

Lessons learnt: Reflections on the 'insider-outsider divide' in working with culturally and linguistically diverse students in a participatory action research project

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Lessons Learnt: Reflections on the ‘Insider-Outsider Divide’ in Working With Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students in a Participatory Action Research Project

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Abstract

This paper explores the challenges and possibilities in research that involves students from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds, a group that tends to be overlooked in university settings and in the literature. We present a reflexive account of our experiences as researchers in a Participatory Action Research (PAR) study that explored the needs of CALD students from an enabling (access) program in a regional Australian university. PAR was chosen as a research method out of our desire to give these students a voice and to help break down any potential barriers because of our positioning as researchers. We draw on the concept of ‘researcher as insider-outsider’ (Merriam, 2016) to highlight these aspects in our analysis of the research process.

Some of our democratic objectives were achieved, but we also found there were limitations. Our position as Caucasian, Australian-born English speakers meant that we remained ‘outsiders’ to the CALD experience in fundamental ways. Further, our ‘insider’ status as researchers and lecturers was difficult to ignore, and institutional expectations created additional barriers. Some aspects of our data collection had unintended negative consequences, thus necessitating a change of course. On the plus side, however, consulting with students at each stage of the research helped to create more equal, trusting relationships and fostered empathetic understandings. The continual cycle of reflection and action assisted in ensuring we were responsive to the needs of participants. Although there are no guarantees, our experiences suggest that collaborative methods can assist in blurring the researcher-researched divide and give vulnerable communities greater agency in research. Despite the complexities and risks, exploring the needs of CALD students remains a worthwhile research endeavour. Any attempts to achieve equitable outcomes should highlight the capacity and potential of these students and not just their vulnerabilities.

Keywords

Action Research, Qualitative Evaluation, Autoethnography, Emancipatory Research

Introduction

This paper examines the methodological and ethical complexities of research involving students from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds. We reflect on our involvement as researchers in a small-scale Participatory Action Research (PAR) project focussed on a group of CALD students and their experiences in gaining access to a regional Australian university via an enabling (access) pathway.

Literature examining domestic CALD students is still relatively limited, especially in an enabling context, and even

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more rare are studies that explore suitable research methods for such groups. As a starting point for our own analysis, we therefore examine the broader research concerning ‘vulnerable’ groups, highlighting the positionality of the researcher and the nature of ethical research in this context. We then describe the key elements of PAR and our desire to apply these democratic principles to our own study, particularly in terms of reducing the research-researched divide. Collaborative, reflexive accounts of our research experiences become the data that are analysed thematically. In our discussion, we draw attention to the challenges and possibilities that arose, sharing our mistakes as well as our accomplishments, in our attempts to make the project inclusive and non-exploitative. The concept of ‘researcher as insider-outsider’ (Merriam, 2016) is used to frame our analysis. It is hoped that the insights we share might help others conducting research with CALD participants or other vulnerable groups, as well as those interested in more collaborative and reciprocal approaches to research.

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students as an Equity Group

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) students have been recognized as a target equity group in Australia since 1990 with the introduction of the Fair Chance for All initiative (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1990). The term ‘CALD’ has become an accepted descriptor in current practice, having replaced that of ‘non-English Speaking Background (NESB)’, though finding a label that does not imply a sense of exclusion has been an ongoing concern (Adusei-Asante & Adibi, 2018; Sawrikar & Katz, 2009). Across policy documents and the broader literature there is little consistency in either the terminology used or the definitions ascribed. The Department of Education, Skills and Employment (2020), for example, describes NESB students as domestic students who have come to Australia within the last 10 years and who speak a language other than English at home. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2018) also includes characteristics such as English proficiency, parents’ country of birth, and religion in its classification, based on guidelines from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. From the perspective of our university, the definition used in recording student data is simply: ‘speaks a language other than English at home’. In recent Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program (HEPPP) recommendations, only NESB students from low Socioeconomic Status backgrounds or regional/remote areas are classified as ‘equity’ (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2017), but from a broader policy standpoint, NESB remains on the list of identified equity groups (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2018a).

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse students, therefore, are ‘domestic’ students, as distinct from international students who come to Australia for the duration of their studies and

mostly return to their home country. The experiences of CALD students have generally attracted less attention in the literature than their international peers (e.g. Singh, 2020; Thamrin et al., 2019). From an Australian perspective, this is hardly surprising in view of the numbers. While changing socio-political dynamics may alter these demographics going forward, in recent years there have been many more enrolments of international students than CALD – in 2018, nearly 400,000 international students were enrolled in higher education (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2018a), compared with about 38,000 CALD students (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2018b). Furthermore, identifying CALD students can be difficult. Because the usual cultural and linguistic markers of difference are less apparent, the particular academic literacy needs of some students in this cohort can be overlooked (Williamson, 2012). While research in the CALD space is still limited, there is, however, a growing interest in equity issues around access to and retention in higher education for CALD students from an Australian perspective (e.g. Achren et al., 2012; Li & Carroll, 2017; Pitman et al., 2016; Testa & Egan, 2014; Williamson, 2012), as well as international (e.g. Bunch & Kibler, 2015; Harklau, 2017; Kanno & Varghese, 2010). Students from refugee backgrounds (SfRBs) – a subset of the CALD cohort – are emerging as a significant research focus in their own right in Australia (e.g. Baker et al., 2018; Kong et al., 2016) and abroad (Müller-Karabil & Harsch, 2021; Tuliao et al., 2017).

Research and Vulnerable Communities

Baker et al. (2018, p. 11) offer some useful insights into the ‘methodological and ethical challenges’ of working with students from refugee backgrounds, but also point out that literature on this topic is limited. In reviewing the research about domestic CALD students more broadly, there does not seem to be much written about the research process itself in terms of critique or guidance. We therefore turn to broader discussions about ‘vulnerable groups’ (Aldridge, 2014; Baker et al., 2018; Ellard-Gray et al., 2015; Liamputtong, 2008), going beyond the higher education context at times, as a starting point for examining the ethical and methodological nuances of research working with CALD communities.

Though open to interpretation, a ‘vulnerable’ population in research may broadly be defined as ‘a subject group at the margins of society’ (Liamputtong, 2008, p. 1). Ellard-Gray et al. (2015, p. 1) argue that ethnic minorities are among groups who are often excluded from social research because they represent ‘hidden, hard-to-reach, and vulnerable populations’. Numbers are often small, and minorities may have a mistrust of the research process and those in authority (Clark, 2012; Ellard-Gray et al., 2015). Language barriers and cultural disconnections can compound these factors, as is the case with students from refugee backgrounds (Baker et al., 2018). By some definitions, enabling students may also be considered a

‘vulnerable’ cohort, positioned on the margins of university cultural settings. As ‘non-traditional’ students, they may struggle with confidence and self-belief because of having been labelled ‘non-academic’ in the past (Burke, 2002, p. 126). In communicating with such vulnerable groups, special considerations are therefore needed at every stage of the research (Baker et al., 2018; Ellard-Gray et al., 2015). The complex and alienating language used in written consent can, in itself, can be a ‘thorny issue’ for vulnerable groups (Liamputtong, 2008, p. 12). It is paramount that participants are not put at additional risk or that ‘their vulnerability is not exacerbated by research processes’ (Aldridge, 2014, p. 114). This includes making sure that the research outcomes do not further alienate the participant (Liamputtong, 2010), and that findings are disseminated respectfully (Clark, 2012).

The Insider/Outsider Roles in Research

Such discussions bring to light issues around the ‘positionality’ of the researcher in terms of their relationship to the research context and the participants involved, and correlating access to power. Such traits as ‘race, gender, social class background, and sexual orientation’ construct the researcher’s perceived position as an ‘insider’ or ‘outsider’ in relation to the research context (Merriam, 2016, p. 63–64). Being an ‘outsider’ has traditionally been assumed to be advantageous for researchers because of the possibility of maintaining a more objective perspective: of ‘making the familiar strange’ (McNess et al., 2015, p. 311). However, this assumption is coming under increasing scrutiny, with some contending that only those who share the social, cultural or linguistic characteristics of their participants are suited to conduct such research (Merriam et al., 2001; Merriam, 2016). The danger that research participants may be exploited remains an ongoing ethical consideration, and especially so when dealing with vulnerable groups such as ethnic minorities.

In response to such sensitivities, some types of qualitative research now adopt a more collaborative or community-based approach in which researchers consult with participants throughout the research project (Burke, 2002; Clark, 2012; Liamputtong, 2010). Participatory Action Research (PAR), for example, seeks to empower participants by inviting them to be part of the knowledge construction (Merriam et al., 2001) through a process of ‘shared ownership of research projects, community-based analysis of social problems, and an orientation toward community action’ (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005, p. 273). Liamputtong (2008, p. 15) argues that cross-cultural research demands ‘more emphasis on trust building, reciprocity and rapport’; likewise, Baker et al. (2019) advocate a flexible, reciprocal research design undertaken ‘with (not on)’ such vulnerable communities (p. 5). Such an approach rests on the researcher’s commitment to an ongoing cycle of action and critical reflection (MacDonald, 2012). Unless researchers are willing to consider more collaborative and creative methodological approaches, there is a fear that

vulnerable groups may be overlooked because of the implicit challenges (Aldridge, 2014).

Our Participatory Action Research Project: An Exploration of the Needs of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse students

In light of the potential benefits of a collaborative approach and our desire to ensure equitable outcomes for CALD participants, we chose Participatory Action Research (PAR) as our research method. The purpose of the study was to highlight the needs of CALD students as they transition to a regional Australian university via an enabling (access) program, since there appeared to be limited research on this student cohort. The small-scale nature of the project meant that sweeping reforms were not likely to result, but we hoped to draw attention to these CALD enabling students, and to begin a discussion about changes that could better accommodate their needs within our university. Although grounded in a specific institution, the findings could contribute to broader research efforts focussing on how best to support CALD students in higher education.

Having secured ethical clearance from our university, we set about collecting qualitative data in two phases. In the first phase, we conducted individual semi-structured interviews with 22 students: 12 who were current students within the STEPS (Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies) enabling program, and 10 who were in their first year of undergraduate study, having gained access via STEPS. Our participants represented on-campus students (5), online students (12) and mixed mode (5); seven were male, 15 female; and they came from a wide variety of backgrounds. Countries of birth included Asia, Europe, the Middle East, Africa and some Pacific islands, while languages spoken at home included Chinese, Korean, Tagalog, Vietnamese, German, Italian, Spanish, Polish, Assyrian, Amharic, Bemba, Krio, Nasioi and Samoan. The interviews were conducted by the two authors and a research assistant. We asked students about the challenges they faced, and how they felt about their studies. In particular, we were interested in the aspects of university support that made a difference, and what might be done to serve their needs better. These discussions touched on the personal as well as the academic aspects of their student journeys, although these were by no means distinct categories.

In line with PAR, we collaborated with the student participants in a number of ways. Firstly, we tried to give them agency over the research process itself. As our CALD participants lived throughout Queensland, we planned to use Zoom videoconferencing technology to allow for non-verbal elements in the communication and also to assist in developing rapport. However, of the 22 participants, only seven agreed to the Zoom format and most opted for phone interviews. Some were too shy to agree to a videoconference, while others were unsure about the technology, which was relatively new at that pre-Covid time. One interview was

conducted face-to-face and one student agreed to provide written answers via an email exchange. Participants were also invited to give feedback on each phase of the research process. At the end of each interview, for example, students were asked to comment on the recruiting and interviewing process, and if there was anything we could be doing differently to help them feel more at ease. This feedback informed the ways in which we conducted the research going forward.

The second phase of the research involved consulting with some of the original participants, as well as staff from across the University, to gain feedback on our findings and recommendations. Five of the original students were approached to participate in a follow-up interview, as well as five staff members, and all agreed. The original intention for this phase was to conduct one focus group interview with the students and one with staff, but participant availability meant that individual interviews with three students and two staff members were needed to supplement the two focus groups. Though small in number, the student and staff voices captured in the second phase proved valuable. The student input allowed us to clarify some of our earlier findings, while discussions with staff were useful in finetuning our recommendations on how to best support CALD students as they make the transition to university.

Our Method: A Reflexive Approach

Reflexivity, which underpins PAR, requires researchers to reflect critically on the construction of knowledge and their own role and influence in the research process (Ellis et al., 2011; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Lapadat, 2017). In this paper, we formalize this process by analysing reflections on our experiences in a particular PAR project, and providing insights that may help others working in similar fields. In line with Guillemin and Gillam's (2004, p. 263) definition of 'ethical research', we wanted to address the ongoing ethical issues that came up throughout the research, beyond simply gaining approval from a research ethics committee at the front end. Openly situating ourselves in the research, we critically reflect on the research process, sharing what we learnt in a more personal, authentic way than traditional forms of qualitative research that are more concerned with 'stability, order, and control' (Bochner, 2014, p. 280).

Our paper therefore reflects aspects of autoethnography in that we are using personal observations as a lens through which to understand socio-cultural contexts (Chang et al., 2013). The strength of this method lies in its potential transparency and the capacity to foreground decision-making in research that is often taken for granted (Lapadat, 2017). Combining responses from both authors allows us to draw on 'the unique strengths of self-reflexivity' and the 'multi-subjectivity associated with collaboration' (Chang et al., 2013, p. 17). In the process of sharing our self-reflections we seek to maintain a critical, analytical

perspective (Le Roux, 2017) that requires ongoing questioning of assumptions and draws on broader theoretical perspectives.

Data analysis became an iterative process in which we shared written self-reflections and discussed possible themes via video-conferences and email exchanges. Our initial focus was to examine the challenges and opportunities that presented in the research project, but once we explored the literature around vulnerable research communities in more depth, the significance of the 'researcher as insider-outsider' concept (Merriam, 2016) emerged and generated another layer of analysis.

Our self-reflections were written in response to the following guiding questions:

- *What challenges and opportunities presented themselves in working with CALD participants in a Participatory Action Research project?*
- *How did the insider/outsider roles (for researcher and participant) impact these challenges and opportunities?*

Rather than sharing two separate accounts of the research experience, a thematic approach to analysing the data as a whole has been used. The study may be considered both inductive and deductive in that we wrote our reflections with the aim of providing fresh perspectives, but drew on a conceptual base, in particular, the positionality of the researcher (Merriam, 2016), to frame understandings. The concept of 'insider-outsider' is not unique to research involving CALD participants, but does have particular relevance with cross-cultural research because of barriers that may result from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds (McNess et al., 2015; Merriam et al., 2001). In this paper we refer to the 'insider-outsider' concept as it plays out in two contexts: firstly, the cultural site which is the focus of the study (here the culturally and linguistically diverse lived experiences of students), and secondly, the research process itself, operating within the broader context of academic protocols and university procedures. We have chosen to focus on these two aspects, though we recognize that a sense of 'otherness' may have also played out for these students from the perspective of being (or having been) enabling students.

Findings

The following section provides an analysis of critical self-reflections in response to the research questions. A number of themes emerged from this analysis, eventually grouped under two broad categories: the CALD experience (researcher as 'outsider', participant as 'insider'), and the research process (researcher as 'insider', participant as 'outsider'). To provide clarity, this section mostly relies on third person descriptions except where direct quotes from critical self-reflections are used. Direct quotes from the original student participants are also used to illustrate key points.

Pseudonyms for students are used throughout to protect their anonymity.

The CALD Experience (Researcher as ‘Outsider’, Participant as ‘Insider’)

As Caucasian, Australian-born English speakers, the researchers remained ‘outsiders’ to the cultural and life experiences of their CALD participants in significant ways. The following analysis focuses on the challenges and opportunities arising from such positioning.

Challenges in Appreciating the Lived Experiences of CALD Students. Many of the students interviewed talked about feelings of loneliness and alienation in having to make an immense cultural shift when moving to Australia. Sofi, who had come to Australia because of her husband’s work, admitted that she was finding life in Australia hard: *‘all my family, they are still living in Iraq. I miss my family, my friends, but you know, we have to adapt to life here. Life’s really, it’s good, and everything is very, very nice. But you notice, just like, it will be hard at the beginning, like starting at zero. For me, it’s like starting from zero for everything ... for study, for friends.’* Another of the participants was a newly arrived refugee who had come from Ethiopia and did not have good support systems in the Australian city where he now lived. Yusuf did not agree to a spoken interview, but he wrote: *‘For some reason, I don’t have any friend from anywhere in Australia. Since I started STEPS course, I am getting support from lecturers.’* It would be naïve to think that the researchers could fully appreciate what it must be like for students like Sofi and Yusuf who had to ‘start from zero’: the people they had left behind, the challenges they faced in moving to Australia, and their experiences in creating a new life.

One participant shared how intimidated she felt every time she went grocery shopping in her regional city in Queensland: *‘I’m still scared to speak English, even now because when I go to the supermarket, if I want to look for something, when I ask a worker there, they can’t understand me when I talk. So I say, “don’t worry, never mind”, and I try to find it myself.’* Another student described this feeling as a kind of disability: *‘I feel that people subconsciously put me in a “the other box”, a “mental wheelchair”, more often than it’s fair because I can’t talk like them.’* Such a provocative image clearly expresses the student’s sense of frustration in feeling that her linguistic differences defined her. Although Caroline and Jenny had each known the frustration and embarrassment of attempting to communicate in French while travelling in France, they acknowledged that these travel experiences paled in comparison to the profound sense of impotence and estrangement described by some CALD students as they talked about their daily struggles with language. Even though some of the participants spoke multiple languages, the researchers’ position of privilege as

Australian-born English speakers was difficult to ignore in this context.

Opportunities to Develop Mutual Respect. In getting to know these students better, Caroline and Jenny gained a fuller appreciation for the diverse range of life experiences represented in the group. Though no two stories were the same, participants shared the obstacles they had overcome, and the challenges they continued to face on a daily basis, from personal as well as academic perspectives. While some struggles were more profound than others, all participants experienced a sense of anxiety about their English language skills, especially in a university setting. The researchers learnt, not just of the students’ vulnerabilities, but of their emotional strength, determination to succeed, and academic potential. This could sometimes be a humbling experience, as was the case with Jenny’s interactions with Tessa. Now well in her fifties, this student lives in a regional centre, working long hours in a steel factory to support her family. Like Sofi, Tessa had already attained a degree in her country of origin, but because these qualifications were not recognized in Australia, was having to start her university studies, and her career, all over. In the phone interview with Jenny, she shared her concerns that it was getting too late for her to think about university study though she longed for more rewarding work. Jenny tried to offer reassurance by saying, *“Never too old!”*, to which Tessa responded, *‘Ah well, when you’re up there, it’s easy for you to say. But when we are here, still trying to climb the ladder, it’s very arduous. It’s not easy.’*

As Jenny reflected on this exchange, she realized her pat response revealed her ‘outsider’ status in relation to this student’s experience: *“Never too late” is something I’ve probably said to many mature-aged students over the years, but the reality is that it will be difficult for Tessa to support herself financially through STEPS and then a degree. It is also likely to be challenging to find a job in her area of expertise when she is in her sixties. My pathway through school and then tertiary education was much more straightforward, much easier, in comparison.’* Both researchers had completed their doctoral studies and established careers in academia. As such, both were indeed ‘up there’, at the top of the academic ladder, and far removed from Tessa’s career trajectory. Jenny remained in touch with Tessa and followed her progress, somewhat concerned that she would struggle with academic writing. However, Tessa did well throughout the STEPS program, even securing a High Distinction in the essay writing subject. Jenny reflected: *‘I came to fully appreciate what a highly intelligent woman [Tessa] was and that I had unfairly pigeon-holed her with my original assumptions.’*

The more the two researchers came to appreciate the students’ lived experiences, the more their respect and admiration grew, and the more equal the interviewer-interviewee relationships became. Both researchers came to feel it was a

privilege to hear the stories of these students and to gain valuable insights into their personal histories and aspirations. These interviews also gave the researchers the opportunity to give positive feedback to the students, by acknowledging what they had already achieved and encouraging them to persevere with their studies. In some cases, the lecturers provided practical advice on university services available and followed up to offer additional support after the interview. Though it is difficult to gauge if the blurring of researcher-participant roles impacted the research outcomes in any tangible way, it is likely that this level of personal support did give students a sense that the researchers genuinely cared about their welfare even beyond the timeframe of the study.

The Research Process (Researcher as ‘Insider’, Participant as ‘Outsider’)

In the following section, critical self-reflections are shared on the research process itself and the dynamics of working within the constraints of a university-funded project.

Challenges in Recruiting Students. The recruitment stage presented a number of difficulties, the first of which was identifying the university cohort of CALD students. [Ellard-Gray et al.’s \(2015\)](#) warning that cross-cultural research can be difficult because of problems with identification and small numbers proved true for this study. Being ‘insiders’ to university systems did not guarantee the researchers had reliable data at their disposal. Unlike full-fee paying international students, CALD students are not easily identified in the University’s systems, mostly due to incomplete data entry, and the information that does exist is not easily accessed, even though it might be considered important if additional academic or personal support was required for any of these students. However, the available data suggested that numbers were small, since CALD students represented between 1.2% and 3.5% of the total STEPS enrolments over a five-year period. Having identified students from CALD backgrounds, there was always the danger that some students might agree to take part in the study out of a sense of politeness and duty, especially if they were still enrolled in STEPS. Caroline observes: *‘As researchers, native speakers and teachers in the enabling program, we were insiders of the academy to which the students were attempting to belong. We had levels of (perceived) power, where interviewees could imagine that we would judge them and potentially impact their studies.’* To help compensate for any sense of obligation, the researchers tried to be reassuring about the voluntary nature of the commitment, and did not approach students who were currently in their classes or likely to be in the future.

Imparting the research aims and processes to potential participants in an accessible way was crucial, but presented another challenge. There is a real danger that cross-cultural groups can be discouraged by the amount and type of

information presented ([Liamputtong, 2008](#); [Loue, 2012](#); [Meadows et al., 2003](#)). To alleviate this barrier, the research team tried to ensure that the CALD students understood their rights at all stages. As well as emailing this information, the researchers spoke to each student about their rights, usually via a preliminary phone-call and again at the start of each interview, checking for understanding. When speaking to the students, the interviewers tried to avoid overly formal or technical language. Similarly, the information on the project’s consent forms was structured and worded as clearly and concisely as possible. However, there were also governance pressures that meant certain processes had to be followed to secure ethical clearance. Jenny provides such an example: *‘when explaining to students that they would receive a \$20 bookshop voucher if they agreed to a follow-up interview, our Ethics Committee stipulated that we tell students to “seek financial advice” on how to use this money. This level of administrative detail seemed unnecessarily complex and unhelpful.’* Such an intervention effectively illustrates the awkward, potentially unsettling nature of the terminology typically used at the recruitment phase and the potential barriers caused.

In line with a collaborative approach, the research team encouraged students to take some ownership of the interview process. To this end, participants were emailed key questions before the interview. The interviews were semi-structured, so the list of questions was just a guide, but students expressed their appreciation in knowing what kinds of topics would be covered, giving them a chance to process the questions and consider their answers. Though the preference for researchers was to conduct the interviews using Zoom technology, not all students were comfortable with that format. Caroline writes: *‘Here the PAR process enabled our potential participants to set limits to how they would participate and the students did indeed make choices, for example one student would only agree to an email exchange, while another would only be interviewed face-to-face as she felt uncomfortable with videoconferencing (our initial offer).’* While the style of communication in the email discussion was less conversational than the Zoom and face-to-face interviews, the topics covered were similar, and the written nature of the exchange has been highlighted in any reporting of the relevant data. Giving students a choice in the mode of communication seemed appropriate to the context, so the researchers remained flexible in this regard.

Challenges in Achieving Meaningful Participation. Efforts to make students feel comfortable so that they could express themselves freely did not all go to plan, however. As the research team listened back over the interview recordings, they realized that in trying to help students with their English and avoid uncomfortable silences, sometimes the interviewers’ interjections disrupted the flow of the communication. As Jenny comments: *‘We were so intent on empathising, of not wanting our participants to feel uncomfortable, that we sometimes jumped in a little too quickly. There were times when we should have been prepared to*

allow for more pauses and just listen.' As the researchers listened to recorded sessions and read transcripts, they continued to refine their technique, and the later interviews better reflect the principles of 'active listening'. CALD students will sometimes hesitate as they search for their words, but unless they are obviously struggling, such pauses should be accepted without intervention by the researcher to ensure the 'voice' being represented is authentically the participant's. Active listening skills that include being patient and attentive, as well as taking the time to check for understanding, are needed not just during the interview but throughout the research process.

Another unintended consequence arose from sharing full transcripts with the participants. In the spirit of transparency, the initial participants were provided with their interview transcripts to check that they were happy with what was shared and how they had been represented. While the aim was to empower participants, it instead created anxieties for some. One student even requested she be given the chance to 'correct' her English in the transcript. As Caroline points out, the process *'raised certain challenges for this particular cohort, which in itself highlights our outsider status to CALD. By offering transcripts of recorded sessions for their feedback we thought we were being participatory and helpful, but it produced a level of anxiety around performance of language and therefore of self. Agreeing to participate in the study suggests a level of willingness to please, so error production adds to a sense of failing. Added to that is the complication that speaking and writing are different language systems so that any conversation which is then written down appears unfamiliar. Thus, an offered transcript is potentially more alienating than an audio recording'*. The research team therefore agreed that, rather than sharing word-for-word transcriptions, only summaries of the interviews, including some select direct quotes, would be given to each participant. The aim of this revised system was to make it clear that the researchers were interested in the thoughts and feelings of participants, not the accuracy of their expression. This approach was used for the remaining interviews, and seemed to be well received by the students. The change of course did not impede the process from the researchers' perspective in any discernible way; rather, the summaries served to streamline data analysis since they highlighted the main messages conveyed by each participant.

Challenges in Negotiating Institutional Processes. No matter how democratic the researchers tried to be, there was always a danger in taking advantage of their positions of power and bowing to institutional expectations. Working on a university-funded project meant there was a certain obligation to fulfil the promised outcomes in a way that justified the institution's financial backing, and as lead investigator, at times Jenny wondered if this affected her decision-making. She recalls one incident when a student wanted to withdraw from the project after reading over her interview transcript: *'Eve's proficiency in all aspects of English was low, and she had plagiarized an assignment in one of her subjects. Even though we did not*

openly discuss this in the interview, I felt she was an important voice to include. In the end, I talked her into allowing us to use her interview, but not quote her directly. I felt that her embarrassment was more about her poor English than what she had shared, but I was also thinking about the research outcomes. Perhaps I should have accepted her wishes to withdraw without question'. Meeting the target number of participants was a struggle and meant that every participant seemed crucial. Such external pressures can create the possibility of putting the researchers' own needs – and those of the institution – above the needs of participants.

Another of the project's limitations concerned the institutional constraints that affected the research team's ability to attend fully to student feedback. As Caroline observes: *'As researchers we too are subject to our own context, where we cannot always guarantee outcomes, especially if our recommendations require further time and funding, or major policy changes.'* Although the research team were able to make a range of recommendations for learning and teaching practices, shared in a number of forums, far-reaching institutional reforms on the basis of one small-scale study seemed beyond its remit. Furthermore, some aspects of the consultation with students could have been conducted in more depth; this shortfall was more a result of the researchers' own time constraints rather than an unwillingness by participants to cooperate. Ideally, more student voices could have been included in the follow-up interviews in the second phase (only five students took part), but the modest budget meant that coordinating this task fell to the researchers without work allowance to do so. Like many research projects, limited resources impacted the scope of the research and its outcomes. From this perspective, the researchers were also subject to external forces that were beyond their control.

Opportunities for shared ownership. Although not everything in the PAR project went according to plan, there were aspects of the research process that demonstrated authentic collaboration and reciprocal benefits. It was not possible to act on all students' suggestions, but their feedback helped to steer the research and also assisted in formulating the final recommendations. As Jenny reflects: *'I think the students appreciated having someone take an interest in them and their opinions, and the participatory aspects of the research may have helped to put us on more equal footing. The interviewers made a point of offering their encouragement and support, and we made sure students knew how grateful we were for their participation. The interviews seemed to be a positive experience for those who participated.'* The researchers tried to involve students at every phase of the study, from getting their feedback on the recruitment and interviewing stages to giving them a say in how the findings were disseminated. One of the project's deliverables was a short video to be used for professional development purposes. Some students gave permission for snippets of their research interview to be used in the video, indicating they were happy to be involved if it could help

other students. Before sharing the video with other academics and researchers, these students were consulted to ensure they approved of the final product and the way they were presented.

Discussion and Implications

Not all the issues raised in this discussion can be directly linked to PAR, but all arose from our desire to include participants in an inclusive, equitable way. In exploring such objectives, it is important not to view any one approach as a ‘fix-all’ when working with vulnerable cohorts such as CALD participants. Describing research as ‘participatory’ or ‘collaborative’ does not guarantee positive outcomes. Although we can be committed to working with more vulnerable participants in inclusive ways, it is unrealistic to think that all ‘personal and philosophical tensions’ can be eliminated (Aldridge, 2014, p. 126). Certainly, in this study, not all approaches designed to elicit cooperation worked as intended, and we had to adapt our methods accordingly. Nor could we always attend to student feedback to the extent we would have liked because of the limited scope of the project and the logistics involved.

However, our experiences suggest that using a collaborative, flexible method can go some way to achieving democratic aims. While difficult to prove genuine empowerment for participants, we felt that the PAR approach facilitated a degree of co-ownership of the process. Blurring the roles of researcher and researched can help foster a sense of mutual trust and respect, thus, encouraging participants to engage in the process at a deeper level. Developing trust in the researcher-participant relationship is not a new concept, but may have particular significance when working with CALD communities. This is due, in part, to the esoteric and intimidating nature of research processes which can be more marked due to language and cultural barriers (Liamputtong, 2008; Loue, 2012; Meadows et al., 2003). To maintain trust, it is therefore important to communicate clearly, practice active listening, and try to make each phase of the research process as transparent and accessible as possible. Constant vigilance is needed to ensure that as researchers, we are putting the rights and needs of participants ahead of any other potential gains so that the trust gained is not exploited.

More inclusive, collaborative methods therefore put into question the traditional ‘insider-outsider’ divide in research endeavour. While it is useful to be aware of positions of power in the research process, the roles of both researcher and participant remain fluid and multi-faceted. In our study, our status as Australian-born English speakers meant that we (the researchers) were ‘outsiders’ to the CALD experience. However, we were also privileged to learn more about the lives of our CALD participants who shared their personal experiences. While we could never presume to fully appreciate their lived experiences, their stories evoked feelings of empathy and compassion; at times we were

humbled by the courage, perseverance and capacity these students demonstrated.

In drawing attention to the particular needs of CALD groups, there is always a danger that their status as ‘outsider’ might be exacerbated, however unintentionally. In our attempts to make meaning out of complex phenomena, there can be a tendency for researchers to label and categorize in a way that could be reductive and ultimately unhelpful. Any research focussing on CALD communities therefore needs to recognize the limitations of the CALD label itself (Adusei-Asante & Adibi, 2018; Sawrikar & Katz, 2009). The diversity within CALD groups make generalizations problematic, and the issue of ‘cultural sensitivity’ (Liamputtong, 2008, p. 4) complex. In our study, there were many cultural and linguistic differences represented within the group, with no clear sub-groups because of the small numbers. Nor can we assume that all CALD students are ‘vulnerable’, as much depends on their confidence with English, their sense of belonging, and their support networks. In any case, being vulnerably positioned in a socio-cultural sense should not be equated with frailty. As Adusei-Asante and Adibi (2018, p. 74) point out, it is important not to characterize CALD communities as ‘needing “fixing”’. The potential of these students – to succeed at university and to make a valuable contribution to university life – also needs to be highlighted and celebrated.

In a similar way, the broad assumption that CALD students are ‘outsiders’ in the research environment is only useful to an extent. In some respects, even the term ‘vulnerability’ places participants on the ‘outside’, while reinforcing the researcher’s perceived sense of power within socio-cultural contexts such as the academy. While a sense of vulnerability might be heightened by language and cultural differences, that is not to suggest that all CALD participants would struggle with communications in research. Nor should it be assumed that those who do would be alone in finding certain protocols and terminology alienating. Any recommendations to communicate clearly and demystify research processes could be construed as ‘good research practice’, and would likely benefit a wide range of participants, and not just those from cross-cultural backgrounds.

As researchers, we are the assumed ‘insiders’ with regard to research practices, but we also experience vulnerability and are beholden to external pressures. Ethical processes are determined at an institutional level, and any funded research means there are certain outcomes expected. Another dimension of risk lies in sharing our reflections about what we learnt in the research process. This level of self-exposure might be considered particularly precarious in the competitive, ‘self-branded’, managerial environments that universities have become. We maintain, however, that stepping away from the researcher’s position of insider privilege and authority also affords opportunities for greater authenticity and a more holistic approach, both in the way that research is conducted and reported. Like McNess et al. (2015), we acknowledge the limitations of ‘essentialist definitions of the outsider as detached and objective, and the insider as culturally embedded and subjective’, and concede the possibility

of a third, 'liminal' space between the two roles, where creative and empathic understandings are born (p. 295, 306).

Research involving CALD participants, or any other potentially vulnerable community, is clearly not without risk for either the researcher or the participant, but such complexities should not deter research efforts in this field. As long as researchers are prepared to remain flexible in their approach, mindful of assumptions, and open about what is working and what is not, equitable forms of research may be possible. Inclusive approaches, such as PAR, with their emphasis on ongoing action and reflection, seem well suited to this objective. Though modest in scope, our exploratory study has allowed us to raise awareness about the needs of a group of CALD students as they adapt to university life, and the considerations of our localized study may well have wider application across the higher education sector. As we disseminate findings via publications and in professional development offerings, we have tried to ensure that we share the stories entrusted to us in a respectful, empathetic way. The voices of CALD university students, though small in number, have a right to be heard; their efforts to gain access to and succeed in higher education deserve to be actively encouraged and supported.

Conclusion

In this paper we have critically examined our roles as researchers in a small-scale PAR project that involved looking at the needs of CALD, enabling students. The PAR method was chosen for this project because its democratic objectives resonated with our desire to break down the 'researcher-researched' binary. In this regard, we had mixed success. There were aspects of our students' lives and experiences that positioned us as 'outsiders'. Our authority as researchers and lecturers, the alienating nature of some research processes, and inflexible institutional expectations reinforced this divide in some respects. However, using a participatory approach was useful in foregrounding the need to check our assumptions, remain attentive to the needs of participants, and to give students a say in the research process and outcomes. Blurring the researcher-researched roles in this way helped to establish mutual trust and respect. Not all of the issues discussed in this paper can be directly attributable to PAR, but all connected to our desire to make the research process inclusive and equitable. We contend that a more fluid, creative method giving participants greater agency has merit, especially when dealing with vulnerable groups. The concept of 'insider-outsider' in research can be useful in highlighting equity issues in such contexts, but requires a nuanced approach. Despite the many layers of risk and complexity, research into the needs of CALD students is a worthwhile endeavour if it can help them to realize their potential in higher education. Any attempts to achieve positive outcomes for CALD students should acknowledge the diversity of this group, and foreground, not just their vulnerabilities, but their strengths, resilience and capabilities.

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