

Describing schools the way they are: reflecting on a baseline study in the Boland

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This article critically engages with the conceptual framework of a baseline study and investigates some of the assumptions underlying its design. The discussion focuses on two central questions: Firstly, what is the value of descriptive data? Secondly, what significance should be given to the data in relation to the development process as a whole? In conclusion there are some thoughts about how to report on the research so that the process of talking and writing about the data is not a mere formality at the end, but becomes a tool for thinking about the project as it grows.

Introduction

This article is a reflection on the intentions and limitations of a baseline study conducted in three catholic schools in the Boland region of the Western Cape. The study formed part of a school development initiative, which I co-ordinated for the Catholic Institute of Education (CIE) for the 2000 academic year. The purpose of baseline research, according to the CIE, is to describe the three schools as the members of the school communities see them at the starting point of the school development programme. At a later stage the institute hopes to use the results of this initial study to recognise and evaluate change. In this article I would like to critically engage with the conceptual framework of the baseline project and investigate some of the assumptions underlying its design. In order to do this, I will focus the discussion of the research design on two critical questions emerging in relation to it: Firstly, what is the value of descriptive data? Secondly, what significance should be given to the data in relation to the development process as a whole? Finally, I will also consider how to report the research results so that the process of talking and writing about the data is not a mere formality at the end, but becomes a tool for thinking about the project as it grows. In this sense, as Alasuutari (1995:177) argues, the process of writing can be a very important part of the research. When all is said and done, the Catholic Institute of Education will be left with nothing else but a text and it is the text that will have to do justice to the complexities of the development process as a whole.

The research design

The research design of the baseline study is focused on exploring teaching and learning issues at the three Boland schools and is guided by an attempt to understand how the members of the school community see the quality of their school as they set out on the school development programme. The notion of quality is not limited to any one specific meaning, but is rather conceptualised as a set of core values, which may be said to be typical of quality schools. These core values are identified with the help of a set of quality indicators that were developed especially by the CIE to suit catholic schools in South Africa (Potterton, 1999:8) and are presented in the form of a quality indicator questionnaire. The quality indicators in the questionnaire are grouped around nine key aspects of the life of the school and include areas such as the school environment, the classroom environment and procedures, teaching and learning, as well as parental involvement, school ethos and resources. When the teachers at each of the schools engaged with the questionnaire they were asked to discuss the quality indicators with each other and agree on a rating of their current performance for each. The indicators in the observation schedule and the questionnaire, however, are not intended to represent real measurable moments in the life of the school. They are mere signposts for concern and should therefore be treated with discretion. During the pilot study, for example, the seemingly straightforward indicators caused quite a lot of debate. Here is an extract from my research diary to illustrate the point:

I took some time to explain what the different levels of quality could mean. There was quite a lot of confusion — how do you judge quality? Is quality where you personally would like to be? Do you compare the school to others in Worcester that are seen as the 'good schools' around here? Or do you judge quality according to what we believe is possible given the poor and depressed community the school serves? I was not sure how to answer that. In the end I encouraged them to go with their gut — their own sense of a good school, not worrying too much about where that gut sense comes from. The debate made me feel uneasy. If we do not know the source of all these 'good school images', what does the QI questionnaire really tell us? It is still useful data, because it is about their personal perceptions, but it only scratches the surface.

This experience shows that indicators in themselves do not provide us with insight into real events, nor do they provide a measure of the actual quality of the school. The results of the questionnaire will indicate the perceptions of quality that teachers work with in relation to specific areas of school life. In an attempt to triangulate these perceptions the same questionnaire will have to be used with parents in order to get their views. Since the development programme concentrates specifically on the quality of teaching and learning, the quality indicators are designed in such a way that it allows for a particular focus on how the teachers see teaching and learning at their school. The triangulation of these perceptions will be done with the help of direct observations of lessons, informal discussions during curriculum workshops and a standardised literacy test for Grade 4 learners.

The key aspects of the Boland research project can thus be summarised as in Table 1.

Participant observation

A critical feature of the above design is that the baseline research is planned to fit in with meetings and workshops that already make up the school development intervention. This means the baseline study will not be completed before the change process begins. One reason for this overlap can be found in the restrictions placed on the research process due to the short duration of the programme, the negligible budget for the research process, and teachers' unwillingness to participate in meetings that are not directly related to the implementation of the school development programme.

There are, however, also fundamental methodological issues at stake. For example, my simultaneous role as facilitator and researcher in the schools means that no 'before' and 'after' evaluation of the project will make sense. Because the baseline data marking the 'before' will only be collected 'during' the facilitation process, it will already be influenced by the effects of working towards change. As a result there is no clear point where the 'before' ends and the 'after' begins and so it is difficult to determine the characteristics which will indicate change. This means the unavoidable overlap between research and facilitation creates a situation, in which the collection of baseline data of the Boland schools cannot simply be seen as the first part of an

Table 1 Key aspects of the Boland research project

Research issue	Research method	Who will participate	Time frame
1. What is the social and economic context of each school?	Questionnaire: the school will complete a form, recording basic data about the school.	The principal	Semd form to school and collect it at first workshop in February.
2. What is the professional context of each school?	Questionnaire: teachers will fill in a form, stating their professional qualifications and work experience	The principal and the teachers at the school.	Complete form at development planning workshop in March.
3. What teaching practices are common at each school?	Direct observation of lessons: researcher observes teaching in progress in at least two different classes, using the observation schedule provided.	Class visits at the invitation of individual teachers	March/April
4. How do teachers feel about the quality of their school?	Quality Indicator questionnaire.	Researcher administers questionnaire to all teachers at the school	Use Quality indicators as part of workshop in March.
5. How does learners' reading performance compare with other schools?	Standardised Grade 4 Literacy test: administer and mark the test and compare with other schools.	All Grade 4 learners at the school	April
6. How do parents feel about the quality of the school?	Quality Indicator questionnaire.	Some parents. (Selection criteria are not clear yet.)	Workshop for Governing Body in June.

Note: The Quality Indicator questionnaire and the observation schedule for the class observation were used at the Roman Catholic School, Worcester during March and April 2000. These two studies are used to provide examples throughout the discussion.

evaluation study for the programme as a whole. The current research design rather seems to fall within the methodology of participant observation, in which according to Jorgensen researchers want to assume a participant role in the very life situations they are researching. Researchers nurture significant relationships with all the people involved in the project and to engage with them in their daily work experience. This interactive stance in turn allows them to 'generate practical and theoretical truths about human life grounded in the realities of daily existence' (Jorgensen, 1989:14) and gain access to the concepts participants use to make sense of their everyday lives. The interpretation and understanding of human behaviour is a central concern in this methodology, especially when it is viewed from the perspective of the participants in the inquiry. The preferred methods for collecting information in participant observation research are informal conversations, structured interviews, direct observation, focused questionnaires and personal reflections of the researcher, as they all allow for an open-ended interactive process between the researcher and the community of inquiry. Most of these methods of collecting information are interactive requiring the researcher to become an insider who assumes a posture of 'indwelling' while engaging in the research (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994:25).

In the context of the Boland schools, the direct class observations and the quality indicator questionnaire, which form the core investigative tools of the study, certainly create opportunities to gather qualitative data for the inquiry. However, as I have illustrated earlier, it is the facilitation of teachers' discussion around the indicators rather than the indicators themselves that provide access to the insider per-

spective. John Olson points out that any amount of detailed indicators about teaching and learning will not necessarily help us understand what teachers are really doing in class. We have to see their behaviour and their responses as pointers towards the purposes, which they serve.

The meaning of what people do lies in the purposes served by those actions, which are not meaningful in themselves, but indicators of the purposes they serve which give them meaning. In themselves they mean nothing (Olson, 1992:55).

In other words, all the impressions and descriptions I gather in the course of my participant observation of the three Boland schools will amount to a mere surface description of the reality, unless I offer some insight into the purposes of the behaviour and processes that allows me to perceive the unity of experience that the observations link into. Descriptions without intentions and contradictions are a bit like soup without salt. Knowledge about the intentions of teachers is also important in order to triangulate the impressions created by the QI questionnaire and the classroom observations and to validate the significance placed on them. At present one obvious shortcoming of the above research design is that it does not offer an explicit process for elucidating the purposes and meanings teachers attach to the process of change. As a result the moments of observation and insights seem like pearls on a string, but they do not add up to what Stake calls a 'bounded system' (Jaeger (ed.), 1988:256) that does justice to the complexity and uniqueness of their case. This limitation is apparent in the following extract from my research diary:

The QI give me no idea about their intentions, or the possible delusions. When I did report back the results (13.3.2000), the response from the staff was strangely flat — especially because they did not seem to agree with me that the result pointed to a solid, well functioning school, well on the way to success. They felt swamped by problems, not feeling on top of it. That contradiction made me think a lot about the gap between their perceptions in response to the QI and their actual daily experience. When we talked more about the issues they were struggling with, they decided together to focus on literacy difficulties of their learners that makes their life as teachers very difficult and the implementation of the new curriculum nearly impossible. This discussion was in clear contradiction to their responses in 3.1,3.2,3.3, 3.4, etc. Without the feedback discussion, the QI give a very different picture. Simply from looking at the questionnaire results I would not have identified section 3 as a key area of concern.

Offering insights into a 'bounded system' that captures the multiple levels of teachers' experience is in itself a complex process, which involves more than merely asking the Boland teachers to justify their behaviour in class or the choices they made in the questionnaire. The above extract mentions, for example, how teachers expressed the explicit intention of improving the reading levels of learners at their school. During my subsequent class observation I was therefore particularly sensitive to the reading behaviour of both learners and teachers, and by doing so, moved beyond a mere description of current teaching behaviours and tried to generate insights about the way teachers could improve their practice. In other words, in the course of the observation I shifted the boundaries of their experience from what they are doing now to include what they could be doing next. However, by doubling up as observer and facilitator, I created a situation where my own good intentions to support the teachers in their good intentions clouded the epistemological issues involved in bounding the research. Lowyck (Day, Pope & Dinocolo (ed.), 1990:88) claims that there is a constant tension between description of and prescription in educational research, because education is an inherently moral practice, and so the concern with describing the way teaching is, often is overlaid with a more or less explicit concern with what teaching ought to be. This moral overlay (in this case expressed as a practical concern for improving literacy) creates epistemological difficulties for educational research, because there is no intrinsic link between what is and what ought to be. Lowyck argues that there is a faulty logic that

operates when we use descriptions of effective practice in a particular context as a justification for making general recommendations (or prescriptions) for improvement. For example, by describing the effective use of paired reading in one class I might come to the conclusion that it should be implemented in all classes, simply because the teachers and I share the belief that literacy is important. Such a recommendation might seem powerful and convincing because it is situated in an irrefutable moral framework (Who would not claim that literacy is important?) and it is derived from practice (I have seen it work in Grade X with Teacher Y). Yet despite their seeming 'rightness', such recommendations avoid the epistemological question, whether particular teaching experiences can be generalised into reliable guidelines for success. It is this issue of generalisation in that I would like to explore next.

Issues of generalisation: What is the value of descriptive data?

The methodology of participant observation that underpins this baseline study falls within the naturalist research paradigm, in which reality is believed to be a multiple complex construct, which is dependent on an interactive research process. The reality will change, if the time and context of the investigation changes. The interpretation of data (including the drawing of conclusions) cannot rely on law-like generalisations, because the research knowledge needs to remain time and context bound in order to be meaningful. This means that in a naturalist paradigm 'time and context free' generalisations about research knowledge are not possible and therefore only idiographic statements about the research are seen to be worthwhile (Lincoln & Guba, 1985: 39). The aim of naturalist educational research such as the Boland study ultimately is not to discover general laws about teaching and learning, but rather to develop descriptive knowledge that facilitates understanding of the status quo and makes particular working hypotheses possible.

Stake argues that perceptive descriptions of particular cases not only support the development of grounded educational theories, but can also be a powerful tool for learning. When teachers share descriptions of their practice, they are immediately giving each other the opportunity to share in vicarious experiences of educational settings and to make 'naturalistic generalisations' about them (Jaeger (ed.), 1988:260). Naturalistic generalisations ultimately are as interactive as the research process as a whole. They depend on the ability of the participants to enter the particular case, to pay attention to the salient features of that case, and to transfer insights from the one case so that they become meaningful in their own experience. In other words, by engaging with the specific detail of the 'story of paired reading' as it occurred in one class, all teachers have the opportunity to come to some general insight about teaching reading that might be useful for them in their own situation. In this framework Stake would argue my responsibility as researcher is not to make general recommendations about reading, but rather to 'describe the case in sufficient descriptive narrative so that readers can vicariously experience these happenings, and draw their own conclusions' (Denzin & Lincoln (ed.), 1994:243).

The above debate about the links between description and prescription and the underlying processes of generalisation has been useful, as it draws attention to the fact that the seemingly simple collection of baseline data is fraught with difficulties, unless I, as researcher, make clear choices about my own purpose for the descriptive data I accumulate in the course of the research. Do I want to use the research data to create opportunities for learning, or find working hypotheses for success? Am I looking for rich descriptions of practice that allow for naturalistic generalisations about teaching and learning or am I looking for data that will help us work out the next best step in the process? If I am concerned with what Lowyck (Day *et al.*, 1990:96) calls conclusion orientated research, my intention will be to generate knowledge that has general significance in the way Stake describes. Decision-orientated research, on the other hand, follows similar research procedures, but it is intended to have particular appli-

cation. The two approaches appear similar in their investigative tools and interactive stance, yet they differ in intention and therefore do not produce compatible results. Richardson (1994:7) argues along similar lines that there are two forms of research that focus on educational practice: formal research and practical inquiry. The purpose of formal research usually is to contribute to a general body of knowledge about educational practice, while practical inquiry is always aimed at improving practice. She points out that it is problematic to proceed with formal research that hopes to arrive at general guidelines about practice, because the formalisation (and hence generalisation) of teachers' practical and contextual insights often causes them to lose their value in informing everyday classroom practice. Given the dual concern of my own research design — the formal request by the CIE for baseline data on the one hand, and the pressing need for information that can be applied to the development process on the other — it seems that I have attempted the impossible. I will ultimately have to make a clear decision whether the purpose of the research is to produce a formal 'product' such as a research report or whether the inquiry should be directly applicable to the change process. Is my primary intention to contribute to a general understanding of the experience of teaching and learning at the Boland schools, or am I engaging in decision orientated action research, in the hope of improving the quality of the schools?

Making choices: What significance should be given to the data in relation to the development process as a whole?

Both the above options are grounded in the assumption that reality is multiple and constructed and that the complexity of the context is critical. The Boland schools are not fixed 'out there', but are an intricate, meaningful experience informed by purposes and intentions of those who live it. Within the framework of conclusion orientated research, however, events are primarily understood in relation to teachers' intentions and interactions within the context under investigation. Their individual agency is asserted and interpreted. The purpose of the research is to describe what occurs and to give a platform to the various meanings people give to these events. In this sense the research process is a conscious, diligent and systematic 're-construction' of the initially often unconscious and spontaneous construction of reality. With the help of a careful re-construction of their experience, teachers in the Boland schools can be given opportunities for reflection, learning and growth. Research knowledge is thus a constructed product that can be used to stimulate insights and understanding of schools the way they are. Once this description has been shared, there is no explicit desire to initiate further action or change, other than a generalised implicit moral expectation for improvement that comes with tradition of being a reflective practitioner.

Decision-orientated research, on the other hand, offers an explicit emancipatory goal for the Boland schools (e.g. 'Quality for all'), and thus is not only interested in mere descriptions of the schools' reality, but also in the hidden structural constraints, which determine its shape. Action researchers especially look for knowledge that allows them to uncover and challenge the general ideas we take for granted. The findings of action research always have a highly pragmatic orientation and are fed back directly into practice with the aim of bringing about change (Somekh, 1994:4). Research knowledge is therefore not seen as a final product, but as part of a process that helps teachers to focus and refocus their teaching practice on its emancipatory purpose. Given the fact that my initial baseline study is part of my brief to facilitate a process that will help to improve the quality of teaching and learning in the Boland schools, an action research approach for the study seems an obvious choice. The explicit moral dimension of the study would lend internal coherence to the data, where the class observations as well as the QI questionnaires, the informal discussions and the literacy scores can not only be used to engage with teachers' common sense perceptions of quality, but also form the foundation for a growing vision of the improved quality of the Boland schools.

Gore and Zeichner (Smyth (ed.) 1995:206), however, are reluctant to propose action research as the panacea for school development

work. They argue that there is nothing inherent in action research that makes it emancipatory and proceed to look at some of the specific practices through which action research can have effects of domination, undermining its own developmental intention. One of these is the way in which action researchers use their knowledge to bring about change. Gore and Zeichner suggest if action researchers operate with universalised notions of emancipation and use these to make sense of the specific complexity they find themselves in, it can easily happen that the moral basis of their work becomes a controlling and prescriptive force for the development process. In such a case the emancipatory content of action research is not derived from teachers' real issues in a real context, but prescribed by a generalised idea. This contradicts the whole notion that interactive research creates opportunities for learning through action and reflection and encourages teachers to improve the quality of their work.

In the case of the Boland study Gore and Zeichner's argument is of particular pertinence, as the external pressures on teachers to effect the current curriculum change do indeed create a potentially oppressive moral imperative for the project as a whole. Curriculum 2005, designed as the post-apartheid curriculum, aims for strong emancipatory outcomes that form the moral justification for the change. The change process itself, however, is often implemented in an officious and undemocratic way that leaves teachers feeling pressurised and insecure. In the case of the Boland schools these feelings lead to self-depreciation of teachers, rather than self-exploration and growth. As a result the context of externally mandated change has created a situation where the teachers' sincere commitment to improving the quality of the schools has lost its emancipatory flavour and is expressed as a survival strategy in response to pressures from outside. A teacher from Worcester summed up this experience as follows:

'We better teach the children to read properly, or we won't cope when new curriculum is made compulsory.'

Small-scale research such as the Boland study will not even begin to engage with the complexity of such sentiments and thus it must be recognised that the literacy test and the class observations (that both explicitly look at the teaching of reading at the schools) cannot in themselves free the teachers from the pressures of change. In fact, the opposite is true. As the scope of Boland study is too small to effectively engage with the real emancipatory issues at the schools, there is little option but to conduct action research with generalised moral imperatives that can easily undermine its very cause.

There is another very practical reason why decision-orientated action research might not be the best way of framing the Boland study. Time was too short. My formal involvement with the Boland schools was limited to one year and after that the schools had to continue the programme on their own with minimal support from the regional office of the CIE. This means I merely was an 'imminent immigrant' (Ball, 1980:5) to the fundamental conditions of change. Although I attempted to develop the kind of relationship with the Boland schools that will support the democratic values of action research (Somekh, 1994: 5), I nonetheless could not accompany the whole process of change. Nor could I offer a research relationship that will guide their practice in an ongoing way.

Conclusion

What other role could the descriptive data of the Boland schools play in relation to the development process as a whole? One possibility is to use the descriptive data together with my ongoing experience of facilitation to construct an intensive and multi-faceted case study of the schools. Although such a case study would be purely descriptive, it can, according to Yin (1994:15), still make a distinctive contribution to evaluation research, as it will allow the participants of the project, as well as others interested parties to appreciate the complexity of the context in which the project began. The detailed descriptions of particular, yet illustrative developments in the Boland schools can in the long run offer explanations about real life interventions that are too complex for simple survey strategies, which are looking for change effects. With this in mind, it seems that the option of writing up the current Boland study as a detailed case study of the 'programme beginnings' allows me to do justice to both my formal brief to collect baseline data for the CIE and my personal concerns to integrate the research into the change process itself. Once the disparate snippets of information have been constructed into a coherent 'case', the purely descriptive data will take on the significance of a snapshot outlasting its time. Future evaluators of the school development programme as well as members of the relevant school communities will vicariously have access to the complexity of its experience and come to their own understanding of it. The notion of vicarious access implies, however, that — no matter how rich and powerful the case study of the Boland schools turns out to be — it will still need to be supplemented by other kinds of knowledge that can make the study useful for practitioners in the field. Lowyck (Day *et al.*, 1990:96) calls such knowledge 'value added' knowledge, as it ultimately is the axiology of our actions that will render any descriptive research significant for practice.

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