Emerging Perspectives
ep.journalhosting.ucalgary.ca

Pan(dem)ic at the (Middle School) Disco: Navigating Data Collection During Quarantine

Rae Ann Van Beers[1]

University of Calgary

Nearly everyone's lives in this province were disrupted in March 2020 when the Alberta government decided to shut down schools in an attempt to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus. For me, the quarantine thwarted my original doctoral research plan to work with my middle school participants to develop our peer-to-peer duoethnographic conversations. The immediate suspension of in-person schooling and the frenzied move to online learning for all Alberta schools required adjusting my well-crafted research plan in order to move those conversations to an online platform. It also forced me to rely on the help of the allies I had found within the school, both the staff and the youth themselves, to obtain the data I had determined was essential to my study.

Keywords: Covid-19, graduate student, research plan, data collection, online platforms, middle school, fair trade, social justice education, duoethnography, qualitative research.

Van Beers, R. A. (2021). Pan(dem)ic at the (middle school) disco: Navigating data collection during quarantine. Emerging Perspectives, *5*(2), 13-16.

Intending to put a twist on duoethnography, my research participants from a social justice-minded school group were ready to start their peer-to-peer conversations (following Norris et al., 2012) in mid-March. Alberta schools were officially shut down on March 15, 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The immediate suspension of in-person schooling and the frenzied move to online learning for all Alberta schools required adjusting my well-crafted research plan, modifying my ethics application to move the conversations to the school's online learning platform, and then working to reconnect virtually with my research participants two months later. In spite of these unusual stressors, we adapted and eventually conducted the duoethnographic conversations online. Navigating disruptions in data collection is a stressful venture, however embracing the chaos when one's "fieldwork falls apart" (Chambers, 2019, p. 437) can prove to be a profound learning opportunity. I had never been in doubt of the importance of building positive, collegial relationships when doing qualitative research, but the lesson of just letting go of my research plan was more difficult to accept. Being adaptable and asking for support from various individuals at my research site allowed me to finally obtain data for my doctoral dissertation. Although the

[1] raeann.vanbeers@ucalgary.ca

outcome was not what I had originally envisioned, there will be an outcome and I will have learned more from it than if my plan had actually gone according to plan.

The Best Laid Plans

A publicly funded middle school in an urban center was the focus of my study, with data being collected over the course of the 2019-2020 school year. Comprised of grade six and seven girls, the principal activity for the social justice-oriented group that I shadowed during this time was to plan the youth component of a national conference about fair trade, while continuing to raise awareness about the importance of fair trade within their school. My choice to have research participants engage in duoethnography with a peer stemmed from the methodology's emphasis on participation, equitable relationships, and transformation. Duoethnography places two researchers, who are also the study participants, into a relationship with one another to create a dialogue with the intention of better understanding a phenomenon under investigation (Norris & Sawyer, 2012; Sawyer & Norris, 2013).

In my research plan, mentorship was a significant part of the study so that I could better explain these ideas to the group, along with the expectations of potential participants. We had planned to begin that mentorship process the week following the conference when I was going to remind the students of my research and describe duoethnography more fully. Tackling the research in this way would have required a great deal of trial and error, as there was no map to follow for such a plan. My hope, in turning over responsibility to the participants for the creation of their duoethnographic conversations, was borne out of respect for both their rights to participate as fully as possible in the research and their abilities to engage in it in meaningful ways (Ceglowski & Makovsky, 2012; Mann et al., 2014). I had decided that I would try to avoid providing interview or conversation scripts for them to work from as I hoped they would discuss the overarching question of 'what is social justice?' and simply let things flow. I believed that this format would more readily adhere to notions of youth voice and perspective that were vital to my study (Herriot, 2014; Smith, 2010). This data ownership by the research teams was intended to bleed into the initial analysis stage as well, where participants were to be presented with transcripts of their conversations for review, to discuss any changes they deemed necessary, and share insights about what they were learning through the process. I also wanted to get their feedback about my initial categorization of themes during data analysis to enhance member-checking of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and provide as much opportunity as possible for their participation throughout the research process (Ceglowski & Makovsky, 2012; Ergler, 2017).

Navigating the Chaos

The teacher in me was deeply disappointed that I had lost out on the opportunity to teach students the art of duoethnography. With schools physically shutting down, I was unable to provide students with (what I deemed to be) a meaningful education about this methodology in the way that I had envisioned. Instead, we settled for a club meeting over Zoom during which I reminded students of my research and asked them to consider participating. A full two months after our last in-person contact at the youth component of the conference, I described the modified process for participation that I had arranged with the principal and sponsor teacher, and which had been approved by the ethics board: research partners would have a conversation through Zoom that I would set up and record and then transcribe for their review. Moving the interviews to this online format was not particularly onerous, especially since the participants had grown used to engaging in school virtually. It is difficult to say how this alteration impacted the data they generated, as I

was ironically more "present" in the conversations than planned. Hovering looks different when done virtually versus in-person as I was not able to give them the same distance as I might have if the conversations had happened in school. Another disruption to my plan involved the participants sticking mainly to the guiding questions that I had created for them in a bid to ease their concerns about what to talk about. Although somewhat frustrating to deal with, these disruptions (Rodriguez, 2020) did not seem to affect the methodological character of my research plan as duoethnography is known to be a fluid methodology (Sawyer & Norris, 2016).

Initially losing contact with the group was a significant and stressful problem. At the beginning of the pandemic, schools were scrambling to move to learning online and a Ph.D. student trying to collect data was low on their list of priorities. Reconnecting with the group took time and some coaxing on my part. In the midst of all this, the sponsor teacher of the group had a family emergency and his attention was understandably elsewhere. Fortunately for me, my friendship with another gracious grade six/seven teacher from the school served as an access point as he helped to reunite our group online. He amplified my plea for research participants by stating in the group chat he set up for us: "This is a great opportunity to help Rae Ann out with her research and share your thoughts." I'm confident that without his help I would have ended up with no participants at all, highlighting the importance of forming collegial relationships with those at the research site.

It felt strange to be reunited with the students after two months with no contact, especially as I had been seeing them at club meetings twice a week since the beginning of that school year. Having put in that much time in the months prior to the school shutdown turned out to be incredibly important, as I believe it was this "deep hanging out" that motivated my six participants to share their stories with each other and with me (Montgomery, 2014, p. 124). Those months of building rapport with the club members ultimately resulted in their willingness to help me with my research. As an educational researcher, I typically viewed myself in the role of helper because by gathering information I could potentially improve the way we engage in teaching and learning. Even in my role of researcher and pseudo-club member during my study I took on the position of helper, allowing the students to tell me what to do. For instance, they directed me through their monthly fair trade bake sales by sending me for forgotten items in other parts of the school and asking for help with preparing the float and figuring out their profits. In the end though, our roles were reversed as they helped me to create the data that was vital to the completion of my study. I am afraid to think about what my dissertation would have become without their generosity of spirit, as well as that of the principal, teachers, and other staff who supported me during the chaos of data collection.

In choosing to "dwell in the cracks" (Spencer, 2014, p. 139) of my research process I was better able to accept it for what it was, rather than what I had planned for it to be. That being said, there was still a grieving process for me as I had to let go of the plan I had grown so attached to. That was perhaps the most difficult part of the entire experience. Recognizing that my plan would not work in the way I envisioned it forced me to be adaptable and figure out what changes could be made in order to make the research feasible and still maintain methodological integrity. Such flexibility required the help of others, both adults and youth in this case, in order to meet my data collection goals. From this experience I now have a better understanding of the messiness of qualitative research and, perhaps more significantly, what it means to be an educational researcher when one's world is turned upside down.

References

Ceglowski, D., & Makovsky, T. (2012). Duoethnography with children. *Ethnography and Education, 7*(3), 283–295. https://doi.org/10.1080/17457823.2012.717197

Chambers, J. (2019). When fieldwork falls apart: Navigating disruption from political turmoil in research. *Area (London 1969), 59*, (2), 437–444. https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12587

Ergler, C. R. (2017). Advocating for a relational and dynamic model of participation for child researchers. *Social Inclusion, 5*(3), 240–250. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v5i3.966

Herriot, L. (2014). The presence of an absence: Youth participation in macro-level educational reform. *Citizenship Teaching & Learning, 9*(1), 35–52. https://doi.org/10.1386/ctl.9.1.35-1

Lincoln, Y. S. & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE.

Mann, A., Liley, J., & Kellett, M. (2014). Engaging children and young people in research. In A. Clark, R. Flewitt, M. Hammersley & M. Robb (Eds.), *Understanding research with children and young people* (pp. 285-304). SAGE.

Montgomery, H. (2014). Participant observation. In A. Clark, R. Flewitt, M. Hammersley & M. Robb (Eds.), *Understanding research with children and young people* (pp. 122-135). SAGE.

Norris, J., & Sawyer, R. D. (2012). Toward a dialogic methodology. In J. Norris, R. D. Sawyer, & D. Lund (Eds.), *Duoethnography: Dialogic methods for social, health, and educational research* (pp. 9-39). Left Coast Press Inc.

Norris, J., Sawyer, R. D., & Lund., D. E. (2012). *Duoethnography: Dialogic methods for social health, and educational research*. Left Coast Press.

Rodriguez, S. (2020). "You're a sociologist? I am too…" Seducing the ethnographers, disruption, and ambiguity in fieldwork with (mostly) undocumented youth. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 49*(2), 257–285. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241619882075

Sawyer, R. D., & Norris, J. (2013). *Duoethnography.* Oxford University Press.

Sawyer, R. D., & Norris, J. (2016). Dialogic interdisciplinary self-study through the practice of duoethnography. In R. D. Sawyer & J. Norris (Eds.), *Interdisciplinary reflective practice through duoethnography: Examples for educators* (pp. 1-13). Palgrave MacMillan.

Smith, A. B. (2010). Children as citizens and partners in strengthening communities. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 80*(1), 103–108. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-0025.2010.01012.x

Spencer, C. C. (2014). "Wow, that bitch is crazy!" Exploring gendered performances in leisure spaces surrounding reality television. [Doctoral dissertation]. The University of Utah. ProQuest LLC.