Mapping the Landscape of Data Collection: A Reflection on the Dynamics of Fieldwork in Qualitative Research

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Abstract

This study explores the complexities of qualitative fieldwork and unpacks the fieldwork dynamics drawing on critical reflections based on the experiences of interviewing primary level teachers in exploring their identities. I argue that qualitative fieldwork is not a one-shot, linear activity but a negotiated and relational task requiring a flexible and context-specific plan. This study identifies challenges associated with the fieldwork relating to establishing and sustaining a good relationship and reciprocity between the researcher and the participants, unequal power dynamics between the researcher and the participants, participants' familiarity with and habitual response to the survey questionnaires, narrow understanding of confidentiality and anonymity as ethical considerations, unmatched gender between the researcher and the participants, and through and detailed capture of micro field jottings and writing the fieldnotes. I suggest initiating fieldwork with sufficient informal conversation and establishing a rapport to gain the participants' trust, positioning oneself as an insider to acquire valuable and meaningful data.

Keywords: Fieldwork, reflexivity, qualitative research, fieldnotes, relational, negotiated

Introduction

Qualitative research considers fieldwork as a foundation for making robust data, in which several concerned data are collected from a natural setting. The quality of data depends on one's fieldwork rigor and the fieldwork crafting skills of a researcher. Since fieldwork is a "dynamic and complex process" (Basnet, 2022; Punch, 2012), the practical aspects of doing qualitative fieldwork are discussed

less in the literature. While the number of literature (Delamont, 2016; Ellingson & Sotirin, 2020; Emerson et al., 2011; Markham, 2013; Marvasti & Gubrium, 2023) discussed the fieldwork as the fundamental departure in making the data, it is often overlooked the complexities of doing qualitative fieldwork. Considering that fieldwork in qualitative research is a nonlinear and context-specific process, the same prescribed guidelines could not work everywhere. In addition, qualitative research courses at universities fundamentally focus on data collection tools and procedures, but instead, they minimally discuss the field's complexities. For example, in the initial days of my PhD fieldwork as a graduate student, I was confused about various aspects of fieldwork, such as planning, accessing, entering, trust building, and collecting data from the natural setting. As such, these minor concerns exist, yet the powerful determinants of field rigor were minimally covered in the graduate curricula. During the initial days of my PhD fieldwork, I navigated the fieldwork literature for the comprehensive guide for carrying out the field activities, but I found it appropriate to fulfill my needs. Although a number of literature (Ghimire, 2021; Mahato et al., 2022; Mishra, 2018; Rai, 2020; Rana et al., 2019; Subedi & Gaulee, 2023) discusses various aspects of doing qualitative fieldwork, they do not offer the comprehensive guidelines covering the major practical concerns. There is a paucity of comprehensive practical knowledge about how researchers can effectively tackle the specific and contextual challenges that may emerge during fieldwork. In fulfilling such a gap, this study aims to contribute to this literature gap, drawing the applicable and context-specific practical strategies from the author's doctoral research experience. This paper offers a comprehensive guideline on the practical aspects of doing qualitative fieldwork.

This study is the outcome of my lived experiences of the PhD fieldwork, the field jotting records, and my reflexive interpretations in the field diary. While qualitative research replaces the validity and reliability by the researcher's reflexivity (Delamont, 2016), it is equally important to provide transparency on the research process and the fieldwork. I attempted to be transparent on the dynamics of my fieldwork engagement as a qualitative researcher in exploring the identity of primary teachers. Notably, novice researchers face challenges in qualitative fieldwork where reflective insights could help them plan and implement their fieldwork. For instance, Mishra (2018) states the importance of "a reflection on fieldwork helps a researcher to review critically and critically appreciate one's work and to identify challenges that can be helpful not only to the researcher but also to other researchers" (p. 27). In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic changes the conventional understanding of data collection from physical presence in the field to working from home (Flannery et al., 2023; Lobe et al., 2020). Arguably, the critical reflection of the researcher could

provide insights to the novice researcher in understanding the "issues of subjectivity and reflexivity systematically in the context of field research" (Basnet, 2022), which contributes to ensuring the rigor and executing their fieldwork appropriately. This study contributes to continuing the discourse on qualitative fieldwork and adds knowledge by unpacking the fieldwork dynamics concerning the data collection, mainly through in-depth interviews. In particular, this study unpacks the dynamics of qualitative fieldwork by exploring the following research questions:

1. In what ways is qualitative fieldwork challenging in exploring the data from the participants?

2. How do the context-specific complexities associated with the field mediate the qualitative fieldwork in obtaining the desired information?

Understanding and Approaching the Field

While fieldwork engagement is the hallmark of qualitative research in making data, it is discussed variedly regarding understanding the field and boundaries of fieldwork. The essence of fieldwork "is its ability to identify and make sense of ways of knowing and being in different social worlds" (Mosher et al., 2017, p. 145). The prolonged engagement in qualitative fieldwork is essential in building a harmonious relationship between the researcher and participants, which contributes to ensuring the research's trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Fieldwork is the means for the researcher to collect first-hand data; "it relies on personal interaction or engagement between the researcher and those being researched in the research setting" (Pole & Hillyard, 2015, p. 3). Notably, fieldwork in qualitative research cannot be imagined without the close relationship between the researcher and the participant since mutual trust is the precondition. The beginning of the fieldwork is dominant in the ethnographic methods, particularly in the sociological and anthropological qualitative research (Markham, 2013; Marvasti & Gubrium, 2023). Later on, fieldwork became a significant component of making data in qualitative research and its various approaches, such as grounded theory, phenomenology, narrative inquiry, case study, and action research (Pole & Hillyard, 2015). While it lacks consensus in understanding the fieldwork, there is no debate on the intent of doing fieldwork for a deeper understanding of the study phenomena in the context-specific setting of the field. While the fieldwork in the ethnographic approach generally associated with the participant observation (Engert, 2022), it is equally associated with other data collections methods such as focus groups and interview.

Fieldwork is essential to gain a deeper understanding of the study phenomenon, providing empirical evidence from the original place. In addition, fieldwork is the first and foremost way to uncover the complexity of the study phenomenon. For instance, Markham (2013) states that "fieldwork is often used as a method of engaging with the phenomenon to gather information/data or to analyze practices in situ" (p. 435). Arguably, making data in qualitative fieldwork is influenced by several factors such as local culture, researcher identity, hierarchy, power relations, and gender matching between the researcher and the participants (Mishra, 2018; Punch, 2012; Subedi, 2023; Subedi & Gaulee, 2023). Likewise, the researcher enters the field with feelings, aspirations, and assumptions concerning their embodiment in the fieldwork. The participants could also have a lot of curiosity, confusion, fear, and hesitation in providing the information to the researcher. Thus, the emotions and fear of both the researcher and the researched significantly contribute to the qualitative fieldwork (Ellingson & Sotirin, 2020) since the fieldwork is often unpredictable and depends on the site context (Pole & Hillyard, 2015).

The understanding and boundaries of traditional fieldwork concepts and the field have changed in recent years concerning qualitative fieldwork. While the conventional fieldwork approach, particularly the ethnographic fieldwork (Schensul & LeCompte, 2013), seeks data from the researcher engagement from the demarcated geographical location, the contemporary literature (Engert, 2022; Lobe et al., 2020; Marvasti & Gubrium, 2023) has conceived the broader boundaries. For example, Reyes-Foster and Carter (2023) criticize the conventional understanding and practice of fieldwork. They argue that "in traditional ethnography, there is a clear boundary for when data collection begins and ends, demarcated geographically and temporally. For us, this boundary was unclear. We never arrived, and we never really left" (Reyes-Foster & Carter, 2023, p. 175). The discussion on the boundaries is going on with the advancement of information and communication in the age of globalization. Globalization has not only changed the thinking and working style in qualitative fieldwork but has also crossed the traditional boundaries of fieldwork. As such, Delamont (2016) states that "with globalization, the boundaries between 'home' and 'the field' are evermore fragile and permeable, and the standards to which scholars are held reflect that" (p. 120). In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic opened a new avenue of qualitative fieldwork despite the virtual data collection techniques used before the coronavirus crisis. Given the variety of fieldwork strategies in use, it is essential to explore the implementation of qualitative fieldwork. The subsequent sub-section outlines strategies formulated from reviewing methodological literature.

Strategies for Doing Fieldwork

The modes of inquiry determine qualitative fieldwork, the nature of the study phenomenon, the sample of the study, and the local and cultural context of the field are also equally important. The following three major fieldwork strategies are identified in reviewing the literature.

Working at Physical Site (setting or location)

Working at the physical site or situ is the most practised fieldwork strategy, particularly dominant in the ethnographic research in sociology and anthropology. For ethnographers, the field refers to a geographical location or site where the researcher collects data from participants meeting in person (Schensul & LeCompte, 2013). Meeting in person physically through prolonged engagement with the participants in the natural setting is a widely accepted way to obtain real information and generate valid knowledge. For example, Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater (2011) emphasize that "working in the field means talking, listening, recording, observing, participating, and sometimes even living in a particular place. The field is the site for doing research, and field working is the process of doing it" (p.1). Participating with the engaged conversations, interactions, and meetings and observing "in situ" (Marvasti & Gubrium, 2023, p. 2) is the widely practised approach in other qualitative methods such as narrative inquiry, grounded theory, phenomenology, case study, and participatory action research. This site-specific fieldwork strategy is equally common in social science and education.

Working at home (home or institution)

Working at home or institutions is another popular fieldwork strategy in qualitative research. This type of fieldwork emerged after the changing boundaries, particularly in the ethnographic method (Reyes-Foster & Carter, 2023) and other qualitative research. When the researcher, particularly in ethnographic research and another qualitative approach, lives in the community or is familiar with the community members with close relationships, conduct the study at home. Doing fieldwork in the home or institution is a face-to-face data collection technique in which the researcher collects data in the physical setting where the participants are located (Schensul & LeCompte, 2013). It is a method of co-creating the data between the researcher and the participants in which the researcher agency plays an important role in elucidating the data (Mosher et al., 2017). Working at home is a fieldwork approach that allows the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the study phenomenon by spending long time with the participants.

Working Virtual (distance)

Collecting data with the participants from a remote place where the researcher and the participants connect virtually through different communication media is a growing trend in doing fieldwork in qualitative research. This mode of fieldwork is beyond the traditional boundaries of qualitative fieldwork. Working at a distance is a virtual means of data collection and a more flexible approach to reaching unreached people (Markham, 2013). Virtual data collection envisions the fieldwork from a physically distinct place, which is particularly useful when an in-person meeting is not possible due to various circumstances. For example, as a number of literature (Engward et al., 2022; Ham et al., 2022; Keen et al., 2022; Lobe et al., 2020) suggest, the COVID-19 pandemic opened new horizons for gathering data, particularly from audio and video interview at a distance. However, careful looking is important that "online environment researchers require a heightened sensitivity and awareness of their attitudes, knowledge, and skills before, during and after the interview to ensure that the process is safe, rigorous and meaningful for collecting comprehensive qualitative data (Engward et al., 2022, p. 1). During the understanding and boundaries of 'field' and 'fieldwork' transforming with the growing information and communication technology and the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, fieldwork exists in different forms and is based on navigating context-specific vetting.

Methods and Procedures

I draw my reflection from a larger PhD research on primary teachers' identity in which I have blended my personal experiences and reflexivity during the fieldwork at two stages in this study. First, I collected the data for the preliminary PhD between July 2021 and December 2021; in the second stage, the final data were collected between January 2022 and July 2022. Qualitative research, particularly the in-depth interview, is influenced by the researcher's background and understanding, so the data collection and findings are biased and value-laden. As the literature (Polkinghorne, 2010) suggests, my personal traits, such as experiences, cultural backgrounds, and beliefs, influence the data collection in the fieldwork. I have blended my personal experiences in crafting this paper. Considering the researcher as an instrument in qualitative research (Wa-Mbaleka, 2020; Yoon & Uliassi, 2022), personal experiences are a powerful data source (Barnacle, 2004; Clandinin & Connelly, 1994) in the interview method. While the reflexivity of the doctoral researcher shapes the methodological decisions (Jayantilal & Lalli, 2023), I have used my reflexivity as a data source, mainly from my reflexive field diary based on the fieldnotes. Hence, I used my lived experiences from the field and the reflexive journal in this study to demystify the complexity and dynamics of qualitative fieldwork. As multiple reflexivity exists in qualitative research, this paper is crafted fundamentally on the 'methodological reflexivity' (Whitaker & Atkinson, 2021).

I have used deductive and inductive coding for data analysis as Saldana (2021) suggests. I generated a few themes (e.g., accessing the field) from the concerned fieldwork literature. However, the inductive coding was dominant based on my fieldnotes and reflexive field diary (Dodgson, 2019; Orange, 2016). After reading the fieldnotes jottings and the field diary multiple times, I marked keywords and coded them, which were generated through a contextual comparison and interpretation of the keywords (Choi et al., 2021; Riessman, 2008). During the fieldwork, informed consent was taken from the participants to ensure ethical considerations.

Results and Discussion

The following themes explore the context-specific challenges and the complexities of qualitative fieldwork in obtaining the desired information from the field.

Accessing and Entering the Field

Accessing the field begins after the research committee approves the proposal and the ethical clearance letter is obtained from the ethical committee or the Institutional Review Board. My PhD fieldwork began after the proposal was accepted from the Graduate School of Education (GSE). Since the ethical committee is not set up at GSE, I obtained the GSE recommendation letter and went to meet the headteacher as a gatekeeper of the sample schools. One of the major tasks of the researcher is to prepare a detailed fieldwork plan and manage the equipment and tools (Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2011), which could vary depending on the nature of the study, local fieldwork context, and the research problem. It is equally important for the researcher to pay careful attention to the fact that the pre-fieldwork plan may not work in the actual field (Mahato et al., 2022) since the reality of fieldwork could differ. While interviewing primary teachers, I planned the tentative fieldwork schedule and a few tools, such as a diary, pen, voice recorder, backpack, water bottle, camera, pen drive, and first aid materials. I was careful to be 'economical and less expensive during the fieldwork' (Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2011), so I initially used my cell phone for audio recording, voice fieldnotes taking, and photos. However, while interviewing, I realized cell phones were inappropriate for recording since the teacher felt uncomfortable with them and not convenient to handle. Realizing the odds of using the cell phone for audio record, I later purchased and used the professional voice recorder, which proved useful.

As the literature (Ghimire, 2021; Hennink et al., 2020; Kawulich, 2010) suggests, the role of the gatekeeper is determinant to reach the participant; it was the first step of accessing the field. As "it is important to set out with a positive attitude

to get access" (Delamont, 2016, p. 72), I was optimistic about getting access to the field. I easily accessed the field since either the headteacher was my friend or the former M.Ed. students where I directly visited the school. After explaining my PhD research and the procedure, they provided formal written consent to collect data from their teacher. Qualitative researchers could have encountered unexpected situations and nudged during the fieldwork (Rana et al., 2019). For example, I also experienced another nudge from the (proxy)gatekeeper (i.e., the husband of my participant) while I was interviewing a female teacher (Subedi & Gaulee, 2023) during the critical time of the COVID-19 pandemic. I approached my participants for the interview in their homes since meeting them in the school was not always possible since the schools shut down for a long time due to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. So, in my case, home also became the field site (Reyes-Foster & Carter, 2023; Schensul & LeCompte, 2013) as the literature suggests, and I managed the problem of meeting the participant as a researcher agency (Mosher et al., 2017). I was able to interview the female teacher after satisfying her husband about the procedure of my PhD research. In addition, sometimes accessing the field, particularly by getting approval from the government authority and non-government organizations, could be problematic, as Rana et al. (2019) reported during their fieldwork. As Mishra (2018) reports, another hurdle could be the compensation payment to the participants if they are habitual in receiving the monetary incentives while participating in the developmental research projects of International/Non-governmental originations. Thus, qualitative researchers should always be cautious of unintended fieldwork hurdles and have alternative plans for possible future obstacles.

The researcher's first impression of the participants is important in creating a conducive environment at the beginning of the fieldwork. Likewise, the participant's perceptions of the researcher are critical to the warming relationship during the data collection. I tried to be present with the primary teachers (my participants) with a simple dress code and local language. For example, if the researchers present themselves as elite, it makes participants suspicious. Regarding the first impression, Delamont (2016) emphasizes that "all clothing, hairstyles, facial hair or stubble, make-up, jewelry, body piercing and tattoos convey visual messages, just as perfumes and colognes, stale tobacco smells and body odors do" (p. 78). Besides, I reviewed my Facebook profiles to see if there were any odds that the gatekeeper and participants could have a bad impression of me. At the beginning of my fieldwork, I faced the challenges of participants' understanding research as they were unfamiliar with qualitative research. My participants were habitual in understanding data collection by filling out the survey form, which I elaborated on in the subsequent section (i.e., building trust).

Doing Ethical Research

  While qualitative research demands the researcher's prolonged field engagement with the participants, ethical research is the hallmark of qualitative fieldwork. Given that qualitative research is relational, I tried to build and maintain a warm relationship with the participants. While ethical consideration in qualitative research refers to the process of "determining what is good or bad, right or wrong" (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012, p. 17), I was always careful in conducting my fieldwork from the beginning. In the initial stages of my fieldwork, I thought that the 'ethical considerations' were a stand-alone thing; however, during the progression of fieldwork, I found my earlier assumption was wrong. I realized that ethical concerns are relational and based on 'mutual trust and reciprocity' (Caeymaex et al., 2023) between the researcher and the participants. For instance, Hammersley and Traianou (2012) are cautious about the relational nature of qualitative research that "asymmetrical dependence rather than mutual independence, and the concept of need, rather than right or even obligation, comes to prominence" (p. 29). Realizing the relational nature of my study, I was sensitive to the ethical criticality of building rapport, interviewing with the teachers, and analyzing and interpreting the data. In addition, I was aware of maintaining my well-being and emotional balance since "loneliness, frustration, despair, unease, uncertainty, disappointment, anger, self-pity, failure and inadequacy" (Punch, 2012, p. 89) of the researcher could create obstacles for ethical research. I argue that doing ethical research is not just considering the research ethics at the beginning of fieldwork; it is an ongoing process that proceeds to data analysis and report writing. Thus, doing respectful fieldwork based on strong relational ethics was my prime concern during the PhD fieldwork.

  Research ethics in the Nepali context from Eastern Philosophy (i.e., Hindu Philosophy) is discussed less despite there being moral and ethical rules and guidelines in Nepali society. For instance, Lamichhane and Luitel (2023) present the broader ethical approach in the Nepali research context as empathy, inclusiveness, and healing, which, in fact, is the relational approach that values participants in the center of the inquiry process. Notably, decolonizing the qualitative fieldwork is the urged need; this Eastern notion of research ethics inspired my fieldwork. In addition, during my PhD fieldwork, I was guided by the ethical guidelines suggested by Flick (2014), which include informed consent, avoiding harm to participants in data collection, doing justice to participants in analyzing the data, and maintaining confidentiality in writing. First, my fieldwork began with obtaining the participants' informed consent. However, I learned that being hurried to obtain the signed written consent is not an appropriate task initially. I experienced that the participants feared to form the consent form as other researchers experienced elsewhere (Caeymaex

et al., 2023; Ghimire, 2021; Riessman, 2005; Yuill, 2018), that's why I started the interview with oral consent. Instead, building rapport and gaining their confidence through informal conversations and meetings could lead to obtaining signed consent during and after the data collection. Second, as the fieldwork is a negotiated task, I assured the participants not to make any harm from the information they provided. However, it was not a one-shot and straightforward task that the participants could trust immediately; instead, it took a long during engagement with them. The participants trusted me as the prolonged engagement progressed, and the conversations were open and free. Third, I tried to persuade my participants that I would not do any injustice in data analysis by modifying their provided information. In order to ensure justice during analysis, I adopted the member-checking strategy by sharing the preliminary draft of data transcription and analysis with the participants. I confirmed any discrepancy between what they said and what was written. The teachers indicated minor discrepancies in my analysis, which I corrected. Finally, I strongly maintained the confidentiality and anonymity of my participating teachers in the written report. For this, I used the pseudonyms of teachers and their schools, carefully looked at the written text of the research context, and modified the possible texts that helped to identify participants. From my fieldwork, I learned that careful looking and consideration are fundamental from the initial phase of fieldwork to its concluding stage to ensure ethical considerations in qualitative research.

Building Trust and Managing Power Relations

The qualitative research data quality depends on the trust building between the researcher and the participant, which shapes data collection and quality. The fieldwork dynamics, such as power relations created by the unmatched identity between the researcher and the participants, significantly influence and add complexity during the qualitative fieldwork. The qualitative fieldwork cannot be isolated from the influences of power relations and hierarchy created such power relations. For instance, Subedi and Gaulee (2023) argue that "unequal power relations, even unintentional, are created by the hierarchy significantly influencing the qualitative interview, which needs to be considered seriously during the field data collection" (p. 2600). For example, during my fieldwork, I realized participants' hesitation due to the unmatched identity between us at the initial stages of data collection. In their eyes, I may be considered a knowledgeable man since I was a teacher educator for over two decades and a PhD scholar, but my participants were the primary teachers who are considered at the lowest rank of the teacher management system. Estimating such a possible halo effect (i.e., cognitive bias) on my identity, I never emphasized and presented myself as a university teacher and a PhD researcher. Instead, I presented as a former public school primary teacher

for five years, aiming to become attached to them. Despite my efforts to present myself as their colleague and insider with the teachers, they again hesitated in the initial interviews. In addition, qualitative research always demands the 'researcher's neutrality' (Subedi & Gaulee, 2023) during the data collection, but the unequal power relations due to various factors such as position, academic qualification, and identity as a researcher challenge such a natural role. While the interpretive approach considers field data co-construction between the researcher and the participants, their unmatched identity creates an obstacle in co-constricting the data.

Notably, in most qualitative research, unequal power relations between the researcher and the participant are challenging in building trust. Generally, if there is an unequal hierarchical position, the participants consider themselves inferior and less knowledgeable (Subedi & Gaulee, 2023), negatively contributing to developing the sense of 'we' (Rai, 2020). Losing the sense of 'we' promotes hesitation and fear in the participants, which does not open the sharing of their stories. For example, during my fieldwork, I experienced my unequal status as a PhD scholar and university teacher to the primary teachers. I noted it in my fieldnotes as:

> After obtaining the consent, identifying the possible participants for my study, and discussing them with the headteacher, I met Ananda, a primary teacher from the same school. I offered him a cup of tea in the school canteen. I started the informal conversation by having tea. I introduced myself as a PhD researcher and university teacher and described the purpose of meeting him. In addition, I explained in detail the nature of the data collection procedure. As I closely observed his body language, his facial expression seemed unhappy and suspicious. Realizing his discomfort, I asked him if he had any queries. Ananda remained silent and just looked at me. I shifted conversations about his school anniversary held a week ago, but he spoke little about that. I thanked him for talking and left the school. (Fieldnotes, July 3, 2021)

The unequal hierarchical position between the university teacher and the school teacher unintentionally creates power relations (Subedi, 2023) because of their different positionality. Confronting such a situation of unmatched identity between the researcher and the participants, I highlighted my earlier status and experiences as a primary teacher during conversations with other participants. Several informal meetings with the participants helped me to gain their trust.

Participants' understanding of providing the information means feeling the survey form was another challenge for me to build trust. After introducing myself during the meeting with Pramod, my initial conversations illustrated his understanding of research, which was almost like that of other participants.

Khim: I expect the information on your teaching journey for my study. Would you share your experience?

Pramod: Okay. I have no problem. Please give me your questionnaire, I will fill that and return it to you after some days. I have filled out the so many questionnaires of many M.Ed. students for their thesis.

Khim: That was great, but my study is a different one. I do not have any questionnaire to share with you. Filling out a questionnaire is basically survey research. As I am doing qualitative research, I am analyzing the stories you would share. I am eager to listen to your stories of lived experiences. I have some queries regarding your teaching journey. Listening to your stories may take a long time, so we need to meet frequently at your convenience.

Pramod: (his smiley face turned suspicious) Long time? How long? I have never participated in this kind of research. (looking at me with a doughty face, he remained silent for a while).

Khim: It will take our long engagement; however, I will not bother you. We will talk at your convenient time. (I described the nature of the qualitative research procedure in detail and assured him to hide his identity in the report.)

Pramod: Yes, okay then. (Finally, he was convinced, and we reached an agreement for the data collection)

These conversations suggest two significant concerns of rapport building with the participants. First, building trust is not a straightforward and one-shot activity for which a participant could not be immediately ready without being convinced of the research procedure. Second, participants understanding and perceptions toward the research and data collection procedure could be challenging for the fieldwork. While the participants' agency shapes the fieldwork (Mosher et al., 2017), changing their understanding as providing data means responding to the survey questionnaire is a critical issue of qualitative fieldwork. For example, in my fieldwork, it is not only the case of Pramod; instead, the remaining participants were habitual in filling out the survey form. I have had several informal conversations and meetings to convince the participants to confirm their involvement in my study. While the researcher's 'insider-outsider background' (Rai, 2020) plays an essential role in building trust with the participants, I tried to present myself as a former primary teacher. As my participants were the primary teachers, my earlier background supported me to create as an insider during the fieldwork. Thus, the trust building of the researcher with the participant is a hallmark in the qualitative fieldwork for obtaining in-depth information during the data collection.

Matching the Gender

In qualitative research, especially in-depth interviews, gender plays a significant role as a powerful element. Matching the gender facilitates the sharing of participants' stories. During my fieldwork, I experienced the complexity of my unmatched gender, with female teachers significantly contributing to openly sharing their stories. I also felt inconvenienced during the initial rapport-building stage after entering the field. While the role of gender in qualitative fieldwork is much discussed in the Western setting, it is minimally addressed in the non-Western context. Considering the literature in Nepal is rare in the role of gender matching during fieldwork, a few studies (Mishra, 2018; Subedi, 2023; Subedi & Gaulee, 2023) discussed the role of complex gender dynamics during the in-depth interview. While interviewing the female teacher, I realized that the extra layer of gendered complexity was negatively influenced. For instance, Subedi and Gaulee (2023) argue about the gender difference in the qualitative interview that "it is necessary to do a comprehensive analysis of the complex dynamics of gender matching, the cultural background of the interviewee, and possible power relations between the researcher and participants." (p. 2589). Similar to my fieldwork experienced unmatched gender, Mishra (2018) shares her experiences of matching gender while interviewing women. She further states that "my sex and my gender both helped me become close to women I interviewed. Biologically, we were females. We shared the same biological processes of menstruation. Most of us also shared motherhood. Socially, we were women" (Mishra, 2018, p. 34). Concerning the gender unmatching during the interview, Subedi and Gaulee (2023) write:

> The interviewer (i.e., Subedi) encountered this gender interference for the first time; he thought it was probably due to the lack of adequate rapport-building with the participants. As the same problem occurred during the second interview, the researcher considered this a phenomenon of interest. It appeared that male and female interviewees' gender dynamics were intermediating the elicitation of stories and hindering the smooth sharing of experiences (p. 2596).

While gender unmatching significantly influences the qualitative interview, it adds extra layers of complexity when interviewing female participants with a male researcher. For example, during the interview with the female teacher, I initially thought it was due to a lack of building trust and reciprocity with them. However, as I repeatedly experienced the challenge of full and frank disclosure of female teachers during interviews, I learned it was due to the complexity of unmatched gender.

Recording the Fieldwork and Journaling

Qualitative fieldwork intends to engage actively in the natural field setting by participating, observing, and systematically recording the details of the fieldwork through 'journaling' or 'writing the field diary' or 'jottings.' This immersive field engagement facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the studied phenomena concurrently undertaken within the context of the field alongside the study participants (Emerson et al., 2011; Wolfinger, 2002). For example, Emerson et al. (2011) elaborates that field jotting is not an evaluative summary or generalizations; instead, it includes observed scenes and actions, events, and detailed emotional expressions obtained during the fieldwork while being with the participants. Notably, I used the audio recording to capture the field jotting immediately within the limited time when writing notes was not possible. Considering the suggestions from several literature (Emerson et al., 2011; Pacheco-Vega, 2019; Wolfinger, 2002), I started writing the field jottings and fieldnotes and converting them into a reflexive field diary/field journal in the same evening after returning home from the field. While writing the reflexive diary, I tried to be neutral about the events, phenomena, and field context I observed. While fieldnotes serve as the key data source in understanding the complex dynamics of fieldwork, they helped me reach the depth of the phenomenon, which the participant did not share during the interview. At the same time, fieldnotes provided powerful data for analysis moving beyond the participant's sharing, from which I realized the importance of 'comprehensive fieldnotes taking' (Schensul & LeCompte, 2013; Wolfinger, 2002). In the midst of the fieldwork, I realized the importance of better organization of fieldnotes for data analysis and report writing. In writing the fieldnotes and field diaries, I became careful not to dump my emotions, biases, perspectives, and thoughts; instead, I tried to be self-critical and reflexive. Considering the recording and journaling fieldwork as a useful data source for a deeper understanding of the study problem, it is equally important for effective organization and precise field note writing to obtain quality data.

Conclusion

As a contribution to the qualitative fieldwork complexities, this study is based on my reflective analysis of the fieldwork conducted during my PhD, where I interviewed primary school teachers to investigate their identities. Initially, I unpacked the challenges associated with entering and beginning qualitative fieldwork. Then, I explored how the context-specific complexities influence the data collection process in qualitative fieldwork.

Drawing on the PhD fieldwork experiences with the public-school teachers, this study shows that qualitative fieldwork is a dynamic activity with multiple complexities. I argue that qualitative fieldwork is not a one-shot activity but context-specific prolonged engagement with the participants. It requires a researcher's careful and flexible strategies with 'open eyes and ears' (Mishra, 2018) to tackle fieldwork-related challenges and complexities. This study does not intend to convey the impression that doing qualitative fieldwork is a complex task and has hurdles. Instead, it intends to make researchers look and plan carefully for efficient fieldwork. Based on this realm, the findings of this study identified five significant challenges and complexities associated with qualitative fieldwork. First, the stereotype mindset of a previously determined and rigid fieldwork plan is a significant challenge since the fieldwork is flexible, context-specific, and 'unpredictable' (Mahato et al., 2022). Understanding the fieldwork diversity and adopting the appropriate strategies to enter the field with a good rapport building with the gatekeeper and participant is critical. Second, qualitative research is a relational and negotiated task that depends on the reciprocity between the researcher and the participants. Maintaining only anonymity and confidentiality does not ensure ethics; research ethics should be maintained while obtaining informed consent, data collection and analysis, and report writing, which is challenging. Third, the unequal power relation between the researcher and the participant, often evident in most of the fieldwork, jeopardizes obtaining rich information and is a complex phenomenon that needs to be minimized. Such an unmatched identity due to the hierarchical system could negatively contribute to meaningful fieldwork engagement. Another, participants' understanding of research as responding to the survey/questionnaire is a critical challenge for qualitative fieldwork. Fourth, while gender matching between the researcher and participants is a critical concern of qualitative fieldwork (Subedi & Gaulee, 2023), unmatched gender creates an extra layer of complexity in obtaining information. Thus, it requires careful consideration of the gender dynamics and the cultural sensitivity of the field. Finally, keeping detailed and micro records of field jotting, writing fieldnotes, and reflexive dairy are the critical concerns of the researcher during the qualitative fieldwork that are often overlooked. While writing fieldnotes without generalization and being evaluative is challenging to qualitative researchers, their careful considerations are required in valuing the importance of organized fieldnotes as a powerful data source. Beyond writing the field jottings, it requires to collect the concerning photos, videos, and artifacts from the field as important data sources.

This study is implacable for novice researchers to understand the dynamics and complexities of fieldwork as a negotiated and context-specific concern of natural data in situ. In addition, this study suggests the researchers adopt the appropriate

mode and flexible fieldwork strategies based on the comprehensive needs assessment of the field.

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