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**Researching School Leadership through Ethnography: In Search for the Best Alternative**

**Icarbord Tshabangu** (Head of Department – Educational Administration and Curriculum Graduate School University of Arusha)

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## **Researching School Leadership through Ethnography: In Search for the Best Alternative**

### **Abstract**

Yukl (2009) has argued that defining and understanding leadership is not only arbitrary but subjective and laden with social influences. Researching social contexts such as schools and how school leaders exercise influence is a complex phenomena which may entail rejecting notions of generally seeking to use positivist approaches in educational research, as these may not meaningfully study human beings and their interactions. This paper examined the effectiveness of ethnography in educational research, particularly in school leadership. The study used empirical evidence from research activities conducted in Zimbabwe and Tanzania's secondary schools to advance a view that ethnography emerges as the best alternative to apprehend complex research activities where human interactions are central. This paper therefore explored some major features in ethnography with a view to illustrate how these are critical in establishing valid meanings and understanding and why these are relevant to studying school leadership. Some of these include multidisciplinary approach, insider status, immersion, listening and conversing. The Gadamerian hermeneutics to conversing and listening has been noted as a significant feature for ethnographers who seek to immerse themselves within studied communities so as to empathise and identify with studied communities. This study posits a view that despite a general trend by some educational researchers to seek to follow positivist approaches and by so doing claim to achieve validity, ethnography emerges as an effective approach particularly where social interactions such as in school leadership are under study.

### **Author (s)**

#### **Icarbord Tshabangu**

Head of Department – Educational Administration and Curriculum Graduate School University of Arusha.

**Email:** preslica\_012@hotmail.co.uk

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### **Introduction**

The field of Educational research provides numerous approaches that could be followed in apprehending various educational phenomena such as school leadership. Without necessarily demeaning other approaches, this paper seeks to advance a view that ethnography emerges as one of the most effective paradigms in qualitative research, able to establish meaning and enhance a deeper understanding of leadership practices in schools. The paper begins by a brief explanation of what ethnography is and what it seeks to do. It goes further to draw from various research activities conducted in several schools in Zimbabwe and Tanzania, exploring in depth key features seen as critical to the ethnographic approach, such as immersion, the hermeneutic imperative, multidisciplinary in methods, access and insider status and why these are suitable strategies for investigating interactionist practices as they exist in school leadership.

#### **The ethnographic approach**

In ethnography, sometimes referred to as the naturalistic approach, data never 'speaks for itself' as in some quantitative research (Grinnell, 1993), but the researcher assesses data to figure out implications. While the quantitative approach would

normally seek to control the research settings, in ethnography informants help the researcher, implying that there is a closer and more equal relationship. The notion of an 'equal' relationship will be revisited and further developed. In ethnographic inquiry the respondents are not seen as objects to be studied, but as participants in the on-going study. An ethnographer is often seen as 'the major instrument' in the inquiry (Eisner, 1985). This has significant implications in terms of reflexivity as to how he/she approaches the research process and behaves towards participants. Despite his/her privileged position the ethnographer should not seek to overwhelm others' social worlds with that of her own. In this interpretivism, the researcher uses ethnographic methods to explore perceptions and meanings and their associated effects upon people's actions within the identified institutions. It is noted that while truth is good, respect for human dignity is better (Cavan, 1977). By its nature, the ethnographic approach is considerate of ethical issues.

It has been argued, that 'the field of education in particular needs to avoid methodological monism' (Eisner, 1985), where at times there is pre-occupation and obsession with doing most of the research in a positivist way. Wolcott (1995) commented that it may be comforting to keep in mind that even the

most scientific of research procedures, regardless of how systematic and objective, can be neither perfectly systematic or ultimately objective. He further observed that the desire for objectivity often traps most researchers into portraying a neat, linear logical sequence of what is in fact a dialectical process in which all critical judgements are made by humans. In ethnography, effort is made to avoid controlling variables and settings. A mechanistic approach to research, which largely seeks to show that some orthodox requirements have been met, is discouraged. However, it is noted for example that elements of a quantitative nature may be used in the preliminary studies in some qualitative inquiries. Nevertheless, it is imperative to observe that in the study of complex institutions such as schools and of dynamic phenomenon such as school leadership and learning processes, ethnography often provides a deeper understanding.

In educational philosophy, the search for truth and what counts as truth (Flew, 1985; Bridges, 1999) continues to cause division even among ethnographic researchers. An ethnographer would do well if they sought the understanding of the multicultural in their search for truth. The need to make sense of the world is essentially an emotional need (Head and Sutton, 1981). This implies that though rationality is often held in high esteem, it may sometimes play a subordinate role in an ethnographic activity. It is noted that some inquiries not only involve knowing about others, but also often develop into self-knowledge and discovery. It is therefore not surprising that some methodological arguments may become personal or emotional. This is largely because the research process may be intertwined with individual stories which are rooted in deep personal experiences and may only be understood through a 'true' conversation that is non-patronising. The ethnographic approach sees the individual and his or her world as co-constituted (Patton, 1991; Vale & King, 1978). A person has no existence apart from the world and the world has no existence apart from the person (Freire, 1970). Such philosophical underpinnings in ethnographic methodology emerge as an appropriate methodological framework in studying educational processes and leadership influences, which involve seeking to reach the depth of participants' perceptions, and their lived world through a multicultural and triangulated conversation.

It is not the purpose of this paper to get bogged down in the methodological debates and seek to make too many, or too definite value judgements. For heuristic purposes, it has adopted a more simplified but nonetheless useful description of the main

epistemological standpoint in ethnography and how these contribute to rigor in an enquiry.

### **Relevance of ethnography in studying school leadership**

Jackson (1992 cited in Patterson, 1993) once observed that in the world over, organizations, including schools, have been built and studied on the basis of the concept of leaders directing others to fulfil a vision conceived and designed by them, but this paradigm has been challenged and a suggestion posited that the eye at the top of the pyramid is often blind to the realities of the workplace below. According to Cuban (1988) leadership entails influencing others' actions in achieving desirable ends. He further stated that leaders are people who shape the goals, motivations and actions of others. Recently, global interest in educational leadership has grown and there is widespread recognition that it is second only to classroom practice (Bush, Bell & Middlewood, 2009). It is also noted that in education there has been a gradual shift from emphasis on educational administration to education management and recently to educational leadership, which is seen as an exercise of influence rather than authority (Bush, Bell & Middlewood, 2009). This notion is linked to contemporary epistemologies in distributed leadership, where there is loosening of formal roles within an organisation, thereby allowing those below the hierarchy, such as teachers and students, to exercise some level of power and influence. Distributed leadership also concentrates on the interactions rather than on actions of leaders hence the need to use interactionist methodologies to research, such as ethnography, where meaning is produced through the interactions of individuals within community settings and institutions.

Despite eloquent attempts to define leadership, the term still remains a contested concept (Yukl, 2009), hence the argued view that it can best be studied through ethnography for deeper understanding. Yukl (2009) further noted that defining and understanding leadership is not only arbitrary but subjective and laden with social influences. Researching social contexts such as schools and how school leaders exercise their influence may entail rejecting the notion that it is possible to meaningfully research human beings and their interaction in a positivist approach such as using categories (McCall, 2005) or objectivist approaches (Eisner, 1985). In the following sections the paper explores various ethnographic features complementary to studying school leadership.

### **Immersion in Ethnography**

It was once alleged long time ago that some school Inspectors in one part of rural Africa would secretly climb a tree just outside the school where, like an eagle they would watch what would be happening in the school and later produce a report claiming knowledge of the goings-on in the school. Such methods of seeking to know about the school leadership and cultures associated may be tempting but are inadequate and provide no opportunities for the teachers and students to be heard. This also becomes the case at times when research is conducted as Beasley (1981) observed that priorities for research often reflect the interests of academic researchers or central office administrators not school people. In ethnography this inequity and gap between the researcher and participants is often bridged by the principle of immersion, which implies a process whereby ethnographers 'immerse' themselves in the 'goings on' in the field and in the examination of the data collected. As an ethnographic researcher, one should empathize and identify with the people studied (Emerson, 1983), as there is no substitute to being present, hearing, touching and seeing it first-hand (Lofland, 1976). Even though the simple idea of 'being there', immersing oneself in a setting may not necessarily guarantee validity (Hammersley 1984), Sanders (1998: 192), observes that 'if our ultimate goal is to truly comprehend the rich variety of perspectives and experiences that shape interaction, processes...we must not avoid involving ourselves in, and emphatically sharing, the sorrow and joy, pain and conflict, which are integral features of social life'. It is noted that perhaps even more important the ethnographer will require self-discipline during the immersion period so as to attain rigor in the inquiry. Prior, intimate knowledge of the immersion site may also be beneficial. Without such knowledge few ethnographers would know how to recognise participants' sorrow and joy, pain and conflict, as spoken of by Sanders.

#### **Hermeneutic imperative in ethnography**

It is noted that conversing, listening and multicultural understanding (Kimball & Garrison, 1996) are some of the key elements in ethnographic researching. Though these may not be achieved completely, the above elements help the ethnographer to 'get inside' the person and understand from within (Grinnell, 1993) or empathize and identify with the people studied (Emerson, 1983). Even though a researcher may have spent many years with the people studied and within the associated institutions and even though that may be helpful, he cannot claim to know fully what was or is 'in their heads.' One can live alongside a people but not fully engage in a

'conversation' except through a research process coupled with immersion.

Most ethnographers would be readily aware of the greater challenge in unlocking the cultural codes (Hyatt & Simons 1999) and breaking the barriers before any fruitful interaction with participants can occur. The interpretive approach to research is like engaging in a conversation so as to better understand the researched subjects and their social worlds. It is a process of unlocking the cultural codes that divide individual social worlds and communities to bring about the desired understanding. Gadamer (1993: 385) argued that 'conversation is a process of coming to an understanding. Thus it belongs to every true conversation that each person opens and transposes himself into the other to such an extent that he understands not the particular individual but what he says'. To engage in a conversation is therefore to undergo change (Kimball & Garrison, 1996). It also involves critical examination of self and self-discovery in the light of new information. It is noted that a 'true' conversation is fruitful to both parties and is dialectical which implies that the process brings about a varied and emergent understanding to multiculturalism. These notions of hermeneutics in research methodology, as discussed above, largely came into force as a challenge to positivist traditions (Hammersley, 1993) and rejected the positivist's overarching methodological dominance or monism (Eisner, 1985).

#### **The challenge of conversing and listening**

Listening, as stated earlier, is one of the critical elements in ethnographic research and should occupy much of the ethnographer's time and that of respondents. It is noted however that in passive and submissive listening one can be colonized while being assimilated by the dominant culture (Kimball & Garrison, 1996) or defined in someone else's terms (Freire, 1970; McCarty, 1993). It has been argued earlier that the objective of the ethnographer is to empathize and identify with the researched subjects. Whilst such a desire may be good in itself, it poses a challenge in that it is often difficult to achieve. Sometimes people listen and interpret an experience not according to the lived experiences of the one telling but according to the one listening. When that happens in research, as it sometimes does, the understanding of the studied phenomenon may be seen in dissimilar ways from participants' perceptions against the researcher's construction and interpretation. The Gadamerian hermeneutics challenges ethnographers to confront their lived experiences as they fuse with those of participants. After-all, none can say a word for another (Freire

1970). In the ethnographer's search for the 'truth', the role of understanding 'what a person says' will often prove critical as opposed to understanding 'a person' (Kimball & Garrison, 1996). The search for truth in this sense is not to be seen in an objectivist way – as a 'discovery', but should be profoundly seen as search for 'truthfulness' in the conversation. In education this would imply seeking to establish deeper understanding, for example, on how school leadership influences teaching, learning and achievement in schools.

#### **Access and Insider status**

Seeking consent and gaining access, particularly from government authorities can be a ritualised process in some polarised environments due to mistrust. Strauss & Corbin (1998) cited some of the reasons for choosing a research venue as ease of access, available resources, research goals and the ethnographer's time schedule and energy. It is noted that insider status also places the researcher in a position of knowing which geographical areas; institutions; participants and individuals may support and enrich the study. Based on insider knowledge, one may easily reach decisions quickly on when and how to suspend or re-negotiate tasks in light of risks involved. The use of insider status and direct assistance from local senior persons is seen as ethically plausible in that it may allay fears from some participants within studied communities and may boost their confidence and participation.

The selection of schools studied is therefore most likely to be influenced by ease of access, since contact has to be established with gatekeepers in those schools, thus minimise potential barriers. Finch (1993 cited in Hammersley, 1993) observed that when she was researching amongst clergymen's wives they felt content and at ease through her notifying them that she was also a clergymen's wife. Most educational institutions would hardly offer any reservations to requests by other educators' as they may be seen as possessing 'insider status', and thus expected to be sympathetic to educational goals. Throughout the whole inquiry it is important for ethnographers to endeavour to maintain the sacred trust extended by researched communities.

#### **Sources of Data**

In the gate-keeping hierarchy in education, some high ranking officials such as government ministers and education officers may not necessarily have direct control of what goes on below. In such cases it is better for an ethnographer to focus on head-teachers, teachers and students as these are the people who are

daily subjected to the learning processes (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000). The researcher would also do well to limit their inquiry within the school environs since it is observed for example, that submissions from students and teachers may help awaken professionalism in education as educators are drawn to reflect on their leadership and teaching practices.

Research has shown that the schools' internal processes as experienced by students and teachers index the nature of leadership obtaining in those schools. Students and teachers are therefore seen as primary sources of qualitative data if one is to establish a deeper understanding of leadership practices in schools. Secondary sources of data may include Education officers, parents and other agencies in Education.

#### **Schools' contexts**

As noted earlier, the ethnographic approach's philosophical underpinnings were seen as suited to seeking to explore ideas and practices of leadership and its overarching influences within school contexts. It is noted that through school leaders' active listening and understanding, students and teachers can become empowered and that some teachers may be led to reflect upon inherited paternalistic ideologies on their interaction with students, especially the issue of involvement in decision making. This may entail putting preconceived judgements at risk and opening up to other senses or new information. In most schools it was noted that students and teachers' participation in decision-making was minimal and that there existed prejudicial tendencies and unwillingness by senior leaders to engage and challenge own assumptions. The ethnographic approach to the study and application of school leadership principles engages school leaders in a conversation in such a way that challenges traditional paternalistic conceptions, particularly in less democratic societies (Ncube, 1998; Indabawa, 1993, Harber 1995), where those below have limited participation in decision making processes.

One sees therefore that hermeneutic listening, whether school leaders have engaged willingly or unwilling may bring out that 'different voice' (Gilligan, 1982) and will fuse with other narrow horizons to create broader horizons (Gadamer, 1993) where the engagement in the conversation has led them to challenge their earlier judgements so as to increase the range of their vision. But this broadening of the horizon also holds true for the ethnographer. For example, listening intently and questioning some participants' views against theory can form a

conversational interaction. What respondents say and how they say it, will often shape the conversation, opening up new and broader understanding of leadership challenges and dynamics facing schools, and the solutions thereof.

### **Multidisciplinarity and validity in ethnography**

Multidisciplinarity in methods arises from the desire to apprehend the complex social locations of studied communities and understand their historicity and meanings from a cross-sectional perspective. The greatest challenge to most ethnographers is discovering 'what is it that is going on here' (Goffman 1974)? Here, the ethnographer seeks to access the social world, its everyday life and its associated ordinary acts, which help to understand 'what is going on' (Wolcott, 1995). Another challenge, though not key in ethnography is of a comparative nature, which seeks to establish how similar or different that social world is from others of its kind (Lofland, 1976). This challenge takes one to three levels. The first one is to learn of the current social world of the researched subjects, the secondly task is to discern how the present is different or similar to when one returns to the site, since cultures and contexts are dynamic. Lastly the aim is to establish how the collective situation can learn from others within or from similar or different types (Vail, 2001).

It is always important for an ethnographer to bring about rigour in the enquiry and avoid some incapacitating eventualities such as poor communication, access difficulties, unreliable contacts and abrupt changes to earlier arrangements resulting in delays. Vail (2001) advises that the researcher should employ a variety of methods or use specialised skills (Lyng, 1990) so as to triangulate and provide a wealth of information. Such a multidisciplinary approach to ethnography, making reference to different sources of data, helps meet the challenges noted above as well as attend to some concerns on validity in a study.

Based on personal experiences people tend to have attitudes towards situations, issues and phenomena and that these attitudes play a significant role in their understanding of phenomena (Hammersley, 1984; Wolcott, 1995). Multidisciplinarity seeks to limit prejudices arising out of this subjectivity. The primary aim of using various methods and exploring many data sources within schools is therefore meant to provide a broad based wealth of information, which must then be analysed and discussed. Somekh (1979) observed that students interpretations and comments are nearly always of great interest, but

they do not constitute the whole truth...the same is true of the teacher's original interpretations and comments. The ethnographer's original observations and comments have the benefit of bringing a fresh impartial view but also have limitations. The triangulation of the sources of data as portrayed, helps to enhance levels of validity in the inquiry. Researching complex institutions such as schools and how leadership obtains within them, will not only require triangulation but may also necessitate stepping back from intense emotions like fear, repulsion, or ecstasy in analysing data (Vail 2001), since data collection and analysis often occurs at the same time in ethnography.

Though reliability and validity as described by Kirk & Miller (1986) seem to serve well the quantitative approach, the same cannot be said of the ethnographic approach, where the notion of reliability is questioned. It is noted that reliability and validity are largely influenced by the philosophical arguments on objectivity versus subjectivity. In reliability the research instruments are supposed to produce a replica of results given subsequent trials if they are to be deemed credible. Wolcott (1995) observed that, ordinarily, fieldworkers do not try to make things happen at all, but whatever the circumstances, they cannot make them happen twice. This assertion holds strong for an ethnographic study where one deals with human beings and processes that govern human interaction such as in school leadership, since participants' perceptions and circumstances are dynamic, dialectical and ongoing.

Because reliability and validity are important to some degree (Hammersley, 1984), as long as systematic methods are not used to validate claims (Wolcott, 1995), in this paper a loose adherence to them has been followed only as a measure where possible to highlight avenues of rigor in ethnography. Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2000) observed that more recently validity has taken many forms. For example, in qualitative data, validity might be addressed through the honesty, depth, richness and scope of the data collected, the participants approached, and the extent of triangulation. Focusing on triangulation as expanded upon by Kirk & Miller (1986), the following observations are made (using selected examples) in relation to various research activities conducted in several schools in Zimbabwe and Tanzania.

**Diachronic reliability** – This focuses on stability over time, where a phenomena keeps recurring over a period of time. The poetry from students collected over a ten year period was indicative of a traditional

lack of opportunities for teachers' and students' participation in decision-making.

***Synchronic reliability*** – This denotes similarity of data gathered at the same time in different settings. From the collated data it was interesting to note that most of the schools studied shared a common perceptions on the lack of inclusive leadership in their schools.

***On combined levels of triangulation*** – This involves collecting data from different sources such as, the individual, a group, an organization, or community. The research sought responses from a cross section of respondents, both from within and outside the schools. Besides teachers, the head-teachers, lecturers and trainee teachers also participated. Some students contributed through poetry and other written constructs. The focus on these data sources was influenced by the perception and judgement that they are the major customers of education and therefore best suited to inform the study.

***Investigator triangulation*** – This entails more than one observer. In this instance, not just the researcher observed, but other professionals such as teachers and lecturers participated in the research and recorded their own observations on leadership practices within schools, which were then analysed.

***Space triangulation*** – The study is not limited to one culture or sub-culture but spreads itself across different cultures. The study on educational leadership focused on three sub-cultures in Zimbabwe and Tanzania, namely urban, rural and semi-urban.

***Methodology triangulation*** – This involves use of different methods to address the same subject of study. The inquiry used questionnaires, interviews, observation accounts and personal constructs so as to enhance methodological triangulation.

It is noted that the above forms of triangulation have not been discussed so as to prove the research's reliability and perchance achieve some validity. On the contrary these have been included primarily to show the extent of triangulation (Somekh, 1979), the multiplicity in methods (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004) and the praxis in research (Lather, 1991) that may go into research activities in ethnography. The triangulation exercise provides an elaborate expression and desire to achieve a 'good enough' inquiry amid unavoidable and contingent complexities.

## **Methods**

Below are some of the research methods that may be considered as tools in an ethnographer's wall chest. The use of these methods will most likely depend on the researcher's expertise, the nature of communities studied, its participants and the subject pursued.

## **The Interview**

Most ethnographers often favour the interview method. This is particularly the case since most investigations are of a complex nature, sometimes personal, or viewed as sensitive. The interview is often time-consuming and as a rule, expensive. However, the positive attribute of the interview is that it offers opportunities to explore in depth, providing access to what is 'inside' a person's head (Tuckman, 1992). This view incorporates understanding, as stated earlier, that in ethnography, research data never speaks for itself since there are mediated influences in interpreting a phenomenon. Because the interviewees are often fewer this helps the manageability of the interview method. Trust and interpersonal relations developed between the interviewer and the interviewees is critical to be sustained. The ethnographic interview may at times be informal, its questions open-ended, capturing uniqueness and to an extent unstructured. It is often advisable that both the interviewer and the interviewee discuss looking from 'inside' the schooling system and not outside.

To satisfy some ethical issues during the interviewing process a researcher should avoid problems reported by Connell & Kahn (1968), where there is a tendency by some interviewers to seek answers that support preconceived notions. Despite the possibility of misconceptions of what the respondent is saying, misunderstanding by respondents of what is being asked and general problems of attitudes, opinions and prejudices of the interviewer, an ethnographer should endeavoured to limit these.

## **Questionnaires**

As noted earlier, the quantitative questionnaire may be used as a preliminary survey to generate leads and key issues or confirm some phenomena before deeper exploration using ethnographic methods. Questionnaires tend not to be popular with ethnographers, (Woods, 1991), since they do not allow for the exploration of phenomena in depth as in qualitative methods (Parahoo, 1997).

Youngman (1986) observed that responses to semi-structured questionnaires may help produce useful information. These may become even more useful and more meaningful where the researcher has the ability, as in an interview, to find clarity on some unexplained issues in survey questionnaires. During this process, due consideration should be given to the pending analysis stage where there is forming of patterns (Wolcott, 1994) and thematizing and categorising (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The researcher should avoid questions that could be offensive to respondents, which may lead to misinformation. It is also ideal to give more time to respondents as a period in which they could complete the questionnaires, commenting on sections.

### **Brainstorming**

Though brainstorming can be done individually with respondents recording their ideas on paper, the aim is usually more or less the same as with focus groups, where there is generation of ideas, development of themes and underlying assumption. This can help the researcher to refocus, for example, on the respondents' perceptions on school leadership practice and what further lines of enquiry to pursue in the development of the study.

### **Poetry**

Students are more likely to enjoy participation in poetry writing. Some poetry can be collected from school magazines of institutions under study, covering different years. It is noted that though this is not a common form of collecting data, it has received much support from some qualitative researchers. Stories just like poetry are oral literature whose meanings, forms and functions are situationally rooted in cultural contexts, scenes and events, which give meaning to action (Bauman (1986). They have a legitimate place as an inquiry method in educational research (Bruner, 1986). In the study of schools, poems were seen to be indicative of students' concerns from year to year in a school environment, and to some extent establishing understanding on prevailing leadership practices.

Since poetry is more likely to produce large stock of data, it is important to focus mainly on themes perceived as recurrent in the data. Poetry will often tell different stories bordering around school activities and the socio-economic conditions in the macro-politics. In dealing with written poetry, one may use conventional techniques such as categorizing and coding of content, thematizing and building up concepts relevant to the study of school

leadership influences. The use of poetry comes out as an extremely suitable instrument in ethnographic researching since the researcher's aim is often to enter the 'minds and hearts' of people studied. It is noted that such recording as poetry is meant to relive, first an emotional experience and then through the reflective process, a rational realization (Ely et al, 1991).

### **Observation Accounts**

Written accounts may be used to observe practices and processes within the schools studied.

An ethnographer may operate as a participant observer, which assists a great deal in that not only does he observe behaviour but has also privileged access to the meaning of most behaviour.

Participant observations are an ideal in ethnographic research (Woods, 1991; Wolcott, 1994), since they afford the researcher a better penetration of the group studied. The researcher personally experiences the culture together with others, and there is full access to the group's activities. The danger with participant observation could be the overshadowing of lived experiences of others by going 'native' (Woods 1991), that is, identifying so strongly with the group and becoming defensive of it. A researcher can avoid this by investigator triangulation that is, allowing teachers and students in studied schools to write their own observation accounts. Such a rigorous approach in the inquiry is more likely to enhance due diligence (Woods, 1991) and honesty (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). Effort should be made to record as seen and heard without prejudice to any party. It is noted that such intensions are aspirations rather than unproblematic realisations.

Though participant observation is ideal, non-participant observation is common (Wood, 1991). In non-participant observation the researcher's role is only that of an observer without interference. Where possible, the whole encounter can be audio taped and notes can be written while observing participants converse or perform activities. When recording the recorder must be positioned strategically and then tested before one observes quietly without interfering in the proceedings.

### **Cartoons**

Cartoons may be collected from a cross section of newspapers in a relevant setting, together with related articles depicting the macro-politics in a country or within schools. Some of the cartoons and articles may cover incidents in schools, and a wide range of other



issues. These articles and cartoons are often used to depict interrelationships between the micro politics of the school and macro-politics and the overarching influences of leadership.

One of the intriguing reasons for the use of pictures (images) in educational research is 'that their use touches on the limitations of language, especially language used for descriptive purposes... the potential exists however elusive the achievement, to find ways of thinking about social life that escape the traps set by language' (Walker 1993). Considerable effort ought to be applied to establish useful and honest interpretation of the cartoons. It is noted that background knowledge, related articles in the same newspaper and editorial comments are often useful in establishing meaning and understanding of cartoons (Warburton, 1998).

### **Debates**

The debates by students may centre on pertinent issues affecting the micro-politics of the school sometimes due to macro-political forces. These will need to be audio taped and analysed later. In this type of approach to data gathering, the research, unlike in the interview or focused groups where the researcher facilitates, is left to the participants who interact with one another and produce responses, which often help develop themes, insights, or generate hypotheses (Morgan, 1988; Lewis 1992).

### **Unobtrusive approaches in ethnography**

Unobtrusive strategies often pursue uncommon data sources, such as graffiti, garbage, dairies, minutes of meetings and statistical information. These strategies should not be viewed as a substitute to traditional methods in research but as additional instrument for the ethnographer. Recently, the widespread use of media sites such as Facebook, where people deposit numerous data about themselves, their associates and their environment provide large information which could be tapped into unobtrusively. It is also noted that unobtrusive approaches can help tackle biases which may arise on the part of the researcher and the researched. A good example is where respondents may say one thing at the interview which is contrary to existing school statistics and recorded minutes from meetings. Unobtrusive methods may prove very critical in social settings where participants' co operation is lacking or the research field is deemed hostile and risky to fully immerse oneself.

### **Some Ethical Considerations in Ethnography**

One of the most challenging questions researchers too infrequently address is who benefits from the research that populates the library shelves (Kartz, 2000). Often times the answers are too painful to contemplate because it is generally agreed that some of the research addresses professional and career advancement as opposed to changing the status of the researched subjects. Some researchers such as social workers (McAuliffe & Coleman, 1999) say they feel a twinge when the big question, 'what am I to do?' pops up. The question may relate to many different things but one of them could be, being immersed in a community of vulnerable people who are homeless and live in abject poverty or face possible death, knowing that one's inquiry will offer them nothing save one's degree certificate or some type of selfish career advancement. Kartz (2000) tells of how in her study of migrant children in America she completed her study without having benefited them and she also recalls a British researcher at a conference exclaiming, 'Face reality, we are all academics gaining benefits and advancing our careers from this research.' Such assertions raise moral questions especially for ethnographers. An ethnographer has to ask whether they are part of a category of people that benefit from other people's misery. It is expected that a truly moral person would always consider another person as their equal. In a situation of social interaction; something is morally wrong where one individual ends up benefitting. And it is morally right when everyone comes out better off (Gilligan 1982). Porter et al (2005) also make reference to the exploitation of participants by some researchers in conflict zones. One of the overriding moral desires for studying schools should be to go through a research experience that not only benefits the researcher personally, but creates possibilities and fosters opportunities for effective school leadership where democratisation of space plays a significant role within the educational process and where head-teachers in schools are awakened to the ideas of distributed leadership.

Since issues on educational leadership may be seen as political in some schools' settings and thus invariably pose a spectre of bias (Jeff, 1988), it is important to conduct the inquiry in a way that respects respondents' different views and records these as they are, without abusing one's power and privilege as the researcher. It is advisable that participating schools are promised access to the research findings so that they may learn from the results and try to implement them. Anonymity and confidentiality should also be promised to all participating schools and individuals (Radnor, 2001),

since some views can be of a political nature and thus pose risk both at school and at national level.

Childress (1994) cite four basic principles in ethics, namely; respect for autonomy (exercise no coercion), non-maleficence (doing no harm), beneficence (doing good) and justice (using fair and just methodologies/strategies). Bearing these four principles in mind protects participants' rights and avoids recriminations. It helps the researcher to exercise impartiality such that the inquiry is not seen as advancing certain agendas, but is professionally seeking to understand better a given phenomenon. As one of its ethical goals an ethnographic study should avoid advancing a political agenda since to do so may be seen as maleficence and catastrophic to both the study and the participants' well being.

One of the ethical challenges faced by those who research polarised communities is that the participants who volunteer information often do so at risk to themselves with the hope that such research is part of a process meant to end their misery. It becomes morally binding therefore that a researcher finds opportunities for information dissemination and where possible incorporation into policy-making or conflict resolution.

### **Judging Ethnography**

It is noted that in its quest to apprehend studied phenomena, ethnography does not claim or argue for 'the truth, the whole truth, nothing else but the truth' but attempts to establish deeper meanings and understanding of phenomena, which might otherwise be hidden. The key in the judgement of an inquiry is often the issue of validity. It is noted that Bridges's (1999) outline of a correspondence theory of truth is not generally suited to ethnography. In fact the quest for criterion validity is often seen as incompatible and anathema to basic philosophical assumptions of the qualitative tradition (Hammersley, 1992). Such rejection of criteria does not necessarily seek to undermine the possibility that some methods are more effective than others in producing valid knowledge, but is against founding notions of certainty and absolutism in our understanding of a complex world with varied social worlds. In seeking to judge ethnography, care should be taken not to impose permanence in approaches. Since criterion validity in the quantitative tradition is often about producing assessments that are 'beyond all possible doubt', ethnography is not about establishing truth but understanding of varied perspectives. Furthermore, in judging ethnography's effectiveness the issue of 'relevance' (Hammersley, 1992), may also be a key.

The question is to what extent do the findings of an ethnographic led inquiry resonate strongly with the experiences of those in the studied social worlds? And to what extent do its multidisciplinary approaches establish deeper meanings than otherwise possible through other traditional approaches?

### **Conclusion**

This paper has advanced a view that ethnography emerges as one of the most effective paradigms in qualitative research, particularly in researching complex phenomenon such as school leadership. It has highlighted how contemporary epistemologies on school leadership such as distributed leadership are suited to being studied ethnographically due to interactionist philosophical approaches relevant to both fields. Using previous ethnographic studies in schools, the paper noted the effectiveness of the ethnographic approach which helps the researcher to explore and establish deeper understanding of studied educational institutions and the leadership practices inherent. The Gadamerian hermeneutics to conversing and listening was also noted as a significant feature for ethnographers who seek to immerse themselves within studied communities so as to empathise and identify with the people studied. The paper highlighted the importance of access strategies and insider status, which helps the researcher to avoid inhibitive barriers that may curtail the study. In reference to the multidisciplinary approach the paper explored how triangulation can be used to greater effect in sustaining a rigorous inquiry amidst complexity. Various traditional methods were suggested as suitable for ethnography particularly the complementary role that could be played by unobtrusive strategies. In view of its effectiveness, the ethnographic approach is posited as a potentially plausible alternative for a researcher seeking to establish meaning and deeper understanding of complex institutions such as schools.

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