Implementation of remote data collection methods for qualitative research in a global pandemic: reflections from fieldwork in Algeria

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Abstract

A wealth of empirical and theoretical literature has shown that different school subjects and disciplines have different importance (Kususanto and Fui, 2012; Resh and Benavot, 2009; Fransis, 2002; Ayalon and Yogev, 1997; Bleazby, 2015). In the Algerian education system, students, at the age of 15, have to choose either a science pathway or a literary pathway to study at secondary schools. I employed a qualitative study to explore how the relative value students have around secondary school pathways shapes who they think they are and how they feel about themselves, and how these self-perceptions and feelings are influenced by broader socialising forces inside and outside the school. This study was conducted by carrying out a students' focus group and interviews with students, teachers, pedagogic counsellors[3] and parents. The COVID 19 outbreak has major impacts worldwide, including on the research community. My research was influenced by this pandemic at many levels. In this reflective paper, I address how the emergence of COVID-19 impacted my qualitative research design in terms of two domains: first, site and participant selection; second, data collection methods. I will highlight my experience of remote fieldwork during the COVID-19 pandemic with all its ups and downs, to encourage reflexivity and flexibility in conducting remote qualitative research.

Research Context and Aim

The educational system in Algeria is composed of three main cycles namely primary, middle and secondary (Bulletin official de L'Education Nationale, 2008). The management of these three levels is entrusted to the Ministry of National Education (Bulletin official de L' Education Nationale, 2008). The main focus of this research study is secondary schooling which is three years in length. At the age of 15/16, students can choose either the academic stream or vocational stream. If they choose the academic stream, they can further choose between the Science pathway (SP) or the Literary pathway (LP). The subjects taken for the pathways are approximately the same, (Technology as a subject is only taught in SP), but the weighting system and the taught content of these subjects are different. That is, the Literary subjects weighting is higher in LP than SP and the Scientific subjects weighting is higher in SP than LP.

[3] Pedagogical counsellors are responsible for streaming students either to the literary pathway or science pathway. The criteria through which the pedagogic-counsellor streams students to either of the two pathways is dependent on the students' preference, their overall performance in their 4th year at middle school and the directions of the counsellor him/herself (Radio Algérienne, 2015).

There is a set of standards through which students are streamed to their assigned pathway (Radio Algérienne, 2015):

- the results of the *Brevet d'Enseignement Fondamental* exam (at the end of middle schooling, students should take a national test that grants them access to secondary education);
- the directions of their counsellors;
- the overall performance in their fourth year at middle school;
- the number of available places in each pathway.

It is worth noting that while first-year science students are allowed by the secondary school education policy to change the pathway to the Literary pathway, LP students do not enjoy the same right to transfer. Not only that, moving to the post-secondary sector, SP students can choose any humanities related fields; however, LP students do not have such an option. Their program enrolments are exclusive to humanities fields. Furthermore, to secure a place in the Science pathway, students need to achieve high grades not only in science subjects but also literary subjects, while there is no prerequisite for getting into the Literary pathway.

In the Algerian education system, this situation calls into question whether secondary school pathways possess the same perceived importance and whether students in both pathways have equal access to different educational opportunities and local labour markets. This, in turn, raises the question whether a degree in sciences is worth more than a degree in humanities. This may lead to the impression that the outcomes of the inequality of these two educational pathways would not only affect students' future educational and job opportunities, but also their learning experiences, and how they see and value themselves as learners. Therefore, this study explores how the educational pathways relative value feature in the Algerian education system in terms of three school contexts and how they are perceived by a different range of people, namely students, teachers, pedagogical counsellors and parents. The central focus of this research is first-year secondary school students. I want to understand how the perceived value of pathways influences the students' self-perceptions.

Research design before the emergence of COVID-19

I designed a multiple case study. The choice of case study is based on the logic that this study will collect and analyse data from several cases (Merriam, 2009) to provide different perspectives on the issue under study (Creswell, 2007). In addition, the explanatory approach allows the researcher to explore a given phenomenon or issue of interest in a greater depth and more richness.

The study was planned to take place in three schools: one urban, one suburban, and one rural. The choice of research location is based on the reviewed literature, which showed that social structure surrounding students plays an important role in influencing students' choices and perceptions of school subjects (Kususanto and Fui, 2012; Eccles, 1993; Eccles, 2009; Cuff, 2007). Therefore, including three schools in differing locations may bring different social contexts, backgrounds, and social structures into play.

Based on common observation, there are notable contextual differences between rural and urban environments in terms of school resources (such as class size, technology access,

teaching staff), parental education, practices and socio-economic background. All these factors may have an influence on the way students' value different school disciplines.

The participants of this study were students, teachers, parents, and pedagogical counsellors. The rationale of selecting participants from different roles was to establish a comprehensive picture of how pathways are valued by different stakeholders (schools and society at large). Different social views may have an influence on how students negotiate who they are through social interaction with significant others, and how these significant others shape students' self-perceptions (Vignoles, 2017).

I selected a set of data collection methods that would be separated into three phases. I employed semi-structured interviews with teachers, pedagogical counsellors and parents, students' focus groups, and finally, two rounds of semi-structured interviews with students.

Fieldwork staging

The school year in Algeria starts in September and ends in June. We have three school holidays during the year, which are nationally determined by the Ministry of Education. The first holiday is the winter holiday, which lasts for two weeks and is held in December. The spring holiday also lasts for two weeks and is held in March. Finally, the summer holiday is at the end of May and lasts for three months. Therefore, data collection was planned to be done during school holidays when schools are closed, and students and teachers are away for a holiday.

I decided to stage the three schools (urban, suburban and rural) in two data collection phases. The chosen plan was to gather data from two schools starting from January 2020 until June 2020, and leave the third school until September 2020, as it was not feasible to work with three schools in one go.

Research Design after the emergence of COVID-19

In January 2020, I travelled to Algeria, and I first started contacting some schools. I decided to start with a suburban school first because I have a family relative who is a teacher at the school, and which made access to participants easier. It took around three weeks to finalise the official approval necessary for ethical conduct of the research in the school. After I had the approval to start my fieldwork, I attended the school quite often to converse with my participants, as I wanted to build rapport with them, and explain the purpose of my study to them. This was mainly done in the school yard during the students' mid-day break. Those moments were so fruitful, especially at the level of field notes.

At that time, COVID-19 started to emerge in China and even some other parts of the world, but it was nothing more than reported news that one would hear on TV and how the situation would unfold was unclear.

In early February 2020, I gained official authorisation from the Academy of Education Province of Batna (where the fieldwork was conducted). When I formally started my fieldwork, there were no significant infected cases in Algeria or in the city where I was doing fieldwork.

Everything was moving very well as planned. I conducted one focus group with students and three further individual interviews with students and the school pedagogic counsellor.

In late February 2020, COVID-19 was confirmed to have spread to Algeria: there was one case in Algiers, the capital. With no idea that schools would be shut down, I thought of gaining access to an urban school while still carrying out fieldwork in the suburban school. The process of school access and approaching potential participants was easier in the urban school than in the first suburban school, as all the paperwork needed for the study was already finalised. It took me two weeks to approach potential participants and have personal contacts. When I was about to start fieldwork formally by conducting a focus group with students, the pandemic was beginning to impact countries across the world. As a result, the Algerian government declared a national lockdown on March 17th, that included all places of social gathering and schools.

At the beginning of the nationwide lockdown, I struggled to keep the same level of motivation to work on my thesis. It was hard for me to be in the role of a doctoral student while staying at home all the time. Prior to COVID-19, I used the university office space where I could fully function as a doctoral student. However, as time went by, I adapted to the new reality of lockdown and self-isolating measures.

I was put in a dilemma of whether to amend the whole research design. Therefore, I started to think of the best ways to adopt remote data collection as an alternative to face-to-face data collection for my research. There were a few questions that I tried to take into consideration such as:

- thinking through what closest remote data collection methods were alternatives to the original research tools of this study;
- how long would they take and whether these methods would have any implications on the timeline of the research;
- I had also to figure out whether participants would be able to be involved within the new context of COVID-19.

In response to all these questions, I decided to carry out the same research design of focus groups with students and interviews with all participants, but I would move to online research. I therefore needed a video-based online platform.

Technology in use: participant recruitment and research methods implementation

Technology has been proven to be more than positive during the pandemic period. Using internet chats and phone calls with participants enabled my fieldwork to run smoothly even during lockdown, which was useful to me and the study participants as all the chats and interview scheduling were planned through the internet.

My plan was to pursue the same processes as I had planned prior to the pandemic in terms of sampling and data collection methods. While I was lucky in the former, I was not so in the latter.

Firstly, my original sampling included various participants (students, teachers, pedagogic counsellors, and parents). I could maintain the same sample of participants. I was lucky to have approached, taken personal contacts and built a rapport with the participants of both two? schools before the lockdown. It is possible that I spent better quality time with the suburban school (especially students) as I used to visit them in the school often. I would talk to them after class, or in the backyard during their mid-day break. All these factors helped me and them to get to know each other and made it easier for them to trust me.

Although teachers and pedagogic counsellors were not the main focus of the research, I faced no difficulties in recruiting them to participate in this research. They were so welcoming and willing to help. However, one of the challenges the COVID-19 pandemic brought to my data collection was recruiting parents. I approached parents on the 'phone twice. The first time was about having their approval to interview their sons and/or daughters (students). The second time was about seeking their participation in the study. The parents I approached refused to participate. One reason for their refusal might be the fact that we never met face-to-face. The virtual recruitment hinders establishing trust: if it were not for COVID- 19, I would have been able to invite them to the school for face-to-face discussions, where we could build a rapport. However, after a couple of trials, I did manage to convince four parents to participate in this research project.

Second, having done a face-to-face focus group with students in the suburban school, I wanted to follow the same research design for the urban school. At first, I considered an internet-based focus group either synchronous or asynchronous (Lijadi & Schalkwyk, 2015; Reid &Reid, 2005; Fox, Morris & Ramsey, 2007). In this situation of a global pandemic, virtual methods are the best alternative to traditional face-to-face methods. At first, I planned to conduct an online synchronous group, but it was difficult to maintain a high-quality internet connection, so I had to think of an online asynchronous focus group where a private Facebook group would be created and students would be invited to join the platform to answer the posted questions and communicate amongst each other. Careful consideration of ethical issues when research is conducted in an online setting is crucial as safety and confidentiality of participants should be highly ensured (Rodham and Gavin, 2006). Given that participants know each other, and they can access the platform any time where personal and sensitive information is shared, I was not sure that this method would ensure the total confidentiality of the participants and that their written responses on the comments section would not be disclosed with others.

Therefore, due to these technical and ethical issues, I dropped the idea of conducting a focus group. I decided to turn to individual online interviews as the main and only data collection method in both schools with all participants. The first technological platform I thought of was Facebook. I knew it was not the best interviewing platform, but I chose it for two reasons. Firstly, Facebook was the only medium of communication between my participants and me. Secondly, it is the most used platform in Algeria, especially amongst teenagers.

As soon as I started interviews with my participants, Facebook did not sustain a stable, good connection. Therefore, I thought of asking participants to download one of the other advanced technological platforms, such as Zoom, Webex, GoToMeeting or Skype (LOB & Morgan, 2020) where we could access better audio and video forms of communication. However, the participants have different backgrounds and ages, and not all of them are well acquainted with the recent technological platforms. I did not want to add a burden on them

or put them under pressure. Besides, I sensed that they did not quite welcome the idea of facial interactions of video interviews. Therefore, I had to abandon this idea.

Phone interviews as a data collection tool

The final best practice I was left with were "Phone Interviews" (Shury, 2002; Gillham, 2005; Hanna & Mwale, 2017). I asked the participants kindly if we could move to speak on the phone; all of them approved. Although phone interviews may sound old-fashioned compared to more advanced technological platforms, it was efficient and practical. Using the Algerian national network, phone interviews were used with the rest of the participants in the schools. Although the absence of visual cues was a downside of phone interviewing, it did not result in a loss of contextual or non-verbal data (Novick, 2008). I could interpret a lot from my participants' tone, intonation, laughs, moments of silence. Besides, using this method allowed my participants to feel more comfortable and relaxed especially when speaking about their own experiences. Overall, phone interviews proved to be a positive experience of fieldwork during the lockdown.

According to the University of Leeds' ethics policy on COVID-19, I did not have to resubmit an ethics amendment form for a second time because the way in which I interacted with participants was safe in terms of COVID-19 restrictions, and besides, no substantial amendments were made to the original research such as recruitment methodology.

Final Reflections

This article discussed my fieldwork experience regarding the transformation of data collection processes after COVID-19 disruption resulted in lockdown, which presented challenges as well as some positive aspects of this research project.

Looking on the positive side, I was lucky in the respect that my study was online adaptable. I did not have to pause the data collection phase, like some of my peers, or drastically alter my methodology. I was even luckier in that I had approached potential participants before the lockdown. I cannot imagine what it would have been like if I had not; the whole process of building trust and recruiting would have been very challenging and time-consuming.

With regards to the use of a remote data collection method, which was via phone interviews, it proved to be a promising and feasible alternative to online and in-person methods in conducting qualitative research. While limitations exist, my experience showed that the use of remote data collection methods sped up the process more than the traditional methods would ever do.

The COVID-19 pandemic became an essential topic of discussion in the interviews with participants. It served as a critical element through which participants discussed the relative value of the SP and LP.

On the other hand, as mentioned earlier, my original research design stated the implementation of three schools, namely, urban, suburban, and rural schools. While I did manage to conduct fieldwork in the first two schools. It was impossible to fully engage with the rural school, as after the national lockdown of the schools I only had contacts with the

urban and suburban schools. Schools closed until further notice, and there was no online teaching. Therefore, I had to adapt to the imposed situation and consider only urban and suburban schools as part of the study.

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