

14th ICLLCE 2019 Kuala Lumpur 016-010 Bridget Lim Suk Han

Treading a Fine Line to Speeding on a Highway: Research Journey of an Educational Leader

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Abstract

This paper is an anecdote of an educational leader who is the researcher of this study, has meandered her way through the context impediments before the intended research could be carried out which is an ethnographic fieldwork case study that explores the capacities and capabilities of a small bucolic school with all the pastoral and rustic conditions in the rural area of Sabah. The main objective of this paper is to delineate the pathway that this educational leader needs to drive on and explore to integrate herself in the daily routine of the case school so as to be accepted in the school community. To order to extract meaning from the unique, lived experiences of the context to facilitate the smooth commencement of the intended study, she conducts peripheral observations when walkabouts, casual interactions with the school community as well as village folks, and joining community gatherings. The archived documents of the village are also delved into to have a taste of its historical establishment. Educational leaders especially those who have just been assigned the responsibility as school leaders are researchers. Undoubtedly, they are consistently receiving data that are valuable input to initiate changes. Nevertheless, they have to be tactful in handling contextual issues surrounding the school before any initiations can be put forth and accepted by the community they are in. Hence, understanding the context is an entrance ticket to the school community.

Keywords: school community, unique context, lived experiences, educational leaders are researchers

Introduction

This paper is emancipated from a bigger ethnographic fieldwork case study to be conducted in a rustic site among rural and bucolic setting on the effectiveness in the teaching and learning of the English language. Before the commencement of any study, it is important to understand the site and the setting to comprehend what is being transmitted and coming out of the study.

Sabah is located on the island of Borneo. It borders Sarawak to the west, Indonesia's Kalimantan to the south and to the east the Philippines. It is the second largest state in the Federation of Malaysia. The terrain of Sabah which is hilly and undulating and with an equatorial climate makes it impossible to reach many areas during the rainy seasons. Sabah gained its independence from the British through Malaysia in 1963. It saw rapid education advancement after joining Malaysia. Nonetheless, most parts of Sabah are still well behind Peninsula Malaysia in terms of educational facilities partly due to the inaccessible terrain.

It is costly to build schools especially if the rate of use is low. Recognising that public education is the only form of education available to these rustic folks, the government still builds schools in areas where the population is low. This is perhaps in

line with Bray's (1987) proposal that it is important for every community to have its own school. Many schools in rural Sabah are low enrolment schools and the case school of this paper is one such school. Low Enrolment School (LES) or "*Sekolah Kurang Murid (SKM)*" is defined as a school with less than 150 pupils. Schools in Sabah are categorised based on their locations such as urban, sub-urban, island, coastal, foothill and mountainous schools.

Each and every school is different in nature. Raven, Johnstone, and Varley (1985) made their point when describing their work which crosses subject boundaries. A school has a life of its own which makes up of different organic and mechanistic characteristics such as the administrative and leadership's make-up, educational programme management structure and student composition. Scientifically, it is referred to as the meta-system of a school. All this structures and processes must be finely tuned or complementary to the research procedures in order to ensure more productive, viable and operational research findings.

Objective

This paper is an anecdote of an educational leader who is the researcher of this study and has meandered her way through the context impediments before the intended research could be carried out. The main objective of this paper is to delineate the pathway that this educational leader needs to drive on and explore to integrate herself in the daily routine of the case school so as to be accepted in the school community.

By delineating and analysing the pathway, it opens up the space for this educational researcher not only to explore the possibilities of transforming the contextual cues namely historical development, economical and physical establishment of the town, as well as social interaction of the communities around the school but also emotional development of the researcher and participants of the case school.

The Case School

The case school of the study is located at one of the local communities of a district about 130km away from the city of Kota Kinabalu. This district is a remote area where the projection of the foot of Mount Kinabalu is extended to. Rural schools in Sabah are categorised based on their locations such as island, riverside and foothill. Hence, the schools in this district are generally foothill schools. The district covers a land area of 1,385.6 square kilometre. The district has 171 villages and population of not less than 100,000 people (Arkib Negeri Sabah, 2010).

The Journey Accessing the Case School

As a matter of fact, the environment encircling the district is known for its beauty and serenity since the early 1900s. Based on an article written by J. E. Longfield who was the district officer then in 1952, he described the district,

...is without doubt the most beautiful district in the country, its great rolling plains, its beautiful big clear swift-flowing rivers, and its ring of mountains rising to that great and magnificent peak – Kinabalu. Then its inhabitants – a varied, but happy, free and sporting people, whom all who come in contact with love... (Kinabalu Magazine, 1952, p. 21, sourced from Arkib Negeri Sabah)

She is too inflicted with its tranquillity every time she visits the school. It seems to slow down the urgency for her to accomplish any job assignment she plans to carry out but eager to submerge in the serenity blanketing the surroundings there. It just makes me feel so lazy to work but to relax and enjoy inhaling its breezy and refreshing fresh air on my way to school and seeing the paddy yellowing and heavy at the tips waiting to be

harvested. This environmental factor greatly affects her eagerness to keep working. If she can feel such effect every time she is there, I bet it too will affect the people working there including the parents, teachers and pupils living there.

The majority of the pupils of the case school come from three different villages within the radius of 10 kilometres from the school. Most of the pupils' parents are not well-educated. Day to day living is a major concern for the majority of the community members. Life is not easy for these people. The records at the school show that the majority of them are involved in the agriculture, forestry and fishing sectors but mostly at the subsistence level. Livelihood is their main concern. They are mostly paddy planters, rubber tappers and minority of them were inshore fishermen. Thus, almost all of the pupils are eligible to receive the government aids namely *RMT*⁽ⁱ⁾ and *KWAMP*⁽ⁱⁱ⁾.

The district language officer is really concerned when it rains continuously for several days because it means the school will be rendered inaccessible, but it will be more serious for some of the parents. This is because the raining spells means that the rubber tappers cannot work, and no work means no pay. Several days of rain means some pupils might have to go without proper lunch and dinner. Many will stay away from school helping their parents with the household chores or doing some odd jobs to supplement the family earnings. However, the availability of *RMT* and *KWAMP* helped ease the burden a bit.

The district language officer describes a very disturbing scene he once observed. According to him some pupils actually eat unripe mangoes that are very sour early in the morning. When asked if they like the sour mangoes the pupils answer 'no' and when they are asked why they eat them they keep silence. He then realises that they have nothing to eat for breakfast. The idea of young pupils eating unripe mangoes to satisfy their hunger is not something that should happen in a country such as ours when wastage goes aplenty. Such condition will definitely affect their concentration and learning in general. With the provision of the *RMT* to the pupils, that can surely help them learn better.

It seems that the people from the community were very concerned with the physical well-being of the school. Apart from pooling in the meagre financial support in putting up the building for *RMT*, they also play a part in beautifying the school. They are even willing to support the school with their physical energy such as helping the school paint the buildings, cleaning up clogged drains, weeding and clearing secondary forestation, mowing the playing field etc. in the spirit of '*gotong-royong*' (which is defined as an activity done within the sense of togetherness, voluntary and helping each other grow in a good spirit that aims to achieve a desired goal).

Armed with the official letters both from EPRD and Sabah Education Department, her access to her purposive sample is made smoother. Courtesy call is first made to the District Education Office and a meeting with the District Language Officer is arranged. Later, she also makes another courtesy call on the Head Teacher (HT) of her case school to formally inform him about all her imminent visits. The courtesy visit is very important as she manages to gather some valuable information. She also learns the 'dos' and 'don'ts' from the District Language Officer and HT. These meetings are not only essential and legally right but have also provided her the needed blessings and approval to enter a different 'territory' for the successful completion of her larger ethnographic fieldwork case study later.

This inaugural visit lasts for two weeks. She admits that this visit is very stressful as she is the sole novice researcher and her inaugural visit turns out to be the most important one. This is largely due to the fact that this first visit is when she starts to establish her rapport with the subjects there namely the HT, teachers, pupils and even the community. This initial contact allows her to have a better understanding of the issues involved which

'grants' her better access to probe further to understand so many things that she is going to observe and listen to. It also permits her to make plans and arrange for observations and informal talks (interviews) with the stakeholders and gatekeepers. During the course of her inaugural visit for two weeks, she begins to identify and make arrangements with the people, teachers and pupils whom she wants to 'chat' with. She obtains some valuable information from the subjects about the accommodation and transportation. Although this information is not directly related to her research questions, it is essential in assisting and making her inaugural stay much easier.

The HT is extremely helpful and even gives some useful tips and advice on how she should go about conducting her preliminary study. He introduces me to some of the teachers and politely suggests to them to take me in during this visit. She starts 'negotiating' for a temporary stay at their home with the hope that this can open up a pathway for her to start mingling around with the teachers to reduce the distance between them. The nearest rest house is more than 40km and an hour drive from the school. She initiates the conversation on the issues of her 'bunking' in with them during my stays there. She also civilly and courteously (to her utmost ability) suggests paying for her stay but politely they reject her request suggesting that their home is fully occupied and not suitable for her. So, she has no choice but to stay at the rest house. It is difficult as she does not have the needed transportation to the school.

The rest house is out of the way to the school and while most of the teachers are staying nearby the school. She feels so awkward and they do not seem to welcome her presence. Her presence seems to be an intrusion to their 'territory'. She begins to worry that her subsequent visits may not be well accepted. According to the HT, it is really unusual for an outsider to pay them any visit let alone staying with them for the whole two weeks! Then she decides to change her questioning strategy. As they know the place well, she gives them the credit for it and seeks advice from them instead on the issue of the rest house and the transportation to their school. Surprisingly some of the start to provide her with some very useful advice. At that point in time, she quickly grabs the opportunity to initiate further interactions and gives them the due respect and appreciation. Later other teachers join in and start to give more suggestions and soon ideas were pouring in.

Finally, they get me the best solution – she is to stay at the rest house and a couple of teachers who drives and pass by the point that is closest the rest house on their way to school is to pick me up. At the end of each day, a teacher is to send her to a nearest bus stop on their way out so that she can wait for a *kereta sapu*⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾ to send her to the nearest pekan^(iv) which is about 500m from the rest house. And that constitutes the arrangement for her movement to and from the school for the whole duration of the inaugural visit.

The car rides to and fro between the rest house and the school for the subsequent days turn out to be fruitful trips as she can chat and learn more on what the teachers and pupils are doing as well as the happenings at her case school.

During the inaugural visit too, she begins to digest the information given to her by the teachers as they seem to talk indirectly to her and so she starts to make some adjustment to the way she handles the situation. Actually, some of the teachers do view her presence sceptically at the beginning. Some of the teachers keep silent upon her arrival in the staff room each single day during the inaugural visit. She knows she needs to try harder and put in more effort in order to be accepted at the school and to be a part of them. She begins to dress down and speaks more informally. She learns and calls them with their nick names. She brings snacks to school and eats with them in the staff room. She talks a little bit about herself and along the way tells them what she is doing. In short, she 'demystifies' herself – soon she is one of them. When she manages to gain their confidence, she starts to have conversations with them in a more relax and cordial manner.

Research Methodology

This is not just a story but a story that provides the researcher with valuable learning points for her responsibilities as a trainer to future educational leaders in schools. This story may be very specific to this case school, but the findings can be utilised as signposts and references for future school leaders and teachers.

The main research approach is ethnographic in nature. Ethnography is defined as a study of the cultural patterns and perspectives of participants in their natural setting (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2006). The method of study designed is to subsequently obtain data to gain an in-depth understanding of the processes and practices intended in this case school especially in their struggle to gain proficiency in the English language. The researcher starts this study by going and staying at the site. For this inaugural visit, the researcher stays at the case school for two solid weeks. Shensul, Shensul, and LeCompte (1999, p.75) make the point that;

“...rapport ultimately rests on the connections through which ethnographers have been introduced to the community setting, how comfortable researchers are with the people in the field, how well they maintain confidentiality, and how fast they learn local customs and norms”.

Hence, the researcher's main concern at the onset of the study is to develop that rapport through building relationship, understanding, bond, and empathy with the stakeholders namely the pupils, teachers, HT and parents of pupils. Such concern has to be achieved at this preliminary stage for a smooth accomplishment of the imminent research.

Research Design/Procedures

The above description of the portrait as well as preliminary access to the case school is drafted based on data gathered at the beginning of the research procedures for the imminent study as depicted in Figure 1 below. The researcher adopts a more subservient self at this stage of the study with the aim of being accepted as an 'insider' eventually. Even though it is a simple flow of procedures, it clearly shows the crucial of the preliminary study. Without careful execution of the preliminary study, the rest of the procedures will definitely be disrupted which may subsequently affect the final outcomes of the entire research.

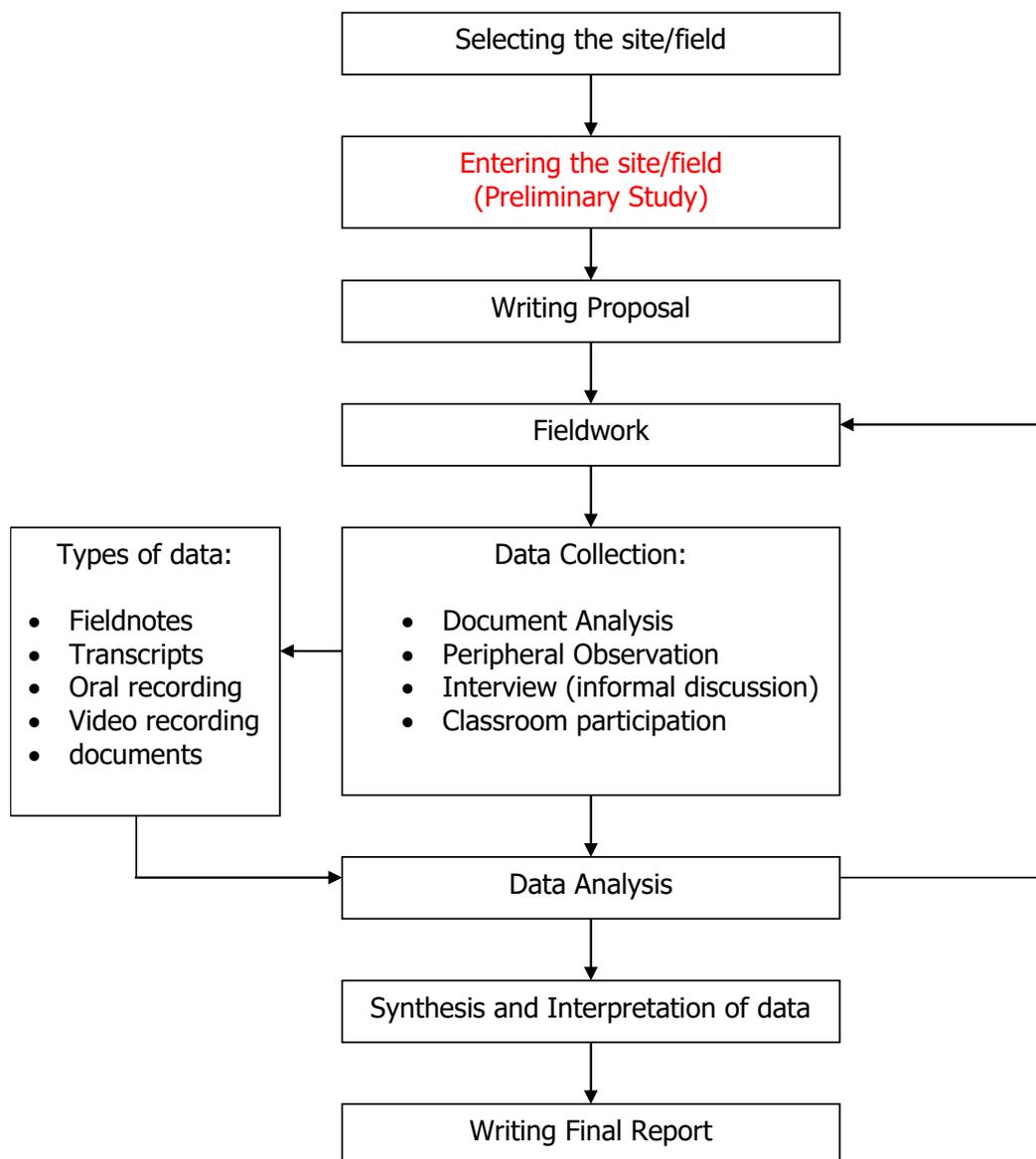


Figure 2: Research Design/Procedures

Data Collection

During the course of the inaugural visit for two weeks at the case school, there are three main data collection methods adopted namely document analysis, peripheral observations and casual interviews.

The researcher conducts peripheral observations on school administration and facilities, teachers' and pupils' behaviours as well as the contexts surrounding the school. In accordance with Gay, Mills and Airasian (2009), when the researchers are observing, they are obtaining data by watching. They can be watching and gathering data, as argued by Morrison (as cited in Cohen et al., 2000, p. 303) at four different settings:

- (i) the physical setting (e.g. the physical environment and its organisation);
- (ii) the human setting (e.g. the organisation of people, the characteristics and makeup of the groups or individuals being observed);

- (iii) the interactional setting (e.g. the interactions that are taking place);
- (iv) the programme setting (e.g. the resources and their organisation, pedagogic styles, curricula and their organisation).

For this inaugural visit, the observations were less structured which Hopkins (1993) termed them as open observation on the four settings manifested by Morrison (as cited in Cohen et al., 2000). With the help of prompts using who, what, where, when, how and why in guiding my observations, details of the setting, who the characters were, events, happenings, actions, activities were noted. This data contributed to my preliminary analysis which was referred to as “Census, Map and Calender” by Purcell-Gates (2004). The Census, Map and Calender procedures helped me as the primary researcher in building the research focus and theoretical models in conjunction with the local setting (Shensul, Shensul, & LeCompte, 1999) for this study.

For casual interviews, the researcher starts very generally and cautiously before becoming more inquisitive and finally, participative. In order to appear less intimidating for the teachers, the researcher utilises the conversational interview during the course of the inaugural visit. In accordance with Conner (1991), this technique is effective and appropriate in school-based enquiries to complement and even counteract the formal stance of interview because it could be conducted in more relaxed manner with the participants. In this way, the teachers at the case school are able to provide insights about the school which might be difficult or impossible to express in more public and formal environment. In other words, the researcher has to ultimately make analytical decisions on “when to probe, when to follow a general description question with a more specific one, and when to modify the interview protocol to fit the needs of an individual informant” (Brenner, 2006, p. 366). This helps break through the communication barriers and establish the trust for the informant as well as the participants to express. This was done to avoid any conflict, scepticism from the informants so as to gain that insider status.

As for document analysis, it involves tracing the historical development of the school as well as the township nearby the school, viewing pupils’ text and exercise books, scrutinising artefacts and pieces of writing on display as well as viewing teachers’ record books and pupils’ progress reports. Photographs and videos recordings are compiled too as supporting documents

Preliminary Analysis and Interpretation

In accordance with Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006), there was no one right way in conducting qualitative data analysis. Tesch (1990) suggested that it “can and should be done artfully, even playfully” but cautioned qualitative researchers to deal with the data with “a great amount of methodological knowledge and intellectual competence” (pp. 96-97) so that the findings would be valid and reliable.

The preliminary analysis of the data gathered through this inaugural visit was dynamic and happening simultaneously (Merriam, 2009). The researcher carries out the analysis procedures adapted from Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006) which is shown in Figure 1 below.

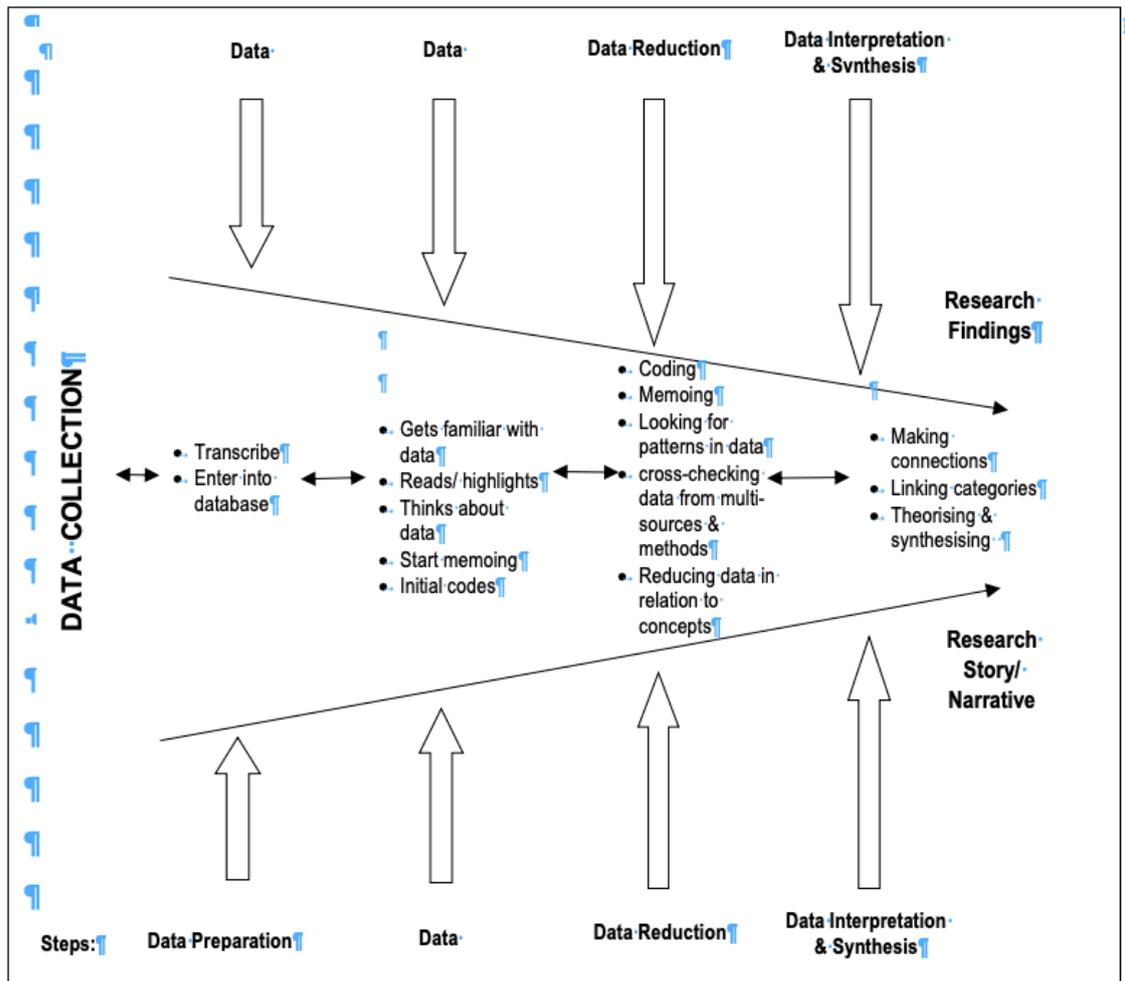


Figure 2. Steps in Data analysis and Interpretation: A Visual Model. Adapted from S. N. Hesse-Biber and P. Leavy, 2006, *The Practice of Qualitative Research*, p. 358.

With reference to Figure 2, the process of preliminary analysis and interpretation of the inaugural visit starts with the coding process of the raw data where it is decontextualized to extract all relevant information from the multiple sources of data collected before it is systematically recontextualized in relation to the patterns emerged. This subsequently facilitated the “teasing out” of various knowledge claims relevant to the framing the concepts of the imminent study to be conducted. Hence, the stage of the preliminary study must be heavily data and context-driven as the outcomes of the preliminary analysis will generate the valid licence for the researcher to commence her imminent research.

Synthesis of Findings and Conclusion

The paper particularly highlights the stage of the imminent entry. This is largely due to the fact that such entries especially of those novice school leaders and teachers at their respective new post, emulates the research process of the inaugural visit to a case school. Careful treading is advised as the wrong footing may disrupt or even jeopardise the subsequent connection with their respective school community.

There are several pertinent outcomes and learning points which are based on the synthesis of the preliminary visit and study of this case school.

TREADING A FINE LINE TO SPEEDING ON A HIGHWAY: RESEARCH

First and foremost, leaders are researchers, they are consistently receiving data that are valuable input to initiate changes. Nevertheless, they have to be tactful in handling contextual issues surrounding the school before any initiations can be put forth and accepted by the community they are in. Constant observation, interview and document analysis are essential tools to generate useful data for the leaders to take into consideration so that necessary compromise and concession can be achieved among the stakeholders involved before any decision is made. Several issues that captured the attention of the educational leader for this preliminary study involve cultural values, norms/habitual practices, beliefs, future undertakings and outlooks, preferences, needs and interests as well as life expectations of the community surrounding the case school. Hence, understanding the context is an entrance ticket to the school community.

The issue of culture is a critical component in any teaching and learning environment. Leaders may attempt to mould and transform those idiosyncratic cultural and even habitual practices of a school community towards establishing the desired teaching and learning environment that leads to better educational effectiveness. Nevertheless, in accordance with Bates (2015), “changing a pre-existing, dominant culture is very difficult” (p.520). Prevailing cultures of an organisation are often so dominant and very difficult to change. Henceforth, investigation on the underlying issues as mentioned above will truly be enriching and rewarding not only for the researcher but also for novice school leaders and teachers which have been newly posted to different schools.

Second, proper analysis of the preliminary data entails the establishment more viable conceptual framework based on the relevant concepts and constructs extracted from the case school. A conceptual framework forms the heart of any research investigation. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), a conceptual framework,

...explains, either graphically or in narrative form, the main things to be studied – the key factors, constructs or variables – and the presumed relationships among them. (p. 18)

A conceptual framework helps researchers to conduct their study in proportion to the relevance of their own context. As cautioned by Wolcott (as cited in Miles & Huberman, 1994), it “is impossible to embark upon research without some idea of what one is looking for...” (p. 17). Therefore, the concepts within this framework provide the “building blocks” (Fisher, Buglear, Lowry, Mitch, & Tansley, as cited in Kor Liew Kee & Teoh Sian Hoon, 2009, p. 61) that structured any research investigation.

Last but not least, the educational researcher of this paper incidentally discovers that she actually undergoes emotional realignment of her personality traits while carrying out the preliminary study. She starts to fine-tune her personality traits as steered by the contextual factors of her case school. She gradually develops from possessing rigid and negative behavioural traits that thwart her emotional development to more flexible, open-hearted and hospitable in accepting various personality traits within that school community she is researching on which may not be that agreeable to her in the first place. We all make judgements about other people’s personalities. Through acceptance, she starts to respect that school community she is attached to and is rewarded with even better admiration from them in reciprocal. She realised that it is important to delve into and gain insight of who she is first.

Although it is difficult to change our personality traits, we may change the way we express them depending on circumstances. With the skills of gauging our own personality, they help us gauge other people’s personalities more accurately and this may subsequently facilitate more realistic and desirable expectations for change from others. I bet this is an important skill especially for educational leaders to invite their school

communities to jump on the bandwagon and speed on the highway together to face the challenges of uplifting school educational excellence together.

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Endnotes:

- (i) RMT is the Malay acronym for *Rancangan Makanan Tambahan* a program implemented by Ministry of Education to improve the diet and health of poor primary school pupils.
- (ii) KWAPM is the Malay acronym for *Kumpulan Wang Amanah Pelajar Miskin*. It is a program established to assist parents in providing proper education for their children.
- (iii) *Kereta Sapu* is a term used to denote an unlicensed taxi which plies the remote areas. They are an essential mode of transportation for the rural folks.
- (iv) Pekan is a small village town. These small towns are very important for the rural economy. This is where the rural folks get their food and other essential supplies. It is here too one can get some forms of accommodation.