LEADING PRIMARY SCHOOLS: RESEARCHING AND THEORISING LEADERSHIP FROM INSIDER/OUTSIDER PERSPECTIVES

Maureen Cain
manchester institute of education, manchester, UK

Background

This paper draws from my professional doctoral thesis which examined the leadership practice and development of primary school leaders through case studies of the working lives of nineteen practitioners in the North West of England. As a practitioner-researcher in the field I used my experience and reading to describe, analyse and explain the current practice of leadership. I take an insider/outsider perspective to the research which, in this paper, focuses on a story of a female deputy head as she shapes her role in challenging circumstances.

Questions

how does a researcher move between a familiar insider position to a sometimes uncomfortable outsider place?

Methods

The methodology for the case study was a study of four schools using qualitative research methods. The data was collected from members of the Senior Leadership Teams in each school through semi-structured interviews, meeting observations and a trawl of school documents. The empirical research for this paper is taken only from the school, Ash Grove, of which 'Karen' was the deputy head.

Framework

The paper includes four extracts from interviews with Karen over a period of one year. The extracts provide a revealing account of actions, behaviours and personal emotions at an important stage of her professional development. My interpretation of this empirical data draws on aspects of 'insider/outsider' theorisations, as well as work on 'fluidity' of these positions.

Contribution to Knowledge:

The paper explores the role of the practitioner-researcher in integrating the research literature with the empirical data. The dilemmas of this research experience are confronted as experiences are interpreted differently leading to a conflict of interest and growth as a professional researcher. I claim that meaning-making of the familiar for a critical, theoretical analysis is only possible through the judicial use of both insider and outsider perspectives.