Research quality in collaborative knowledge generation: a Chinese-UK Collaboration

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Abstract

Our research aimed to gain insights into how teachers in a convenience sample of primary schools in Chengdu, understood and engaged with the diversity of students in their classes. Responding critically to research we participated in as part of a large EU funded project on inclusive Education which had western or European framing underpinning the survey of teachers across four areas of South West China, this small focused project produced 146 observation sheets that were filled in by training teachers based at Sichuan Normal University on their school placements and 25 short interviews they conducted with teachers they observed. In attempting to stimulate preliminary thought about how to generate collaborative knowledge from a less 'Eurocentric Epistemic' in this particular socio-political, economic and cultural context, we relate to Amanda Helengwa's Think Piece. We are developing and trialling methodological and analytical approaches that challenge the current western dominance in the generation of knowledge for inclusive education. However, our work and data are fraught with issues of quality and authenticity, raising questions about the degree to which it escapes Eurocentricity and transcends the boundaries necessary for collaborative knowledge generation.

Hence, we engage substantially with many of the issues discussed by Bruce MacFarlane in his Think Piece regarding research quality, especially if we think and judge our research using conventional Eurocentric-methodological terms. For example, despite Chinese and UK colleagues' efforts to work collaboratively and supportively, the data generated by the observation sheets feels short and perceived absences are hard to interpret. Short conversations (instead of 30–40-minute interviews as envisaged) are shaped by power relations that we cannot directly experience. The student-teachers could only engage in our project for data generation. This raises many questions about how we generate truthfulness from these small snippets of data and ensure valid interpretations of it.

However, we argue that these qualitative insights and the cross-national-linguistic conversations represent, the important efforts we have made to centre the specific Chinese context as suggested by Chen (2008) in Asia as Method. We believe that systematically recording the relevant knowledge's that we found through research encounters, can help us build layers of understanding about inclusive education is important to our endeavours. We have adapted Danermark's (2019) critical realist-based framework for interdisciplinary research with the way of generating systemic ways of recording the presence, absences, inclusion and discarding of potentially valuable knowledges and research practices.

Keywords