligations (Jorgensen 1989, Daymon and Holloway 2002). When participants' voluntary participation is obligatory, as per the ethical guidelines of the university ethics committees, power relations between the gatekeepers and participants underpin the co-production of the research data (Miller and Bell, in Miller et al. 2002).

University ethics committees in their guidelines mandate voluntary participation and informed consents of research participants for their aim to maintain high ethical standards in research, by ensuring validity and accuracy of the research data (Iphofen 2009). Hence, researchers provide prior information of their studies to the participants, such as, known or anticipated risks involved, and get their informed consent in writing (Seidman 2006). But, the ethical obligation of voluntary participation

also implies the assumption of no physical or psychological coercion. Therefore, ethical considerations do not end by getting ethical forms duly filled up from the participants in the purview of their power relations with the gatekeepers. The "researcher must continually reflect on the ways in which decisions around routes of access can affect the data collected" (Miller and Bell, in Miller et al. 2002, p. 56). In the following paper, I argue that an opportunistic approach was most appropriate in order to gain access, re-access and informed consents of the participants in a school in India, for a qualitative study on teachers' understanding and teaching of environment and environmental values in the context of globalisation.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

A study was conducted to investigate: (1) the secondary school teachers' understanding of environment and environmental values in the context of globalisation, (2) the environmental values these teachers and secondary environmental education curriculum intend to teach, (3) how the environmental values are being taught, and (4) how the teachers resolve values, conflict in controversial environmental issues. In fact, the research questions of this study surfaced from the prevailing scholarly contentions and contradictory research findings in various areas of environmental education, such

as, the possibility of deriving and imparting universal values by critical thinking and teaching globalisation through secondary school curricula, environmental educators' value-neutrality, importance of science and technological education in environmental education, etc. However, discussing a number of substantial reasons for which the study was conducted in India, and also how the schools in India were categorised into three categories following India's culture and values orientations in globalisation, is not the primary focus of this paper.

The study was conducted in three schools that represented traditional, modern and 'traditional yet modern' schools of India. For instance, schools like Delhi Public School facilitating modern education, and gurukul schools—the ancient, traditional education (see Pathak 2006, Dogra and Gulati 2006). The methodological approach was qualitative, since the nature of inquiry was contextual and the research questions primarily sought to explore the research areas due to the prevailing scholarly contradictions and research findings. In addition, a case study approach was adopted for its particular suitability in exploring new research areas by holistically understanding the uniqueness and complexity of a social phenomenon (Yin, 2003). Moreover, the selection of location and schools for the study was purposeful and as per convenience. As New Delhi and Haridwar were

locations, easy to access, schools were selected as per the opportunity forwarded by their respective head offices. Further, teaching of the NCERT (National Council of Educational Research and Training) curriculum by all three schools was one of the school selection criteria.

Two schools—the modern and 'traditional yet modern' were located in New Delhi, and the third, the traditional, was in Haridwar. The data collection methods involved—guided interviewing of the research participant, non-participant classroom observations and document analysis. The choice of participants and their numbers were not only based on the teachers' availability, interests and their potentiality to contribute valuable information to the study, but also their profiles, i.e. the subjects they were teaching in the schools. Moreover, apart from the secondary teachers, curriculum planners were also interviewed. However, simply identifying the sampling criteria does not, at all, assure actuality of access to the participants in qualitative research (Susan et al. 2006). Therefore, given the limited scope of this paper, how the access, re-access and the consents of the research participants were gained through the gatekeepers in one of the schools, i.e., 'traditional yet modern' in New Delhi, during the pilot and final study has been reflected. And, it includes addressing the ethical issues and dilemmas faced during the study.

**INITIAL ACCESS TO THE SCHOOL
AND THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS
THROUGH A HIERARCHY OF CONSENTS**

Obtaining ethical approval is the most primary concern for accessing research site or participants, because ethical considerations are a major component in research design. Any academic research is first reviewed by an Institutional Review Board (IRB) for ethical violations and/or procedural errors, and then the permission is given or the required revision of the proposal is called for (Weseley and McEntarffer 2010). The Research Ethics Committee for Non-Clinical Faculties (HREC/NF) of the University of Hong Kong granted ethical approval for this study, as it was requested for gaining access to the schools. However, “(o)btaining access to the research field can vary to a considerable extent, depending on the kind of cases being investigated” (Johl and Renganathan 2010, p.42). Moreover, local authorities or governing bodies of the schools acting as gatekeepers may pose as ethics committees to re-check the ethical aspects of any study and hinder, or on occasions, stop research activities (Aubrey et al. 2000). But, recommendation letters help in gaining access to research sites through the gatekeepers (Brounés 2011).

Gatekeepers are the individuals having power to grant or withhold access in an organisation for research purposes (Burgess 1993).

In other words, they are the “formal or informal watchdogs, who protect the setting, people or situations sought as a target for research” (Berg 2007, p.185). Besides the university’s support, NCERT’s recommendation was sought to do this study in India, because it was assumed to avert shortcomings due to any red tape and bureaucratic pettifogging, while accessing the schools. In addition, NCERT is the apex body of the Government of India in school curriculum policy, design and implementation (Chhokar and Chandrasekharan 2006). As such, NCERT immediately extended its support and it was obtained in black and white, though most researchers inform the local authorities about their studies just by sending letters as a matter of courtesy (Aubrey et al. 2000). Yet, a hierarchy of consents from the top management position is also needed to gain access in a school (Leonard 2007).

The websites of the schools labeled as ‘traditional yet modern’ revealed their management hier-archy. An organisation runs the schools all over India. In fact, the school and its various other branches in Delhi were managed by a regional director and the head office, both located in Delhi. When a regional director was looking after the schools in Delhi region, the chairperson in the head office was responsible for the whole organisation, i.e., the management of all the schools in India. Therefore, on the basis of different media

reports, such as, books, journals, newspapers etc. — first, a few reputed schools were selected on the basis of their fames related to educational achievements among all the schools in Delhi; and then, besides the regional director and the chairperson, the principals of these schools were communicated, by sending the study proposal through emails. This is because the principals are the main gatekeepers in the school (Leithwood and McElheron-Hopkins 2004). Yet, contacting the schools over the phone had to be initiated, as none of the emails received any reply, even after a span of three weeks.

Successful completion of a case study research project requires researchers to carefully consider the logistical issues (Luton, 2010). Conducting the above study in more than one school was impossible due to the time and financial constraints. Therefore, after gaining the opportunity of access for the study from one of the school principals, no further efforts were made to contact the rest. Infact, he gave his consent and signed the request letter, when I explained the study and submitted the proposal along with documents like ethical approval, recommendation letters, etc. However, he also inquired, if any concerned authority in the regional or head office had been informed. When no reply to several email correspondences was pointed, he advised to email the academic director

in the head office or meet her directly as she was the concerned authority in this matter. Thus, a hierarchy of consents was needed in gaining access to the school. Of course, the academic director gave her verbal consent after consulting with the principal over the phone. But, I had to meet her personally, due to no reply of the email correspondence.

As such, researchers may gain access to the research sites either formally or informally. Formal access consists of sending a request of communication, along with university recommendation-letter to the gatekeepers. On the other hand, informal access becomes only possible for the researcher's prior familiarity with the gatekeepers or the research sites (Johl and Renganathan 2010). According to Susan et al. (2006), the second strategy is advantageous to establish rapport and credibility with the gatekeepers. However, formal access also helps create researchers' impression essential for his/her rapport and credibility and a critical analysis of informal access shows that it should not be taken for granted (Johl and Renganathan 2010). Further, the research sites and the gatekeepers in the above case were unknown to me, and hence, I was bound to follow the first strategy. Yet, gatekeepers' pre-conception, due to any previous experience of researchers, and research also influences their responses to the requests for access (Foster 2006).

The name of the university perhaps helped in gaining access to the school. During introduction, the principal revealed that he already participated in a research activity of the University of Hong Kong in his previous tenure, which helped him in the capacity building of the school. In this study, teachers teaching language or social science subjects or heading environment clubs were more prospective as participants than other teachers, because NCERT curriculum in secondary level imparts environmental education in an integrated manner (Chhokar and Chandrasekharan 2006) and teaches globalisation as content matter in the social science subject: economics (Bose and Sardana 2008). In addition, initial data gathering took place through informal discussions with the prospective participants, and this was followed by the interviews of the selected potential participants for their ability to add valuable data to the study. However, only two interviews, each followed by a classroom observation were conducted out of fourteen social science and language teachers due to the resource constraints and purpose of the pilot.

ACCESSING THE SCHOOL AND RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS THROUGH THE GATEKEEPERS DURING THE FINAL STUDY

Contacting the administration through email was not repeated again while re-accessing the school during the final study due to the previous experience

of not getting any reply from anyone. However, it is not just cooperation, that a researcher always can expect in gaining access to the research sites and participants. There may be resistance and hostility. In some cases, entry is simply denied as a matter of “infiltrating the setting” (Susan et al. 2006, p. 76). In fact, an adverse situation was experienced while re-accessing the same school, which extended full cooperation just four months back. The process of gaining access through the gatekeeper at the top management had to be repeated, not just because the previous principal was transferred, but the new principal wanted the written approval from the head office. Yet, the research could not be conducted ultimately, even after, fulfilling the requirement. The principal stopped the study due to severe resistance and hostility from some of the secondary teachers.

RE-ACCESS RESTRICTED DUE TO LACK OF WRITTEN PERMISSION

It was very disappointing when the office of the school was contacted over the phone for the final study. It not only conveyed the transfer of the previous principal, but also informed the loss of all the previously submitted documents. Therefore, while meeting the new principal, I had to re-submit those and explained her briefly about the study, ethical measures, etc., and hoped that the permission would again be given as before. On contrary, after going

through the documents and hearing me as well, she told to wait for another three months, as I did not turn up since the pilot. I reasoned her that the time was required to clarify certain aspects in the methodology of the study, such as, to determine the interview questions in the final study and the analysis of the research data. But, she pointed that I have to wait for another three months because of the teachers' engagement in forthcoming school inspection and term examinations.

As such, school inspection is a matter of a day and term examinations are held all over the years. In addition, teachers usually get more leisure time during the days of term examinations for not having regular teaching. Moreover, the consent forms clearly mentioned no student involvement in the study. Further, the study was running short of time as per the university schedule. Therefore, informing the logistical constraints, I requested her not to delay the study for such a long time. But, in reply, she strictly pointed me, either to show the written permission to start the study from the next week or wait for three months. Although I tried to tell her the benefits of the study for the teachers and curriculum by pointing how the research questions surfaced from the research gaps; she told me not to argue and very rigidly pointed either to choose any of the two options or leave her office. In fact, she told this in such a manner that I

felt as if the study has no importance and I was spoiling her time.

The thought of my research endeavor coming to a sudden stop frightened me. At that juncture I realized my mistake for not procuring the permission from the academic director during the pilot itself. Moreover, I felt confused and helpless, since the study could not be further delayed for another three months. Getting written permission from the head office in just two-three days or a week's time was very important. But, whether permission would be given immediately or be delayed was totally contingent. Hence, being unable to understand what to do, I just emotionally revealed the problem to the errand boy of the principal and he sympathetically listened. However, when I asked particularly about the previous principal, he revealed that he had been promoted as a school inspector in the regional office. I felt the absence of the previous principal, but approaching him was not a solution, since the new principal required written permission particularly from the head office. In addition, whether the previous principal would help in this matter or turn cold shoulder, was again contingent.

Truly speaking, I could not spare my scarce resources during the pilot study in running behind the top management officials to get their written approval. Further, the previous principal approved the study and never demanded such a

thing from anyone at the top. It is particularly worthwhile to mention here, that at that point of time the academic director in the head office told that a written permission was not necessary, since the study had already been informed over the email. But, denoting the official requirements, when I requested, she mentioned that a permission letter would be issued after her coming back from the official tour, and meanwhile, I could continue my work in the school. Yet, she wasn't available in her office after a week and also never intimidated me about her probable transfer. Her secretary only enlightened me about this and that was after few days of her departure from the office.

The new principal's intentions were very clear. In fact, "organisational gatekeepers tend to deny and delay researchers" (Smith 2007, p. 226). This is because they want to protect their organisations, people or situations, by keeping the sensitive things hidden so that the pictures appear in favorable lights (Walsh 2004). Although, this concern is not unreasonable, gaining access for research in organisations is also difficult, due to the deluge of such requests from researchers (Buchanan et al. 1988). Hence, researchers adopt a number of techniques to bargain with the gatekeepers and bring something to offer (Janesick 2004). Sometimes they try to create interests among the gatekeepers by emphasising

potential knowledge gains from their studies and fully explain the nature of their research, methodologies, or stress over the ethical commitments like maintaining confidentiality. In other occasions, they may selectively provide these accounts and use deception (Foster 2006). However, for (Buchanan et al. 1988), "it is helpful to offer a tangible product in return for cooperation".

Janesick (2004) successfully negotiated access by helping the school principals in organising their references, by using a computer program and this was squarely possible, because they were in their doctoral programs. But, negotiating access with the gatekeepers for research in organisations is a 'game of chance, not of skill' (Buchanan et al. 1988, p. 56). In the above case, it was impossible to do something like, what Janesick did due to anonymity with the principal. Hence she was asserted the benefits of the study for the teachers and curriculum. Moreover, deception could not be used, as it was not pre-planned. Denial of access, due to lack of written permission was totally unexpected from the same school that extended full cooperation already. Further, use of deception was also not very necessary as the research questions did not intend to investigate any sensitive issue that would prompt the gatekeepers to take a defensive stand. In fact, none of the negotiation techniques came into work as the principal was completely reluctant to

listen to anything, after keeping her two options on the table.

GAINING ACCESS TO THE TOP MANAGEMENT FOR WRITTEN PERMISSION

I had to run to the head office to get a permission letter, the same day the principal closed the negotiation talks. Else, the study perhaps was vulnerable to bear the consequence of unsuccessful research. The verbal consent of the previous principal or the academic director had no meaning and the new principal was too rigid on her decisions. Obviously, it conveyed a very restricted entry in the research site imposed by a gatekeeper in the middle management position of the organisation. However, entry inside the head office through the security personnel at the gate and accessing the top management, without any appointment was also not very easy. Moreover, there was no time either to call the receptionist for an appointment or wait for a month with a false hope of getting reply from someone in the head office. In fact, while delineating on key ideas in educational research, Scott and Morrison (2006) pointed about 'cold-calling' as a technique to overcome initial rejection as used in sales. Hence, this technique was the only way to gain entry in the head office.

Often I used 'cold calling' in my previous corporate sales career and played tricks to gain entry in organisations, when faced rejection to any sales-related information or appointments with the decision

makers. And, it was no exception when the security personnel in the head office stopped me, at the gate, to inquire the purpose of visit or if I had any appointment. Therefore, instead of answering them, I briefly pointed about the issue and named the previous academic director and the principal of the school, who was promoted as a school inspector, in such a way that they get the impression of no unknown person was going inside and the issue required immediate attention. Indeed, the trick again worked and I could enter the head office. But, from the reception, I learnt that no new academic director joined the office and also the secretary of the previous one was transferred. Hence, I had to find someone in the top management position, who would not react in the first place for not having the particular decision-making power, to approve a study in a school, but would listen to the problem, give suggestion, and perhaps also support, if necessary.

Instead of the chairman's office, I planned to knock on the door of the director of examination and stated the problem of accessing the school to his secretary. Perhaps the name of the university on my card helped to draw her immediate attention. She sent an errand boy to find out about the previously submitted documents as I was claiming the initial access to the school, due to the verbal consent of the previous academic director and showed the NCERT recommendation letter and email correspondences as

evidence. But, when no document was found, she suggested me to meet the deputy director and conveyed him the problem over the phone. She also pointed that a new academic director joined the office, but that was only for a month after the departure of the previous director. Yet, I was completely spellbound, when briefly explained the study and the problem of accessing to the deputy. He stated that any effort in environmental education in a school in India cannot be withheld under the Supreme Court's mandatory. Hence, he not only prepared the permission letter within an hour, but also directed the new principal to allow the study with immediate effect.

GAINING RE-ACCESS TO THE SCHOOL AND RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS, BUT WITH CONSIDERABLE RESISTANCE

At first, the principal was a bit surprised to see the director's permission, the very next day, when I kept a copy on her desk. Then, she allowed the study from the next week by signing the proposal and mentioning the date of commencement. Handing over the documents, she also introduced me to the vice-principal and told her to help, if anything needed for the study. Therefore, first I chalked out a plan, along with her, and then engaged in some informal talks to build rapport. But, from the first day, I started contacting the teachers for informal discussions and interviews due to the shortage of time. Fixing

up appointments with them was rather easy and no new introduction was needed, since all the prospective participants remembered me. However, neither could I conduct more than two interviews nor any informal discussion with a new participant in three consecutive weeks, despite that they initially conveyed interests for their participation by scheduling interview timings. Indeed, plying between home and the school for interview or informal discussions with the teachers was a complete waste of time, money and energy.

Formal permission for access granted by the gatekeepers does not guarantee cooperation of all participants (Padgett 1998). In the above school, though most of the prospective participants inquired about the written approvals, they were continuously postponing their interviews and requesting to contact someone else. Some even fixed appointments by particularly verifying the approvals. When I asked the reason of postponements, almost all the participants replied unavailability of time, due to their hectic teaching work in the school. Two teachers even asked for questionnaires, so that they could fill in their leisure. Squarely, it indicated their workload and lack in reading the consent forms. But, they also revealed that research means questionnaire-filling, since they have always experienced it in that way only. Hence, it also indicated a perception due to the dominance of quantitative

methods in educational research in India that Baily 2009) witnessed. Yet, continuous postponing of interviews by most participants for the same reason, invoked skepticism whether these were genuine.

The route of access, either to the research sites or participants, never opens unless the consent and support of the gatekeepers are achieved (Riemer 2012). Hence, gatekeepers' authoritative power was apprehended to influence most participants' repeated assertion for participation. Otherwise why were they inquiring or verifying about the written approvals? Further, perhaps the participants were also unwilling to spare time for the research, and hence, postponing their interviews. Again, it could have been also for their apathy towards the research topic. As such, gatekeepers even may find any study on mundane matters as uninteresting and therefore can prevent it (Walsh 2004). Yet, the principal's authoritative power seemed more dominating in the school, because two social science teachers particularly, asked for a photocopy of the principal's approval despite reading it in black and white when they were approached again in the second week. In addition, they again rescheduled interviews for another week by pointing the hectic work in the term examinations.

I, immediately, furnished the concern of these two teachers by providing them the photocopy. However, researchers must also

carefully consider the participants' cost of participation, such as, money, time and conveniences (Wiles 2012). Hence, considering participants' problem, I agreed to postpone the interviews for another time. But, when appeared before one of them in the teachers' room in third week, as per the schedule, she again wanted to postpone it for another week. Therefore, I urged her to clarify her participation by politely reminding her rights. However, annoyingly she replied her inability to spare her little free time from the overloaded classroom teachings and examination paper-checking, even though she was interested. Moreover, she advised me to get a time-slot from the principal or the vice principal for the needed participation. When approached the vice-principal for help, she also pointed to the principal and stated that everyone needs her permission to do anything, as she is the sole authority in the school.

HOSTILITY, REJECTION OF PARTICIPATION AND DENIAL OF ACCESS

I requested the principal to allocate a time-slot for the concerned teacher to ease her participation. I thought that she might have been interested for the study, though genuinely not getting little time to contribute. Allocating the time, the principal also immediately made a note and signed. However, when I showed it to the teacher, surprisingly she became very furious and alleged that the time was allocated because I complained.

Although I tried to clarify, she was completely reluctant to listen to anything and threatened to speak to the principal for nagging. Thus, it became very clear that actually she was not interested in the study though she was repeatedly assuring her willingness for participation and that might be due to the principal's authoritative power. Was she really interested or willed? She could have managed the time, howsoever, she was busy, as did another social science teachers. Yet, just after two days of this incidence, when I went to interview another social science teacher and met the principal on the corridor after the morning assembly, she suddenly told me that the study is no more allowed in her school.

Obviously, the social science teacher, who threatened me, complained to the principal. But, it was totally shocking when she alleged that I was disturbing the teachers by going into their classrooms. I tried to tell her that it was a complete fallacy, but again she was unwilling to listen anything and asked me to leave the premises immediately. Hence, I started pleading to save my study and the career. Yet, I had nothing to do except to walk out of the gate silently and as quickly as possible to save myself when she threatened to call the police. No doubt, the environment of the research site turned totally hostile and it could not be abated. Perhaps, the principal also lacked interest towards the study, like the teachers who were

postponing their participations. She also pointed that she does not bother if I approach another director again for the permission of access. However, I clearly understood what catalysed the problems, when met her errand boy and told the incidence just before leaving the school premises.

What the errand told me was something that I was completely unaware. He revealed that during the principal's previous tenure, someone complained against her for which she received suspension from the head office. But, her job was not at all affected due to her husband's influential position in the government. In fact, not only the school staffs, but many officials in the head office also were not happy with her. Moreover, the previous principal was also not in good terms with her. Therefore, not only my haste that intercepted the new principal's willingness to delay the study, but also the director's overpowering by directing her perhaps catalysed the problem. In addition, another cause of the new principal's apathy towards the study perhaps was the previous principal. Further, constantly pursuing the two social science teachers for their participation, being unable to understand their tacit unwillingness, also aggravated the problem. But, if the director's overpowering or the previous principal's approval caused the new principal's resentment towards the study, then surely the researcher and the research were

the victims of narrow organisational politics.

Obviously, being at the top of management hierarchy, the deputy's power was more than the school-principal's in the middle. But the process of re-accessing in this study was not started at the top, because the consent was already gained from the top during the pilot. In addition, document loss by the school administration which contained the previous principal's approval and the new principal's attitude towards the final study was completely unpredictable. Further, despite having more power being the head of the school, the latter only advised to get written permission from the former. In fact, according to Buchanan and Bryman (2009), gatekeepers can make their consents so contingent that even confuses the researchers. In addition, it is also politically unwise to approach more than one gatekeeper simultaneously for access. However, scholars differ in their opinions, whether permission for the access to research sites and participants should be sought at the top or lower level power position in the management hierarchy (Bryman 2005).

As per Irvine and Gaffikin (2006), it is risky to approach anywhere in the management hierarchy but at the top, because they can even restrict access being most powerful. "If they cooperate, the path of research can be smoothed, and their recommendations might make others

more willing to collaborate" (Holloway and Wheeler 2002, p. 48). On the other hand, for Buchanan et al (in Bryman, 1988), sometimes securing access through a gatekeeper at the lower levels by creating interests for the research and influencing to act like a sponsor is advantageous, though that may be time consuming and rejected by the top. Moreover, entry solely through the top, may have the problem of subsequent identification and resistance by lower power positions. In this regard, Foster (2006) argued that the help from a sponsor is a common strategy for gaining access to the research settings that might remain closed otherwise. Yet, researchers often have choice of which gatekeepers to approach in order to gain access (Buchanan and Bryman 2009).

RE-NEGOTIATION WITH THE TOP MANAGEMENT AND GAINING ACCESS TO A NEW SCHOOL

A 'sponsor' being 'an established and trusted figure' within an organisation not only can vouch for a researcher's intentions and the purpose of the study to any gatekeeper, but may also provide invaluable advice about the most appropriate ways to successfully complete the study (Foster 2006, p. 68). In the above case, the previous principal of the school, who had been promoted in the regional office as a school inspector, was such a figure. He was the last resort to help me conduct the study because of the established

rapport with him due to his positive impression about my university. In fact, though I had no evidence to prove against the false allegation, slammed by the new principal of the previous school, I eagerly wanted someone to understand my situation as well as trust and help me to gain access without any hitch to some research participants, in any of the school in Delhi, run by the organisation. Indeed, hearing my plight in mid of a school inspection, the previous principal promised to help and asked me to meet him in his office the next day.

I could also go to the deputy in the head office for help. Yet, approaching him again for another problem was not a good idea as it could spoil any positive impression created. Moreover, it could even stop any further chance to gain access to any of the schools in Delhi, had he turned skeptical on my truthfulness and asked for evidence. On the other hand, pursuing the school inspector in the regional office to favor me was much easier, due to the already established rapport and cordial, friendly behavior with me. When I met him the next day, he introduced me to the regional director and taking his consent, called up another school principal to brief her about me, the study and the director's permission. Of course, as Padgett (1998) coined, the director was no exception to many of the gatekeepers who remain skeptical about the researchers and the benefits of their studies. Hence,

I had to negotiate with him, by revealing how the research questions surfaced from the research gaps and reassuring the ethical measures as he inquired about the particular information the study needed, despite these were clearly mentioned in the proposal and the consent form.

In the new school, total seven teachers participated and among them were also the principal and vice-principal. They extended full cooperation and were never worried about any kind of permission, because the principal took the effort to call up a formal meeting to introduce me with the vice-principal and head of the environment club. She clearly conveyed the consent from the regional office and instructed them to further introduce me with other teachers, whosoever, was needed. Indeed, this helped me to break the wall of anonymity with the participants, and thus, straightway talking about the study could have been started, avoiding their perceptual engagement with any kind of skepticism. But, squarely, this became possible, due to the school inspector's good terms with the principal and their initiatives in the study. In fact, the regional office extended the opportunity in such a school, where the stuffs were most cooperative. Hence, as Buchanan et al. (1988, p. 55) rightly stated, gaining access to the school and participants necessitated exploiting the 'opportunities offered in the circumstances', and this involved

some combination of possibilities and dumb luck.

DEALING WITH THE ETHICAL ISSUES AND DILEMMAS

Gaining voluntary participation and informed consents from the participants is obligatory as per the university ethical guidelines. However, it not only requires providing information to them about the study, but also let them exercise their choice of participation (Miller and Bell 2002). In addition, researchers should obtain their consents both in written and verbal form (Pitney and Parker 2009). Further, they should also ensure respondents' validity for the trustworthiness of the research data (Barbour 2007). Hence, although the consent forms contained all the needed information for the participants, they were also explained verbally, both, while handing over those and getting signed from them before the interviews. In addition, the participants were contacted for the interviews as per their convenience, after few days of giving the consent forms. Further, they were given back full, verbatim transcriptions after the interviews. Finally, ethical considerations also included thanking the participants and gatekeepers cordially, and gaining passive consents from the students and their guardians for non-participant classroom observations.

Ethical considerations in gaining informed consents from the participants were the same in both

pilot and final study. Yet, ethical issues cannot be forgotten by just getting the consent forms duly filled up from the participants at the beginning of a study (Miller and Bell 2002). This is because the power dynamics between the gatekeepers and the research participants and the roles played by them in the research underpin the co-production of the research data. Although approaching via agencies is a useful way to gain access to vulnerable people, the participants may feel obligation to participate in the research and provide positive views about the agencies since these agencies support them. Moreover, accessing the participants via agencies increases the possibility of losing control over their selections (Henn et al. 2006). Therefore, researchers encounter ethical dilemmas while accessing the participants for their voluntary participation and informed consents (Miller and Bell 2002). Not to mention, ethical dilemmas were not exceptional, and these were faced at several occasions while doing the study.

In order to minimise the possibility of losing control over the selections of participants due to gatekeepers' power influence, the initial data-gathering was conducted through the informal discussions with the participants followed by the selection of the potential ones. In addition, snowball technique was used to identify additional participants by asking already contacted ones to

name others since it is one of the most common forms of purposeful selection of the participants in qualitative case studies (Merriam 2009). As such, in the new school, the references of prospective participants started building up as the principal introduced me with the vice-principal and head of the environment-club and asked them to further introduce me with other teachers. However, first encounter with the ethical dilemma related to participants' voluntary participation in the study occurred when one of the social science teachers in the previous school mentioned her incapacity to spare time and wanted the principal to allocate a time-slot for the interview.

No doubt, the new principal was the main gatekeeper in the previous school. Yet, her high authoritative power to allow or withhold anyone's action within the school premises probably influenced many of the teachers' participation in the study. On the other hand, the social science teachers, who were constantly postponing the interview, might not have been getting little free time to contribute in the study due to their overloaded work. Hence, I was in an ethical dilemma whether to approach the principal to request a time-slot for the concerned teachers or to avoid their participation since the gatekeeper's authoritative influence does not assure participants' voluntary participation in the study. Similar was the case with

the participants in the new school. Unlike the teachers in the previous school, they never inquired of any permission. Instead, they extended full cooperation, and obviously, that is, because the vice-principal conveyed the principal's and regional director's approval while introducing me with them.

Ethical obligation of voluntary participation stipulated by the ethical committees implies the assumption of no physical or psychological coercion (Christians 2005). However, ethical dilemma arises due to the dualistic stances between the gatekeepers' power and the participants' voluntary participation. Gaining access to the teachers and their participation was not possible without the principal's approvals and teachers perhaps expressed willingness or participated in the research, due to the approvals from the authoritative power positions though they might not have been actually interested. In fact, a subtle coercion is involved as employees feel obliged to participate in research, due to their employers or employment expectations, though they may not wish to do so (Hennink et al. 2011). Then, ethical obligation of voluntary participation and informed consents of the participants, through the gatekeepers itself incubates a subtle form of coercion, because the name or any previous experience with a university may positively influence a gatekeeper, which in turn even may influence the participants.

According to Hennink et al (2011), in order to gain participants' trust and ensure their voluntary participation, researchers must inform them about their particular right to refuse participation, without any fear of retribution from their employers or the gatekeepers. In addition, they should also be promised anonymity and confidentiality. In the above study, though the consent-forms included all these information in detail, some of the participants of the previous school perhaps lacked reading those properly. Further, they never disclosed their unwillingness to participate, despite their rights being informed verbally and repeatedly to them. Probably, either the participants didn't pay much attention when those were explained, or the researcher totally failed to build trust and rapport. As such, gaining informed consent from the participants in its true sense is not easy and straightforward (Eynon et al. 2008). Moreover, building trust and rapport requires prolonged engagement with the participants, such as, the residents of care homes to investigate their relationship development (Wilson et al. 2009).

Prolonged engagement with the participants was neither possible nor desirable in this study, since getting their views for the research questions did not require high intimacy with them. In addition, prolonged engagement is 'primarily appropriate for ethnography' (Lichtman 2010, p. 230). Further, the power relation

between the gatekeepers and participants did not invalidate the research findings though the participants gave positive accounts of the environmental education in their respective schools. This is because the research questions had no concern at all, on how the environmental education was imparted in the school. In fact, when researching vulnerable people, one way to eliminate agency influence on the participants is not to include anything into the research objectives that directly deals with the services of the agencies (Henn et al. 2006). Yet, gaining informed consents from the participants involves another serious ethical dilemma due to two contrasting obligations: publishing research findings that may improve the society and protecting the participants from any kind of harm due to the publications (Kelly and Ali 2004).

Actually, the nature of 'consent' only becomes clear at the end of a study because the impact due to presentation of the research findings by the researcher may not resonate with the research aims informed to the participants at the outset (Miller and Bell 2002, p. 54). Hence, for Robert-Holmes (2011), providing feedback to the participants about the learning constituted from the study is ethically important. However, a range of ethical approaches exists upon which ethical decisions in research are made, such as, the consequentialist, non-consequentialist, virtue ethics,

etc. (Wiles 2012). Moreover, ethical guidelines of the IRBs are the universal statutory and ethical praxis in social and educational research is local and specific; cannot be universalised (Simons and Usher 2000). In the above study, research findings were not shared with the participants and gatekeepers, because if it was done, participants would have felt defamed, and consequently hindered the greater interest of contributing for the academic community.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of gaining access and re-access to the research site and the participants for their voluntary participation and informed consents through the gatekeepers, while following the university ethical guidelines were like crossing a barbed gate. Indeed, it was thorny and challenging, but offered a crucial reflection. Although the selection of the school for the study was purposeful and the pilot was conducted successfully, the final study didn't succeed in the

same school, due to the resistance and sabotage of the uncooperative factors despite the formal permission of the gatekeepers. This is perhaps because of the participants' skepticism about the researcher or the topic could not be avoided, since the middle management gatekeepers in that school, didn't do anything, like introducing the researcher formally and freshly with the participants. On the other hand, the participants in the new school became very cooperative only when the middle management gatekeepers helped as a sponsor and offered the opportunity by properly introducing the researcher with the participants. In fact, the organisation ran many schools, and accessing one of these as well as the cooperation from the participants for the study was not possible without the permission of the gatekeepers. Moreover, there was change in the top and middle management gatekeepers. Hence, an opportunistic approach in gaining access was most appropriate for the above study.

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