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A Reflective Analysis on Strategic Approaches Implemented in Accessing and Conducting Interviews with Elites in Sri Lanka.

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Abstract

In this paper, I intend to share my experiences and reflections on the process of how the organisational elites, the gatekeepers and the participants of my study, were accessed and interviewed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The three-fold objectives of this paper are: negotiating access, the strategic approaches implemented by me as the researcher in accessing and conducting interviews, and sharing my lessons with novice researchers, who work in similar contexts. In the discussion, an emphasis is placed on accessing and interviewing elites attached to national, provincial and school-level in Sri Lanka, by considering them as single-type elites and different groups of elites as introduced by Li (2021). The discussion is based on my experiences and supervisory records that I maintained during the data collection process.

Introduction

My doctoral study focuses on the new policy introduced to develop Sri Lankan school leaders as professionally advanced human resources. I investigate how the execution of this policy meets the professional development needs of novice principals in Sri Lanka. In line with this idea, different stakeholders (policymakers, policy implementers and policy receivers) were interviewed to understand their feelings, perceptions and expectations regarding the new policy implementation. Within this study, the administrative officers attached to the Ministry of Education (MoE) and Provincial Ministries of Education (PMoE) were identified as the policymakers and implementers, while the novice school principals were identified as policy receivers. The study stakeholders were also identified as elites who were attached to the Sri Lanka Educational Administrative Service and Sri Lanka Principal Service as well as being highly skilled, knowledgeable, and busy.

With reference to the elite interviews, Liu (2018) states that they are difficult, and require careful planning (p.2), based on her experiences during her doctoral degree. Taking Liu's experience into account, I will first discuss the methodological literature on elite interviews. Afterwards, I will be sharing my experiences as a novice researcher in accessing and conducting interviews with elites who are educational administrators

in Sri Lanka. The discussion is based on my own experiences and reflections included in the field notes and the supervisory records maintained by me. It covers two aspects; how I planned and executed the selection and how I gained access to elites for interviews in conducting interviews.

Elite Interviewing as a Method

In academic literature, the term 'elite' is defined and used in different ways. Zuckerman (1972) provides a comprehensive explanation to the term elite as, ''…they are very top, a typically thin layer of people who exhibit especially great influence, authority, or power, and who generally have the highest prestige within what is a prestigious collectively, to begin with'' (p.159). In line with Zuckerman's (1972) definition, many researchers have identified the elite as a small segment of people in society who have close proximity to power (Vergara, 2013; Liu, 2018; McClure & McNaughtan, 2021). Further, in organisational research, elites are defined as people occupying senior organisational positions (Empson, 2018), such as government policymakers. Generally, they occupy leadership roles (Scally et al., 2021), policymaking roles, decision-making roles and implementation roles (Maramwidze, 2016), which influence the behaviour of others within the organization and society. In light of the definition of elites in organisations, the next section examines how elites in organisations were interviewed.

Numerous studies have attempted to explain interviewing elites in different contexts such as political, sociological, economic, and educational. It is also pointed out that interviewing elites differs from interviewing non-elites in any context (Mikecz, 2012; Empson, 2018). Li (2021), who examined recent literature on elite interviewing has identified two aspects of interviews, namely, interviewing a single type of elite and interviewing different groups of elites. The first aspect provides a common understanding of elites while the second provides an opportunity to understand the activities, values, attitudes and evident patterns of conflicts and concerns among different groups of elites (Hoffmann-Lange, 2007). Further, Li (2021) highlights the lack of systematic understanding when interviewing different elite groups in the literature, which is needed at present. In an attempt to fill this gap, this paper discusses how to access and conduct interviews with single-type elites and different groups of elites in educational institutions, who are both professionals and organisational elites in the field of education in , during the data collection process of my doctoral study. Further, it will also discuss how I worked under pressure and how I had to change/adjust my plans on conducting interviews, owing to difficult circumstances like the global pandemic and the industrial action that the school principals, who are one group of stakeholders in the study, were engaged in.

Process of decision-making and procedures implemented

Maramwidze (2016) states that the "process of gaining access to elites depends entirely on the category of the elites being pursued" (p.159). In line with the explanation on elites in organisations, I carefully thought of whom to access first, how to access them and how to build and maintain a trustworthy relationship throughout the interviewing process. In addition, I also paid specific attention to the BERA Guidelines (2018) which stress that "researchers should think about whether they should approach gatekeepers before directly approaching participants" (p.10). This guided me on which path to follow. In line with this, my engagement in the pre-interview stage in accessing gatekeepers and how I progressed to interviewing single-type elites and groups within the Sri Lankan context are discussed in detail below.

Accessing Elites Who are Gatekeepers

To commence the fieldwork, it is important to receive preliminary permission from the gatekeepers to access the research site. Therefore, my first engagement was accessing the MoE in Sri Lanka because it guards access to research sites as a central gatekeeper as illustrated by Busher & James (2012). In reflecting on the access of the national and provincial level gatekeepers, I identify two stages of access: while being abroad and while being in the country.

Attempts while being abroad

In order to contact the MoE, my plan was to send an email because by this time I was continuing with my doctoral study in the UK. Therefore, as suggested by Maramwidze (2016) I checked the official website of the MoE, but I could not get proper information on whom to contact. Therefore, upon my request, one of my colleagues at the Open University of Sri Lanka visited the MoE with a copy of my request letter to ascertain the procedure to obtain a permission letter to collect data for my doctoral study. Her visit helped me to receive the official email address and the WhatsApp number of the officer to begin the necessary initial permission process.

After receiving the contact details, I sent an informal text message and an official request letter as an email to the officer. In response, the officer agreed to issue a permission letter, but asked me about the template for the letter, which took me by surprise. I was under the impression that the MoE would have a standard letter format to grant permission, as there are many who come to the MoE requesting permission letters to access and conduct research within Sri Lanka. I suggested that I would send a draft template to the officer, to which he agreed. When drafting it, I referred to the sample transfer documents of postgraduate researchers that were posted in the online space provided for Post Graduate Research students in the School of Education, at

the University of Leeds. The sample permission letters were very helpful when drafting mine. I received the permission letter to access national, provincial and school-level officers to collect data for my study within a very short period. I believe that my request was well accommodated, as it was forwarded through a senior academic of a national university and an administrative officer in the MoE. This experience provides evidence that personal and influential contacts work better than the formal procedures within the Sri Lankan context. Situations like this must be quite common in developing countries like Sri Lanka because the procedures are not formalised with follow-up mechanisms. The permission letter from the MoE was instrumental for my ethical clearance, as it provided evidence of following the proper procedure in conducting the study ethically as illustrated in the BERA ethical guidelines (2018).

I had no problem in contacting the respective sample of elites who are high in ranks in the profession directly, as I had MoE's approval which authorised me to contact the necessary administrative bodies for research purposes. To start off the process, I sent an email introducing myself and the study and requested the details of the study from the relevant institutional heads who are administrative officers at national and provincial levels. This was important for two reasons. Firstly, based on the ethical dimensions highlighted in BERA (2018), I thought that it was ethical as well as polite to inform them as they act as gatekeepers and to also obtain their support to conduct the study. Secondly, they had the details of the study participants I needed to recruit to interview, for both piloting and the main study. I was aware that the necessary details would not be given to anyone at once for reasons like privacy, official responsibilities, and ethical considerations. Therefore, sending an official written request was a necessity. In contacting and making the request to the relevant administrative officers, my options of communication were restricted to email and telephone, as I was in the UK continuing with my doctoral study. Due to the pandemic, officials worked from home, and I was unable to contact the respective administrative officers on their office numbers. Therefore, my contact with them was restricted to email.

When sending the initial email to request access, I pondered over the choice of language. Although the official languages in the country are Sinhalese and Tamil, the linking language for official purposes in Sri Lanka is English. However, I had my doubts about the receiver's fluency when sending the email seeking permission and relevant details solely in English. Therefore, I decided to send the email in Sinhalese and attached a translation of the email in English. This could be a situation that many researchers face when sending emails for research purposes where English is not the mother tongue.

I sent emails to selected national and provincial authorities requesting help to obtain details in conducting the research, as I was unable to return to Sri Lanka for data collection due to restrictions imposed in the UK and on international travel. As I did not receive any response to my emails, I contacted one of the provincial administrative officers through a WhatsApp message. In the message, I introduced myself and mentioned my need as it was convenient and popularly used as mentioned by Sánchez-Moya and Cruz-Moya, 2015. The reply was 'I will contact you', which did not happen. Being a native Sri Lankan, I had doubts about receiving a reply to my email as there were instances where emails went unanswered by respective officers. As I neither had the contact details of the study participants nor access to documents, I could not progress with the data collection. Further, within the Sri Lankan context, face-to-face conversation is needed in order to progress in accessing elites who are administrative officers attached to national, provincial and school levels. In my case, I believe that they were not motivated in replying to an unknown email. As I failed to contact the authorities in Sri Lanka, it was essential to move to the site of the study (Sri Lanka) as soon as COVID-19 travel restrictions were lifted in 2021. This return was vital to meet the officials face-to-face and progress with accessing and interviewing in the collection of data for the study.

Attempts after return to Sri Lanka

Prior to my return to Sri Lanka to commence the data collection, my supervisors advised me on access, negotiation and how to conduct interviews with elites as a novice researcher. In the discussion, one of my supervisors advised me,

> ''…best-laid plans always change. So, you just have to be ready if
> something happens. If somebody says, 'Oh, I can't make this interview'
> or 'I have to drop out' or whatever, 'OK? No problem'. You just have to
> be very flexible. It happens to everybody''.

(Supervisor X on 24th April 2021)

The above words rang in my mind every time I contacted organisational elites. They helped me to maintain my position as a doctoral researcher, and not as an academic from a university. In addition, they helped me to remain calm and unaffected each time my request was rejected and I felt low due to rude responses, unanswered calls and unanswered emails during the process.

At the beginning of the process, I faced problems in obtaining physical access, as the office premises were closed and work from home was implemented due to lockdown restrictions. The only option left was to contact the relevant officials over the phone. In identifying whom to contact, checking the official directories as suggested by

Maramwidze (2016) and checking the official website was very useful. To contact the three national-level officers who were in charge of relevant departments, I called their personal numbers which were gained through known official contacts as their official numbers were unanswered. When making the call, I first introduced myself as a lecturer attached to a national university in Sri Lanka cum doctoral researcher from the University of Leeds, and secondly, I introduced my study which is on the training needs of school principals. Finally, I explained the purpose of making the call to the respective administrator and the reasons for seeking help. As gatekeepers at national level, they were very supportive and made arrangements for me to visit soon after the lockdown restrictions were eased for work purposes. During these visits I accessed documents and obtained contact details of national and provincial level officers.

As I received a positive welcome and maximum support in obtaining permission and contact details to contact national level officers, I thought that I would receive the same support from provincial officials as well. However, my experience with them differed and it was quite unexpected. As I had to collect data from two provinces, I called the head of the department in both respective provinces during office hours, to gain permission to obtain details of the study participants. In failing to contact them through official numbers due to their busy schedules and limited work hours because of the pandemic, calling them on their personal contact numbers given by the national level officers was an option. When doing so, I introduced myself as a doctoral candidate as well as a lecturer and conveyed my research need. One such official's aggressive and impolite response was "how are you conducting research without our permission?" disregarding the ministerial approval. His authoritative response made me feel really low and I did not want to contact him again. But I had to collect data, so I decided to change the approach when contacting provincial level officers in the respective province A. In the next instance, I called one of my colleagues who is a good listener and also a good adviser as I wanted to ease the frustration I was experiencing due to the former conversation. When reflecting on my experience, I believe that it is important to share the highs and lows of the doctoral journey with someone who is close to you, as it helps to ease the tensions that you are experiencing.

By referring to the literature of Glas (2021) in 2014 as a doctoral researcher, I managed to gain access to a provincial administrative officer through one of his colleagues with whom he had a good professional relationship. I implemented the same strategy followed by Glas (2021) as I believe it was an effective lesson to learn in order to gain access. This colleague called the provincial administrative officer, conveyed my need to him and got an appointment on my behalf to have a telephone conversation with him to get an appointment for the interview. This strategy was a success because the administrative officer considered a request coming from one of their colleagues, as

opposed to an external request. I implemented this strategy by recruiting senior administrators to conduct the interviews for both the piloting and main study. Glas (2021), reflecting on his own experience, stated that the elites apologised for not attending in the first instance. In contrast, in my experience, they never apologised or even acknowledged or mentioned the receipt of my emails, WhatsApp messages or calls. Facing this experience, as a researcher, it helped me in learning how to handle and negotiate with different people in different ways. Further, as a researcher, I learnt not to take rejections personally which is very important, especially when working with elites who are probably working very hard in extremely demanding situations during the pandemic.

However, in Province B, I experienced a totally different response from Province A. Here I received the contact details of the administrative officer from the MoE.

Though I contacted the officer in province A through a known contact, I had no such opportunity to contact the officials in province B. So, I directly contacted him and requested permission to enter the site as a gatekeeper and requested them to take part in the study as a participant as well. Being an experienced principal and a mature administrative officer, he agreed to join as a study participant without hesitation. His positive response and helping hand pleased me and made me comfortable in continuing the process of interviewing not only him but also the other participants as well. This positive response of the administrative officer is quite motivating, helped develop my self-confidence and also gave a positive feeling in progressing with the interviewing.

Access Elites as Study Participants

In contacting the elites for interviews I implemented two strategies. The first was obtaining their contact details (official and personal phone numbers) from the MoE and PMoE in order to contact them for research purposes. Secondly, I used the snowball sampling method in finding some of the study participants who were both administrative officers and principals. Implementing the snowball method, I selected individuals who had similar experiences first and then they were asked to nominate others who had similar experiences to them as explained by Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtle (2010), which was a success.

All the contact details which were on papers were stored in a locked cupboard and the computer and the phone were password protected and only accessible to myself. These measures were implemented in order to ensure data protection.

I contacted each participant individually through a voice call as a form of initial contact. During the call, I provided a self-introduction and details of the study verbally. The

participant information sheets, consent forms and meeting details via Zoom were sent to all participants through either email or WhatsApp as requested by the participants. The replies on WhatsApp messages were received in the means of a thumbs up (👍) or smile (😀). Thus, it was seen how top-level senior officers were very polite and sent their willingness to join the interview without any hesitation through email. Their reply to my email was short and to the point, which was similar to the experience of Zuckerman (1972) as a PhD candidate. A simple example is shown below:

> Dear Sasheeka
>
> Sorry for the delay.
>
> I have completed the form with Signatures and sent it herewith.
>
> Shall we have the meeting on 20.09.2021 *Poya-day* [Government Holiday in Sri Lanka] around 10.00 am?
>
> Highest Regards,
>
> (National Level Administrative Officer -1)

On the other hand, some elites at national and provincial organisations proved to be challenging. They replied with a "yes" but neither gave a date nor responded to the WhatsApp messages or calls. This reminded me of my supervisor's words on how to respond to rejections as "Ok, thank you". Unfortunately, the interviews to be conducted with the two administrative officers were significant due to their exclusive involvement with the leadership training provided for school principals at national and provincial levels which is the focus of my study. After failing to contact them for three months, I finally drafted the following message:

> Hello! Hope you are doing well during these challenging times. I understand that you are very busy. Therefore, I shall be thankful if you can nominate any other administrative officer similar to your rank, whom I can contact for an interview about the principals training offered by your department. Thanks for your help throughout.

For the above message, both of them had the same immediate response stating, "I can join you for the interview tomorrow…". I feel that this shows their attitudes towards interviews. They may have delayed in joining the interview due to their un/occupied schedules un/intentionally. However, when I sought their help to find another administrative officer, they did not like another person commenting on a programme that was in their hands. This might be one of the reasons that they joined the interview at the last moment.

I experienced that principals were quite flexible and friendly when compared to the administrative officers. Further, although they were supporting industrial action at the time, they were positive in giving their consent for the interview, as this is an academic project, which provided them with an opportunity to share their experiences. In contacting them, I directly called them and sent all the details either as a WhatsApp message (which was preferred by almost all) or as an email. The most helpful response I received from them was them coming up with a convenient date and time for conducting the interview within a day or two.

Conducting Interviews

There is much literature highlighting that merely obtaining consent and conducting the interview does not make it a successful interview (Goldstein, 2002; Darbi & Hall, 2014; Li, 2021). In order to get good quality information and conduct a successful interview with elites in organisations, developing a rapport and establishing trust are crucial (Darbi & Hall, 2014; McClure & McNaughtan, 2021). Therefore, I always maintained a friendly and confidential atmosphere within the process by means of verbal communication and action. Before commencing the interview, I introduced myself, my research, data storage, making the data anonymous, analysing the data in detail and allowed the participants to make clarifications about anything they needed. Further, as I was also affiliated with a higher educational organisation, my personal identification as an academic could not be concealed when accessing elites. Therefore, I was always cautious and mindful about making clear I identified as a doctoral researcher.

In preparing to interview, the questions were developed in line with the research questions covering four areas namely personal details, induction training needs, professional development needs, and changes to be expected based on the new policy introduction for school leaders in Sri Lanka. I had more than 35 sub-questions planned for 90 minutes which was reduced to four open-ended questions covering the four areas in line with the supervisor's feedback. Thus, the sub-questions were kept as prompts to be used. Further, they only needed to be used if the interviewees had not mentioned any of these points in their response to the main open questions.

Before conducting the interviews, at the supervision meeting, supervisor Y said "I think out of many important things, the first one is to listen very carefully to what is being said so that you can follow it with probes to look into things more deeply" (on 28th July 2021). This guidance was very helpful as I listened carefully to what was being said and picked up on the expressions, feelings, and comments made by the elites in mining for more information. Further supervisor Y said, "…the skill of the interviewer is so important in what we call the co-construction of knowledge. A very good interviewer will get much more knowledge and information from the same person" (on

28th July 2021). This informative discussion assisted me in gathering more details from each interviewee through probes by way of follow-up questions as mentioned by Given (2008). For example, one of the principals said, "I wanted to develop a creative school…" so my follow-up question was "Oh, that's very interesting. Could you tell me a little bit more about the skills and assistance that you require as a principal in developing a creative school?", which led to digging deeper into his training and development needs and the present context of training which is relevant and useful for my study. I was able to gather such detailed new insights that were possible only through careful listening.

There were, however, a few instances where the follow-up question was complicated as I added more information to it and that confused the interviewee. As a result, the interviewee asked me to repeat the question or rephrase the question to be clear about what was being questioned, which made me realise my mistake. At the same time, I felt both excited to have recognised the mistake and ashamed of having made the mistake, however, I had the confidence to not show my excitement but continue the interview from that point onwards carefully. Learning a lesson from this, I was very careful to ask a follow-up question only on one point and keep notes on what to ask further, from thereon.

Most of the time, the administrators and principals answered the question to the point, by relating their views to their experiences at national and provincial level policy development and implementation. Further, within the interview, I experienced that they are strategic in covering up the institutional weakness when implementing the policy introduced in the context. This is a very similar situation experienced by Empson (2018), when senior professors who were highly skilled at answering avoided difficult questions during the interviewing. However, there were instances where few of the participants expressed ideas out of topic. In such instances, I had to patiently wait and rephrase the question at a different point during the process of the interview as explained by Kaliber, 2019. This strategy helped in obtaining their ideas in a deeper manner, as by then, the interviewee had already passed the point where they had deviated from the question. Sometimes the participant himself realised that he had deviated from the question and asked the question again to answer.

In academic literature, papers written by doctoral researchers have mentioned that their experiences with elites were difficult. Explaining the experiences, they stated that there were instances where elites avoided difficult questions and some elites were horrified during the interview process by the use of hard words with long faces (Rice, 2010; Empson, 2018). In contrast, although I had difficulties in accessing participants, the interviews were friendly and informative with rich insights and experiences. Even

though all the interviews were conducted via Zoom, a friendly atmosphere was created throughout, with smiles and initial greetings and I both welcomed and thanked the officers for joining the interview. Quite importantly, my self-introduction allowed them to ask me anything about myself and my research, which created a friendly and trustworthy relationship when meeting for the first time via Zoom.

The use of technology

Prior to, and when conducting, the interviews via Zoom I faced technical difficulties which were generated by the system. When I used Zoom for the first time, I used the free version to set up the meetings and some of the official IT systems generated automated warning messages which requested participants not to use the previously sent link. In overcoming this problem, I switched to the paid version of Zoom, provided by the University of Leeds. In addition, there were instances where the interviews were interrupted as interviewees had no data, technical problems with the internet and no signal due to bad weather or distance (rural), to continue with the interview. In such instances, I had to wait until they fixed their problem. Further, connection problems and low bandwidth were problems that I experienced, which are very common in developing countries like Sri Lanka. All the interviews were recorded from the beginning and stored in a password-protected M: drive at the University of Leeds.

In addition to the above, I experienced how most senior officers who were very busy, selected a weekend or a government holiday to participate in the interview as they wanted to be actively involved in the interview without interruptions. Furthermore, they told me that it was a pleasure to join in with the knowledge construction and share their experiences for research purposes.

Reflections

My experiences showcase how the traditional face-to-face method is still at the forefront in accessing gatekeepers when obtaining their permission to access the field. I observed that not using technology or formal procedures were main reasons as to why the officials opted for face-to-face methods when granting their permission as gatekeepers. On the other hand, as gatekeepers, they could also have been concerned about researchers either being or not being scrupulous when adhering to ethical principles. In line with the concerns and intentions of gatekeepers, these situations are very common in developing countries like Sri Lanka. Based on my experience, I think that researchers need to have a sound understanding of the context and the intentions of gatekeepers in safeguarding the participants.

Nevertheless, new communication apps like WhatsApp and platforms like Zoom have made communication during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic way easier than before. Further, during the initial stage of access it was witnessed how all types of elites widely use modern forms of communication like WhatsApp rather than telephone or email. I observed how WhatsApp messages were faster in contacting elites than email or telephone communication. It made it easier for me to see whether the recipient has seen my message or not, as the read messages were denoted by the blue ticks.

In the above sections, I explained how some elites neglected my efforts to contact them. Most often, they did not respond or contact me again despite stating "I will contact you". In this situation, I felt reluctant to send messages over and over for multiple reasons. Firstly, I felt that they were busy and had no time to accommodate a request from an unknown source. Secondly, since I was out of the country and the official could not see me in person, I realised that it was difficult for them to trust a mere message. Thirdly, I did not want to trouble them but wanted to be strategic in obtaining details and in recruiting the officer as a study participant for interviewing purposes in the future. All these made me be patient, think critically and work practically. Further, when I first experienced failure during the process of accessing gatekeepers, that I developed my patience which I call 'silent strategic patience'. I had to practice this throughout the whole process of access, communication and negotiation. Following my initial negative experience, I thought both forward and backwards about any act of mine and waited patiently for the response before contacting the elites. When thinking forward about my acts, I thought about the best time to contact them (either before office hours or in the evening before 7.00 p.m.), and that it was best not to contact them during the weekend or a holiday. I also thought about the best way to draft a message which was simple and whether it will be possible to keep my camera switched on throughout the interview as the researcher. Thinking backwards, I carefully thought about my strengths and weaknesses along with the mistakes and added them to Diaro, a reflective journal which I electronically maintain. Entering both my highs and lows within the process was very useful when planning for the next steps within the process. There were times where I had to wait longer than expected in getting an appointment for the interview. This waiting delayed the data collection process to some extent. However, any doctoral candidate could face these challenges and I believe sharing my experience will help in shaping their processes in accessing and conducting interviews with elites in organisations, in similar contexts. Further, I believe that when facing challenges or difficulties, developing 'silent strategic patience' within a researcher is vital in accessing and interviewing the elites at different levels in any context.

In addition, I have shared my different experiences with elites as individuals and as groups as explained by Li (2021). I experienced differences in access depending on

their power relations, knowledge, decision-making power and availability. Further, I believe that I implemented strategic approaches in accessing and conducting interviews such as giving ample time to respond, accessing through known channels, and wording the messages in a manner that motivated the participants. In addition, I believe that it is important to identify the personality of each individual as well as a group, especially in accessing and negotiating.

When reflecting upon the experiences gained by accessing and negotiating with national-level and provincial-level elites in organisations considered as a group, I feel that direct access to administrators at the national level was a little difficult due to their tight schedules. Irrespective of this initial difficulty, after contacting the national-level administrators, I was able to infer that they gave priority to fulfilling my research needs because they were interested in supporting junior researchers like me. Further, it shows that national-level elites gave up their free time on weekends and national holidays to talk to me which was extremely kind of them. It emphasizes their commitment to research, to support researchers, and also their professionalism. Additionally, when comparing national-level administrators with provincial-level administrators, I feel that national-level senior officers were much more supportive and understanding in providing support for research purposes compared to provincial-level administrative elites.

Further, when considering administrative officers as individuals, I experienced that those who have directly joined the administrative service as administrators without prior experience were more difficult to access as compared to administrators who had experience in teaching or principal service. When reflecting upon the experience in contacting the elites in organisations as a group, I feel that their maturity, experience and long years of service in the field of education as a teacher or a principal act as an influence in accessing them as gatekeepers. Further, I feel that as individuals reflect upon their own personal experiences faced while being involved in research for their postgraduate studies, their official involvements made them interested in providing help without any hesitation.

The school principals generally being busy were difficult to contact due to school activities during the day. However, I managed to contact them and get an appointment easily due to two reasons. First, they were working from home due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions imposed. Secondly, the principals were involved in industrial action during the period, which provided me with an opportunity to get a time slot from them to conduct the interview without any hassle. Further, I appreciate how despite being engaged in industrial action during the period, all of them agreed to join in for interviews via Zoom without hesitation. This shows their positive attitude in supporting

academic engagement and also their willingness for knowledge construction by sharing their perceptions, experiences and understanding the new policy introduced on principal training in Sri Lanka.

I experienced the power relationship more acutely within the process of access and interviews with principals rather than with administrative officers. I feel that the principals felt that there was a hierarchical difference between them, being attached to school, and me to a university. Therefore, being contacted by an academic for research purposes was considered as a difficult and important job by them, a job that was respected. Further, while working with the principals, I felt that they saw my engagement as a difficult job with knowledge construction. So I realised that their understanding led to the development of the power relation between me as the researcher and the principal as the participant.

Further, all the principals addressed me as 'Madam' throughout the process whereas all the administrative officers addressed me by my name which was a significant difference between the administrative officers and the principals. I felt very comfortable when being referred to by my name, rather than being called Madam. However, I did not request to be called by my name, as I forgot to do so due to being more focused on the conduct of the interview over how they addressed me. On the other hand, I was careful to pay due respect to principals as school leaders as well as elites within the school context. I always addressed the ladies as 'Miss' and the gentlemen as 'Sir', in order to give them their respect. These are commonly used phrases in the context, which also helped to minimize the impact of power relations between me and the principals who were the participants of the study.

Conclusion

In this reflective article, I have shared my experiences about accessing and interviewing elites who are administrators in different capacities within different educational organisations in Sri Lanka. The process of contacting the elites was challenging due to their busy schedules and the imposed COVID-19 restrictions. Within the process, I had an overall plan and an idea of 'what next'. Although the overall plan was implemented, steps within the plan had to be changed due to unavoidable circumstances, like the busy schedules of the elites. There were instances where my plans and expectations were not met as expected. In such instances, I had to wait, rethink or re-start from another angle. In my experience, I believe that there is no hard and fast rule to follow when accessing and conducting interviews with elites. According to Goldstein (2002) "getting the interview' is more art than science" (p.669). Therefore, I believe that being successful in accessing and interviewing is an artistic and strategic

skill that is developed by novice researchers by being theoretically skilled while being engaged in the process. In addition, I believe in the importance of engaging in constructive discussions with the supervisors about how novices plan to conduct the interviews. These discussions are extremely helpful to prevent oneself from falling into pitfalls within the process, as the supervisors who are experienced researchers are well aware of. Further, I believe that novice researchers should be strengthened from their own strategic approaches to access and negotiate with organisational elites, by having a sound understanding of the context. This lays the foundation for developing trust and understanding between the novice researcher as the interviewer and the elites as the interviewees. All these points collectively matter for the successful completion of the interview as an effective tool for data collection. Finally, every step within the process and the qualities of the researcher cannot be easily learnt from books, but rather, are embodied and also conferred from experience.

Acknowledgments

Bio

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