

Education for Sustainable Development for policy-makers through critical-reflective interviewing

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Introduction

This paper provides a reflexive account of the conceptual framework and methodology developed during research built on qualitative data-generation and inductive thematic data-analysis informed by critical theory, constructivism (Charmaz, 2006) and phenomenology (Van Manen, 1990). This approach was deemed appropriate to address questions about the views of policy-makers on SD, the related decision-making process and power relations, and the role of ESD for Maltese policy-makers in seeking critical reflection (Brookfield, 1995) through emancipative communicative reasoning (Habermas, 1984) and problem-solving (Freire, 1970). Through reflective interviewing (Roberston, 2004), the research sought to promote reflection and critical thinking in the participants as a form of ESD. The paper includes a review of the research concepts and design, their appropriateness, and a discussion of the participants' stakeholder groups. In addition, it also discusses the credibility and trustworthiness of the research and addresses issues of accessing and interviewing the powerful.

Problem of research

The research area aimed to address the apparent lacuna around education for policy-makers to promote SD (UNESCO, 1987) and the issues related to accessing and interviewing the powerful (Walford, 2003). The professional standing of the main researcher as a civil servant¹ was instrumental in

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facilitating access as it enhanced the chances of being granted an interview by policy-makers (McHugh, 2003). The insider status was an asset as knowledge of the field helped to understand more reflexively the research context (Olesen, 1994) in the acknowledgment that facts cannot be separated from their constituent values (Griffiths, 1995).

ESD was seen as an example of transformative education. As educators can be transformative intellectuals (Giroux, 1989; Mezirow, 1991), it was held that the interview interaction could assist policy-makers in thinking critically on SD. Nonetheless, working with policy-makers is a complex matter because of the individuals' condition, the social interactions, and ethical issues (Griffiths, 1998) as well as their differing modernist and postmodernist views on knowledge and the effects of power (Foucault, 1983, 1997; Popkewitz, 1999; Torres, 1999). These considerations on SD policy-making and ESD for policy-makers necessitated a research design within a critical theory perspective based on the following research questions that were developed through a cyclical process based on reflection:

Research question 1: What are the views of Maltese high-level policy-makers on their awareness; knowledge/understanding; attitudes/values/responsibilities; skills; and participation/interests, with regards to SD?

Research question 2: How and why do Maltese high-level policy-makers arrive at decisions on SD related matters?

Research question 3: How is ESD perceived by Maltese high-level policy-makers? How can ESD be delivered/provided to Maltese high-level policy-makers?

A qualitative research design, not immune to self-doubt and uncertainty (Ely et al., 1991; Law, 2006), was adopted to seek in-depth understanding (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005) of the views of policy-makers. A positive force of reflexivity shaped the process through a heightened awareness of the subjectivities of the researcher and of the participants while acknowledging that simplicity does not do justice to a messy world (Law, 2006). Given the constructivist ontology and interpretative epistemology, a qualitative method using semi-structured interviews as a tool was chosen to address the research questions. Apart from its phenomenological objective to describe the perceptions of policy-makers, the critical-inductive research built on constructivist ontology "by aiming for interpretative understanding and situated knowledge ... as it positions inquiry in its historical, cultural, social situational, and interactional location and thus

recognizes partialities” (Charmaz, 2008: 133). Critical theory provided the basis of the research process that critically delved into power relations and SD promotion. Notwithstanding this critical perspective, the construction of knowledge was deemed partial, local, and regional (Foucault in Foucault and Deleuze, 1977) in the post-structural awareness of the complexities emanating from socially derived constructions of reality (Brown and Jones, 2001). The researchers reflected on the views of the participants keeping in mind individual positions and subjectivities (Griffiths, 1998) and explored change without prespecifying it (Blake and Masschelein, 2003; Foucault, 1983).

This research emanates from a philosophical position that realities are multiple and shifting and all enquiry is value-bound (Ely et al., 1991). So, the process aimed at understanding the policy-makers’ experiences by seeing events in a context and by giving policy-makers the opportunity of a counter-narrative space (Walsh, 2012) through an interactive process. Noting the uncertain nature of knowledge due to its dependence on local and provisional values (Foucault in Foucault and Deleuze, 1974; Griffiths, 1998), the study generated experiential narratives about SD policy-making and ESD within the cultural context of Malta. The analysis of data delved into personal motivations, but also social contexts that support individual views (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The interviews were based on critical reflection on understandings (Brookfield, 1995; Mezirow, 1991) through undistorted interaction (Habermas, 1984). The idea of value-free knowledge was rejected in favour of political engagement (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003) arising from the critical stance (Anyon et al. 2009) towards the political commitment of Maltese politicians, and the need for socially-engaged and purpose-oriented critical research (Cookson Jr, 2003). The interactional setting promoted awareness and consciousness through reflection (Freire, 1970) to hopefully improve social practice (McTaggart, as cited in, Brydon-Miller et al., 2003; Macey, 2000; Popkewitz, 1999).

General background of research

Appropriateness of the philosophical underpinnings of the research design

Aware of the limitations of multiple realities imposed by positionality, partial knowledge and variation, the study rests on constructivist ontology, interpretative epistemology, inductive and methodological flexibility (Charmaz, 2008). The researchers avoided imposing their own world view (Freire, 1970) on the participants. Thus, the interview involved problem-posing to policy-makers providing them with a setting to explore their possible potential with respect to social inclusion, equitable economic distribution, and environmental protection. The research approach upheld these objectives by

engaging with values to question taken-for-granted dominant policy views (Ozga, 2012).

Cognizant of Habermas' theory of communicative rationality the process was embedded in the lifeworld of the participants and based on respectful dialogue (Walseth and Schei, 2011). Policy-makers were engaged through communicative action to seek awareness of their potential ability to promote SD and thus of the needs of the oppressed (Mickelson, 2003), by considering the limitations of their actions imposed by power relations and power discourse (Cookson Jr, 2003; Foucault, 1972). This course of action was taken as the aims of SD, could be better served by having committed policy-makers rather than disempowered ones, as social conditions are created through social institutions (Cookson Jr, 2003). This study did not forfeit the quest to potentially represent a reality, albeit constructed and interpretative, with respect to SD promotion in the cultural context of the smallness and islandness. This position significantly contributed to the rationale of the research.

A constructivist intersubjective dialogue based on problem-posing (Freire, 1970) for self-reflection by policy-makers on their lifeworld, while avoiding its colonization (Habermas, 1984) was adopted, as a means of reflective learning conversation and methodological device for emancipatory transformation. Following critical theory, the methodology sought some form of common understanding based on situated knowledge on SD in the Maltese islands but remained aware of postmodern concerns about the quest for certainty (Parkin, 1996). By looking into the world as experienced by the individual (Kafle, 2011), the processing of data along thematic aspects (Van Manen, 1990) was conducted through a hermeneutic cycle by reading of the interview texts, reflective writing in the forms of analytic memos and interpreting (Laverty, 2003). Based on these research concepts and role values (Griffiths, 1998) the research design evolved (Burgess, 1984) as the research proceeded as a moving target (Law, 2006).

The main phases of the research design

Each research phase built on the previous ones, leading to co-creation of data-generation (Griffiee, 2005: 36). Questions were personalised and open-ended leaving enough space for policy-makers to develop the interview as a participative constructive dialogue of their lifeworld (Habermas, 1984). The research project and interview question were firstly discussed in an open manner with the participants (Engward, 2013) to verify their relevance to policy-makers (Eckersly, 2002). Secondly, a senior civil servant who worked on SD evaluated the relevance of the research objectives and interview questions

thus comparing them with the experience of an expert in the field (Biesta, 2006) to strengthen the democratic values of the study (Brookfield, 1993). The consultations field-tested the research and interview questions with experts (Cookson Jr., 2003) in preparation for the interviews as a dialogic space (Craft, 2012; Freire, 1970).

Thirdly, a pilot interview was conducted to address any unclear questions (Peabody et al., 1990) and ensure that pertinent questions were built on the life experiences of policy-makers (Freire, 1985; Hamilton, 2013) and aligned to a culturally and historically determined interview (Kong et al., 2002, as cited in, Fontana and Frey, 2005). Consultations gave more power to the participants (Deem, 2003), but ensured that the questions reflected not only what the researchers had set out to study, but more importantly what was there to find out (Ely et al., 1991).

Problem-posing semi-structured interviews promoted critical reflection for emergence of consciousness (Freire, 1970) to possibly influence future policies (McHugh, 2003) hence serving as a narrative of benefit to policy-makers (Denzin, 2003; Weston, 1998 as cited in, Fontana and Frey, 2005). Feedback was sought at the end of each interview from policy-makers on their views on the interviewing session. The data generation, preliminary coding and data funnelling refined the outcomes of the research process (Charmaz, 2006). Further interviews promoted a more refined data generation guided by the data in hand and an evolving set of interview questions (Charmaz, 2006). After interviewing 60% of the stakeholder groups no new patterns emerged and saturation was reached (Engward, 2013).

Population

This study did not assume that all potential participants are interchangeable, but held that different stakeholder groups (that is, politicians, civil servants, and advisers) have different power, interests and insights. The stakeholder groups consisted of elected politicians including Ministers, Parliamentary Secretaries and Members of Parliament (MPs); Permanent Secretaries (PSs) as the top public officers in each Ministry and; Heads of the Ministry's Secretariat (HOSs) as the main adviser of each minister and parliamentary secretary.

The total number of high-level policy-makers consisted of sixty-nine elected politicians including Cabinet members, eleven PSs and thirteen HOSs making a total of ninety-three policy-makers, with only eight policy-makers being females. The age of the stakeholders ranged from the mid-thirties to the late-sixties. These three sub-groups were chosen because they constitute the top

brass of the executive and administrative arms of government and of parliament thus taking into consideration the legislative, executive, and administrative aspects of policy-making.

Sample method and size

The elite sample covered the range of opinion on SD matters (Cookson Jr, 2003). As the number of high-level policy-makers was relatively small it was decided to target the whole group. This decision was taken as there was no guarantee that if a sample had been taken, rather than the total stakeholder group, the interviewed number of stakeholders would not have been reduced even further by policy-makers opting out.

Out of ninety-three policy-makers, fifty-six were interviewed amounting to 60% of the total number. Out of a total of sixty-nine MPs, thirty-seven were interviewed amounting to 54% of MPs: sixteen of them were Nationalist Party (PN) MPs (the Government) and twenty-one were Labour Party (PL) MPs (the Opposition). Moreover, six out of eleven members of Cabinet, that is, 55% of ministers were interviewed. Nine out of eleven PSs were interviewed amounting to 82% while in the case of HOSs ten out of thirteen were interviewed leading to a success rate of 77%. The female gender was adequately represented as out of eight female policy-makers four or 50% of them were interviewed.

Instrument and procedures

Semi-structured reflective interviews

Semi-structured reflective interviews were adopted to provide insights into policy-making that are not public and easily available and explore policy-making networks and the ideas and values of the key actors (Fitz and Halpin, 2003). This reflexive problem-posing interviewing provided policy-makers the opportunity to actively explore their beliefs (Robertson, 2004), promoted reflection and constructive dialogue (Eckersly, 2002) and led to a discussion-based interaction (Brookfield, 2008; Freire, 1970, 1983; Hamilton, 2013; Goulet, 2007) favouring new understandings within a social context (Mulkay and Gilbert, 1982, as cited in, Freebody, 2003).

The interview setting has implications on interviewing, hence 'where' and 'when' specificities were considered (Odendahl and Shaw, 2001), while keeping in mind that the interviewer was eliciting information from participants "whose professional and institutional locations suggested that

they were skilled at releasing very little" (Fitz and Halpin, 2003: 37). As prior preparation to the open-ended semi-structured interviews (EPIC Workshop, 2002), research on the individual participants' background was conducted in the knowledge that interviews do not offer an authentic picture of the interviewee (Freebody, 2003). This issue was also addressed by building a rapport with the interviewee (Kogan, 2003) built on emancipatory expression (Craft, 2012). This personal approach limited situations where policy-makers conveyed only the official views of their ministry (Fitz and Halpin, 2003).

Access, informed consent, and confidentiality

Access was gained through personal contacts with prospective participants and gatekeepers rather than academic status (Semel, 2003). Nonetheless, a good dose of logistical flexibility was inevitable. Access for individual interviews was not difficult as all approached policy-makers accepted to be interviewed (Walford, 2003). Information letters avoided unnecessary detail that might be counterproductive (Dexter, 1970, as cited in, McHugh, 2003). Civil servants were given the option of remaining anonymous as this guaranteed their participation in policy research (Fitz and Halpin, 2003). After following conventional procedures (Fitz and Halpin, 2003) a number of PSs accepted to be attributable following clearance from the Principal Permanent Secretary (PPS).

Researchers must be ready to answer questions as the powerful might want to make sure of one's credentials. This was crucial to build a rapport with the powerful based on mutual respect, academic thoroughness, and a disposition to learn from them (McHugh, 2003). Access to the high-level policy-makers proved to be a process in time that called for creative strategies and was dependent on the particular setting in which the researcher operated. There is no one-size-fits-all and one must identify the most suitable strategies. Access was a demanding process in terms of time, but it could also be termed as easy in terms of success rate (Fitz and Halpin, 2003; Whitty and Edwards, 2003). This research confirmed that gaining access to members of elites is not as difficult as some envisage; working with policy-makers is challenging, but worthwhile (Walford, 2003).

Instrumentation, validity, and reliability

Semi-structured interviews were used as the research tool as interviewing provides insights about motives that explain how policy makers function (EPIC Workshop, 2002) and some level of control over politicians who tend to dominate discussions (Fitz and Halpin, 2003). The researcher remained flexible

during the interviewing stage to be open to emerging issues. The intra- and inter-interviewing probing resulted into a cyclical process of doing, thinking and doing (Ely et al., 1991). Rather than adopting a positivistic type of interviewing characterised by detachment, the researcher interacted with policy-makers in a reflexive manner to create new meanings. Subjectivities (Scheurich, 1995) were used to enhance the research process while at the same time remaining aware of the assumptive world view (Kogan, 2003). The researcher discussed with policy-makers, and was aware of doing so (Fontana and Frey, 2005) helping them to better understand themselves in relation to SD through an exercise in self-awareness rather than through the identification of some meta-narrative or truth about the achievement of SD.

In qualitative studies “validity and reliability are encompassed by credibility, transferability and trustworthiness” (Golafshani, 2003, p. 600) and refer to whether the interview questions are formulated in a manner that reflects what one is trying to find out (Guba and Lincoln, 1985). Having open-ended personalised questions gave the participants the opportunity to bring up issues of importance to them so that any foreshadowed issues came to the surface. Trustworthiness (Ely et al., 1991) was sought for by having prolonged engagement in the field, triangulation, the identification of negative cases, and the checking of the data generated with the participants. The interview data was corroborated with the interventions made in parliament by MPs on the legislation on SD. As to transferability (Guba and Lincoln, 1985), the research context was described in detail and any assumptions outlined so that readers could make an informed judgment as to whether the outcomes could be applicable to similar contexts. Reflecting on the context of the interviewing and generating a narrative based on a degree of exchange of views addressed the fact that interviewing elites does not give the whole story (Fitz and Halpin, 2003).

Ethical considerations

The research process followed key ethical considerations (Cookson Jr, 2003) such as honesty as well as adequate data collection and analysis. Research was conducted in line with the Data Protection Act (Cap 440) and provided the necessary precautionary measures to ensure high ethical standards, safeguard the confidentiality of the participants as necessary, refrain from deception and protect them from harm in the knowledge of possible consequences (Ely et al., 1991). No names were mentioned of participants who asked for anonymity, and the recording of interviews was conducted with prior authorisation from the participants.

The issue of whose side the researcher was on (Becker 1967, as cited in, Walford, 2003) was very clear to the participants. Participants were involved as collaborators to give them a voice in the research process. By treating the policy-makers involved in this study with respect by acknowledging their status (Dalton, 2011), the study was conducted with and for policy-makers. Ethical considerations were taken with respect to the integrity of the research by trying to be accurate, fair and trustworthy. Bias as it emerges from one's values (Peshkin, 1988 as quoted in Ely et al., 1991) did affect perceptions, but researcher bias was brought to the surface. This was addressed by giving an in-depth account of positionality, describing the context of the study and by conceding that the knowledge developed is based "on uncertainty, fallibility and risky judgments made in particular material, historical circumstances" (Griffiths, 1998, p. 91) and that the narrative is an interpreted description (Deem, 2003). The researcher also tried not to prejudge the interviewees by remaining open to their points of view (Jones, 2003). The research process tried to engage with policy-makers to provide them with a setting to become more aware, responsible and sensitised on SD by bringing to the fore SD-related issues to the attention of, and for reflection by, policy-makers (Freire, 1970).

Data analysis

Transcripts were analysed critically by line-by-line reading, reflective writing and interpreting, to identify codes and categories as well as through the writing of analytic memos to develop critical themes. The large volume of data was analysed using the method developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) based on six phases: familiarisation with data through reading; generating initial codes through data collapse and complication; combining codes into categories, sub-categories and themes; checking how themes work in relation to the entire data set; defining/naming themes through ongoing data analysis; and deciding which themes are meaningful contributions to understanding.

Methodological and respondent (Bush, 2002) triangulation, seeking convergence of the information (Wiersma, 1995 as quoted in Freebody, 2003), of semi-structured interviews, observations, and the review of relevant documentation was conducted while keeping aware of hegemonic (Gramsci, 1971) and discursive power (Foucault, 1972) implications, and the limitations of triangulation. The theoretical critical themes were developed as a form of emancipatory (McLaren, 2012), democratically developed non-banking knowledge (Freire, 1970). This transformative participatory space approach was geared for policy-makers to reflect on their views on SD to move from creativity discourse to performative discourse (Craft, 2012; Griffiths, 1998).

Results of research

Policy-makers' views on the interviewing process and its outcomes

This section presents the feelings of policy-makers on the interview and their perceptions on its outcomes. Policy-makers described the process in various manners including: a discussion; a means of reflection; an awareness-creating process; a challenging process for education; and a learning experience conducive to future action for SD.

A discussion of ideas

The interviewing process was perceived by policy-makers as a discussion which served as a reminder of their responsibilities towards the promotion of SD through policy-making:

"As we were talking, I remembered things which we could have done in a better way, I recalled things which we should have done and we didn't, and it got me thinking on the need to have a more structured way of carrying our policy-making process." (PS 1)

It was deemed that this discussion centred on ideas and elevated policy-makers to a higher level from the mundane work responsibilities since *"the problem is that we rarely discuss the abstract as we are too focused on the enormous load, and we rarely have a discussion of ideas. Therefore, yes, we need more discussions like this interview."* (HOS 1)

Moreover, the interview was perceived as a two-way interacting process of expressing and sharing views. Such discussions have also been termed as focused and direct which helped to think about SD: *"...it was... as we are talking in a focused and direct manner. It was very helpful as it made me focus on sustainable development"* (HOS 2). Deep down the interview process turned out to be an exercise in sharing life experiences and thoughts on some very important issues.

A means of awareness and consciousness

A number of policy-makers defined the interviewing process as a means of awareness and an eye-opener on SD-related issues: *"Yes, it made me think. Through reading I was always sensitive on the broader issues, but you have to find the time"* (PS 2). This awareness promoting exercise in some cases helped to instil an interest in the participants to learn more about SD in the Maltese context.

Such awareness seemed related not only to knowledge, but more importantly to values related to SD:

“Yes, I hope this research will serve as an eye-opener to convey more awareness on sustainable development and also sustainable morals... as against the existing quest for money, egoism, and immorality.” (PN MP 1)

This discussion provided a time efficient means for bringing up SD issues among this group: *“Yes, I reiterate that I found this discussion very useful as it opens your eyes and say that I could have delved further to work in a better way” (PN MP 2).*

While some issues were already known to policy-makers and the interview helped to think more about them, new issues came to the fore during the discussion: *“In fact I told you that I had not thought about certain issues, and I started thinking about them as we talked and I started realising new issues” (PN MP 3).* So, in many cases the interviews provided an opportunity to think of SD in a more holistic, professional, and wider perspective:

“... I am not saying that I found all the solutions; but usually when we talk of SD, without knowing one thinks about the environment while you provided me with the occasion to think and say certain things as well as to think on sustainable development in a wider manner.” (PL MP 1)

Others hinted that this newly found consciousness, facilitated through a discussion setting, led to an awareness of one's role in the promotion of SD and thus empowerment on such issues:

“You made me realise how important sustainable development is and moreover that I have a role in all this. While my point of departure was that of coordination ... I think that you made me push myself a bit further to say that even my opinion is important.” (HOS 3)

Interviewing as a challenging process

The interview was described as a challenging process which contained an educational element and *“there is no doubt since when you are challenged with questions you have to think. The interview is also a means of education” (PN MP 4).* In fact, this helped policy-makers to reflect to promote sensitisation, consciousness-raising and opinion-forming:

“... coming with a set of probing questions like these and expecting an answer made me think. It definitely made me reflect; and these questions are a means to sensitise those being interviewed so that, if not conscious they become conscious... and it is a feather in your cap that you helped me reflect.” (PL MP 2)

An exercise in reflective thinking

Most participants were of the opinion that the interviews served as a means of reflection on SD since *“...it was a means to reflect on sustainable development and on the possible means of awareness in this area for me and other MPs” (PN MP 5)*. This interactive process provided policy-makers with an interlocutor on SD, through whom they had the opportunity to conceive a framework for their responsibilities:

“Locally I do not find individuals with whom I talk on sustainable development... therefore when you have an opportunity like this one for discussion, in a mental fashion you start inserting your responsibilities within the framework of sustainable development.” (PS 3)

Apart from this, policy-makers also maintained that through such reflection they managed to bring together the different social, economic, and environmental mosaic pieces to see the whole picture of SD:

“... it makes you think, as what happens is that you are aware of many initiatives; however like in a mosaic you start putting them one next to the other and you start coming up with one beautiful picture which is the picture which indicates where our country should be moving towards.” (PN MP 6)

Policy-makers, in particular Cabinet members, said that the interview made them question themselves about the reasons behind the decisions they take on their duty:

“... you made me reflect on what I am actually doing and for what ...why am I doing it? The fact I had an interview which I had never had one like it before, I must say the truth, it means that I had to ask myself the reasons behind my decisions.” (PN MP 7)

Having the opportunity to stop and reflect was seen as a luxury as politicians have little time to reflect on SD issues. In certain instances, they claimed that they realised their personal responsibility to promote SD through the interview

“... and I say mea culpa ...I have to start from myself.” (HOS 4). The interviews were seen to help move SD away from the political backburner by serving as a refresher:

“The fact that we talked, increased my consciousness and I think there is a role for expert individuals like you to increase consciousness on sustainable development so that everyone understands that it is related to our lives.”
(PL MP 4)

Interacting with policy-makers: A learning and empowering experience for future action

A good number of policy-makers underscored that the interviewing resulted in a learning and empowering experience: *“... to use an expression... I need human petrol to understand”* (PN MP 8). This human interaction was seen as a learning experience as it was said that *“...during this discussion I learnt a lot”* (HOS 4), as well as a gauge of their consciousness and values:

“... certain circumstances come your way, like this interview, where one feels the need to react to questions in a thoughtful manner which in itself is an exercise which shows you whether you have attained a certain consciousness.” (PS 3)

Another way to put it is that this researcher-participant interaction served as a primer for thoughts on SD: *“You instigated me to come up with certain things which I would not have thought about alone ... you were educating at the same time”* (PL MP 5).

It transpired that this learning experience encompassed not only issues of knowledge and awareness, but more importantly incorporated a focus on personal values: *“And it serves as a soul-searching exercise both to me personally ... and to the political class”* (PL MP 6). There was a realisation of the need for this kind of interview as *“... it would be good to have this type of interviews which are more frequent for all politicians”* (PL MP 7).

It was underscored that the interview session was considered as an educational experience that promotes further thinking. It also provided policy-makers with a reflective opportunity to analyse their attitudes and values on SD:

“Yes, as while I was speaking with you, I externalised things which I had thought about and which are a part of my life, but which however no one had made me reflect on ... this interview helped me a lot. Yes, yes in fact

before, these thoughts were always internalized, and I think that today I had the first opportunity to externalize them.” (PL MP 8)

It thus transpires that the interviewing process can be seen as a critical pedagogical tool that seeks to promote an intra-personal SD-based counter-narrative in policy-makers through dialogical encounters aimed at perspective transformations.

Discussion

Data-generation

Notwithstanding planning, there are always external factors influencing the collection of data. While embarking on the interviewing stage, there was a political crisis. Thus, care was taken not to seem irrelevant to MPs when outlining the objectives of the study. This situation of political instability might have affected the way MPs reacted during the interviews. When interviewing government MPs there were a number of disenchanted PN MPs who were, to various extents, critical of their government with Opposition MPs being very critical of government. The coincidence of issues such as on the “current decision-making process” and “related power relations” between the interview questions and the political debate at the time, where the PN government was being accused of being dominated by a non-elected inner clique that wielded a lot of power, reassured that the questions were credible, valid and pertinent to Maltese politicians.

Stock of the situation was taken to crystallise the research questions, to refocus the interview questions and verify any emerging categories. The interview sessions became characterised by a two-way process of clarifications, exchanges of views and recapitulations. This created a virtuous cycle that led to a joint exploration of ideas that promoted awareness in the powerful rather than disempowering them (Walford, 2003). This co-ownership process led to a reflection on the self. The interviewing and data-generation were not conducted for the research, but a case where the research was conducted for the interaction with the participants and its outcomes.

Access

Issues of access are very important when studying policy-makers as they have very busy schedules. With a 60% interviewing rate the research indicated that access is a demanding process in terms of time for preparations, but it could be considered as easy in terms of success rate (Fitz and Halpin, 2003; Whitty and

Edwards, 2003). Suggestions to other researchers to secure access to policy-makers include:

- flexibility by the researcher with regards to logistics of the interviews including time and venue;
- the building of a trusting relationship during the access process and a rapport where policy-makers see themselves as a contributor to the goals of the study (Kogan, 2003);
- honesty by making the aims of the interview known and by discussing the project in an open manner with the participants (Engward, 2013);
- a realisation that personal and professional connections with policy-makers and their gatekeepers are more important than academic status in gaining access (Semel, 2003);
- information letters and consent forms should be concise, courteous, clear and non-patronising and should underline the benefits for the participants as well as give an assurance that the researcher has no ulterior partisan motives;
- follow conventional procedures (Fitz and Halpin, 2003) and ask for institutional approval as necessary;
- seek assistance of gatekeepers and identify any personal contacts to access ministers;
- be sincere and convey a disposition of learning from policy-makers;
- show respect and acknowledge differences in status;
- avoid putting policy-makers in a defensive mode;
- researcher needs to be practical and aware of the needs, concerns, and constraints of the powerful and move accordingly; and
- consider timing issues as start and end of a legislature should be avoided due to learning curves and election modes constraints respectively.

Interviewing and indoctrination concerns

Researchers should remain aware of concerns of indoctrination with regards to 'for' type of education like ESD that can be interpreted from a prescriptive perspective. As to socio-political and ethical implications of the research, policy-makers can be engaged by providing them with a setting to explore their views and awareness on SD (Freire, 1970). However, care needs to be taken of the 'how' issues while conducting ESD exercises with policy-makers not to fall in the trap of indoctrination. Thus, the need for a number of precautionary measures. Interview questions should be personalised and open-ended to leave space for participants to develop interviewing in an iterative and participative manner. The research process should be discussed in an open manner with the

participants (Engward, 2013) in preparation for the interviewing stage to get the participants' perspective and identify areas of interest for them to be included in the interview schedule. This should address influence on the shaping of the interview questions as determined by the researcher's theoretical premises (Freebody, 2003). The whole process of interacting with policy-makers should be democratically-embedded and the themes should be member-checked by the participants as the ones in the field. The dangers of unacknowledged bias and indoctrination can be limited by the adoption of a constructivist ontology where realities are seen to be multiple and where reality is seen as an individual construct based on situation, and interpretative epistemology based on subjectivity of knowledge aiming for interpretative understanding and situated knowledge.

The new ESD learning space for policy-makers developed by this research suggests an approach that favours a critical reflective discussion on SD through problem-posing (Freire, 1970) with the aim of searching for alternative views, meanings, and possibly new understandings (Brookfield, 1987). Policy-makers can reflect on their role with regards to SD by holding a particular experience in awareness and seeking its significance and not by imposing ready-made knowledge or some meta-narrative on SD, as a means of active learning to consider developing new contexts (Jackson, 2011). Thus, research should be accompanied by a process of making the values involved in the educational process (Freire, 1970) and the purpose of education (Biesta, 2006) explicit. A progressive philosophy of adult education that strives to liberate people through dialogue, reflection, and mutual investigation of issues (Walter, 2009) rather than on the imposition of views, beliefs and values together with alien knowledge fits perfectly with ESD goals for policy-makers.

Through questioning, policy-makers can be presented with an opportunity to reflect on their own experience to come up with new meanings (Mayo, 1999, as cited in, Clover 2002). This can be based on authentic dialogue (Habermas, 1984) as an opportunity to analyse and reflect on one's experience and assumptions (Clover, 2002). While trying to explore values for SD it should be kept in mind that the principles of ESD profess that participants should be treated as critical thinkers who can arrive at their own conclusion through participant-based education (Pace, 2010). In this way, the interview should not be restricted to the researcher's questions but developed into a discussion led by the concerns of the participants. Using a reflective approach can promote reflection as a form of democratic cultural transformation (Monroe, 2012). ESD research should distinguish between an instrumental approach which can verge on indoctrination and a more empowering and emancipating approach

(Wals, 2011) through dialogue for learners to envision solutions which are context specific (Jickling in Jickling and Wals, 2012).

ESD learning spaces should be based on a learner-centred constructivist approach whereby learning is closely interlinked with the learner's interests, needs and experience (Missimer and Connell, 2012). Interviewing should seek its own conclusions in the belief that ESD, as 'for' type of education, is necessary but the adopted means to reach this end remained democratically-based to enhance alternative views and new ways of thinking and doing, that is, "an educational process that is contextually relevant, participatory, emancipatory and leading towards SD" (Pace, 2010: 8). The process should be based on the lifeworld of the participants and conveyed in a democratic and respectful manner reflecting 'what' and 'how' issues (Habermas, 1984).

The research process

This process should be conducted in the knowledge that

"... political interviews are in themselves highly political [as] the interviewee has specific aims for and in the interview: to present themselves in a good light, not to be indiscreet, to convey a particular interpretation of events, to get arguments and points of view across, to deride or displace other interpretations and points of view." (Ball, 2003: 97-98)

This process is the result of openness on the researcher's part to leave enough space for policy-makers to develop the discussion (Fitz and Halpin, 2003). As to whether policy-makers do not tell the whole story (Gerwitz and Ozga, 2003), one should be prepared for instances when policy-makers leave certain issues open to interpretation or just insinuate certain things. Through an interaction with participants, interviews can be the basis for an increased consciousness. Having the attention for an hour or so of the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, ministers, and junior ministers, MPs, PSs and HOSs should make researchers realise that the interviewing process could also serve as a setting for reflection and therefore as a means of ESD and critical pedagogy. The research process should not only gather data to be subsequently analysed to come up with a set of themes of relevance to policy-makers. The ESD and critical pedagogy component of the research can be present in the whole process of interacting with policy-makers as the ESD process is more about process rather than information.

Conclusions

Access to policy-makers was enhanced because the first author had an outsider-within and insider status to political institutions and the civil service respectively. Getting to know gatekeepers was of ultimate importance to gain access to policy-makers as they facilitated access by introducing the researcher to other potential participants. Once in the field, it is of utmost importance to remain truthful as access to other potential participants could easily be lost. Personal reputation is a very important aspect to secure access. It is also beneficial to directly contact the top gatekeeper in a ministry, to avoid the request having to pass through the dangers of bureaucratic layers. Being recommended by officials high within the organization is a maxim. So, care must be taken as to whom to approach and to come across as a professional and reliable individual and not politically partisan. The sequence of whom to approach to interview is also important, with the highest political levels, being only approached after one has built a good reputation among other policy-makers. Researching the powerful needs persistence and patience. Respect and gratitude are also conducive to obtaining an interview. Unlike prevalent perceptions, getting access and interviewing the powerful is not an insurmountable feat, as it gives politicians the opportunity to air their views which is something they like doing as they are neither intimidated nor inhibited. Thus, the need to find the optimal time to take up research on the powerful. There is also the need to building trust and cultural sharing as these contribute to access and interviewing.

Interviewing policy-makers is highly political and care must be taken in interpreting them. One must be well-prepared including by having interview questions that are relevant and culturally embedded. Interview questions should be field-tested through consultations with potential participants so that they reflect what there is to find out. Interviews should be directed to get personal views rather than official positions that are already publicly available. Researchers must also be ready to answer questions aimed at verifying their status prior to being accepted by the powerful. Speaking the same language is also conducive to access and fruitful interviewing. Research promoting reflection on SD through interviewing requires challenging critical interview questions for an interactive stance without coming across as arrogant or dangerous. This is a very fine balance that researchers must find for themselves after evaluating their interview scenario. Flexibility and space for policy-makers to elaborate their views opens new perspectives. Thus, the interviewer must take up new leads and depart from the original interview schedule to explore previously unexplored areas. Interviews should be conducted,

although not always possible, away from the office, to avoid disruptions, which are to be expected, and to be provided with more interviewing time.

Apart from the gathering of data, interviews with the powerful can be used to influence future policies and decisions. The outcome of the research shows that the interview can serve as a critical-reflective pedagogical tool that promotes reflection by policy-makers with respect to their duties and responsibilities for SD.

Analysing interviews can be challenging and one must read between the lines of the interview transcript as these are highly political. Other interviews should be used for corroboration, and interviews should be evaluated within the prevalent historical and cultural context. Interviewing outcomes should be treated as political power discourse and hence, the researcher has to keep in mind who is saying what and why. Moreover, results must be triangulated with other evidence. Adopting a constructivist and interpretative stance aware of positionality helps to understand the interview outcomes as subjective, situated, partial and interactional knowledge or reality that is co-created during interviewing.

Researchers need to be aware of outside factors that may affect interviewing such as the political scenario. Interviewing should be held away from the political heat of general elections. On the other hand, the relevance of the interview to issues of national importance validates the interview and thus promotes the chances of access and good interview outcomes. Adopting a bottom-up approach whereby policy-makers contribute to the structure and nature of the interview pays off in terms of access and the trustworthiness of the research and to operate satisfactorily within constraints.

The balance of power during interviewing remains with policy-makers, but an insider status, a good rapport and knowing the participants or their gatekeepers, can bridge the difference in power. Provision of information about the researcher and the aims of the study can also contribute to this end. It is also important that researchers convey that they are not after some 'right' answer, but are interested in policy-makers' views, feelings, and perceptions. Interview questions must be captivating to policy-makers and should take into consideration their individual interest and sensitivities while avoiding the dangers of indoctrination.

This research shows that researching the powerful, while requiring good planning and building a good rapport with policy-makers is much easier than previously thought, is highly gratifying, and that critical-reflective

interviewing can serve as an innovative and tailor-made ESD tool for policy-makers. Further to the contribution to the discussion in critical pedagogy in relation to SD, his research addresses the gap in knowledge in critical pedagogy and SD literature with regards to ESD as a critical pedagogy for policy-makers by personally involving policy-makers in their critical education through dialogical encounters aimed at perspective transformational change.

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Education for Sustainable Development for policy-makers through critical-reflective interviewing

Pierre Hili and Paul J. Pace

Abstract

The paper critically reflects on the conceptual framework and research methodology applicable to researching the powerful. More specifically it sheds insight and proposes ideas to those about to research high-level Maltese policy-makers including politicians and civil servants with respect to the promotion of sustainable development (SD) and the role of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). It addresses issues of access and interviewing the powerful. It shows that access to high-level policy-makers can be facilitated by building a rapport with the participants based on sincerity and respect, through the help of gatekeepers and by gauging the political scenario. This paper proposes critical-reflective interviewing as a means of ESD and critical pedagogy for politicians and top civil servants.

Keywords

Researching high-level policy-makers; Education for Sustainable Development; critical pedagogy; interviewing the powerful; critical-reflective interviewin

Éducation au Développement Durable pour les décideurs politiques à travers entretien critique-réflexif

Pierre Hili and Paul J. Pace

Résumé

Cet article propose une réflexion critique sur le cadre conceptuel et la méthodologie de recherche applicables à l'étude des décideurs politiques de haut niveau. Plus précisément, il offre un aperçu et propose des idées pour ceux qui envisagent de mener des recherches sur les politiciens et fonctionnaires maltais de haut niveau en ce qui concerne la promotion du développement durable (DD) et le rôle de l'éducation au développement durable (EDD). Il aborde les questions d'accès et d'entrevues avec les

décideurs politiques de haut niveau. Il montre que l'accès à ces décideurs peut être facilité en établissant une relation basée sur la sincérité et le respect avec les participants, en faisant appel à des intermédiaires et en évaluant le contexte politique. Cet article propose l'entretien critique-réflexif comme un moyen d'EDD et de pédagogie critique pour les politiciens et fonctionnaires de haut niveau.

Mots clés

Recherche de décideurs politiques de haut niveau ; Éducation au Développement Durable ; pédagogie critique ; entrevue avec les décideurs politiques ; entretien critique-réflexif.

Educación para el Desarrollo Sostenible para formuladores de políticas a través de entrevistas crítico-reflexivas

Pierre Hili and Paul J. Pace

Resumen

El artículo reflexiona críticamente sobre el marco conceptual y la metodología de investigación aplicable a la investigación de los poderosos. Más específicamente, arroja información y propone ideas a aquellos que están a punto de investigar a los responsables políticos malteses de alto nivel, incluidos políticos y funcionarios, con respecto a la promoción del desarrollo sostenible (DS) y el papel de la Educación para el Desarrollo Sostenible (EDS). Aborda temas de acceso y entrevistas con los poderosos. Muestra que el acceso a los responsables políticos de alto nivel se puede facilitar construyendo una relación con los participantes basada en la sinceridad y el respeto, a través de la ayuda de los guardianes y evaluando el escenario político. Este artículo propone entrevistas crítico-reflexivas como un medio de EDS y pedagogía crítica para políticos y altos funcionarios.

Palabras clave

Investigación de los responsables políticos de alto nivel; Educación para el Desarrollo Sostenible; pedagogía crítica; entrevistar a los poderosos; entrevistas crítico-reflexivas