Politics of Access: Negotiating Permissions for Qualitative Research into NCLEX-RN® Exam Preparation in British Columbia

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Gaining access is a crucial endeavour in qualitative research and yet very little is written in the literature about the politics of gaining access into higher educational settings (Burgess, 1984/2016). ‘Gatekeepers’ have the power to permit or deny access into the organization, including its people, procedures, and situations (Burgess, 1984/2016; Leblanc & Schwartz, 2007). This poster reports on the politics of gaining access into multiple access points of a local post secondary educational organization, including access to its classrooms, faculty, meetings, and documents. The qualitative study was designed to examine how a school of nursing (SON) prepared for a relatively new assessment, the NCLEX-RN® exam, and the poster illustrates how a continuous process of negotiation and renegotiation were required throughout the research process (Burgess, 1984/2016; Leblanc & Schwartz, 2007; McDermid, Peters, Jackson, & Daly 2014). In addition, both the researcher and organization demonstrated several moments of being reflective, creative, and flexible as part of gaining access.

Background

As of 2015, Canadian nursing graduates, except those in Quebec and the Yukon, no longer completed a Canadian based registration exam as part of their program requirements. Instead, they wrote the American National Council Licensure Examination for Registered Nurses (NCLEX-RN®) exam as one component in the nursing registration process (Canadian Nurses Association (CNA), 2011; College of Registered Nurses of British Columbia (CRNBC), 2015). The NCLEX-RN® exam replaced a Canadian based registration exam which had been in place from 1970-2015. Greater protection of the public was the rationale provided by the Canadian Council of Registered Nurse Regulators (CCRNR) (CCRNR & National Council of State Boards of Nursing, 2012) and the CRNBC (2011) for the adoption of the NCLEX-RN® exam as Canada’s new registered nursing regulation exam. The Canadian Association of Schools of Nursing (CASN) (2012a, 2012b), and the CNA (2011), both expressed concerns with the adoption of the NCLEX-RN® exam. One concern expressed was the amount of time and resources that would be needed to assist nursing educators to revise their teaching practices to assist students’ success on the test (CASN, 2012a, 2012b). Additionally, in a 2014 online survey of Deans and Directors of Schools of Nursing across Canada, CASN (2014) researchers found many nursing programs across British Columbia (BC) and across Canada began adjusting their curriculums and purchasing new computerized teaching and testing materials to prepare both faculty and students for the NCLEX-RN® exam.

The adoption of the NCLEX-RN® exam was a result of many factors. Global and economic restructuring generated the need for policies that were more responsive to economic, labour, and market needs (Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard, & Henry, 1997). Educational policies (such as the adoption of the NCLEX-RN® exam in Canada) are often created to assist in managing change (Taylor et al., 1997); however, educators (a) are routinely left out of the policy-making process, (b) are given little opportunity to understand or learn about particular policies, (c) experience a displacement of their own pedagogical and curricular values, and (d) are often confused and resentful about recent policy shifts that implicitly and explicitly ask them to change their historical practice (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012a, 2012b; Laschinger & Finegan, 2005; Taylor et al., 1997).

Purpose
Currently there is a void in the nursing and educational literatures about how SONs, nursing administrators, and nursing educators are positioned and constructed by the adoption of the NCLEX-RN© exam. The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain insight into how the NCLEX-RN© exam influenced Canadian SONs, nursing administrators, and nursing educators as they prepared students for the new NCLEX-RN© exam. The significance of this study is that its findings will contribute and extend current disciplinary knowledge, theory, and practice and may inform future policy- and decision-making at local and national levels. Moreover, the study provides important research on how Canadian SONs, nursing administrators, and nursing educators are positioned and constructed through legislative and other policy-making practices. The study’s focus on how the power relations involved, with the design and implementation of educational policies in nursing, has significant practical relevance when participants and other stakeholders find the study’s contributions insightful and applicable to their own practice (Tracy, 2010).

Methodology

The study consisted of two complimentary qualitative approaches, focused ethnography and critical policy analysis. Focused ethnography is designed to examine phenomena in real time, in a natural setting, and uses ethnographic methods (such as participant observations, interviews, and document analysis) to explore an ‘emic’ point of view pertaining to specific situations, activities, and actions under study (Ball, 1994; Cruz & Higginbottom, 2013; Knoblauch, 2005; Taylor et al., 1997; Wall, 2015). Critical policy analysis is concerned with power, politics, and difference as well as how actors are “constituted in and by policy” (Webb & Gulson, 2015, p. 5). There are parallels between ethnography and critical policy research in that both can be disruptive and threatening to organizations and local participants (Ball, 1994; Tamboukou & Ball, 2003). Moreover, both qualitative approaches reveal how power and knowledge operate within specific sites of change, conflict, and struggle (Ball, 1994; Tamboukou & Ball, 2003). Because of this qualitative design, the processes involved in obtaining access to organizations and its personnel were a delicate process of negotiation and renegotiation.

Methods

My research consisted of specific methods of participant observations, participant interviews, and document analysis in a SON in BC. As the researcher in this study, I served as the primary research instrument in each method and functioned as both an ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ in the setting in relation to my own positionality as a nursing educator (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; McDermid et al., 2014; Murchinson, 2010). For instance, because I conducted research in a SON other than the one where I work, I was an outsider to the organization that I researched. However, I was also considered to be an insider in the profession and may have known some of the participants (that is, nursing educators and administrators) from shared professional development events. My dual role as both insider and outsider provided a key component to obtaining access to the organization and its personnel.

Gaining Access

Ethics approval was obtained from the University of British Columbia’s (UBC) Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB) (2016). An ethics application was concurrently submitted to the Riverside [pseudonym] organization that housed the Bachelor of Nursing SON, and specifically to its respective institutional research ethics board (IREB). The process of obtaining ethics approval often revolves around both institutions providing approvals once the other institution grants permission. This process is often a very delicate and convoluted one. Importantly, I had established a relationship with a key informant in the SON. Prior to submitting my research application to Riverside, I had been in contact with the Board’s Chair who believed that since my study was deemed minimal risk at UBC, the approval process at Riverside would be short.

Ethical approval from the UBC’s BREB was obtained seven days after submission. Ethical approval from Riverside’s IREB was more complex and took a total of eight weeks. Four days after the submission of
the application, I was informed that the ethical application needed to go to a full board review by default due to the complexity of the study and the Chair’s wish to have input from the other IREB members. The full board did not meet for another six weeks. After the full board met, they created a list of provisos and amendments to documents. Their concerns revolved around (a) justification for attending faculty and department meetings; (b) the indirect identification of faculty; (c) the preservation of confidentiality and participants’ rights; and (d) the methodology. They requested that a SON sponsor be identified as a coinvestigator in the study and suggested that the Faculty Association was contacted to see if participation in the study would affect the participants’ risk to employment. Finally, they requested that someone at the institution read a draft of the study’s findings and discussion sections to ensure confidentiality of participants due to the potential for participants to be exposed to criticism (for example, their teaching methods, pedagogical decisions, etcetera). The IREB exercised great care to protect the faculty and institution’s welfare partly due to my description of the critical nature of the study.

A continuous process of negotiation and renegotiation with key players took place to address the provisos. Gaining access also consisted of multiple points of entry besides the specific organization. Once ethical approval was obtained from both research ethic boards, gaining access to classrooms, faculty, meetings, and documents remained a challenge that required constant negotiation and renegotiation. SON faculty did not readily volunteer to be observed in participant observations of classroom or meeting settings. Few faculty volunteered for interviews. A schedule of the SON faculty meetings, meeting agendas, or meeting minutes were not provided as originally had been discussed. The head of a committee responsible for the planning and assessing of the SON’s response to the NCLEX-RN® exam did not communicate after initial contact.

A continuous process of negotiation and renegotiation, being reflective, creative, and flexible was required throughout the process of gaining access.

Title:
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Keywords:
Gaining access, NCLEX-RN® and Qualitative research

References:


**Abstract Summary:**

Gaining access is crucial for qualitative research, yet little is written about the politics of obtaining access into higher educational settings. This poster reports on the politics of gaining access to study how a school of nursing prepared for the NCLEX-RN© exam and the continuous process of negotiation it required.

**Content Outline:**

Politics of Access: Negotiating Permissions for Qualitative Research into NCLEX-RN© Exam

Preparation in British Columbia

**Introduction**

Gaining access is a crucial endeavour in qualitative research and yet very little is written in the literature about the politics of gaining access into higher educational settings (Burgess, 1984/2016). ‘Gatekeepers’ have the power to permit or deny access into the organization, including its people, procedures, and situations (Burgess, 1984/2016; Leblanc & Schwartz, 2007). This poster reports on the politics of gaining access into multiple access points of a local post secondary educational organization, including access to its classrooms, faculty, meetings, and documents. The qualitative
study was designed to examine how a school of nursing (SON) prepared for a relatively new assessment, the NCLEX-RN© exam, and the poster illustrates how a continuous process of negotiation and renegotiation were required throughout the research process (Burgess, 1984/2016; Leblanc & Schwartz, 2007; Mc Dermid, Peters, Jackson, & Daly 2014). In addition, both the researcher and organization demonstrated several moments of being reflective, creative, and flexible as part of gaining access.

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Educational policies (such as the adoption of the NCLEX-RN© exam in Canada) are often created to assist in managing change (Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard, & Henry, 1997); however, educators are routinely left out of the policy-making process and experience a displacement of their own pedagogical and curricular values (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012a, 2012b; Laschinger & Finegan, 2005; Taylor et al., 1997).
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The study consisted of two complimentary qualitative approaches, focused ethnography and critical policy analysis. Focused ethnography is designed to examine phenomena in real time, in a natural setting, and uses ethnographic methods (such as participant observations, interviews, and document analysis) to explore an ‘emic’ point of view pertaining to specific situations, activities, and actions under study (Ball, 1994; Cruz & Higginbottom, 2013; Knoblauch, 2005; Taylor et al., 1997; Wall, 2015). Critical policy analysis is concerned with power, politics, and difference as well as how actors are “constituted in and by policy” (Webb & Gulson, 2015, p. 5). Both qualitative approaches reveal how power and knowledge operate within specific sites of change, conflict, and struggle (Ball, 1994; Tamboukou & Ball, 2003). Because of this qualitative design, the processes involved in obtaining access to organizations and its personnel were a delicate process of negotiation and renegotiation.

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Gaining access also consisted of multiple points of entry besides the specific organization. Once ethical approval was obtained from both research ethic boards, gaining access to classrooms, faculty, meetings, and documents remained a challenge that required constant negotiation and renegotiation.

Conclusion

Gaining access is a crucial endeavour in qualitative research. The politics of gaining access into higher educational settings requires a continuous process of negotiation and renegotiation, being reflective, creative, and flexible.

Bibliographic References


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**Author Summary**: Patricia (Trish) Rampersaud is a PhD candidate in Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia, Canada. Her research interests include critical and educational policy, nursing, and higher education. Her doctoral research explores policy in a nursing education context. Trish received her MSN from the University of British Columbia where she conducted a qualitative study exploring the experiences of new emergency nurses’. Her work was presented at conferences in Canada, the United States, and Europe.