

Introduction: ‘embedded research’ as an approach into academia for emerging researchers

Management in Education
2014, Vol 28(1) 3–5
© 2013 British Educational Leadership,
Management & Administration Society
(BELMAS)
Reprints and permission:
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0892020613508863
mie.sagepub.com


Ruth McGinity

University of Manchester, UK

Maija Salokangas

Trinity College Dublin, Ireland

Introduction to the collection:

In July 2012 a doctoral seminar was held at the University of Manchester, School of Education, which debated the challenges and implications of ‘embedded research’ as an approach into academia for emerging researchers. At this seminar eight doctoral students presented reflexive accounts about their conceptualizations of embedded research and raised issues regarding the ways in which they developed and designed collaborative research agendas with their host organizations. They also critiqued the potential embedded research partnerships can offer for the development of policy and practice within educational organizations.

The keynote speakers at the seminar reflect the multidisciplinary nature of the embedded research; in his critical analysis, Michael Apple (University of Wisconsin Madison) mapped out the landscape of societal power relations and raised important questions regarding the ethical implications of undertaking embedded research specifically in educational settings. Megan O’Neill (University of Salford) on the other hand drew from her experiences in criminal sociology to discuss the practicalities of conducting embedded research with other types of public sector groups and organizations. Although this special collection focuses upon the activities of embedded researchers from an educational perspective, we recognize that such arrangements arguably have roots within both anthropological and sociological traditions, and thus are not tied to either a specific methodological approach or to a singular discipline.

This special edition is a collection of papers from three of the presenting doctoral students: James Duggan, Sam Baars and Harriet Rowley, along with contributions from Professor Helen Gunter, University of Manchester and Kevin Hollins, Principal of an Academy that has hosted an embedded researcher. The contributors were selected to reflect how the arrangement of embedded research is experienced from the researcher, supervisory and host institutional perspectives.

Before introducing each of the papers within this special edition the following section of this introductory paper will firstly set out a working definition of embedded research

and situate the approach within existing literatures. Secondly, it moves on to highlighting the challenges and implications embedded research has for policy, practice and educational research.

What is embedded research?

By embedded researchers we mean individuals or teams who are either university-based or employed undertaking explicit research roles within host schools or other educational organizations, legitimated by staff status or membership with the purpose of identifying and implementing a collaborative research agenda. Embedded research describes a mutually beneficial relationship between academics and their host organizations whether they are public, private or third sector. The relationship typically provides the researcher with greater access to the host organization with benefits for collecting data and research funding. For the host organisation the relationship provides a bridge to academia and academic knowledge, networks and critical approaches to developing organizational policies and practices. As yet, the methodological, ethical and practical implications of embedded research have not been appropriately identified and critiqued within existing methodological and practice based literatures, and as such it was this absence that the seminar in June 2012 was intended to address, which in turn has led us to the current edited collection.

The term embedded researcher emerged as a conceptual and practical label to help understand how we were undertaking research for our doctorates. The phrase, ‘embedded’ was borrowed from the discourse in media and academia on ‘embedded journalism’, an approach to war journalism in which US reporters were attached to military units during the 2003 invasion of Iraq. This type of reportage wasn’t unheard of in previous conflicts, but it appears to be the first time the term embedded came into use in such a context; the approach was argued to provide the journalists a greater access to the unfolding news stories on the frontline (Ignatius 2010, Tuosto 2006). Important issues were raised in the following debate about the nature of information

sharing, the meaning of informed consent and confidentiality, the subject of moral responsibility and positionality and significantly the reflexive question of whose stories were being told and whose voices were being heard (Feinstein and Nicholson 2005, Haigh et al 2006, Pfau et al 2004). Since then the term embedded has been adopted in other fields or professional practice describing professionals located in settings traditionally considered to be occupied by professionals of another field; to observe, learn and/or share knowledge, ideas and/or practices. Examples of such usage are embedded librarians, an established network of law librarians located in law school clinics (Feliú and Fraser, 2012, Shumaker 2013) and embedded teachers, a collaboration between teachers and researchers coordinated by NASA in which science teachers were located in a polar research centre (Hale, 2012).

Certain parallels between these arrangements exists/pre-vails obvious, and our attempt is to be more explicit in the definition of these arrangements. For us embedded research is not reduced to a single methodological approach nor is it a branch of 'critical friendship', which can at times seem like a catch for all lucrative consultancy deals between organizations and 'producers of knowledge' (Swaffield 2007, Costa and Kallick 1993, Swaffield and MacBeath, 2005). In this sense the analogy to embedded journalists, is actually quite a useful one in that we believe research to be a political act we undertake to disrupt, de-stabilize and question the validity of assumptions that inform social mechanisms within our society, research is neither neutral nor objective. The embeddedness allows researchers to get under the skin of these organizations and ask difficult questions, granting access to see multiple perspectives as they traverse the hierarchies inevitable within such institutional apparatuses.

There is a significance that the development of a discussion centring upon 'embedded research' as an important and growing arrangement for doctoral students, occurred at the University of Manchester. That a number of doctoral students have and are currently engaging in embedded research, conducting site specific studies in schools and Local Authorities in the Greater Manchester area, has been influenced by the strong tradition of case study research in educational studies (Hargreaves: 1967; Lacey: 1970; Beynon: 1985), especially as grown and developed by researchers at Manchester since the 1960s (Lacey, in Ball, 1981, p. xii). Such studies were patterned together through methodological approaches, with the immersion of the researcher into school life and thus the blurring of lines between practitioner and researcher. Although this approach differs considerably to the development of embedded research as an approach to case study research, the approach is part of a broader institutional legacy, which has had an influential impact upon the development of the sociology of education as a field.

Issues for research, policy and practice

According to our experiences as embedded researchers, as well as the accounts shared by others in this edited

collection, we claim that embedded research arrangements tend to be complex in nature. Broader national as well as local politico-economic circumstances have implications to these arrangements, as schools and Local Authorities in which the embedded research takes place are dynamic institutions and affected by a great number of external factors. For instance budgets can be cut (all the more likely during the period of economic crisis through which these researchers were working), re-alignments can occur, and in the face of the march towards greater diversity of provision in the marketplace, these organizations may undergo extensive restructuring of personnel on a regular basis. All this has implications to embedded research and as such the fragility of agenda setting in a collaborative environment identifies a researcher's need for flexibility and adaptation, alongside rigor, integrity and a commitment to ethical practices.

In addition to broader national and local contexts, organisation-specific power-relations, cultures and interests also affect embedded research. Examples of organisation-specific complexities can be drawn from the funding arrangements of embedded research, as all of the doctoral students writing for this special collection had their PhDs funded to some degree by the institution or organization they were embedded within. In each case the host organization provided the student with a member of staff status solely as a researcher, with no teaching or other responsibilities attached. The implications of such arrangements are discussed in more detail in our concluding article, however it is worth noting here how such research partnerships and activities are funded goes to the core of the relationship between researcher and researched (Cheek 2005) and thus illustrates that embedded researchers must rigorously interrogate the dynamism of the power relations in which they are working within.

Such questions provide insights into the complexities of these arrangements, which can start to be addressed through the analysis of in depth case studies. As embedded research arrangements have not yet been thoroughly defined and critiqued, there is an urgent need for research to tackle these arrangements and provide us with more understanding of what embedded research encompasses to each party involved, especially if these arrangements become more popular. Sam Baars opens up this discussion with his article *The retreat of the state and the future of social science* in which he conceptualizes, and critiques the possibilities that the embedded research approach holds for social and specifically educational research. The article draws from the author's experiences as an embedded researcher in an academy school. From the broader societal contexts of embedded research, the focus shifts to more specific organizational contexts. In his article: *Critical friendship and critical orphanship: embedded research of an English local authority initiative*, James Duggan addresses challenges an embedded researcher faces when undertaking research in an organization undergoing change. His critical reflections on the embedded research partnership with a local authority highlights the dynamic nature of these arrangements, and how organizational

changes have direct implications to the embedded research process. In the third paper *Going beyond the procedure: engaging with the ethical complexities of being an embedded researcher*, Harriet Rowley addresses issues regarding ethics of embedded research within the framework of positionality. Rowley's reflections echo from her experiences from conducting ethnographic research within a sponsored academy, and the ethical issues that arose throughout this research process. What each of the papers bring is an acknowledgement that challenges are thrown up by shifting politico-economic circumstances and that embedded researchers again need to display flexibility, adaptation and reflexivity in order to cope with these issues when attempting to undertake collaborative agenda setting.

The articles from the embedded researchers are book-ended by contributions from Professor Helen Gunter, an academic supervisor for an embedded researcher, and a principal, Kevin Hollins, whose school hosted an embedded researcher. These contributions provide an incredibly useful lens by discussing the implications of such an arrangement from a practitioner and an academic supervisory perspective.

This collection of articles attempts to target an existing gap in research and bring into light implications these arrangements have on the researcher and the host organization alike. We anticipate that by sharing these experiences we are in a better position to further develop the framework for best practice with the intention of developing a wider understanding of the processes and implications of embedded research. We consider that a platform for discussion on approaches to embedded research is not only useful to the academics and researchers involved but also to a wider audience, as we seek to engage with organizations in which such research may take place. As such we anticipate this collection of papers will speak to the interests of BELMAS, by discussing and critiquing the implications of embedded research as a way to strengthen ties between educational research and practice.

References

- Ball S (1981) *Beechside Comprehensive: A case study of secondary schooling*. Cambridge University Press.
- Beynon J (1983) Ways in and staying in: Fieldwork as problem solving. In M. Hammersley (Ed.), *The ethnography of schooling*. Humberside: Nafferton Books.
- Cheek J (2005) The practice and politics of funded qualitative research, in N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln (eds.) *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed.) Thousand Oaks, CA; pp. 387–410.
- Costa A and Kallick B (1993) 'Through the lens of a critical friend'. *Educational Leadership*, 51(2): 49–51
- Ignatius D (2012) 'The dangers of embedded journalism, in war and politics'. *The Washington Post*, 2 May 2010.
- Feinstein A and Nicholson D (2005) 'Embedded journalists in the Iraq war: Are they at greater psychological risk?' *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 12(2): 129–132
- Feliú V and Frazer H (2012) 'Embedded librarians: teaching legal research as a lawyering skill'. *Journal of Legal Education*, 61(4): 540–559.
- Haigh M, Pfau M, Danesi J, Tallmon R, Bunko T, Nyberg S, Thompson B, Babin C, Cardella S, Mink M and Temple B (2006) 'A Comparison of Embedded and Nonembedded Print Coverage of the U.S. Invasion and Occupation of Iraq'. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 11(2): 139–153
- Hale G (2012) 'Embedded educators: teacher research experience in Greenland with Operation IceBridge'. NASA.
- Hargreaves D (1967) *Social relations in a secondary school*. London: Routledge.
- Hirsch D and Beckhelling J (2012) *Child poverty map of the UK. End Child Poverty*.
- Lacey C (1970) *Hightown Grammar: The school as a social system*. Manchester University Press.
- Pfau M, Haigh M, Gettle M, Donelly M, Scott G, Warr D. and Wittenberg E (2004) Embedding Journalists in Military Combat Units: Impact on Newspaper Story Frames and Tone. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 81(1): 74–88
- Shumaker D (2013) The embedded librarian: Exploring new, embedded roles for librarians in organisations of all types. Available from: <http://embeddedlibrarian.com/about/> Accessed: 15th June 2013
- Swaffield S (2007) Light touch critical friendship. *Improving Schools*, 10(3): 205–219.
- Swaffield S. and MacBeath J (2005) School self-evaluation and the role of a critical friend. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 35(2): 239–252.
- Tuosto K (2008) 'The grunt truth' of embedded journalism: the new media/military relationship'. *Stanford Journal of international relations*, 10(1): 20–31

Author biographies

Ruth McGinity is in the concluding stages of her PhD in which she has looked at how the development and enactment of localised policy processes position a range of actors in a case study school, at a time of rapid educational reform in England. She also works as a lecturer in Educational Leadership and Policy at the University of Manchester. Ruth.mcginity@manchester.ac.uk

Maija Salokangas examined governance in a chain of academies in her PhD research. Currently she works as a lecturer in Educational Leadership and Management at Trinity College Dublin. salokam@tcd.ie